



Summary of Awareness, Aspirations, and Motivations: Session One

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In conjunction with the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Midwest, Nicole Farmer Hurd facilitated a session on the role of aspirations, awareness, and motivation in encouraging college readiness among high school students. Hurd is the executive director of the National College Advising Corps (NCAC), an innovative program that works to increase the number of low-income, first-generation college and underrepresented students who enter and complete higher education. NACAC, headquartered at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, has partnerships with 17 higher education institutions across the country.

Hurd shared specific findings of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Practice Guide entitled, *Helping Students Navigate the Path to College: What High Schools Can Do*. The practice guide is a collection of evidence-based recommendations for use by educators addressing specific challenges such as increasing access to higher education for historically underrepresented student populations. Moreover, the guide undergoes rigorous external peer review and was written collaboratively by authors with specific expertise in college readiness and access issues. The guide structures recommendations by tests of the level of internal and external validity, ranging from low (direct evidence does not rise to the moderate or strong level) to strong (high internal and external validity). Hurd was careful to mention that none of the studies fall into the “strong” category. Rather, a randomized control study is currently under way at Stanford University; the results of which may enable researchers to make stronger inferences about causal relationships among nonacademic factors and college readiness.

Hurd outlined the following five recommendations in this session: (1) offering courses and curricula that prepare students for college-level work and ensuring that students understand what constitutes a college-ready curriculum by the 9th grade; (2) utilizing assessment measures throughout high school so that students are aware of how prepared they are for college and assisting them in overcoming deficiencies as they are identified; (3) surrounding students with adults and peers who build and support their college-going aspirations; (4) engaging and assisting students in completing critical steps for college entry; and (5) increasing families’ financial awareness and helping students apply for financial aid.

Hurd spent the majority of the session discussing cost-free ways for practitioners to implement strategies related to the third and fourth recommendations. Among them, she mentioned creating

a college-going club, implementing a decision day (a day in which students' college destinations are shared and celebrated at the school), and linking benchmarks in the college-going process such as completion of the FAFSA and submission of college applications in order to incentivize students to engage more fully in the college-going process. She also encouraged session participants to create a college leadership team comprised of staff, parents, counselors, and teachers. The goal of this group is to share in the responsibility of helping students prepare for college instead of allowing the burden to rest solely with guidance counselors, as is traditionally the case.

The session concluded with a discussion of roadblocks and lessons learned from the recommendations. Hurd encouraged policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to use data and analysis tools to assess the status of college readiness in their respective states and schools, foster an environment of collaboration, and think innovatively about ways to use aspirations, awareness, and motivation in facilitating the path to college.