Five Ways to Ease Transitions for Students During COVID-19

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The end of the school year is typically a series of planning and celebrations. Middle school students participate in field trips and celebrations, and many prepare to enter high school for the first time. High school freshmen and sophomores celebrate the end of a school year full of self-discovery and academic rigor. Students in 11th grade begin planning their future and ramp up college visits, workforce exploration, and standardized testing. Seniors savor the moments and pack their school year making memories with the classmates they have known for years. This year, however, things look different for all students. For most, there will be no field trips, prom, or even high school graduation. Because of COVID-19, all the activities normally held throughout the final quarter of the year have transitioned to a virtual experience or cancelled altogether.

For educators who have been forced to change course midway through the school year, the challenge of transitioning to online learning is overwhelming and focuses mainly on the academic experience. But as the end of the school year approaches, it is also imperative that school leaders, in partnership with their school counselors, focus on the transitions of their students.

In what is typically one of the most exciting and busy times in the life of a school counselor, a lot of unknowns exist as they struggle to reach out to students—many who do not have sufficient access to technology or the internet. Instead of greeting students in the hallway or scheduling meetings, counselors are emailing, texting, and reaching out via social media to collect information and help students with all the activities associated with the end of the school year.

Pivoting in the Time of COVID-19

COVID-19 has upended the education industry as colleges and universities work to find balance between accommodating the needs of their admitted students, and fiscally and logistically planning for the upcoming school year. In high schools, educators are trying to assist students of all backgrounds and abilities to finish out their school year,
but often students are not attending courses\textsuperscript{1} or even responding to requests for contact.

Reports are emerging of students reconsidering their college of choice or post-high school pathway altogether. A recent survey showed that a quarter of students are rethinking their college choice because of COVID-19. Students are considering other college choices or are viewing fully online educational experiences for the 2020-2021 school year\textsuperscript{2}. The same survey also found that 12.6\% of students may defer their college attendance for a year in order to be closer to home, to not miss out on tuition money, and to stay healthy and free of COVID-19.

Colleges and universities are also in crisis mode as they navigate a multitude of obstacles that emerged during the spring of 2020. Like their K-12 counterparts, higher education institutions have transitioned to online learning, but they are also dealing with decreased revenue, as they issue refunds for students who had to move off campus in the middle of the semester. They face a plethora of unknowns for the 2020-2021 school year. The biggest concerns reported by college presidents include the impact on their underrepresented students, a decline in enrollment for the future, and overall financial stability\textsuperscript{3}.

Perhaps the most alarming indicator of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on college admissions is the sudden decrease in the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA\textsuperscript{®}) completion over the months of March and April. The National College Attainment Network (NCAN) year-on-year analysis of FAFSA show that completion rates among high school seniors has dropped almost 3\% since March 13\textsuperscript{4}. This number increases for students at Title I eligible schools, where many are financially disadvantaged and often first-generation college students without the context of how to transition to college life.

\textbf{Year over year FAFSA completion among high school seniors is down 3\%.}
Now more than ever, students need assistance with their transitions. And unfortunately, this assistance is more difficult to provide with students at home instead of in their school. Counselors, teachers, administrators, and community-based organizations must work to instill these skills in a personalized virtual setting so that all students can start their new normal in a positive, successful way.

A Focus on Transitions

Students face several pivotal changes throughout their time in a K-12 setting. Perhaps the most influential, however, are the shifts from middle school to high school, and from high school to the postsecondary experience. Students who face difficult transitions can face academic challenges, an increase in absenteeism, and difficulty in building and maintaining relationships.

The College, Career, and Life Readiness (CCLR) Framework® expands the definition of college and career readiness by incorporating the skills that will help students make informed decisions and set and achieve goals beyond high school graduation. Developed through research, best practices, and insights within Naviance, the six competencies outlined for CCLR success include social emotional learning, interpersonal skills, academic skills, career knowledge, college knowledge, and transition skills. Specific transitions-focused themes include postsecondary institutional navigation, living on your own, and budget skills.
An analysis of the CCLR Framework assessment, developed by Naviance and administered to schools and districts nationwide, shows that transition skills are the least administered competency in high schools, with less than half of schools across the country teaching these capabilities. This number is even lower for schools in small districts and charter schools who may have less resources than their counterparts.

Addressing Summer Melt

Summer melt—when students who committed to a postsecondary institution as high school seniors do not show up for the first day or make it through the first week of college—is perhaps the most prevalent and tangible consequence of this lack of preparation. This may happen for a variety of reasons, including a lack of knowledge on financial assistance, the lack of institutional navigation, or the absence of a supportive adult to assist in the transition from high school to college. Because students are not in school during this crucial time, the baton can get dropped between the high school support system and the new support team in college. With COVID-19 expanding that physical distancing, summer melt will more than likely increase for the class of 2020.
As schools focus on transitions in a virtual learning setting, it is also important to incorporate social emotional learning and awareness. These two competencies are aligned as students understand how to overcome obstacles, develop a growth mindset, and understand their strengths as they navigate their new normal. Lessons, activities, and individual student meetings that focus on change should also have the lens of social and emotional wellbeing.

**Five Ways to Ease Student Transitions**

School counselors and other educators must take the lead in assisting their students to successfully navigate transitions. Through a variety of tools and conversations, this resilient group of students will thrive in self-discovery and in setting and achieving postsecondary goals.

1. **Use student surveys** to assess and follow up with students. Surveys are easy for students to complete and can offer a glimpse of the status of transition skills. Create personalized surveys by grade level or student group. Collect blanket information on wellbeing, task completion, or post-high school plans. If you use Naviance, assign the COVID-19 Student Needs Assessment evaluation in the Naviance survey library to assess the status of student transitions. The Naviance Graduation Survey collects information including postsecondary plans, scholarships received, and final transcript requests.

2. **Identify at-risk students** and offer extra support. These students can be identified through attendance records, survey responses, academic achievement, or first-generation status. Create social groups, video conferencing lunches, and individual check ins to ensure their wellbeing. Provide interventions when needed. Track the students’ progress and schedule live individual meetings when needed.

3. **Utilize social media** to get your students to complete critical tasks. Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat are popular apps for students, especially as they strive to remain connected to peers while socially distanced. School counselors have found ways to connect with...
students using informative, and sometimes funny, interactions via social media. FAFSA, scholarship, Naviance senior survey, and even student council voting information are common social media topics. Non-personal information that is typically shared as emails can be shared as social media messages. Encourage students and parents to subscribe to updates. Include a call to action, like completing a survey or replying to your post, in order to measure your reach.

4 Connect with students individually to provide support. In a school building, counselors can easily set up meetings with students as they pass in the hallway or pull them out of class. Students still need these interventions, and those who need them most may be less reluctant to reach out. Identify those who may need individual outreach based on survey results, recommendations from teachers, and previous interactions with students.

5 Partner with colleges and universities to support juniors and seniors. This is unchartered territory for students and educators. Colleges and universities want to provide successful transitions for students just as much as high schools do. Invite college admission representatives to join video calls, conduct virtual college visits for juniors, and even schedule meetings with individual students. By facilitating the connection between students and college contacts, schools can ensure that students have all the information needed to successfully attend college in the fall and avoid potential summer melt.
A Case Study in Addressing Transitions

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is well positioned to support student transitions during the pandemic due to years of work addressing the issue. In 2016, the district leaders recognized a need to address transitions when many students who had enrolled in college did not end up attending. With almost 30% of the new class of graduates not showing up for their first day of college, the district began putting resources into the post-high school transition. CPS works with school counselors, community based organizations, and colleges to make sure students understand the essential steps to get to college and have the resources needed. For students entering the workforce, the district partners with organizations to prepare them to be successful, productive employees and to live independently. Using Naviance to plan, communicate, and report, the district now ensures that every student has a post-high school plan.

By focusing on transitions throughout middle school and high school, the district has seen a 36% increase in their college enrollment rate over 10 years. They have also attained a 20% decrease in summer melt in one year alone. Most important, every student has a tailored post-high school plan for success.

Chicago Public Schools has seen a decrease of 20% in summer melt since focusing on transitions district-wide.
References

1 Source: https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/08/829618124/4-in-10-u-s-teens-say-they-havent-done-online-learning-since-schools-closed

2 Source: https://www.artsci.com/studentpoll-covid19


4 Source: https://national.fafstracker.com/

About Naviance
Naviance is a comprehensive college and career readiness solution that helps districts and schools align student strengths and interests to postsecondary goals, improving student outcomes and connecting learning to life.

About Hobsons
Hobsons helps students identify their strengths, explore careers, create academic plans, match to best-fit educational opportunities, and reach their education and life goals. Through our solutions, we enable thousands of educational institutions to improve college and career planning, admissions and enrollment management, and student success and advising for millions of students around the globe.

Learn more about Naviance at Hobsons.com/Naviance