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Understanding Barriers and Working within Structures:

My Time as a Corps Member

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Overview

I began working with Illinois Student Assistance Commission (ISAC) directly out of college. ISAC is a state-funded agency that handles many aspects of financial aid, but also serves to address the college process as a whole—such as finding career interests, to picking high school classes, getting involved during school, identifying colleges, applying to school, applying for financial aid, identifying scholarships, and even transitioning from high school to college. ISAC's mission is to make college accessible and affordable for all Illinois students. This is part of Illinois' larger goal of '60 by 25.' The state of Illinois aims to have 60% of the adult population complete a post-secondary education (certificate, associates, bachelors or beyond) by the year 2025. This goal was created in order to match the changing job climate in Illinois. Over the last 20 years, many factories have shut down, construction workers have struggled to find jobs, and previous positions that did not require education beyond high school are now requiring certificate degrees, most commonly in industrial fields.

Currently, 54% of Illinois' high school students are low-income, with an 88% graduation rate and a 70% post-secondary enrollment rate (Illinois Report Card). Overall, these look like great numbers, but there are pockets of high need that do not get the attention they need: North Chicago Community High School is a great example of this. A resounding 83% of students at North are defined as low-income, with only 6% of the students meeting expectations on the state test during their freshman year (PARCC). The school maintains a 68% graduation rate, with 7% of students ready for post-secondary education (based on ACT scores), and only 38% of their students enrolling in college or a university (Illinois Report Card.)

These gaps of need are the reason why ISAC was created in 1957. The agency originally started, "to ensure that financial considerations did not prevent Illinois students from realizing their postsecondary educational goals (About ISAC)." Over the years, ISAC has expanded its programming and initiatives to cover the entire college-going process. Some of these programs are financial based—such as the Monetary Award Program Grant, the prepaid tuition program, or the student loan repayment program—some of the programs are directed towards educators and counselors—such as our Gift Assistance Program Access, the College Changes Everything Conference or our Financial Aid Certifications—and some of the programs are directed toward the students and families—such as our Community Outreach program (known as the Corps), our

College Application Month, or our student portal. ISAC's services are completely free to anyone within the state of Illinois, but as a Corps we focus on low-income and first-generation students.

What We Provide

Within the Corps Program there are three main types of assistance offered: presentations, office hours, and one-on-one mentoring. At the time this report was written, ISAC offered 15 different presentations ranging on topics from preparing for college as a freshman in high school, the college application process, managing college costs, financial aid, and connecting the dots between interests and career opportunities. Each presentation has the ability to be altered and tailored to the specific needs of the school or organization based on the population, what the program is looking for or other needs.

The second kind of assistance that the Corps Program offers is office hours. These are traditionally done within the guidance department or college and career center of the high school. Students can sign up to meet with the Corps member and discuss college preparation or application. These meetings traditionally cover writing essays for applications or scholarships; finding schools and their application requirements; filing for financial aid; sending professional emails; and decoding financial aid award letters.

Finally, Corps members offer one-on-one mentoring, which is meant for students and parents we cannot reach through the high school model (such as students who attend alternative schools, who have graduated high school but have not yet attended college, or who are already in college). This mentoring can occur anywhere—a local café, a library, at the park, a community center, etc. This level of mentoring is usually more involved and intensive than the office hours held at the local high school.

How the Corps Program Works

The way a school or organization receives services from ISAC is a two-way street. As Corps members, we maintain contact with organizations and schools that we already have a good relationship with and continually provide services to them year after year. In addition, we are constantly seeking out new organizations and programs that ISAC could further assist in their mission. We make cold calls and e-mails to these organizations to see if they would like to partner with us—either for a single event, a series, et cetera.

In addition, any organization or school in Illinois can request ISAC's services through the website. These requests are processed by the region coordinators and given out based on availability and language accommodation. It is through these 'cold requests' that we also make new partnerships with organizations and foster new relationships. Typically, these requests are for financial aid presentations or FAFSA workshops, but through them we have an opportunity to show the organization what else we can offer to them.

Finally, if there is an individual who is in need of assistance—someone who would need one-on-one mentoring—they can reach out to ISAC through the toll free number or through the Corps member directory where a zip code search for the nearest member is available. These

kinds of requests are not frequent simply because we as an organization have yet to find the best way to market to this population.

Overcoming Barriers

Once we as Corps members get our foot in the door, our job has only begun. The life of a Corps member consists of an interesting balance between the wants and needs of ISAC and the wants and needs of the organization. During my time as a Corps member, I have discovered that there were times when schools/organizations would simply not be interested in utilizing our services, and I found that there were three common reasons.

First, the guidance department and/or staff were nervous about their reputation. They did not want to seem like they were incompetent at their job and as if they needed to bring in someone from the 'outside' to help them. Usually I was able to persuade these counselors by reminding them I was simply a supplement to their already amazing programs and expertise, and that I would only help benefit their students and their school. Especially now when counselors are so overwhelmed with their caseloads and keep having additional responsibilities added to their job description, this explanation tended to calm their nerves.

The second reason schools and organizations were hesitant to accept ISAC's assistance is due to the rotating staff on both ends. The Corps program is a 2-year commitment (similar to AmeriCorps or the Peace Corps) so sometimes organizations or schools can be lost when Corps members change. In addition, sometimes one faculty member at a school would be open to having ISAC enter and being the liaison for that process, but once they leave there is no other faculty member willing to pick up that responsibility. Usually, this obstacle is overcome simply by finding a new way in. By contacting a different guidance staff member, principal or an academic chair, we are able to pitch our program to the organization and gain access to students in that way instead. Other times, we turn to the after-school or before school programming as another way to access these students.

The third and most challenging reason to handle was that school officials did not feel like their students had a need for our services. Now, in some instances the schools were technically correct, most of their students were not first-generation or low-income and their guidance department was well versed in the subjects of financial aid. (These schools also had a staff member specifically dedicated to college and career planning.) However, it was in my experience that these students needed our help just as much as anyone else, but only on different topics. Instead of needing counseling on financial aid and the FAFSA, they needed someone to talk to about the stress of getting into a certain school, handling the pressure put on them by parental expectations, or sometimes wondering if they really even wanted to go to college.

In my experience, I found that students at these schools knew the technical information regarding college preparation and financial aid, but they want someone to talk to about their experience and their thought process. The students I have worked with from these schools have benefited tremendously from office hours and near-peer mentoring. These results can be seen through the increase in FAFSA applications and college-bound high school students since the inception of this program.

Summary

The biggest community psychology principle that has been utilized throughout this experience is viewing the community as experts. Letting the organization, the school, or the family tell you what they need was the best way to start a larger conversation around how ISAC could help. Instead of pointing out what the school is doing wrong, framing the services as supplemental to their mission has made organizations more willing to form a partnership. From there, a dialogue could begin and programming could be individualized and created for what they need. It can be difficult for an organization to point out their gaps or their flaws, so the framing of the conversation is very important. As Corps members, we are not there to judge or blame them for these flaws. Instead, we are there to help their population through programming they want and/or need.

The Illinois Student Assistance Commission was the first program of its kind. However, many states are starting to adopt similar programs due to the success we have seen since ISAC's inception. That being said, our agency still faces barriers and obstacles towards increasing the average education level in our state. Some of these barriers that were not discussed include addressing cultural stigmas around attending college, helping students transition from high school to college—in the academic, social and emotional realms—providing services to more non-traditional students, and addressing retention rates. Although we have yet to find solutions for all of these problems, I hope other communities across the country consider adopting a similar framework for their youth.

Works Cited

About ISAC. (n.d.). Retrieved March 17, 2016, from <http://www.isac.org/about-isac/>

This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Tabitha Underwood at underwoodtabitha@gmail.com.