This chapter discusses the collaboration between a national college access program, the National College Advising Corps, and its research and evaluation team at Stanford University. In an effort to benefit other programs seeking to form successful data-driven interventions, we provide explicit examples of the partnership and present several examples of how the program has benefited from the data gathered by the evaluation team.

3

Lessons learned from a data-driven college access program: The National College Advising Corps

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Promoting college access and student success is an important policy goal to maintain an effective society and competitive economy. Too many academically able students are not enrolling in postsecondary education, and that comes at a cost of millions of unattained bachelor’s degrees across the nation. One of the documented causes of this problem is that many students do not have...

Each author contributed equally, and we determined author order randomly. Nicole Hurd is the executive director of the National College Advising Corps and contributed to the section on how NCAC uses evaluation data to drive program reform. The remainder of the authors make up the Stanford evaluation and research team.
the necessary information and support to navigate the complex college search, application, and selection processes. The college application process itself requires completing a complicated series of procedures that many students find bewildering. Furthermore, the financial aid application process has been described as a gauntlet presenting imposing barriers that many students struggle to overcome.

One of the major responses to this complexity has been the development of college access programs and interventions. These efforts work directly with students and their families to overcome the information and complexity obstacles to applying to and entering college. Although evaluations of these programs have produced varied results, recent and ongoing work suggests that helping students navigate these processes improve their educational outcomes. For instance, Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, and Sanbanmatsu demonstrate that providing assistance in completing the federal financial aid application improves college enrollment.

The National College Advising Corps (NCAC) is one such college access and success program currently active in nearly four hundred high schools across fourteen different states. The program's goal is twofold. First, it provides necessary information and support for students who may find it difficult to navigate the complex college admission process. Second, the advisers conduct outreach to underclassmen in an effort to improve the school-wide college-going culture.

The program partners institutions of higher education with underserved high schools to provide a recent college graduate as a full-time college adviser. The advisers work with high school students on a variety of college preparatory activities, such as the college search process, the application process, test preparation and registration, and financial aid applications. The program is a full school model in which the advisers work with any student who requests assistance as opposed to a cohort-based model in which the adviser only works with a subset of students from the school.

This chapter discusses our research team's multiyear collaboration with the National College Advising Corps. This collaboration
has successfully combined evaluating the program’s effectiveness with scholarly research that will contribute to the broader literature on college access. These studies will be helpful for both policymakers and practitioners as we move toward a more complete understanding of how best to support high school students making the transition to postsecondary education.

The chapter is structured as follows. We first describe the various data sources we compile and consider when evaluating how successful the program is at improving college enrollment and instilling a college-going culture in high schools. Then we turn to discuss the established partnerships between the evaluation and research team, national office, state program directors, and local schools. We also present summaries of the current research projects under study in coordination with the program evaluation. Finally, we describe how NCAC uses the data and findings from the research and evaluation team to improve their program.

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**Triangulation of data sources**

As we began collaborating to design an evaluation, we had to weigh the diverse interests of stakeholders and the diverse understanding among stakeholders of different types of evidence. For example, many of NCAC’s funders wanted to see qualitative data in the form of anecdotes. In contrast, other funders wanted quantitative, even causal, evidence. Different stakeholders had different levels of trust and comfort with different methods and sources of evidence. Some stakeholders did not trust the black box of quantitative analysis while others worried about the representativeness of qualitative data.

Our goal was that each stakeholder would learn from the evaluation. To make this happen, we elected to conduct the evaluation in multiple parts. First, we divided our team into three parts—one which would gather data through qualitative methods, particularly using interviews and observations conducted during site visits of selected schools; another which would focus on surveys of advisers...
and students; and yet another which would focus on administra-
tive data on subsequent college attendance (for example, data from
the National Student Clearinghouse). Each team used either or
both qualitative and quantitative methods depending on the data
source. Once each team was formed, we then proceeded with the
data collection aiming to triangulate the evaluation and to analyze
the key research questions with different methods and data. While
the teams shared data to facilitate triangulation of evaluation find-
ings and the development of research-focused inquiries, each team
aimed to provide a unique perspective based on the data they had
available.

By relying on both quantitative and qualitative social science
tools, we were able to examine the many facets of the program
and to provide both descriptive and causal evidence. Survey data
from high school students provide an account of participants’ col-
lege knowledge and preparation and how these may have changed
through interactions with the NCAC adviser. Survey data from
NCAC advisers allow us to examine the interactions advisers have
in their schools with colleagues and students and to explore the
impact of participation in NCAC on their own lives. Site visit data
afford a rich understanding of the role the advisers play in their
schools and the impact they have on their schools’ college-going
cultures. Data on subsequent college enrollment provide evidence
on changes in long-run outcomes. The combination of these mul-
tiple sources of data provides this evaluation with breadth and
depth.

**Student survey data**

The student survey gives NCAC an opportunity to track student
decisions with respect to college preparation activities at partner
high schools. We rely on these data to identify the specific steps
that students have taken to prepare for college. The survey also
provides insights into students’ preparation for college and moti-
vation to continue their education. The student survey also allows
NCAC to identify potential levers where advisers can increase their
efficacy.
The survey focuses on four types of questions: (1) demographic information, including grade, parental education, ethnicity, and gender; (2) postsecondary aspirations; (3) college preparation activities; and (4) college knowledge. The first category captures socioeconomic and demographic factors associated with differential college aspirations, preparation, and admission outcomes. The second category includes measures of the resultant influence of all contexts on students' outlooks on college. The third are indicators of behaviors along the pathway related to college going, and the fourth measures specific knowledge emanating from the federal policy context.

The survey primarily targets seniors who are making college decisions. Students are surveyed annually in April and May, when they are far enough along in the planning process that they likely have a clear idea of whether and where they will attend college in the coming year. In addition to asking students about their college plans, we ask them to reflect on their academic preparation throughout high school. We also ask them about what college-going information they received and from whom they received it. The student survey data help us to identify important trends in NCAC schools. We rely on these data to identify the specific steps that students have taken to prepare for college.

Most recently, we invited 168 schools to participate in the student survey across nine states, and we achieved a 67 percent student response rate among these schools.

Adviser survey

Every spring, we also ask current NCAC advisers to complete a survey. The survey gathers data on the full spectrum of college advising efforts at the school as well as to understand advisers' thoughts on the program. The survey asks advisers to discuss some of the experiences that they have with students, teachers, parents, and administrators. The survey questions cover a broad array of topics, such as the level of coordination on college access efforts at the school, how advisers spend their time, and what their future study and career prospects are. The 2012 adviser survey was
conducted online in May. It is important to note that the timing captured advisers at the end of the school year after the majority of college application and FAFSA filings have taken place. By this time in the school year, even the first-year advisers have a thorough understanding of their students and of the operation of their school(s). In 2012, every adviser completed the survey.

**National Student Clearinghouse data**

NCAC collects lists of graduating seniors from partner high schools. We submit these lists for matching with the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) on behalf of NCAC. The NSC provides FERPA-compliant access to a nationwide coverage of post-secondary enrollment and degree records. Over 3,300 colleges and universities, enrolling over 93 percent of all students in public and private U.S. institutions, participate in the Clearinghouse. Using NSC, we have tracked the collegiate experiences of 260,412 students from over 150 high schools across eight states.

**Site visits**

The purpose of the site visits is to examine how NCAC is being experienced by various actors in the schools, and in particular, what type of impact they report the program is having on the college-going culture of its schools. This qualitative approach allows us to provide a more holistic and in-depth description of program operations and functioning within schools. The primary mission of NCAC is to raise the rates of college enrollment and completion among low-income, first-generation college students, but the process by which this mission is carried out varies significantly by individual, by type of stakeholder, and by school. It is this microlevel, operational aspect of the program that is important to understand if it is to have an impact on college-going culture. Specifically, in what way is the program disrupting, complementing, or enhancing the college-preparation behavior, activities, and attitudes of the different stakeholders?

In spring 2011, we conducted seventeen site visits in five states and interviewed the primary stakeholders implicated in the college
advising efforts at each school, specifically, administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, students, NCAC advisers, and any additional college advising personnel (for example, GEAR UP coordinators). In total, we conducted 112 interviews at the seventeen schools. The stakeholders at each school were either interviewed in groups or individually depending on the type of stakeholder and their availability (for example, students and parents tended to be interviewed in groups whereas school staff tended to be interviewed individually). Individual interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes, while group interviews lasted forty-five minutes to an hour. Most interviews were conducted on site at the school, although a handful had to be completed by phone due to time restrictions. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using Atlas.ti analytic software. We developed the coding scheme using a grounded theory approach, which was developed and validated by a team of three researchers.

**Triangulation**

As we mentioned, each source of information provides unique data on some aspect of the program. We gather data on advisers through the adviser surveys, student surveys, and interviews. Each gathers similar data on advisers, and we can triangulate the sources to create a concrete picture as to the advisers’ strengths and weaknesses. Similarly, we can triangulate evidence on school leadership, teacher participation, parental participation, and student preparation and initiative. With the additional National Student Clearinghouse data, we can triangulate on the program’s overall efficacy.

One concrete example of this method relates to how advisers work with teachers. We discovered very early through the student survey that teachers are an important resource for information on college going among high school students. Through the adviser survey we asked how advisers interact with teachers and how smoothly that coordination works. Site visits explored this interaction more deeply in a smaller number of sites, and administrative data from the National Student Clearinghouse enable us to
examine whether differences in enrollment rates correlate with teacher and adviser interactions.

Partnerships

Many partnerships are critical to the success of a data-driven educational intervention. Perhaps the most important of these is the partnership between the researchers and the National College Advising Corps. The partnership focuses primarily on the evaluation of program effectiveness with the aim of continuous improvement. This shared objective requires several shared assumptions:

- All evaluation results are welcome. Positive, negative, and inconclusive results are all valuable for understanding the nature of programmatic impact.
- Scholarly research is welcome. A successful intervention is guided by both data-driven programmatic assessment as well as research-focused scholarly inquiry.
- Data are preeminent. All personnel, from research team to individual advisers, need to expend appropriate effort to successfully gather critical data.
- Research and evaluation informs design. The work of the research team is expected to influence programmatic design.
- Programmatic considerations inform design. The realities of implementation, the need to be locally responsive to stakeholders, and the wisdom of engaged practitioners are expected to guide research design.

With these shared assumptions, we aimed to develop a collaboration that would yield both valuable evaluation data as well as research for broader impact in the field. From the outset of our collaboration, research and evaluation considerations were central to programmatic discussions of grant writing, program expansion, and local assessment needs. Integral to this collaboration is built-in communication across research and practice. For
example, the research team is routinely invited to monthly programmatic meetings. Additionally, the research team presents developing and completed research projects to NCAC central staff and regional program directors nationwide. The research team also presents research findings and information about the evaluation to the actual advisers once per year. With this structure and key shared assumptions, we strike a continual balance between the programmatic needs of evaluation and our own research objectives in the area of college access.

Several other partnerships are critical to the NCAC program as well as our research and evaluation work. We discuss the most important among them below.

**Program design: Federal, regional, and local levels**

To administer the advising program, NCAC relies on two types of institutional partnerships. First, NCAC partners with postsecondary institutions willing to host the program by facilitating space and staff as regional program directors. Currently, NCAC partners with eighteen colleges and universities across fourteen states. The organization supports the partnering universities through fundraising, evaluation services, oversight, and an annual training for advisers.

These postsecondary institutions, in turn, partner with local school districts and schools to place NCAC advisers in high-need high schools. In these university-district-school partnerships, the college- or university-based program directors assume the responsibility to recruit and hire the NCAC advisers. In addition to the national training, the directors facilitate multiweek regional trainings during the summer. Moreover, directors regularly monitor advisers' activities. For example, directors require advisers to set quarterly goals, such as meeting with a percentage of the senior class and track their progress toward these goals. As necessary, directors also assume the responsibility to mediate challenges that providers and school staff experiences while working together. For example, at one school in California, the adviser found it challenging to engage with the school principal and garner support for the
activities; this adviser relied on the program director to mediate the relationship with the principal and clarify the program's objectives. This adviser described the director's contribution noting:

And so (the program director) would come in and you know, just kinda sit down and say you know, I know you're (the principal) really busy but you know, especially at this moment it's really important for the students to be exposed to this message of college and you know, and it'll help them with their school work. It'll provide an incentive for them to get their school—so she's really good at sorta figuring out what like catering to what they would wanna hear but kind of working in our agenda as well.

While program directors oversee the advising program, high schools hosting an adviser retain some autonomy in shaping the advising program to meet their needs. A staff member, often a guidance counselor, is assigned as the adviser's immediate school-based supervisor. Advisers work with these school-based supervisors to determine the adviser's scope of work at the high school. Given this flexibility, in some schools, counselors use advisers to fully oversee college preparation allowing the counseling department to focus on other forms of advising. In other schools, school-based supervisors more closely coordinate their efforts with the advising program and collaborate with the adviser to co-design and host college-oriented workshops.

The university-district-school partnership design facilitates opportunities for partners to tangentially benefit from the college advising program. Often, the increased attention on postsecondary planning and pathways that advisers contribute aligns with the district's efforts around college and career readiness. As an example, during our site visits, school staff and advisers often noted that in an effort to promote college going, districts were implementing new policies to pay ACT or SAT registration fees for juniors and seniors; the advisers' efforts to meet with upperclassmen and encourage seniors to apply to college further enhanced the impact of these district policies on college going. District and school personnel also often gained more detailed, timely knowledge of the college application process from recently trained advisers.
one case, district personnel and school-based supervisors attended a regional training for advisers hosted by the university-based program director to learn more about recent changes to the college application process.

Our evaluation team also contributes to these multilevel partnerships by providing data at all levels. We rely on the individual advisers' contact logs to record all of the interactions they have with students in each high school. We then aggregate those reports at the state level and provide monthly summaries to the program directors at each partner university. We also aggregate state numbers to provide monthly summaries to the national office. Finally, we provide trend data to program directors and the national office in annual program reports.

Although working with each individual high school requires immense logistical coordination, both the evaluation and the high schools gain from the collaboration. High schools provide lists of graduating students each year that the evaluation team matches to the National Student Clearinghouse. We then produce school-level reports that provide detailed information on the college enrollment patterns of their graduates over several years including charts and tables of two-year and four-year college enrollment rates, full-time enrollment rates, and college persistence rates. Most high schools are unaware of the college enrollment rates of their graduates, and this report provides them with a baseline level of college enrollment so that they can monitor changes to their enrollment rates as time progresses. For some schools, the numbers come as a surprise and highlight that additional emphasis needs to be placed on college preparation. Schools appreciate this individualized level of analysis, and it encourages their continued cooperation with our data collection and evaluation efforts.

Research relationships with individual states

During the first year of the partnership between NCAC and Stanford University, the research and evaluation efforts took an expansive approach. The overarching goal was to understand the wide scale impact of the program across multiple states. As the
program matured, establishing long-term relationships within states as well as broaching new territory, it became important to focus our efforts on particular cases. This section provides an overview of two such cases: one a robust data gathering effort on the newest and largest NCAC program in Texas, and the other an in-depth qualitative case study of established NCAC schools in Missouri.

**Texas.** In the 2010–2011 school year, Texas piloted implementation of the NCAC model in fifteen high schools in the state. The following school year (2011–2012), the statewide NCAC program, known as Advise TX, was expanded to 120 schools in multiple regions across the state, marking an 800 percent growth in the span of a single year. The vast expansion of Advise TX afforded a unique and necessary opportunity to gather robust data on the program’s effect on various college outcomes.

Prior to this, evaluations of NCAC’s success in schools across several states employed a difference-in-differences methodology to focus on college enrollment outcomes. Difference-in-differences compares trends across treatment and control groups before and after the inception of a new program. In this case, the treatment group includes schools that have an NCAC adviser currently operating on the site. Control schools are high schools in the same or neighboring school districts that do not have an NCAC adviser. Both rural and urban schools were included in the analysis, although the percentage of each varies by state. The study made comparisons across approximately ninety NCAC and non-NCAC schools over the period 2006–2009.

Results vary substantially across states. The variance of these results is driven in part by different numbers of control schools used in the analysis. While some of this evidence points to the efficacy of the NCAC intervention, results are somewhat inconclusive. Because the evidence is mixed, a larger study incorporating experimental methods and a larger number of treatment and control schools was necessary. The sheer size of the Texas program provides an incredible opportunity for such a study. By randomizing which schools receive advisers and tracking college
enrollment rates at thirty-six treatment and seventy-six control schools, in future years, our evaluation of Advise TX should provide conclusive evidence of the impact of the program on the college-going rate of high schools.

In addition to the experimental opportunities afforded by the size of the Texas program, we have been able to collect complementary quantitative and qualitative data, including student and adviser surveys; school-level administrative data, such as socioeconomic variables (for example, racial distribution and free/reduced lunch population), academic variables (for example, TAKS scores and graduation rates), and other descriptive variables (for example, size); and finally, daylong site visits to multiple Advise TX schools where interviews with teachers, administrators, counselor, students, and parents were conducted.

The partnership with Advise TX has provided important information on the rapid growth and integration of a young program, particularly in a state where there is no shortage of external providers working closely with schools. By establishing an early and long-term partnership with the NCAC program in a single state, we are able to identify meaningful trends and college-going outcomes affected by NCAC, while trying to understand the context in which these effects arise.

Missouri. Beginning in fall 2012, we focused the qualitative component of the research and evaluation activities on single-state case studies. Throughout the partnership with NCAC, the goal of the qualitative case studies has been to understand the program's impact on the college-going culture of various high schools. Studies on college-going culture demonstrate the positive impact a school can have on students’ aspirations and college-going rates. In order to explore variation in cultures in different school environments, it was necessary to collect interview and more in-depth observation data that allow us to explore values, expectations, attitudes, and behaviors related to college going and college preparation across entire schools. With these case studies, it was possible to examine and describe more and less cohesive cultures and identify the existence of fragmented or segmented cultures.
By focusing our efforts on a single state, we were able to design week-long site visits per school. Between the months of September–November of 2012, we visited eight high school campuses across three areas of Missouri. Each of the schools had a well-established relationship with NCAC, such that they had become accustomed to working with a college adviser. The eight schools varied in terms of the length of their relationship with NCAC, but at minimum, they were on their second adviser. The research team used maximum variation sampling to select case schools based upon college-going culture, utilizing college-going rates and state assessment scores as a proxy for college-going culture. A two-by-two matrix design was used to guide this site-selection process. Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the two-by-two design; two schools were selected from each cell for a total of eight possible sites.

Each of the eight schools participated in these extended site visits during which multiple types of interviews and observations were conducted by a two-person research team. In addition to multiple interviews with teachers, administrators, counselors, students (9th–12th grade), and parents, observations were conducted of (1) college-related events (for example, college fairs and campus tours), (2) classroom presentations on college preparation, (3) college advising sessions with individual students, and (4) interaction
between the college adviser and other school staff. Inquiry generally focused on how the school was organized to prepare students for postsecondary education, including how attitudes toward college varied among stakeholders, how different staff members discussed and promoted college, and how intrastaff collaboration supported college-going efforts throughout the school.

This in-depth, qualitative approach has allowed us to develop a more complex understanding of college-going culture than currently exists in the literature. Specifically, we have created a typology of college-going culture that allows us to identify where schools fall in their college-going practices and attitudes and also where there are gaps in their approach. That is, which types of students are not being reached and which staff members are absent from college preparation efforts? Moving forward, we will continue to use a single-state case study approach to explore specific cultural features and the means by which an external provider can make a cultural impact.

**Scholarly studies**

The NCAC evaluation facilitates a unique opportunity for Stanford University research faculty and graduate students to pursue scholarly research while simultaneously meeting evaluation objectives. This section delineates three research projects in varying stages of completion currently under pursuit by members of our team. By combining our array of data sources with qualitative and quantitative analyses, we are able to unite the evaluation and research agendas. These projects both inform practice and deepen our conceptual understanding of the conditions and practices that shape college access.

**College-going culture**

This research project examines the organization of college advising and the expression of normative college-going culture in schools. Empirical research on college-going cultures is relatively scarce, leaving our understanding of college-going culture in schools as
fairly simplistic and undertheorized. In this project, we utilize the rich case study data of eleven high schools and conceptualize a typology of college-going cultures to guide further research as well as continuing culture-building efforts in schools. With our typology, we are able to categorize schools across two conceptual axes. First, we identify schools based on whether their approach to college reflects a more integrative or cohesive organizational culture or whether it reflects a differentiated, fragmented or diffuse culture. Second, we illustrate that some schools conceptualize and enact college going as being highly central to their overall mission—it is the primary expectation they have for their students. That is, all students are expected to go to college and it is seen as a natural next step. Other schools, which we designate as low-centrality schools present a view of college going that is less central to the overall mission—college is presented as one of several options available to students, and one that is not necessarily for everyone.

**Advise Texas experiment**

Given the multiple approaches high schools often take to improving college enrollment among their graduates, determining the efficacy of the NCAC program in isolation is a challenge. Thanks to federal funding from a U.S. Department of Education Challenge Grant, Texas increased the number of high schools with an NCAC adviser from 15 to 120 in one academic year. We identified this rapid expansion as a unique opportunity to experimentally study the impact of the program by randomly assigning advisers to high schools. We are currently compiling data on college preparation activities from student surveys and data on college enrollment from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board for both treatment and control schools.

**College advising dosage experiment**

While the Texas experiment randomly assigns advisers at the school level so that we obtain school-wide impact estimates of the adviser’s presence, we are also interested in the individual level impact of working with an adviser. To answer this question, the
dosage treatment study randomly assigns students within NCAC high schools to receive extra attention and support from the adviser (a higher dosage of the NCAC program). This study randomly assigns this extra focus of effort to thirty students with high school GPAs between 2.0 and 3.0 at the beginning of their senior year in each of about twenty NCAC schools across four states. Preliminary analyses indicate that randomization produced balance across treatment and control, and the treatment group received a higher level of interaction with the advisers than the control group. College enrollment results will indicate whether additional meetings with the adviser are productive.

**Data-driven program changes**

Because the program integrated an evidence-based approach from the onset, the program’s culture is imbued with a data-driven mentality at all levels from the director and oversight board to the individual advisers. We communicate results of the evaluation and research to all of the advisers during a national summer institute, and we believe an awareness of the findings improves their effectiveness. In concert with the developing literature on college access, data obtained from the research and evaluation team inform programmatic practice in numerous ways. We highlight three specific examples: developing key performance indicators (KPIs) and accountability, advising on the growth strategy, and involving teachers and parents in promoting college access.

Our first-year evaluation report contained a wealth of descriptive information that was previously unknown to the national office such as how many college workshops the advisers were hosting. Out of this report, they developed eight KPIs that have driven every aspect of the program including training, implementation, and evaluation. NCAC’s initial funders were primarily interested in college enrollment statistics. While these are undoubtedly important, the evaluation provided very clear information on the
intermediate steps to achieving increased college enrollment rates, such as visiting a college, registering for the SAT/ACT, submitting a college application, and completing the FAFSA. These measures now serve as the KPIs currently pursued by the advisers. In collaboration with regional program directors, we also developed a student tracker data collection system in which advisers monitor and record their interactions with each student. This individualized level of data collection promotes accountability of each adviser as well as at the partner institution level.

The program expects to move from serving the current number of 389 schools to reaching over 1,000 high schools in the next five years. Data collected for the evaluation facilitate this growth trajectory in several ways. First, we assist in selecting high schools most in need of college advising support using state and district level data. Second, our qualitative research identified the importance of school leadership in promoting a college-going culture, so the program directors are attuned to selecting schools with cooperative principals and guidance staff. Program directors have also disseminated the message of how valuable school leadership can be to improving college access and assisting in the program’s success. Third, the program ensures a baseline level of success thanks to the evaluation identifying poor performing schools and programs which can result in corrective action or even program termination at those schools. Finally, we convinced the national office that the quantity of data needed for a robust evaluation requires extensive logistical support that will be provided by a newly created director of measurement and insight position housed in the national office.

One of the most surprising results of the evaluation appeared in the student survey responses. When asked with whom they most often discuss college-going issues, students overwhelmingly report that their teachers and parents are the two most important groups. These findings prompted two changes to the structure of the program. The initial NCAC structure focused on the advisers providing necessary college information directly to students in isolation or in collaboration with the school’s guidance office. The revised model incorporates an intentional effort to work with teachers as
the advisers' partners in promoting a college-going culture. Advisers now commonly hold information sessions in teachers' classes, and they identify partner teachers that integrate college materials into their normal daily lessons. Our studies also discovered that many students claimed they did not know anyone that had attended college, never realizing that all of their teachers are college graduates. To rectify this situation, advisers in NCAC schools ask teachers to put the name of the college the teacher attended outside their classroom door.

The second change in the program in response to our survey results is an increased effort at parent outreach. Parents are a key component in encouraging college enrollment, and advisers should view them as partners in the effort to increase the number of students' applications to college. The survey results prompted NCAC advisers to host more parent information nights and build relationships with parents in the communities in which they live. One adviser took tickets at high school football games in order to meet as many families of their seniors as possible. Others reach out to community organizations such as churches to disseminate information to parents that are difficult to attract to school.

Conclusion

The philosophy undergirding the collaboration of the NCAC program with our evaluation team is to pursue mutually advantageous goals. The evaluation and research projects enhance the program's effectiveness. In return, the research team is able to use the NCAC program as a laboratory for investigating important questions about college access that can be applied more widely in policy and practice.

One potential concern with this style of ongoing partnership is that negative findings are dismissed or, at worse, hidden. Throughout our work, we have been forthcoming when we obtained negative results, and the national office has welcomed them
as opportunities to identify problems and improve the program. This willingness to receive feedback from all evaluation results—"everything, warts and all"—encourages a wider array of useful studies because the evaluation does not need to focus solely on the most promising components of the program.

Being a successful, data-driven program requires three components. First, a mutual understanding of both the program’s and evaluators’ goals ensures that both sides are benefiting from the partnership. Second, open lines of communication throughout all levels of the organization and with the data analysts ensure that important information learned from the evaluation spread to everyone in the organization who could benefit. Finally, receptiveness to learning from the data and altering the program when results suggest improvements can be made is key to developing a successful intervention.

Notes

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LESSONS LEARNED FROM A DATA-DRIVEN COLLEGE ACCESS PROGRAM

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