



ENGAGING COLLEGE STUDENTS AS POSTSECONDARY TRANSITION COACHES THROUGH LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

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All students in K-12 schools and out-of-school time programs can benefit from evidence-based academic and social supports that address their holistic needs. While high-impact tutoring and mentoring often form the bedrock of youth development supports provided in the early grades and onward, older students depend on specialized guidance to navigate the many complex questions, challenges, and opportunities that arise when planning for life after high school.¹

In K-12 systems, school counselors lead comprehensive programming that bridges these key domains of holistic student development, by connecting academic growth to social emotional learning and college and career readiness. However, research indicates that school counselors face many structural challenges that impact quality program implementation. The most significant barriers include unreasonably high student caseloads, and expectations to fulfill out-of-scope duties that detract from delivering the direct student services that are required of their roles.²

Education ecosystems face a pressing need for additional staff to deliver people-powered student supports. But, solutions to meet this need can be stalled when institutions have limited resources and capacity to independently recruit, hire, train, place, and supervise new people. Being unable to find a source for capable and motivated candidates for the roles can halt the entire process before it begins. However, many communities already have an underutilized group of individuals who are uniquely positioned to fill this niche: college students.

College students often possess key characteristics that make them well-suited to work in K-12 student support roles, like postsecondary transition coaching, which can be brought to the surface and refined through proper training and support.

Community service is a major motivator for the average student, and they commonly seek part-time positions during the academic year where they feel like they can make a meaningful difference. Many value career-connected work opportunities that enable them to learn quickly on-the-job and build their resumes. College students can also be relatable role models to students on the cusp of young adulthood. Thus, this population represents an untapped, reliable source of near-peer leaders, who can be trained to meaningfully contribute to postsecondary transition efforts in schools and nonprofits.

In this brief, we summarize some key features of postsecondary transition coaching programs and uplift examples of promising practices by spotlighting programs in action. We also highlight how postsecondary advising can yield direct and indirect benefits for all involved parties. Lastly, we address how K-12 schools, districts, and youth-serving organizations can partner with higher education institutions, to engage college students in postsecondary transition support initiatives.

Elements of Postsecondary Transition Coaching

Postsecondary transition coaches (or advisors) are experts who implement evidence-based supports to build the awareness, preparation, and actionable steps required for students and recent graduates to pursue life options after high school.³ Potential postsecondary pathways may include 2-year and 4-year college degrees, technical training, job certifications, credentials, or other opportunities that are well-aligned with students' aspirations. Postsecondary advisors are also trained in communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and relationship-building. These strengths are useful when cultivating connections with students and the many caring adults in their lives. Advisors sometimes engage with students' teachers, school counselors, youth program directors, families, and others across the education ecosystem to enhance the individual work they are doing with the student themselves.

While specific content knowledge and relevant skills are important to the role, postsecondary advisors do not necessarily need to be full-time practitioners. Postsecondary transition coaching programs have the potential to be staffed by current undergraduate and graduate students who provide direct services to middle and high school students at schools and community sites. Through ongoing training, leadership development, and mentorship from their supervisors, these emerging professionals can establish robust knowledge and experience in postsecondary advising topics and relationship-driven student supports.



Critically, they are primed to assist with college and career readiness, tracking academic requirements for high school graduation and college eligibility, college applications, financial aid, goal-setting, and finding campus and community resources, given these are all actions they have had to undertake themselves within the past few years.

Ideally, postsecondary transition supports of any kind are integrated and sustained as part of local engaged partnerships that bridge K-12 systems, higher education institutions, and the workforce. This kind of coordinated, collective effort helps equip programs and advisors with the infrastructure, training, and resources necessary to deliver evidence-based, high-impact support services with quality. Depending on the local ecosystem, this structure is not always feasible. Nonetheless, postsecondary transition coaching programs can still effectively respond to student, school, and community needs, with the right design and supportive conditions in place.

Program Spotlights on Promising Practices

Below, we spotlight several programs that rely heavily on well-trained college students and recent college graduates to serve as postsecondary transition coaches for local youth. All of these programs leverage partnerships with colleges and universities as an essential element of their model. These collaborations show how the role of higher education partners can extend far beyond simply enabling access to their campus populations as a source of people able to serve in K-12 student support roles. In addition to operating as hubs for program implementation, some colleges and universities also contribute substantial funding and administrative resources to postsecondary transition initiatives through institutional budgets, grants, research, and more.

Overall, these spotlights offer a glimpse into a handful of evidence-based programs representing different possibilities for higher education partnerships. Beyond these examples, there are many versions of partnerships – whether established or fledgling, large or small – that can generate collaboration, innovation, and mutual support between colleges, K-12 schools, and nonprofits.

Nationwide Example: Federal TRIO Programs

[Federal TRIO programs](#), including Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services, focus on providing a breadth of evidence-based interventions that address common social, economic, and academic barriers to postsecondary opportunity and success through offices established in colleges and universities across the country. For example, TRIO programs that target students in grades 7-12 establish partnerships between higher education institutions and nearby school districts to support multi-level postsecondary transition initiatives. Eligible middle and high school students must apply to participate in their local TRIO program, and then commit to ongoing engagement in intensive college and career readiness activities. Participating youth gain exposure to future possibilities in their communities, and are mentored by current college students who provide relationship-driven postsecondary transition support.

Local Spotlight: Hampton University Upward Bound

The [TRIO Upward Bound Program at Hampton University](#), based in the Office of Student Success and Enrollment Management, delivers year-round postsecondary transition support to 60 high school students at four partner sites in Newport News, Virginia. These Upward Bound scholars exemplify promising potential for postsecondary success, if provided the appropriate guidance to achieve their educational goals. Supplementing the services they receive during the school year, participants also attend a Summer Enrichment Academy. Enrichment programming focuses on increasing academic achievement, preparing for college entrance exams, and reducing the need for remedial education, through summer bridge courses in math and writing.

Upward Bound scholars also receive academic and social support from college mentors, who are Hampton University undergraduate and graduate students. Mentors model good academic habits, engage mentees in a welcoming university culture, share their experiences attending an Historically Black College/University, and advise youth through the college application process. Many Upward Bound mentors were past participants in TRIO programs themselves. They strive to give back to communities by motivating the next generation to explore opportunities and excel in education.

Statewide Example: Advise NC

Advise NC is a statewide collaborative, which supports postsecondary education and workforce development pathways in partnership with universities across North Carolina. Building on College Advising Corps' national work, Advise NC recently relaunched as a state initiative. Advise NC demonstrates how postsecondary transition programs can swiftly adapt and respond to local conditions as the context of their work shifts. Today, they recruit, train, and place recent college graduates to serve as "Next Step Advisers," who support school staff by providing direct services in under-resourced communities.

Next Step Advisers are employed through a partner university to work at local high schools full-time, where they guide students in pursuit of college degrees, job training, employment, or other life possibilities. Next Step Advisers must have recently earned an associates or bachelors degree as their experience recently navigating postsecondary transitions is viewed as an asset. As role models who are close in age to the youth they serve, Next Step Advisers often relate to students by sharing similar challenges and goals.

Local Spotlight: Advise NC at NC State

[Advise NC at NC State](#) is housed in the Division of Student Affairs at North Carolina State University. Through this university-school-community partnership, Next Step Advisers work at 24 high schools in 14 counties, expanding educational opportunity and access for rural youth. As part of the student services team at each school, they collaborate with school counselors, administrators, and teachers to address postsecondary advising needs of the entire student body. They build capacity for school staff to reach more students and families. Through 1:1 advising, community events, and family engagement activities on postsecondary transition needs, Advisers help ensure that every student graduates from high school with a "right fit" plan in place.

Advisers are expected to be actively involved in the local community, and typically work at the same partner school for one to two years. They participate in ongoing training and earn a monthly living allowance. As AmeriCorps members, they can also receive other benefits such as an education award that can be applied to future educational expenses.

Systemwide Example: Early Academic Outreach Program

[The Early Academic Outreach Program \(EAOP\)](#) is the largest pre-college academic preparation program for the University of California. EAOP operates at all ten campuses in the University of California system, serving partner schools in their respective geographies. In each region, the university employs undergraduates as peer mentors who assist local middle and high schoolers with postsecondary planning. Beyond providing specialized individual and group academic advising, peer mentors actively engage students' support networks throughout the process. With EAOP, families, educators, and community members participate in postsecondary planning through parent conferences, financial literacy workshops, events, and university campus visits.

Local Spotlight: UC, San Diego Early Academic Outreach Program

[EAOP at the University of California San Diego](#) is part of the [Center for Research on Education, Assessment, and Teaching Excellence \(CREATE\)](#). The program serves more than 4,000 middle and high school students, in partnership with 20 schools and community sites located in San Diego and Imperial Counties. EAOP and CREATE provide many opportunities for college students to contribute to postsecondary transition programs and broader K-12 support efforts as interns, volunteers, or paid student employees. In any position, college students are required to complete orientations, ongoing training and professional development, and regularly check-in with the university staff, faculty, and community representatives who guide their work with local youth.

If an undergraduate student's responsibilities with EAOP fulfill specific institutional requirements, they can have those contributions documented on their "co-curricular record." The co-curricular record is an official university transcript reflecting a student's learning, skills, and achievements beyond their academic coursework. Not exclusive to UC San Diego, this practice is one of many ways that institutions can formally recognize students' holistic developmental experiences. Graduate programs and employers can use the co-curricular transcript as a verified record of an applicant's undergraduate community service, leadership, research, and campus employment.

Collective Wins for Students, Schools, and Communities

As students throughout the pipeline benefit from postsecondary transition coaching programs, their respective K-12 and higher education systems also realize the positive impacts of these evidence-based student supports. Collective wins can have ripple effects for the community, too.

Wins for K-12 Students

Evidence indicates postsecondary advising can positively impact educational attainment, with data showing improvements in college eligibility,⁴ enrollment,⁵ and completion.⁶ Such promising effects are especially pronounced among first-generation college-going populations.

Students who participated in EAOP were twice as likely to complete the college preparatory coursework required for University of California admission compared to nonparticipants.⁴ Students who participated in TRIO programs had stronger outcomes than comparison groups on several measures of success. Compared to peers, TRIO students showed higher rates of applying for college admission and financial aid, enrolling in college, and completing degrees. Further, a subgroup of TRIO participants who received enhanced advising from specially trained mentors showed even more growth. With deeper personalized coaching, these students applied to more colleges overall, attended more selective and competitive institutions, and ultimately did not face significantly higher educational costs or dropout risks compared to control groups.⁵

Even if a school already has an established professional staff member who oversees postsecondary advising efforts, there is a benefit to college student postsecondary transition advisors. A majority of the work of postsecondary transition advising is assisting with vital yet repetitive technical tasks, such as filling out the FAFSA and requesting letters of recommendation.⁷ Well-trained college students can easily assist many students with these tasks, allowing the staff member to spend more time working with students who are in more complex situations, have harder decisions to make, or need more one-on-one time to effectively advise.

Wins for College Students

College students serving as postsecondary transition coaches gain many benefits from these experiences. Individuals seeking social impact opportunities can directly address an immediate community need, by contributing their knowledge and skills to the local education ecosystem. Beyond attaining a sense of personal fulfillment through public service, students can experience the real-world value of their college degree. By linking classroom concepts to out-of-classroom realities, developing durable and transferable skills, and strengthening authentic human connections, students build their capacity to thrive amidst ever-changing social conditions.

Practically, postsecondary advising roles are a good fit for college students seeking part-time work or community service hours that accommodate their academic schedules, while (in some cases) earning wages to support their educational expenses.

Eligible college students may be paid through the Federal Work Study program, fellowship awards, stipends for public service, or other funding sources. Many colleges also acknowledge community service work in other ways. Depending on the institution, college students might earn academic credit towards graduation requirements, fulfill major-specific coursework, or complete certifications and microcredentials. They may gain strong referrals and recommendations for internships, full-time employment after graduation, research opportunities, awards, and scholarships. Even receiving university-verified documentation of experience, such as the co-curricular transcript utilized by UC San Diego and other institutions, can provide a useful record when pursuing new opportunities.

Beyond advancing their own college and career trajectories, college students serving in K-12 roles can also expand their support network. Higher education administrators, faculty, and staff who oversee school and community partnership programs can be particularly attuned to the importance of peer connections and shared experiences for students of any age. Leaders who supervise postsecondary transition coaches may intentionally integrate relationship-building as part of college students' collective service commitment. Social support might be facilitated through orientations, reflection exercises, connector events, or cohort models for service activities. When done well, college students gain a built-in opportunity to befriend peers in similar roles, showcase their own unique talents, and forge connections with relevant groups across their campus and community.

Wins for Higher Education Institutions

Finally, postsecondary transition supports help higher education institutions at large. Colleges, universities, job training programs, K-12 schools, districts, and community-based nonprofits all win by engaging college students in these efforts. Local partnerships hold power to enact programs in ways that benefit all involved organizations.



By cultivating engaged partnerships across the education and workforce development pipelines, organizations can build on their collective strengths to support postsecondary transitions. When siloed, individuals and institutions may be more vulnerable to instability driven by policy shifts, funding uncertainty, and/or other external factors. If partnerships are established with fit, collaboration, sustainability, and community needs in mind, postsecondary transition coaching programs have the varied voices and persistent support needed to exist in an ever-evolving postsecondary landscape.

Schools and nonprofits also benefit from building greater capacity to provide direct services. When college students are trained as experts in postsecondary advising and working with youth, the local sites hosting them gain a steady influx of people-powered support for the community they serve. Even small numbers can make a big difference in enhancing the quality or scale of initiatives, improving student-to-adult ratios, and alleviating program implementation barriers. In the long term, schools and nonprofits may gain access to a potential pool of highly-qualified full-time employees as students graduate and apply to work in and around the communities they have spent their academic career serving. These wins cannot be overstated, especially in contexts where the demand for high-quality, evidence-based, postsecondary transition interventions outpaces the available resources.

Colleges and universities benefit when their students thrive through meaningful public service opportunities. Explicitly or implicitly, college students are representatives of their institutions. When youth, educators, and leaders are willing and eager to welcome them into schools and community spaces, these undergraduates are models of postsecondary possibilities realized. By providing academic and social support, postsecondary advisors build trust, create positive connections to the college experience, and strengthen the education pipeline for K-12 students who become future applicants to local institutions. Further, when administrators, staff, and faculty commit to nurturing their students as emerging professionals, leaders, and change agents, the university is investing in its future workforce. Local postsecondary transition coaching programs, K-12 systems, and nonprofit organizations provide fertile ground for college students to establish professional roots and a deep commitment to the community. Upon degree completion, recent graduates can be ideal candidates to transition into entry-level positions in and around the university. Expertise developed through service in youth support roles is strong preparation for careers in student affairs, community outreach, after-school programs, teaching, and other domains, growing the future educator pipeline for K-12 and higher education systems.

Conclusion and Next Steps

In this brief, we explored several aspects of postsecondary transition coaching as an essential student support area, which can be addressed through partnerships between higher education, K-12 systems, and community-based nonprofit organizations. Although postsecondary advising remains a core responsibility for K-12 school counselors and other educators, adults beyond the school walls are increasingly being tapped to support this work.⁸ As adults who have recently navigated postsecondary transitions themselves, college students have a particularly important role to play in this domain. We end by providing the following resources for readers considering potential next steps to support their own students, organizations, and communities.

Additional Resources

A collection of additional resources for further reading and action on this topic are outlined below:

Learn More about Postsecondary Transition Advising

- Partnership for Student Success (PSS) & National College Attainment Network (NCAN): [Why It Works: Postsecondary Transition Advising](#)
- PSS and Knowledge to Power Catalysts: [Navigating Pathways to Next: A resource guide for community-based organizations helping young people navigate transitions to college and work](#)
- PSS: [Free Online Training Modules](#)
 - Preparing to Work with Youth in a School Environment
 - College Fit/Match Exploration & Decision Making
 - Financial Aid and Paying for College
 - Post-FAFSA Submission
 - Understanding College Offer Letters and College Decisionmaking
- The Navigate Project: [The Navigator Toolkit](#)

Program Development & Implementation

- PSS: [Bridging Student Needs and Community Resources: Meeting the Needs of P-12 Students Through District and Nonprofit Federal Work-Study Partnerships with Higher Education Institutions](#)
- PSS: [Moving from Commitment to Action: Leveraging Partnerships between Higher Education and P-12 Systems to Support Students Through Federal Work-Study Roles](#)
- PSS: [Bridging Talent And Need: How Partnerships between Higher Education and Afterschool Programs Can Benefit Students](#)

Endnotes

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- ⁶ DeBaun, B. (2019, August 16). *Get to Know the Top 10 Pieces of College Access and Success Research*. National College Attainment Network.
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