



High School Adviser Creates a College-Going Culture to Encourage FAFSA Completion

College Advising Corps adviser Rekebak Lester was sitting in a meeting with administrators at Person High School in Roxboro discussing ways to encourage seniors to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA. One administrator explained how the FAFSA saved her college career. During her sophomore year in college, her parents' financial situation changed, threatening her chances to return for her junior year. Thanks to the FAFSA, she completed college.

The story sounded familiar to Rebekah. As a high school student in Texas, her mother told her that finding scholarships and other financial aid for college was her full-time job. So she attended a FAFSA night hosted by her school and completed the application, which paved the way for her to attend Duke University. She is now giving back by advising students on how they can make attending college a reality.

"In our community, there is a really high need to make college affordable," Rebekah says. At Person High School, 49% are students of color and 51% are from low-income households, groups that traditionally have not completed the FAFSA.

"The FAFSA let's students see that there are doors they can walk through," Rebekah points out. "Many of our students also go to college and return home after the first year because they don't know how to keep paying for it."

The financial aid, college application, and enrollment process can be overwhelming for any student, but it is especially difficult for lower-income and first-generation students. Yet, high school and community college advising programs are beyond their maximum capacity.

College Advisers Critical to FAFSA Completion

"We need more college advisers in our high schools," says Cris Charbonneau, myFutureNC's director of advocacy and engagement. "myFutureNC's collaborative partner College Advising Corps is filling this gap by placing in schools recent college graduates who are dedicated to helping students from lower income and first-generation households with completing the steps they need to attend and finance their postsecondary education."

Thirty-three percent of students from lower-income homes attend college compared to 58% of students with greater economic stability. College advisers are critical to closing this gap.

One reason for this discrepancy is access to college advisers who have time to create a "college-going" culture where it is expected that every student will pursue postsecondary education. At Person High School, part of creating this culture started with the teachers.

Rebekah wrote up the administrator's story without using their name and distributed it to teachers. Soon, they were posting it in their classrooms and on their doors, sending a clear signal to students that college is accessible to them.

College and career advisers also ensure students take the courses they need to attend college and provide information and assistance with the state's residential compliance forms, FAFSA, and college applications.

To help her students, Rebekah scheduled one-on-one sessions with students and their families at times that were convenient for them. She also used incentives to encourage them to meet with her and complete the FAFSA. Thanks to the increased efforts, the school's FAFSA completion rate increased by more than 19% compared to the previous year.

In North Carolina, only about three out of five high school seniors apply for federal aid and only two-thirds enroll in postsecondary programs within two years of graduation. Those rates are much lower for underrepresented students and those from rural counties.

To reach these students and close the attainment gap, schools and communities should increase their investment in and provide greater access to robust college and career advisers and mentors who can guide them on the pathway to college and career.

Learn more about how North Carolina is closing the attainment gap at myfuturenc.org.