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COMMUNICATION AND DATA SHARING BETWEEN K-12 AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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SUMMARY OF ISSUE

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) Faculty and Administrators Leadership Academy (FALA) tasked Group 4, comprised of faculty and administrators from community colleges in Southwest Virginia, with investigating communication and data sharing between K-12 and community colleges to identify best practices. This wide-ranging topic encompassed many efforts that impact student recruitment, retention and success in their postsecondary education. To prioritize the most pressing issues, Group 4 focused on recent system-wide findings and recommendations.

In 2016, the Virginia General Assembly directed the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) to review the VCCS, a process that had not been done since 1991. The JLARC report in 2017 stated that a relatively low percentage of community college students obtain a degree or credential (39 percent). It also found that community colleges serve a large percentage of at-risk students who may be older, part-time, low-income, the first in their family to attend college, and require remedial coursework in English and math. These students' educational outcomes typically are not as successful as those of other students (Joint Legislative Audit & Review Commission Report, 2017).

In addition to the JLARC report on student success findings among Virginia's Community Colleges, community colleges do not consistently ensure the quality of dual enrollment courses. It stated that dual enrollment programs do not appear to consistently save students time or money in their pursuit of bachelor's degrees.

To address these concerns, the JLARC report included VCCS implementation of the following executive actions:

- Develop a proposal for identifying high school students who are not prepared for college-level course work and actions that could be taken to improve college readiness.
- Develop standard criteria that colleges can use for identifying students who are at risk of not succeeding in community college and a standard policy for colleges to follow to ensure that the most at-risk students receive proactive, individualized, mandatory academic advising and other academic services.
- Require colleges to use recommended quality assurance practices for dual enrollment courses and disclose more information about the transferability of dual enrollment courses.

To meet the JLARC report's call to action regarding these items, strong communication and data sharing between Virginia's Community Colleges and their K-12 partners is essential. Through background literature research, surveys and interviews with key stakeholders, Group 4 members identified current practices in data sharing and communication, including successes and shortcomings.

Group 4's recommendations will provide concrete steps to improve communications and data sharing between Virginia's Community Colleges and their K-12 partners.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Communication and data sharing between colleges and K-12 partners is a challenging but essential process. According to M. Grady (2016) of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, “collaboration by K-12 and postsecondary educators can significantly improve data use, research, and analysis and thus enhance the cooperative activities proposed ... for a ‘shared transition zone.’” Such a shared transition zone between the senior year of high school and first year of college results in more students who are prepared to enter college and earn a post-secondary credential (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2014).

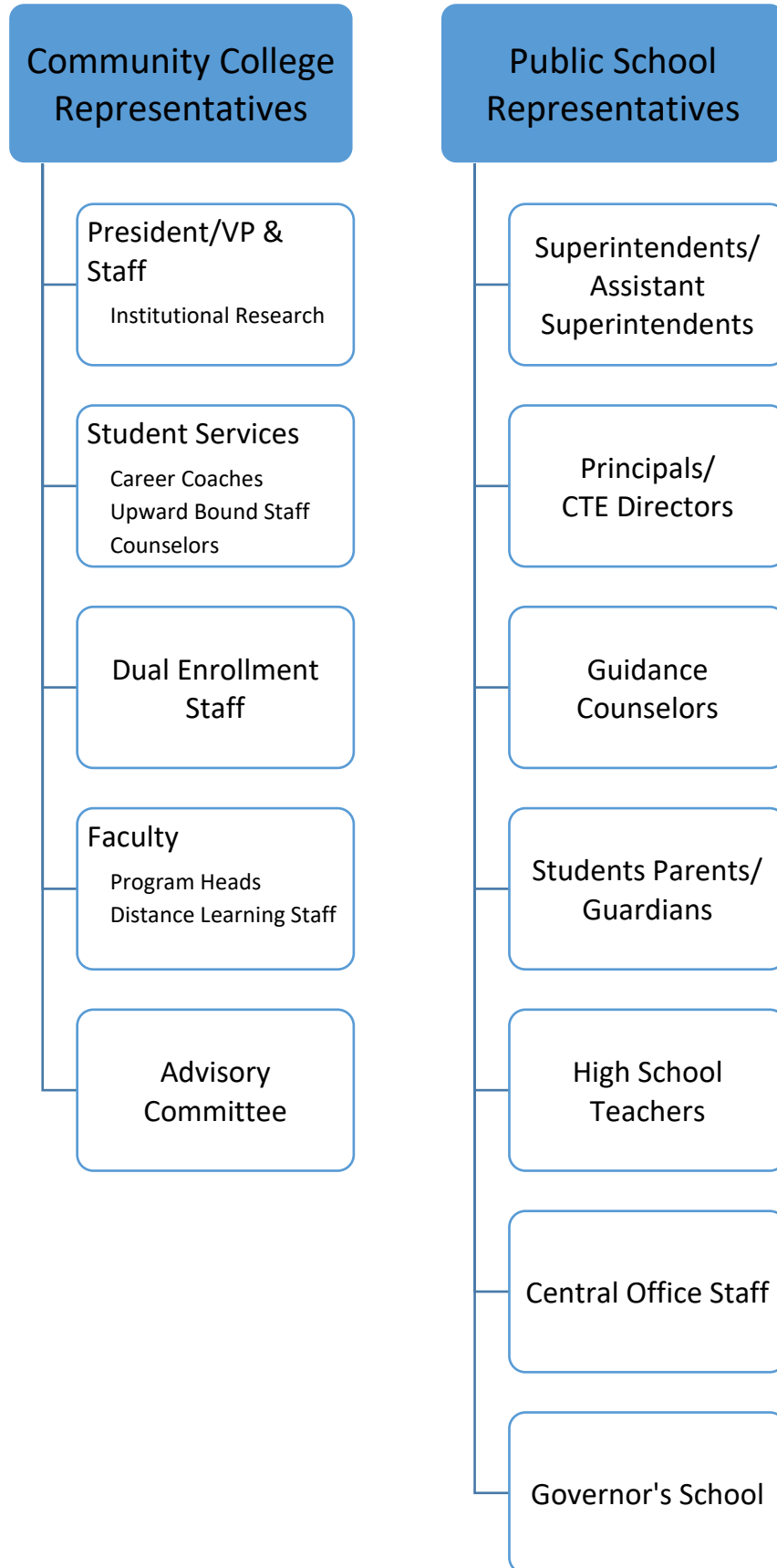
In 2012, California established a Student Success Task Force to establish recommendations to better support high school students’ transitions to college and careers. The task force’s first recommendation was that its 112 community colleges “collaborate with K-12 education to jointly develop new common standards for college and career readiness that are aligned with high school exit standards” (California Community Colleges Student Success Task Force, 2012). The task force suggested community colleges work with K-12 partners to establish assessments to evaluate “career readiness” and guide students’ programs of studies. With clearly defined pathways such as those provided in California, the route to success for at-risk students is achievable.

Another effort to determine college readiness nationally is the use of multiple measures for students rather than placement tests alone. A community college in North Carolina made the shift to multiple measures in 2013, using a hierarchy of GPA, college entrance exams like the ACT or SAT and finally placement tests as a last resort. Placement tests alone were not providing a true picture of a student’s abilities because “what it really measured was how students performed on a single day and whether or not they had prepared for the exam” (Smith,

2016). But what is important to note here is that in order to implement multiple measures, collaboration between community colleges and K-12 partners is essential.

Implementing multiple measures can present difficulties. For example, “States planning to link data across sectors must consider a number of challenges, including how to match student records, how to protect student privacy, and how the linked data will be used to inform educational programs that prepare students for higher education and the workforce” (Institute for Educational Sciences, 2014). The U.S. Department of Education has developed a toolkit to assist with data-sharing agreements and ensure they do not violate the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Although a toolkit exists, “Unfortunately, there is no single data-sharing model for communities to follow. There is, however, one thing communities can do to improve their chances for data-sharing success: build relationships” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Grady (2016) writes, “Building and sustaining data collaborations requires significant commitments of leadership, infrastructure, capacity, and staff—from both K-12 and higher education systems.” The key recommendations Grady developed to ensure high-quality and lasting collaboration include the following: 1) promote long-term leadership commitment; 2) invest in core operating capacity; 3) develop faculty incentives for participation; 4) expand partnerships to engage other agencies and community representatives.



CURRENT PRACTICES

Communication practices between community colleges and the public school systems in Southwest Virginia are working very well according to local public school superintendents. The primary communication flow seems to occur between high school guidance counselors and college dual enrollment staff but the lines of communication are fluid at several layers. For example, school superintendents tend to communicate with the college presidents; Assistant superintendents tend to communicate with college vice-presidents, and so forth. However, it does depend upon the issue or the type of information provided or sought. As seen in the communication flow chart, numerous offices with both organizations actively contribute to the process.

The exchange of information occurs on a regularly scheduled basis (College Application and FASFA Workshops) as well as on an as needed basis (college faculty conversations with dual enrollment faculty). College personnel are present almost daily in all of the area high schools between dual enrollment, student services including TRIO, plus college career coaches. The constant presence of college personnel in the high schools greatly contributes to the amount of information shared with high school guidance counselors and principals. Conversely, ongoing visits to college campuses by students and high school staff reinforce the connection. The subsequent relationships that develop between college and high school personnel ensure that issues and problems are solved in a timely fashion.

Another common practice that reinforces the relationships between the public schools and the community colleges in Southwest Virginia is the mutual desire and need to share the sometimes limited resources available to each. Perhaps this is the critical factor that promotes the need for strong relationships between these rural based organizations. Types of shared resources

include dual enrollment offerings, facilities, technology, personnel, institutional research, and others.

Feedback from the superintendents indicate they believe the current communication practices are working very well and the only change they would like to see would be to increase the formal meetings they have with the college presidents and vice-presidents. They would also like to have an updated directory of college personnel each year with contact information and especially would like to be informed when a new president is being hired. They appreciate being included in the planning process when the college is undergoing SACSCOC reaffirmation. Superintendents also appreciate when the conversation extends beyond dual enrollment. One superintendent asked for more information about a QEP Soft Skills initiative one college is implementing so that the high schools could begin to conduct similar activities with their students in order to promote a sense of continuity. These requests have been shared with the college personnel and will be implemented to improve upon the well-functioning current practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen Partnerships

The partnership between community colleges and local school agencies is one of the most, if not the most crucial, to successfully serving the community. These partnerships have been in place since the birth of the VCCS; and in order to ensure they remain strong, several steps need to be taken. Rarely do colleges allow involvement and membership of faculty, staff, and administrators from the K-12 partners on committees. Such involvement would provide several benefits, especially when hiring administrators, strategic planning, and initiative and

project implementation. One strategy to cultivate such a practice would be for each college to host bi-annual meetings with key stakeholders from the respective colleges and K-12 partners to enhance communication with intentionality. These purposeful and planned encounters will ultimately improve the consistency of communication and offer an improved platform for open dialogue.

Often, changes in leadership or structure for both VCCS schools and K-12 partners occurs, but is rarely shared or communicated without delays. A recommendation for consideration includes colleges inviting K-12 partners to participate on hiring committees for recruitments that have direct involvement at the K-12 partner school. Include key K-12 administrators in college wide notifications that directly impact or involve K-12 partners such as when leadership changes occur.

Data and Information Sharing to Proactively Implement Programs

Due to the ever-changing nature of education, institutions must have access to reliable, consistent data sources to implement programs and initiatives proactively. One such recent initiative for VCCS schools was multiple measures. In order to effectively implement this initiative, each college must have access to high school transcripts to accurately document and share graduates GPA for appropriate college level placement. Unfortunately, this does not occur in a standardized way across Virginia. Several schools in the Southwest request these documents annually, or only receive them from each individual student. It is recommended that in collaboration with the Department of Education, VCCS identify and implement a strategy to have these high school transcripts shared not only between local education agencies and VCCS schools, but all institutions of higher education in Virginia. Receiving transcripts upon

immediate graduation will ensure the ability to accurately advise and place students, as well as ensure compliance with federal regulation for issuing financial aid.

Sharing Information and Data

Sharing information, not only with employees of K-12 partners, but with students is most crucial. We need to explore ways to ensure that students who are enrolled in partner public schools understand the value, options, and pathways to community colleges. To do this, we recommend that VCCS partner with guidance counselors and career coaches embedded in the high schools to provide accurate information as counselors begin advising high school seniors early regarding college options. It is crucial that during these sessions, counselors have an accurate understanding of the mission, vision, offerings, and possibilities for community colleges in the area. It is recommended that during the bi-annual meetings, faculty, administrators, and student services staff share information and open discussions with high school counselors.

Sharing information should be a two-way path from the colleges to the K-12 partners. Each school within the K-12 system has valuable pieces of information that would greatly benefit the colleges. For example, if local school agencies are experiencing increased needs to serve students with physical, intellectual and learning disabilities or other mental health issues, colleges could benefit in planning for changes that result from transitional enrollment. We recommend building a communication loop for this type of information to be shared with leaders at the VCCS schools to implement initiatives, programs, and services to accommodate this potential need if those students plan to enroll at the colleges.

Connecting earlier with potential students would also be a huge asset to the community colleges. This occurs often with dual enrollment students who are already prepared for college

level course work, but we need to build opportunities to connect with students who do not fall into that category. For example, student with learning, physical, and mental challenges might not understand the comprehensive services and options that colleges provide. We recommend that each high school host a meeting for parents and students to learn about opportunities at the local community college. During this meeting, a break out session would be offered for Student Services staff to share information regarding how accommodative services are delivered in the college setting, process for submitting documentation, and other resources available. Not only could individualized sessions be offered for students with learning challenges, but also other sessions focused on career pathways, transfer institutions, athletics, and other services the college provides.

Dual Enrollment Strategies

There are already strong partnerships and lines of communication established between local school systems and the community colleges through dual enrollment offerings. However, there are areas where both can be improved. As is recommended by SACSCOC, developing regular communication between faculty in the discipline is crucial to ensuring quality instruction. We recommend that dual enrollment faculty be invited to division and/or department meetings on a regular basis. If it is not possible for all to attend, these meetings could be recorded, minutes shared, or a teleconference option provided. In addition to regularly providing opportunities for participation, we also recommend that each college perform an annual, internal evaluation of the effectiveness and quality of the dual enrollment program. Each college should conduct this evaluation in collaboration with all K-12 school systems they provide dual enrollment instruction

with. This collaborative effort will provide an ongoing opportunity for regular communication and data sharing.

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INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

- 1.) Dr. Don Stowers, Former Superintendent of Pulaski County, VA Schools on February 5, 2018 by Debbie Bond, NRCC
- 2.) Dr. Keith Perrigan, Superintendent of Bristol, VA City Schools on February 8, 2018 by Beth Page, VHCC
- 3.) Dr. Gregory Clark Mullins, Superintendent of Wise County, VA (Region VII) Schools on January 29, 2018 by Mitzi Jones, MECC
- 4.) Dr. Greg Brown, Superintendent of Russell County, VA Schools on February 20, 2018 via email survey with Brian Wright, SVCC.
- 5.) Mr. George Brown, Superintendent of Tazewell County, VA Schools on February 21, 2018 by Brian Wright, SVCC.

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