Research Findings - Part III

Expectations Drive Effective College Recruitment Strategies

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Colleges need to identify and remove institutional barriers for students and their parents. This is among the key findings from an IDRA study of San Antonio College that are informing strategies that the college will use to improve its recruitment of Hispanic, low-income students.

This is the final in a series of three articles in the *IDRA Newsletter* presenting the results of this research study, with SAC's permission.

IDRA interviewed different groups of respondents to identify the most critical factors that impacted a decision to enroll in college and graduate. Focus group and individual interviews targeted key stakeholders including: high school administrators, counselors, high school students, parents of high school students, and current SAC students. High school administrators were also surveyed.

IDRA developed the survey, focus group interview and individual interview questions in partnership with the SAC advisory committee. Parallel questions were developed for each of the surveys and interviews in order to triangulate responses by group and identify points of convergence or divergence among groups.

It is important to interpret these findings cautiously given the nature of focus group interviews. While the methodology provides an opportunity for in-depth probing and a greater understanding of the issues, the findings are not representative or generalizable for all colleges and universities. In the final analysis, additional studies should be conducted to gain greater understanding of what has emerged from these interviews.

Key questions across all groups included:

- What has helped students the most in preparing for college?
- What are the most important things that help to select a college?
- What are the barriers of students going to college?
- What are the benefits of going to SAC?
- What are the reasons for choosing SAC over other colleges?
- What are the reasons for choosing other colleges over SAC? and
- How can SAC help students prepare for college and support them once they enroll?

IDRA conducted content analyses of responses across all groups. These analyses yielded clear patterns across the seven areas of parallel inquiry for all groups. Following are the responses from the five respondent groups: high school principals, counselors, high school students, parents and current SAC students.

When answering what has helped students most in preparing for college, respondents most often mentioned visiting college campuses while still in high school and their parents' and families' encouragement.

The top three things that respondents cited as **helping students select a college** included matching individual student goals and scholarships to college, convenience in terms of access and transportation, and online access to help with registration.

The most frequently mentioned **barriers that students encounter** on the road to college were inadequate academic preparation, competing work and family responsibilities, and the lack of transportation.

Respondents listed **benefits of going to SAC**: location (proximity), access to students' homes and work, resources and support for students, ease of transition to a four-year university, convenience allowing for students to live at home and continue working, its low cost (mentioned by every group), and its small class size.

The top reason for **choosing SAC over other colleges** was its low cost. The top reason for choosing other colleges over SAC was its reputation as an extension of high school – not academically challenging, same high school classmates enroll there, etc.

Respondents suggested **ways to help students prepare for college and support them** once they enroll. These included providing better student support services such as tutoring, mentoring, daycare and counseling; providing transportation options for students such as a SAC shuttle for the neighborhood; and providing financial support through scholarships.

The implications and recommendations from this IDRA research for SAC can be organized into the following five focal areas: communication, academic preparation, recruitment, financial aid and support services. While these recommendations were provided for SAC specifically, they can provide insight for other K-12 and higher education institutions.

- First find out *who* is getting information and then find out among those who do receive it, what conflicting or vague messages students and their parents are receiving about what is needed to enter and succeed in college and communicate the correct information.
- Make sure student and parent language needs are addressed in all oral presentations and written materials.
- Communicate the expectation that all students are "college material."
- Make students and their parents aware that getting into college is not the hardest part of the college experience, but that challenges to staying and graduating can be addressed and overcome.
- Make sure that students are clear about what it takes to succeed in college, including college academic standards and the importance of strong high school preparation.
- Make sure that high school staff, college staff, and students have regular and ongoing communication.

- Provide solid academic preparation in the K-12 system.
- Create strong partnerships with the local school districts. Establish a memorandum of understanding to clarify roles and responsibilities. Regularly exchange information, knowledge, resources and staff in a true K-16 partnership.
- Align high school and college curricula and assessments so that the same knowledge

and skills across institutions are emphasized.
- Coordinate with high school teachers, articulating high school and college content areas.
- Allow students to take placement exams in high school so that they can prepare for college and understand college-level expectations. Then offer support to those students who need help.
- Reward high-performing students by enabling them to begin college work.
- Expand successful dual or concurrent enrollment programs between high school and college to include all students, especially minority and low-income students, and ensure their success.
- Coordinate with K-12 education reform efforts that help prepare students for college.
- Connect data systems across institutions so that each can identify and address student needs and issues.
- Sequence undergraduate general education requirements so that appropriate senior-year courses are linked to post-secondary general education courses.
- Improve articulation between the community college and four-year institutions given that Hispanic students' pathways to college differ from those of other ethnic groups.
- Provide extra time and help for high school students who are struggling in making transitions.
- Create a unique niche for SAC that distinguishes it from the other nearby community colleges and four-year universities.

- Use unconventional recruitment strategies that include direct communication with community groups rather than conventional school settings.
- Use media (print, radio and television) to expand reach to non-traditional students and their families.

- Remember that many Hispanic students have myths and misconceptions about their eligibility for financial aid and are unaware of the financial aid that may be available, much less how to navigate the system.
- Be aware of Hispanic students' responsibilities and obligations (work, economic, family) and increase financial aid to lessen their struggle.
- Be aware of Hispanic students' work ethic and aversion to building up debt, and adjust financial aid as needed.

- Establish support systems for students who are historically underserved. Design and implement strategies to address their inexperience with a college environment.
- Include multiple components in the support system, including counseling, mentoring, tutoring, enrichment activities, financial aid and academic support.
- Tailor services to students' age and experience.
- Provide incentives such as waiving a course fee at the university if a student is enrolled in nine hours at the community college.
- Waive test fees and be flexible with test dates.
- Create powerful peer student and faculty support systems that address academic and social support needs.
- Connect students early in their academic careers with local employers.
- Ensure that students take courses as a cohort so students can relate to each other's

age and experience.

Perhaps the most important message heard during many of the focus group discussions related to expectations and the need for institutions to "live the expectation that all students will succeed."

If institutions begin with the expectation that all students are college bound and that their families value education and achievement, then many barriers to post-secondary education can be removed.

Then college access and success becomes an issue of identifying and removing institutional barriers and deterrents for students and their parents. This research provides some of the approaches and strategies that colleges and universities are using to change the status quo in recruitment, retention and graduation of Hispanic students.

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