

# Cracks to Craters: College Advising During COVID-19

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*The COVID-19 (coronavirus disease–2019) pandemic disrupted the education of students across the globe in the spring of 2020. Students who were previously at most risk for falling behind their peers and through the cracks because of academic, financial, racial, and/or generational disadvantage faced a wide range of additional obstacles in the pursuit of their college goals. This qualitative study sought to uncover postsecondary advising implications for students through the perspectives of near-peer college advisers (n = 23) serving in high-need schools in two different states as intensive, in-person advising was forced to adapt to virtual formats. Two key thematic findings reveal that advisers faced new communication challenges and existing systemic barriers for marginalized students became even larger. For seniors who had not yet made final postsecondary decisions or who had remaining to-dos, the impact of school closures and distanced advising may have fatally widened existing cracks in the path to college.*

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THE path to college for low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students has been plagued by documented potholes for decades (Roderick et al., 2011). However, school closures induced by the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease–2019) pandemic in the spring of 2020 meant that many of these obstacles became insurmountable. Data have consistently emerged that indicate a disastrous portrait of COVID’s impact on college enrollment for the class of 2020, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds. While overall first-year enrollment was down in the fall of 2020 by 16% compared with that of 2019, community colleges saw a 23% drop in enrollment for first-time students (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020b). Additionally, postsecondary enrollment from low-income high schools was down 33% compared with the enrollment during the fall of 2019 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020a). This article will explore the forced advising changes COVID-19 school closures caused in the spring of 2020 and the resulting implications to students on the precipice of college enrollment by illustrating how the persistent systemic cracks students face accessing college evolved into even larger challenges than ever before.

## Literature Review

College application, financing, and enrollment processes are complex and often overwhelming to students, especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds. These students face a range of academic, financial, social, cultural,

informational, and psychological barriers accessing college (Ardoin, 2018; Clayton & Means, 2018; Cochrane & Ahlman, 2017; Perna, 2005; Roderick et al., 2011). Such barriers translate into college enrollment and completion rates that are consistently lower for students from low-income, rural, and racially minoritized backgrounds compared with peers from suburban, high-income, and majority White schools (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018; US Department of Education, 2015). The following brief literature review will highlight critical challenges students have long faced receiving financial aid as well as key advising strategies that have evolved in recent years to help address crucial gaps toward expanding college access.

### *Barriers to Receiving Critical Financial Aid*

Accessing financial aid has been a persistent need for students as the cost of college at public 4-year institutions has increased by 81% and increased by more than 50% at community colleges from 2000 to 2015 (College Board, 2015). For low-income students, state, federal, and institutional aid is often available, but the process of applying for and receiving aid is often a barrier itself (Davidson, 2015). Taylor and Bicak (2020) found first-generation students particularly struggle with jargon, which contributes to issues completing the critical Federal Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Recent data indicate that FAFSA completions may have been even more of a barrier to college enrollment in 2020 than ever before. Year-over-year percent change in



FAFSA completions was down by 3.3% as of filing deadlines in June 2020. In Title I eligible schools where students are most likely to receive critical federal financial aid, FAFSA completion rates were down by 4.5%, and in small town and rural schools, year-to-year completion rates were down 4.8% at the end of June. These percentages translate to hundreds of thousands of students who were likely eligible for financial aid but did not apply or fully complete their applications.

For those who do complete the FAFSA, many are selected for verification, a complex process where 42% to 66% of applicant families must prove their financial need through additional documentation, creating even larger barriers for the neediest and most vulnerable students (Oster et al., 2020). A recent investigation by *The Washington Post* provides a decade of evidence showing that low-income students of color are disproportionately selected for FAFSA verification (Douglas-Gabriel & Harden, 2021). Illustrating the burden further, a study by Cochrane et al. (2010) found that of those who did not complete verification, 62% of students incorrectly thought that the financial aid process was finished and an additional 15% knew that it was not but did not know how to complete the process.

Another barrier to students and parents completing the FAFSA, verification, and enrollment processes is access to quality internet service. Recent data indicate that 12% of K–12 households do not have internet access through a computer, with 6% having access only through a phone and another 6% with no access at all (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Disaggregated data paint a starker contrast with 11% of Black, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, or Native American students and 13% of low-income students having internet only through a phone. Additionally, one-third rural students lack broadband internet access at home (Anderson, 2019). Even when access is possible, cost is often a barrier for many households, an issue that is exacerbated during times of economic hardship.

### *Advising Support for Students*

Consistent findings indicate that historically marginalized students are dependent on teachers, counselors, and other nonfamilial adults in making postsecondary education (PSE) plans (Ahn, 2010; Avery et al., 2014; Ceja, 2000; Center for Law and Policy, 2015). As a result, a growing body of research suggests that mentoring/coaching/advising/counseling for college access makes a positive difference for historically disadvantaged students (Carrell & Sacerdote, 2013; Le et al., 2016). Sustained, relational, and intentional advising has been found especially impactful for helping students overcome barriers to postsecondary enrollment (Avery, 2013; Barr & Castleman,

2018; Bos et al., 2012; Carrell & Sacerdote, 2017). Successful mentoring not only addresses student instrumental needs along the college-going pathway but also supports students' important identity explorations and development as well (Naughton, forthcoming).

New research suggests that elements of virtual advising may address important informational gaps (Bakert et al., 2020) and can support student enrollment at higher quality institutions (Gurantz et al., 2020); however, virtual tools have not successfully replaced engaged and intensive support provided through interpersonal relationships and in-person mentoring. For example, elements of distanced or virtual advising (e.g., text messages and reminders) have shown mixed results despite creative and innovative advances in technology (Castleman & Page, 2015; Sullivan et al., 2019). In fact, a recent study with 80,000 students found that one-way text-based messages about financial aid made no impact on college enrollment, although two-way message exchanges offered promise (Bird et al., 2021).

Another recent study found little impact of virtual advising on college enrollment with socioeconomically disadvantaged students and concluded that historically marginalized students require more intensive support to matriculate (Phillips & Reber, 2019). The authors speculate that such students face barriers that are best met with in-person advising interventions because the transition process is simply too overwhelming to navigate without intense support (Phillips & Reber, 2019). Carrell and Sacerdote (2017) similarly conclude that “many students at the margin of failing to apply and attend need direct in-person help and hand holding” (p. 149).

Throughout the late spring and summer months of 2020, colleges announced continuous changes in admission and enrollment policies to account for the disruption to in-person testing and orientation availability as well as deposit and registration deadline extensions. The changes were so extensive that the National Association for College Admission Counseling created an online tool to collect and disseminate the changes for more than 850 postsecondary institutions across the country. For first-generation students without quality internet service, and students already burdened with overcoming barriers getting through high school, the need for support and guidance only intensified given these rapidly changing policies and timelines. Given the ongoing systemic and emerging barriers for students historically marginalized in the college-going process, this study explored what happened to college-intending students and advising strategies when these critical relational, in-person support systems were shuttered due to abrupt school closures.

### **Method**

This qualitative study sought to uncover postsecondary advising implications for students through the perspectives

of near-peer college advisers ( $n = 23$ ) serving in 24 high schools (one rural adviser served two schools) across one Midwestern and one South Atlantic state. Near-peer advisers in this context are recent college graduates, generally 4 to 7 years older than the high school seniors they advise. Due to the unprecedented nature of COVID-19 school closures and the need for a better understanding of postsecondary advising efforts and outcomes within this context, the present study utilized grounded theory methodology. The primary research questions framing this study include the following:

**Research Question 1:** How did high schools and college advisers adapt PSE support and services as a result of COVID-19 closures?

- a. What methods of distance advising (e.g., email, phone, video, social media, etc.) were utilized and what methods were the most/least effective?
- b. How did different school contexts affect college advising methods and tools?

**Research Question 2:** How did K–12 school closures affect student PSE goals, plans, and actions?

#### *Participants and School Context*

All advisers ( $N = 90$ ) serving in two statewide chapters of the national College Advising Corps (CAC) were invited via email to participate in the study, and 23 advisers (18 females; 5 males) accepted the invitation. Participating advisers were recent college graduates serving in their first (52%) or second (48%) year with their CAC chapter. Unlike district teachers and counselors, CAC advisers generally have one main goal within their partner high school—to help facilitate a college-going culture by guiding and supporting seniors to their best-fit postsecondary institution or pathway (Clayton, 2019). CAC advisers supplement and complement the counseling efforts at their schools, sometimes working in close collaboration with one or more counselors but often serving as the primary or only postsecondary contact for students while counselors focus on other duties. It is important to note for this study that advisers serve in schools but are not school district employees. As AmeriCorps members, advisers are typically supervised by university staff who manage the CAC program and by one or more school staff who provide varying levels of guidance and support.

While serving the whole school, CAC advisers work most closely with seniors because of the immediate needs and deadlines related to the college application, financial aid, and enrollment processes. Protocol for these two statewide CAC chapters generally required advisers to meeting with 100% of their seniors one-on-one once or twice each semester, but many students develop strong relationships and end their senior year with dozens of documented meetings. In addition to meeting with students individually, advisers facilitate workshops and presentations for students

and parents about multiple processes (e.g., applications, financial aid, scholarships, etc.) as well as activities such as college fairs, campus visits, ACT/SAT registration and preparation (CAC, 2021).

CAC advisers serve as full-time near-peer mentors in some of the highest need public high schools nationally. Basic demographics of the 24 schools and more than 5,500 seniors served by this study's participating college advisers (all names are pseudonyms) are indicated in Table 1. The average free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) rate of 70% indicates advisers served in schools with high numbers of students from low-income (and often also first-generation) backgrounds. The average PSE going-rate of 51% also represents a need for college advising and support since this average is 10% to 15% below both states' average PSE going-rate with some schools 20% to 30% below their state average. Additionally, participating advisers served in schools from two states where an average of 15.5% of all households did not have access to broadband internet and over 49% of rural students in both states did not (Federal Communications Commission, 2016).

#### *Data and Analysis*

All data were collected in May 2020 through semistructured video interviews ( $M = 63$  minutes) with advisers. Four additional interviews with CAC program staff were conducted after all adviser interviews were complete. These interviews were not included in data analysis or coding but served as a form of triangulation and member checking.

Grounded theory methods were utilized to analyze and explore the experiences and perspectives of college advisers, as these methods are useful in the exploration of a social phenomenon of which little is currently understood (Charmaz, 2006). Audio from interviews was transcribed verbatim, and data analysis was conducted using NVivo software in a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, open and inductive coding was utilized to create central categories. These categories were combined through a process of axial and selective coding to create emergent themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Throughout the interviewing and analysis process, reflective memoing informed evolving codes and major themes.

#### **Results**

The dramatic move to physically close schools in March of 2020 meant that schools effectively “froze” student grades in the middle of the spring semester. According to advisers, although students were often offered physical packets of work, virtual class meetings, and access to teachers and staff, they were generally not held accountable for completing assignments unless they wanted or needed to improve their grades. For seniors whose

TABLE 1

*Schools Served by Participating CAC College Advisers*

Urban	Suburban	Rural	School districts	Average FRPL rate	Schools with 100% FRPL	Average PSE-going rate	Average senior caseload
8	3	13	22	70%	8	51%	230

*Note.* CAC = College Advising Corps; PSE = postsecondary education; FRPL = free or reduced-price lunch.

traditional celebratory milestones (e.g., prom, graduation, award nights) were cancelled or significantly delayed until later in the summer, such a scenario often enabled a “checked-out-”of-school attitude advisers contended with as they continued to serve as virtual mentors. As a result of these circumstances, two major themes that offer important insights into the impact of COVID-19 school closures on college advising with low-income and first-generation students emerged from the analysis: (1) advisers faced new challenges connecting to students and providing effective virtual advising and (2) existing systemic barriers to accessing postsecondary education became even larger for students.

#### *Theme 1: New Communication Challenges Inhibited Effective Virtual Advising*

According to advisers, when COVID concerns abruptly closed schools in mid-March, many schools indicated to students and staff that the shift would be temporary and did not make immediate plans to accommodate a fully remote educational experience for the remainder of the year and beyond. Only one school in this study had previously provided opportunities for fully online coursework, although many students had some exposure to Google classroom. Additionally, school information systems typically included parent phone numbers, but access to student cell phone numbers was rare. As a result, advisers consistently struggled to make contact with students after schools physically closed their doors, even students whom they had typically seen in their offices daily. For young, generally tech-savvy near-peer advisers, the shift to distanced advising created both challenges and opportunities to engage with students using creative platforms. However, the ability to use various tools varied widely across schools, and technology accessibility problems often made it difficult to meaningful reach, interact, and support students in the transition from high school to postsecondary education.

*Available Communication Methods Often Limited Student Contact.* In the rapid shift from in-person to remote education, school communication protocols did not often allow creative or proactive contact with students or parents. Schools often relied on email to connect with and push out information to students and parents, but advisers quickly

found that this traditional method of communication was not very effective for engaging students who needed support the most.

*School Policies Prevented the Use of Effective Communication Tools.* While the unprecedented nature of the pandemic hit every industry differently, K–12 or schools faced unique hurdles in the move to virtual education because of the need to protect minors no longer in their buildings while continuing to support their emotional, academic, and social needs from a distance. As a result, many schools and districts created new policies with dramatically different approaches. Across 24 schools and 22 districts served by advisers, some administrations prioritized student privacy and security while others pushed invasive and proactive contact. There were also a few schools whose leadership and administration offered no clear direction or policies for supporting student needs. Overall, these inconsistent approaches highlighted important new challenges faced in the shift to virtual college advising.

Many schools among the 22 districts represented in this study had preexisting prohibitions against making contact with students outside school, and the rush to push all interactions to a virtual format created wide disparities in the communication tools and methods advisers could use. Table 2 illustrates some of the restrictions that persisted or were put in place between March and May of 2020. Four schools (17%) prohibited advisers from calling students or parents for any reason, and three schools (13%) prohibited advisers from texting students or parents. One school indicated that no one-on-one contact with students was allowed in any format (phone, email, text, etc.). Seven schools (29%) had no restrictions in place, but advisers were not always familiar or comfortable utilizing possible platforms like Instagram.

When advisers were asked to assess how many students they had successfully made contact with by May, many advisers, especially those who had limited tools available, expressed despair. Mya, an adviser serving an urban school with 400 seniors estimated with exasperation:

I would probably say at least 70% I’ve heard nothing from. Probably 15% I hear from pretty consistently. Then I have the 15% of others who when they need something, they’re not afraid to email or they’ll send a meeting request.

A similar pattern of not hearing from most students emerged for advisers across schools. However, the quality of

TABLE 2  
*Communication Methods Advisers Allowed to Utilize*

Communication method	No. of advisers who were allowed to use (%)
Email (student school account or parents)	23 (96)
Google Voice no. for calling and/or texting	15 (63)
Texting tool (Remind, Google Voice, or CAC tool)	14 (58)
Video tool (Zoom, Canvas, Google Classroom) <sup>a</sup>	12 (50)
School Facebook or Twitter accounts	9 (38)
Adviser managed Instagram account	7 (29)

<sup>a</sup>Video conferencing totals account for availability at any time during closure (many schools changed policies in both directions) and often required caveats (e.g., another staff, no recording, etc.)

TABLE 3  
*Primary Communication Method Used by Advisers*

Communication method	No. of advisers who utilized it as primary tool (%)
Email	10 (43)
Phone calls to students and parents	3 (13)
Social media	3 (13)
Texting	2 (9)
No primary combination	5 (22)

contact also demonstrated concerning patterns because even if students made contact, almost no adviser felt that they were able to fully engage with more than 30% of their students and most estimated average response rates around 10% to 20%. For advisers who were limited in communication strategies, the inability to provide critical assistance exacerbated known challenges in the transition to college, as described by Charlotte, a rural adviser serving a school with nearly 400 seniors:

My school has a pretty big percentage of students that say they're going to go to community college but never matriculate, and this time around I think it's even worse because I cannot contact them, I cannot intervene with them, and even the counselor can't intervene with them.

Although not being able to contact students at all was rare, advisers struggled to provide proactive, timely assistance to students they would have normally seen in-person. Advisers who were able to utilize multiple forms of communication often targeted students with overlapping communication tools. For example, it was common for advisers who could use multiple tools to first send mass or individual emails, then following up with texts to those they did not get a response from, and then make phone calls to remaining students and/or parents. Table 3 indicates the primary method of contact utilized by advisers, sometimes because it was the only tool available but sometimes because advisers discovered their most effective strategy after weeks of varied attempts.

There was no clear “best” strategy that advisers found for connecting with the bulk of their students because what

might work for some students did not work for others. Additionally, depending on the support needed, advisers found that some strategies were more meaningful than others. For example, Charlotte recounted, “I think that text is probably the most accessible, but there’s something that cannot be captured in a text that you can do with your voice and just talking to them.”

*Technology and Internet Issues Widened Gaps in Student Support.* In the unexpected transition from in-person to remote schooling, students across the United States faced internet and technology issues, but these struggles were even more pronounced for students from rural and low-income backgrounds. Of the 24 schools whose advisers participated in this study, 50% provided Chromebooks for every student prior to school closures and another eight schools (33%) attempted to distribute additional devices after schools closed. Five schools (21%), which were all rural, did not make any attempt to provide or distribute devices in the spring of 2020. However, devices themselves were often not enough because of gaps in internet availability. Ten schools (42%) attempted to distribute internet hotspots to students who indicated a need, with another six (25%) transforming school parking lots or school buses into hot spots. Eight (33%), all rural or suburban schools, did not provide any internet assistance for students and four urban schools relied solely on provider discounts and student creativity (e.g., business parking lots) for internet access.

Internet connectivity challenges created additional college access problems for students because they became

physically and figuratively disconnected from the very professionals positioned to provide support and struggled to complete important tasks from home. Multiple advisers described the difficulty students faced in accessing reliable internet and the extreme effort students had to make just to connect for basic assistance. Naomi, a first-year adviser serving two rural schools, described the widening support gap caused by technology issues:

A lot of them say, "I don't have internet, I can't do this." I had one student that had to drive over to the library to use her laptop to just get on a call with me. Of course, they don't want to connect with me because it means they have to get out of their house and drive somewhere to access the internet . . . They were in the parking lot and they had siblings in the back of the car and things like that . . . It's so difficult and not very appealing to do college access stuff right now.

*Virtual Communication Methods Failed to Meaningfully Engage Students.* Typical in-person advising methods used at school rely heavily on student physical proximity. At school, advisers can reach out to students who need extra support, but do not often ask for it, through passes, appointments, and tracking students down. Advisers commonly have "frequent flyers" who stop in for daily help but also strategize to offer proactive outreach to students who may be more reluctant to ask for assistance. Such an approach is by design and one of the hallmarks of the CAC strategy to position near-peer advisers within school buildings full-time. Unfortunately, since students were not physically or even virtually attending classes in the final weeks of the 2020 school year, advisers faced significant hurdles in making contact and providing crucial proactive support. Naomi voiced the impact of such a contrast:

It's a lot harder to get them individually because when I'm in the building, I just go and grab them from their classroom. I say, "Hey, you got to do X, Y, and Z. Come with me, let's do it" and it's done. [Virtually] it's harder to wrangle them because a lot of them don't have internet access. They don't have personal laptops and just getting things done is so much harder . . . As for the emails, they don't necessarily read them but at least when I was in person, I could tell them, "Hey, read this email" or "Hey, did you do this? Did you read this?" Then we'd get things sorted out.

Although email and internet-based tools offered mixed results, text messaging offered promise to some advisers because students could access messages without needing internet access. However, sending text messages to cell phones required knowing student phone numbers and only four schools or advisers had collected senior cell numbers prior to COVID closures, with another 10 aggressively trying to collect them before the end of the year. Some schools used the Remind app, which used student cell numbers while hiding them for a level of privacy, but student response rates varied dramatically. Reece, an adviser serving in an urban

school with roughly 120 seniors, described a losing effort on this front:

We were trying to use text messaging. We use an app called Remind for texting them. We were trying to text them, schedule appointments from the get-go, just to check in with everybody, but we didn't get a response from that. Probably less than 30% of the senior class [responded].

Generally, delays between text and email exchanges frustrated advisers who noticed a stark contrast compared with what in-person interactions and assistance would have facilitated. Adviser after adviser recounted the frustration they felt while trying to provide support virtually. Amber, an adviser serving an urban school with 130 seniors, described her struggle:

Before if a student were to come into my office and needed help talking about their options or they just don't know something . . . we can talk about it, we can make a list, we could call the right people together . . . versus now they send me a text or email . . . I may respond a little later. Then they respond a few hours later because maybe they are at work . . . It just makes it so much harder to help them.

One of the reasons why virtual advising struggled was because of the ongoing need to build relationships with students, many of whom are often still guardedly debating going to college at all in the spring of their senior year. For advisers who had established working relationships with students, virtual communication tools sometimes allowed relation-driven mentoring to continue, but for students who did not yet have those relationships when schools closed, advisers noted a difficult challenge communicating care and compassion. Nathan, an adviser serving an urban school with nearly 400 seniors, shared,

It's hard to do over email because you can't read my body language . . . through email I have to sound a little bit more robotic and you can try to sound empathetic through email, but please. It's just not the same.

Allison, an adviser serving in a rural school with just more than 100 seniors recalled the impossible task of giving a student bad news about the reality of his intended PSE plan virtually. She recalled, "I told him, 'That's not how it works.' But we don't have the kind of relationship where I can sit him down and explain through texts that [his plan] is not a reality."

*Social Media and Instagram Offered Promising Results.* The one communication method students seemed the most eager to engage with was Instagram. The five advisers who used Instagram to directly message students found students to be much more responsive to these exchanges. Advisers considered multiple reasons why students were more accessible via Instagram and found the application's tracking and

activity features especially helpful. Charlotte used Instagram as her primary method of communication and explained,

There's a level of accountability because I can see if they've read it, and I can see when they've been active. They can see when I've been active . . . They know when I've been active and stuff, and that seems to help because we can connect at the same time.

Tracking activity for effectiveness was possible because students were often active on Instagram, as Talia, an adviser whose suburban district quickly created a policy prohibiting messaging students through the app emphatically declared, "They're on there every second of the day!" As a result, the five advisers who used Instagram adapted their communication efforts for maximum interaction and impact. Charlotte described her strategy, "I get it straight to my phone, so I can just text them back really quickly. Because it's usually not a big thing. It's usually something that could be answered pretty quickly, so they get help right away." Getting help right away was important because advisers noted that delays of hours or days in between exchanges slowed down the progress in completing important to-dos or sometimes even meant that students disappeared completely.

Using Instagram to respond to student questions quickly and in real time mimicked the immediate assistance and support students commonly accessed at school with quick, drop-in or hallway conversations. At school, students could access support for both major or minor questions through quick passing-period exchanges or scheduled advising appointments. In contrast, after school closures, many students seemed to avoid making virtual appointments or sending a detailed email and therefore missed out on professional assistance. When asked why Instagram was different from emailing these same questions, experience suggested to advisers like Charlotte that students simply would not send such an email "because they're quick questions . . . and they say they feel they have to be formal [to email] or it has to be something important." Talia also explained, "it was easier for them to just ask a question on the go instead of spending time on the phone with me or knowing how to operate Zoom." Since "quick" in-person questions commonly open the door to more lengthy discussions and answers, the shift to virtual advising meant that students who felt that questions needed to be significant potentially missed opportunities for important advising.

Kiara, an adviser serving a large rural school with 330 seniors, captured the worry from many advisers about a lack of contact with her students because she knew that they had questions but also knew that they did not know how or what to ask:

Students have a lot of questions, but they don't know what questions to ask. They're in a boat that they've never been in, college is something that's completely new to them. It's just like, "What questions do I ask before I get there if I don't even know what it's like?"

For Kiara and all the advisers interviewed, not having in-person contact and real-time access to their students represented the most pressing and dispiriting outcomes from COVID school closures. Although these advisers missed their near-peer mentoring relationships with students, most frustrations were inspired from fear about how the loss of meaningful communication would affect students as they continued to navigate the path to college.

### *Theme 2: Existing Challenges to College Access Intensified*

For large numbers of low-income and first-generation seniors, the last weeks of the academic year are crucial to the college-going process because it is such an important time for final decisions and enrollment steps. As a result of school closures and the shift to virtual advising, seniors faced more challenges because they were tasked with finishing these required last steps at a distance, while managing both misunderstandings and misinformation.

*School Closures Created Barriers for Support at a Critical Time.* Intensive advising during the last semester of high school is particularly critical for low-income and first-generation students who often need help finalizing their FAFSA applications and verification requests, applying for scholarships and loans, interpreting award letters, signing up for and attending enrollment orientations, and so on. Although advisers estimated that 10% to 15% of their college-intending seniors were fully on top of remaining tasks and decisions, they all shared concerns for the remaining majority of students who were now tackling complex decisions and to-dos from a distance. Leah, an adviser serving a small urban school with large numbers of immigrant families summarized the key issue as, "I think the big thing that's missing for my students is someone that can sit them down and make them check all those boxes." Especially for many first-generation students, sitting down with a counselor or adviser in the spring (and even summer) is critical to successfully matriculating in the fall.

When schools closed, advisers found that students still in the financial aid pipeline faced crippling obstacles that were exacerbated by a lack of contact. Derrick, an adviser who served a large suburban school with more than 300 seniors described the common situation, "The students that we keep seeing are not the students we need to see . . . the ones that we continue to see are the ones who probably need the least help because they're already pretty squared away." Although students are generally eligible for more aid if they submit the FAFSA by state deadlines in early spring, every adviser indicated that they knew of students who had started but not completed or not yet started the FAFSA when COVID forced schools to move online. Without reliable internet or computers at home (and with public libraries shuttered too), many advisers recounted distressing student and parent stories trying to complete the

FAFSA on smartphones, in fast-food parking lots, and even through calling the government to have physical forms mailed to them. Although a few advisers found success walking through the FAFSA virtually by sharing screens to provide quality assistance, most shared a constant concern for students who they knew needed help finishing but with whom they now had little to no contact.

*Community College Enrollment Barriers.* In typical years, because large numbers of students from CAC high schools attend local community colleges, introductory orientations and enrollment sessions are physically held at the high school or through campus visits where multiple community college staff spend the day at the high school or buses transport students directly from the high school to the community college. These spring activities allow students who are fully committed and those who may be just deciding to pursue postsecondary education to jump onto the college-bound path. COVID school closures fully cancelled these events at 10 of the 24 high schools in this study, leaving hundreds of students to navigate placement tests, advisor scheduling systems, vital enrollment paperwork, course selections, and a variety of other tasks without in-person assistance. Consequently, advisers described a range of minor challenges that easily overwhelmed students unfamiliar with higher education structures and systems. Leah, whose language-diverse urban school served just under 100 seniors, recounted the prevalent struggles of students trying to enroll and her inability to guide them from a distance:

There's basically a 10-minute video they have to watch . . . They have to log in to "Navigate," which a lot of them don't know how to do, or they don't remember their accounts. Then they have to set up an appointment. There's a LinkedIn Navigate place where they can set up an appointment with an advisor. But they don't know how to pick an advisor . . . They have all these initial problems . . . and then I think they get confused on who they're supposed to talk to and I can't help them because I can't get into the system.

Struggles helping students navigate the community college enrollment systems from a distance were common for advisers across all 24 schools. As a result, providing timely, sensitive support over email, text, or even a screen caused previously existing barriers to become even more challenging for students. Charlotte contrasted a common scenario pre-COVID where she coached students how to advocate for themselves when contacting the local community college but post-COVID found little success in providing virtual support:

Our local community college requires that they not be on speakerphone and that they call individually. They won't pick up a school number . . . but I usually will sit in there and pass them notes on what they need to say, or just practice with them what they need to say on the phone, and have them do it. Because if I just sit there and do what I'm doing right now and provide links, it just does not help them. They won't call on their own.

Emailing students links and information about enrollment steps and actions was common for advisers but tremendously ineffective. Jason, an adviser serving in a suburban school with 350 seniors, recalled that the local community college in town had "been reaching out to me saying that 90% of my students that are going to that school have not completed their orientation yet." Advisers were used to providing intensive direction to students and noted again and again that without that guidance students were often overwhelmed by the responsibility suddenly shifted to them and worried that these students would give up or simply avoid moving forward without more help in navigating the system.

*Misinformation and Missing Information Intensified Existing Barriers.* One reason why limited communication and contact with students as they completed their last steps or made postsecondary decisions was so troubling to advisers was because in brief responses to outreach, students frequently indicated misunderstandings about the process or their place along the PSE pathway. Without timely and meaningful follow-up engagement, advisers worried that students would suffer from misunderstandings and get even more overwhelmed by obstacles. A common concern across advisers was that students often thought they were all done and ready for enrollment, but advisers knew they were not because important requirements had not been completed. For example, advisers received replies to their outreach indicating that students were planning to go to a particular college, but advisers knew that the students had not yet finished the application to that school, been accepted, applied for financial aid, taken the ACT, and/or requested their high school transcripts. Since effective virtual advising was reliant on students replying, asking questions, or requesting guidance, advisers struggled to communicate with students who thought that they were done and, therefore, did not ask questions or seek assistance. Leah summarized her struggle trying to help students follow through with important steps from a distance:

Once they're accepted and they get their financial aid offer, I think they just think that they're done. It's been hard to keep reminding them that they have to actually log into those college emails and the student portals to get the [enrollment] information and next steps.

Adviser after adviser told similar stories of students misunderstanding their place in the admissions process, mistakenly thinking that they had been fully enrolled and just needed to show up for classes in the fall. Without seeing the institutional emails and letters themselves and guiding students through the next steps, advisers worried that students would fall through the existing cracks. Marissa, an adviser serving a rural school with 230 seniors, summed up the fear:

But a lot of my students, I would say, "Where are you going to school?" "Oh, I'm going to X." "Okay, have you been accepted?"

“Yes, I got my letter in the mail.” So, I check our [database]. We haven’t even sent the transcripts yet! What [the student] got was, “Hey, thanks for your application. Send me your transcripts.” . . . Those are the kids that I think will most slip through the cracks—the ones that think that they’ve got their acceptance, maybe got their orientation information but they don’t actually read it. They’re like, “I’m good.” Then it’s going to be fall and they’re going to be like, “Where are my classes?” But they don’t have classes.

Misinformation and missing information were especially concerning for students still in the process of completing financial aid applications. Advisers typically provide proactive assistance to students and parents selected for verification as students physically bring in and share acceptance and award letters from their intended institutions with advisers. However, without that step, advisers had no way to know who was selected for verification and students often did not understand the process for finalizing crucial financial aid packages. Katie, an adviser serving in a fast-growing rural area with just more than 200 seniors, illustrated the confusion her students faced working through the steps virtually:

I had a student send me her award letter last week. She was like, “This is my preliminary award. I’m supposed to get my finalized one after I do something, but I don’t know when that’s coming.” I’m like, “Okay. Have you given them the information they’re requesting?” She’s like, “No. I don’t even know what that is.” She had been selected for verification. I’m so glad that she sent me her award letter because she never would have known and she would have missed out on all kinds of aid.

Katie’s student was able to receive guidance and successfully complete the verification process because Katie noticed a red flag in the exchange and provided timely follow-up clarification. However, Katie and other advisers feared that for every one of these students, there were likely many others who overlooked or misinterpreted verification requests and therefore failed to provide the necessary additional documentation they needed to receive critical financial aid and successfully enroll at their intended institution.

Complex application, financial aid, and enrollment processes have long created barriers to college access for first-generation and low-income students. However, because of school closures due to COVID, existing barriers became even more burdensome for students managing the final steps of the process physically removed from the professionals who often helped them get started down the pathway.

### Discussion

Widespread and unexpected school closures due to COVID caused a long list of challenges for students, families, and educators in the spring of 2020. College advisers in this study felt largely ineffective at providing virtual support and guidance to students after schools closed because of new challenges in simply communicating with students. Advisers were discouraged by not being able to provide motivation,

reassurance, and encouragement to students through virtual tools and especially worried about students with whom they suddenly had no or limited ability to reach.

Like the rest of society, school administrators were unprepared for the swift shift to virtual education, and this resulted in no clear set of best practices to follow or consistency in approaches to support student needs from a distance. Advisers’ large, small, urban, rural, and suburban public schools all scrambled to manage remote education and triage student needs for food, learning, internet, and graduation requirements through different policies and practices. While some schools took a hands-off approach and allowed advisers to use any means necessary for supporting their seniors, others changed or implemented policies severely limiting adviser communication strategies.

When all tools were available, advisers could combine tools to reach as many students as possible, but these instances were rare, and most advisers spent their time pushing out information they were not convinced ever reached their neediest students. A small number of advisers found Instagram to be the most effective tool for engaging students in two-way dialogue, but this tool was also the most restricted. Other virtual conferencing tools, which offered meaningful opportunities to see and support students, required quality internet as well as shared availability during the day. Although texting did not require internet access, its impact was severely limited by the availability of student cell numbers. Finally, social media like Facebook and Twitter were not found to be effective at engaging with students or exchanging information, so many advisers used these platforms for pushing out reminders or announcements and celebrating student accomplishments.

Fundamentally, as high schools, postsecondary institutions, and the world became reactive in the spring of 2020, many students struggled to suddenly become proactive as they pursued and considered postsecondary pathways. Advisers, administrators, and educational leaders often had no clear answers for students about what to expect in the fall, but somehow, students were expected to push through the uncertainty to make important decisions. For students who were used to being proactive or who had parents or family members behind them to help advocate for answers and solutions, these patterns seemed to persist as advisers indicated that students who had already completed their to-do lists were likely to ask questions, seek guidance, and ultimately follow through with their postsecondary plans.

However, working in schools with the highest need for college access assistance in their state, college advisers’ students were predominantly not in this category. As a result, advisers predicted that the most significant impact of COVID school closures fell on those who had not yet made final, fully informed decisions or who had not yet finished navigating the final steps. These were students who had always been most at-risk for falling through the common cracks in the

PSE transition but who now had to attempt to overcome them without in-person support. These were students who may have always questioned their fit for college but relied on their adviser's encouragement and reassurance. These were students who often delayed making decisions and completing tasks because of fears or uncertainty (especially financial uncertainties). And these were students who were not always proactive about asking for help (or knowing what questions to ask). For these students, those who often pursue open-access, community college pathways, COVID school closures and the impact of distanced, virtual advising appear to have had devastating impacts on postsecondary enrollment.

Data suggest that some of these students may have opted out of college all together for a year or more; but while gap year experiences like travel, service, or internships offer financially secure students a chance to build their resumes and discover their interests, postponing college so as to work in order to support themselves and/or their families makes historically marginalized students as much as 64% less likely to complete a degree at all (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005).

Long-standing preexisting cracks in the transition to PSE have for years meant that up to 40% of low-income, college-intending high school graduates "melt" over the summer months, and these data indicate that low-income, racially minoritized, and students likely to enroll at community colleges are the most susceptible to this phenomenon (Castleman & Page, 2014). However, in the spring and summer of 2020, the cracks became even larger for these students, and many potentially found them to be impassable craters along the path to college.

### *Implications*

Students from the class of 2020 who did not matriculate because they could not financially support their PSE pathway, they failed to complete important to-dos, or they took time off to work and wait out uncertainties of the pandemic will all need proactive, intense outreach and support from PSE institutions to get back on their intended educational track. These students must be prioritized and supported by PSE institutions, policy makers, practitioners, educators, and their communities so that they do not become a lost generation of talent and possibility.

*Policy Implications.* Helping these students access PSE pathways must be a focus of economic recovery efforts so that educational and career options are widened, not narrowed. Resources should especially go toward community colleges, which enroll large percentages of students from low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized backgrounds and those students highlighted in this study who need support the most. Unfortunately, current trends indicate that states are instead directing stimulus funds to 4-year institutions (Whitford, 2021).

Fundamental obstacles inherent in both the systems of financial aid and of PSE enrollment must also be addressed as college advisers' experiences during the COVID pandemic demonstrate how fragile this system is, with potentially devastating effects to a generation of students. The current financial aid structure of federal, state, and institutional aid, coupled with private scholarships, require students to search, discover, apply, verify, accept, and finalize complex packages of financial support that inherently require support structures in navigation, explanation, and translation. Furthermore, enrollment systems at even open access higher education institutions require multiple steps, unique to each college, before walking into a first class. Both K-12 and higher education institutions have a responsibility to support the transition from high school to PSE, but access to higher education in the United States has long depended on supplemental support structures to balance inequities as students navigate complex application, financing, and enrollment processes. Stopgap measures and supplemental supports are not enough to fully bridge systemic gaps facing students with the most need.

*Implications for Practice and Research.* As the pandemic has continued to cause disruptions to in-person education, K-12 schools and programs have been forced to adapt and consider revised advising strategies and policies. CAC now offers a Virtual Advising Guide available online to support best practices and strategies for supporting students at a distance (<https://advisingcorps.org>). While this study supports the evidence that in-person, intensive advising is best for students who are most at-risk for falling through the cracks and not enrolling or matriculating to PSE, lessons learned from the past year of virtual schooling can provide valuable possibilities for maximizing outreach and providing effective guidance to students and parents.

The impacts of COVID on student PSE enrollment will require extensive, long-term research to fully understand the depth and breadth of student struggle and success. Research should continue to quantitatively and qualitatively explore the differences in PSE advising strategies and effectiveness, with a focused effort to investigate for whom particular approaches work best. The expansion of virtual advising provides important opportunities to aid students' PSE transitions, but intensive, in-person support also deserves in-depth attention to better understand diverse student needs for motivation and reassurance.

### *Conclusion*

This qualitative study sought to contribute important understandings around the impact of COVID-19 school closures on college advising for seniors in the class of 2020. Utilizing the perspectives and voices of 23 near-peer college advisers across two different states, findings indicated that

intensive postsecondary advising strategies generally did not effectively adapt to virtual formats. Advisers, whose schools predominately served students from low-income, first-generation, and/or racially minoritized backgrounds faced surprising new challenges in simply communicating with students. As a result, advisers described widening barriers to higher education that students faced without informed guidance—barriers that were especially pronounced for students who had not previously been proactive about their next educational steps or who had remaining decisions to make and tasks to complete.

In highlighting the widening cracks in the pipeline to college as a result of school closures, this study pressures policy makers, educators, and researchers to prioritize both the unique circumstances and challenges caused by a global pandemic and the pervasive problems and systemic cracks in the transition to higher education that have been plaguing the system for generations. This study was focused on the impact of COVID school closures on college advising, just one area with long-term consequences for students from historically marginalized backgrounds, but it illustrates how critical gaps and cracks throughout the system amplified and accumulated to become craters students had to overcome to access college.

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