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Stories from the Front Lines of Student Success: The Implementation and Progress of Near Peer Mentoring Programs in Alaska and Idaho

Introduction

The College Access Challenge Grant (CACG) program is a federal formula grant designed to foster partnerships among federal, state, and local governments and philanthropic entities to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. Originally created by the College Cost Reduction Act of 2007, the program was expanded in 2010 and extended for another five years with an increase in the amount of the award. Grant funding came to an end in 2015 and states that were able to meet federal Maintenance of Effort requirements are currently in the carryover year of their programs.¹ The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) launched the College Access Challenge Grant Consortium and Network in 2008 to give Western states an opportunity to collaborate and share promising practices with colleagues in other states, learning from college access and success experts, and collectively addressing common challenges.

The CACG program has given states the opportunity to experiment with a variety of approaches to increase the number of low-income and first-generation students prepared to enter and succeed in higher education. One increasingly popular approach has been the development and implementation of near peer mentoring programs. A number of states have included this approach in their CACG programs, including Alaska and Idaho, both of which were members of WICHE's CACG Consortium from 2008 to 2015.

This brief provides an overview of the implementation and impact of near peer mentoring programs in Alaska and Idaho from the standpoint of both existing research and the near peers themselves. While progress is being monitored as part of state College Access Challenge Grant (CACG) program implementation and activity, only limited data on the overall effectiveness of the model are currently available. Therefore, in addition to what we know about specific outcomes, including increased Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) submissions and postsecondary applications and enrollments, this brief provides testimonials from mentors and the students they served – students who might have never considered college as an option without the extra support of a near peer or college guide. Further, based on internal program data and outcomes, the brief also offers strategies and promising practices that have helped to foster a college-going culture in schools that serve a predominantly low-income student body.

Both states share the same basic attributes of established near peer mentor programs in that they rely on recent college graduates to mentor the students who need the most help and are the most at risk of not going on to postsecondary education.

The History of Near Peer Mentoring

Alaska and Idaho were able to draw from existing models when creating their individual programs. Nearly every successful near peer program focuses on serving low-income students, which is one reason the model aligned nicely with the goals of CACG. The other major commonality is the use of current college students or recent college graduates as mentors or advisers for high school students in need of extra assistance. To better understand the various approaches to near peer mentoring, below is a brief summary of some notable models and programs that employ the near peer philosophy.

- ▶ **College Advising Corps** (<http://advisingcorps.org/>). In 2005, the Center for Undergraduate Excellence at the University of Virginia (UVA) developed what it called the College Guide program by placing 14 recent graduates of UVA into rural communities with a high population of low-income or first-generation students. Based on the success of the initial pilot, in 2007 the program moved to the University of North Carolina, expanded to other states, and was re-branded as the National College Advising Corps (NCAC). The NCAC employed recent college graduates from partner universities to work full time as college advisers in underserved high schools. Advisers helped raise expectations and awareness of the benefits of postsecondary education and assisted students and their families with filling out FAFSA and college applications, in addition to other college preparation activities. Advisers also supplemented (not replaced) the work of existing counseling staff and faculty at the schools they served, with the goal of reaching more students at risk of falling through the cracks. Now known as the College Advising Corps (CAC), the program employs over 500 advisers in 14 states across the country and has served approximately 543,000 students since its inception in 2005.²
- ▶ **University of Washington Dream Project** (www.washington.edu/dreamproject). Also established in 2005, the University of Washington (UW) Dream Project similarly serves a low-income and first-generation student population by relying on UW students to mentor high school students in the Seattle area. Mentors help students apply for federal financial aid and scholarships, write college admission letters and essays, and study for college entrance examinations. They also help mentees explore issues related to educational opportunity and social mobility. Structured as both a course that counts toward college credit and a community outreach program, UW Mentors meet on campus twice a week in one large class and again as a smaller class with their specific high school teams, and then again at their assigned high school to work one-on-one with students. In 2013, 61 percent of students who worked with UW Mentors enrolled in postsecondary education immediately following high school, and 27 percent of those students decided to apply to four-year colleges, in addition to two-year institutions.³
- ▶ **iMentor** (www.imentor.org). Started in 1999 in New York City, iMentor partners with public high schools and uses both in-person and online advising to reach a growing number of students across the country. In addition to providing every student in a partner New York City high school with a peer mentor, iMentor shares its curriculum and technology resources with partner nonprofit organizations located in other states. According to an Impact Summary of 2013-14 program activity, 75 percent of iMentor students enrolled in postsecondary education, up from 67 percent during the 2010-11 school year.⁴
- ▶ **"Summer Nudging."** A 2014 working paper from EdPolicy Works at the University of Virginia investigated the efficacy of peer mentor outreach and whether it decreased summer attrition of students who had enrolled in college after graduation but failed to show up for the first semester of their freshman year. The researchers worked with three sites – the Dallas Independent School District, a Boston-based nonprofit agency called uAspire, and a network of charter schools in Philadelphia

known as Mastery Charter Schools – in 2012 to conduct student interventions and track outcomes. The study concluded that peer mentoring outreach, along with personalized text messages to students, significantly increased postsecondary enrollment and participation among students who did not typically receive in-depth counseling while in high school.⁵

Alaska

During the very first year of its CACG grant, the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE) established a “college and career guide program” based primarily on the CAC model. Starting with pilot programs in the Anchorage School District (ASD) in 2009 and 2010, two recent college graduates began to assist high school students with career exploration, higher education preparation, and the college application and financial aid process at Service and Bartlett high schools. ACPE soon formalized the Alaska College and Career Advising Corps (ACAC) and expanded into the remote Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD) in 2011 at Bethel High School. In grant year 2012-13, the ACAC added new mentoring sites in Fairbanks, North Pole, Kodiak Island, and the Kenai Peninsula. In 2013-14, four new sites were added – East Anchorage High School in the ASD, as well as Kenai Central High School, Seward High School, and Soldotna High School, all in the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District (KPBSD). With a total of 10 college guides serving students at 19 high schools across the state in the 2014-15 school year, the ACAC has reached thousands of students who otherwise might not have considered college as an option upon graduation. Data collected by the program shows that in schools served by an ACAC guide, six percent more students enroll in postsecondary education than in schools that do not participate.⁶ In addition, over the course of its seven-year history, ACAC guides achieved the following:

- ▶ Provided individual services to 24,039 students since the program’s inception in 2009-10.
- ▶ Facilitated 3,729 group presentations about college preparation, including classroom visits and other schoolwide events, with a total unduplicated attendance of 16,831 students.

- ▶ Provided financial aid information to students who later went on to complete 3,355 FAFSAs.
- ▶ Helped students fill out and submit 5,658 college applications since the ACAC started tracking this measure in 2012-13. In the 2014-15 school year alone, 1,857 students submitted a college application, up from 1,705 students the previous year.

“First week of school: I met with a bunch of seniors individually, ranging from the highest achievers to some of the lowest, who ALL came in on their own. It was amazing. Already had three college applications submitted (from two different people).”

– Chuck Herman,
Bethel High School Guide, ACAC

“I had a parent of a student from last year come up to me in Safeway and tell me that I changed his son’s life because there was no way they were going to be able to afford to send him to college. But after they found out about the FAFSA and all the need-based aid out there, they’re only paying for 20 percent of his tuition and everything else is covered. Yay!”

– Corissa Heyes,
Kodiak High School Guide, ACAC

“This week I assisted a senior in filling out the FAFSA, and she was able to finish it with her parents over the weekend. Her parents kept insisting they wouldn’t qualify for any money. However, the student ended up qualifying for \$4,440 worth of Pell Grant money!”

– Emily Knight,
Soldotna High School Guide, ACAC

“When you come in and present, you have all my attention because I get into what you’re saying, that it’s [going to college] important to our success. You make it so obvious what we have to do to make sure we give ourselves a future. I appreciate all of the help you have given me so far this year and I will be in your office as much as I can this year making sure I solidify my future!”

– Student at Nikiski High School
talking to Jordan Brown, College Guide, ACAC

“I am really glad you are in this position. A lot of teachers here think that we don’t want to go to college, when in fact we don’t know how to go to college.”

– Student at North Pole High School
talking to Sonja Long, College Guide, ACAC

Bethel High School: From the Bottom to the Top

Located on the eastern edge of the state, Bethel High School serves a large Alaska Native population and a predominantly low-income student body. The location is so remote that travel by air or boat is a necessity. After the successes at Service and Bartlett high schools in the urban Anchorage School District, Alaska's CACG program intentionally targeted a rural location that had struggled to get students to continue to higher education. The ACAC program was launched at Bethel in the 2012-13 school year after the hiring of a college guide who had graduated from Bethel before pursuing and completing a four-year degree in history. From the beginning, creating a college-going culture was an uphill battle. An August 2013 article in the Alaska Dispatch News referred to Bethel as "a place that was called a dropout factory in a widely reported 2007 statistical analysis by Johns Hopkins University. The label was given to schools where 60 percent or fewer students make it to their senior year."⁷ But through the efforts of the college guide, attitudes and aspirations began to quickly change.

According to Bethel High School principal Janelle Vanesse, the college guide "filled that missing gap. . . He does everything from [working with] the junior high kids by just giving them exposure to what careers are out there,

to the seniors by helping them be able to navigate the very difficult paperwork involved to get where you want to go."⁸ Part of that help included getting students to participate in a national contest sponsored in part by Taco Bell and MTV called "Get Schooled" that encouraged students to complete both college applications and the FAFSA. When the contest ended in the spring of 2013, Bethel had won by a significant margin. Over 60 percent had completed a FAFSA compared to the national average of 40 percent, and over 80 percent completed a postsecondary application. According to Vanesse, more than half of those who applied were enrolled in college the following 2013 fall semester.⁹ As a reward, NBA star James Harden and rapper Kendrick Lamar visited Bethel High in August 2013, with Harden serving as the honorary principal for one day.

More important, program data collected show that "go on" rates have gone up at Bethel every single year of the program. In the first year of its program, the number of students who enrolled in postsecondary education directly after high school rose from 34 percent in 2011-12 to 45 percent in 2012-13. In the second year, Bethel High School showed another marked increase in high school graduates who immediately enrolled in college, rising from 45 percent in 2012-13 to 65 percent in 2013-14.

In order to keep the ACAC alive once grant funding comes to an end, Alaska developed a sustainable hiring model during the course of the 2014-15 program year that requires future (and some existing) sites to split program costs, in addition to contracting with an employment agency to act as the human resources administrator. A new site, Nome-Beltz High School, was established in the fall of 2015 under this new staffing model, with more to hopefully follow in the spring of 2016 in Barrow and the Bering Strait School District. All of the new locations are in extremely remote areas of the state, thereby increasing the reach of the ACAC and the extra supports the college guides provide.

Idaho

The purpose of Idaho's near peer program is to increase the number of high school graduates who enroll in and complete postsecondary education. This includes two- and four-year degree programs as well as trade/vocational certificate programs. After joining WICHE's CACG Consortium in 2010, project managers from the Office of the State Board of Education (OSBE) drew heavily from Alaska's program in the development of the Idaho Near Peer Mentor Program (NPMP), which began its pilot phase in 2011-12 at two central rural locations, Weiser and Payette high schools, and then expanded to North Idaho at Post Falls High School in 2012-13. Like the ACAC, recent college graduates are placed in high schools to directly assist students with the financial aid and college application process. Working collaboratively with guidance counselors and other school staff, the mentors motivate students to make appropriate curricular choices and increase the level of college participation among low-income and first-generation students. During the 2013-14 school

year, the NPMP expanded from five locations in the western and northern regions of the state to include three new locations in eastern Idaho, allowing Idaho's CACG program to reach a new rural student population that has benefited from increased advising and support.

Now with 16 near peers at 11 locations across the state, including three new locations in the Treasure Valley, the NPMP has made a great deal of progress toward changing student attitudes and aspirations regarding college and careers. Specific examples of overall program impact include:

- ▶ Near peers in Idaho have directly advised 7,053 students during one-on-one meetings. During the 2014-15 school year, this number rose by 1,452 compared to 2013-14.
- ▶ Near peers have conducted 1,046 group presentations related to college preparation, with a total unduplicated attendance of 11,547 students.
- ▶ 1,353 students have completed and submitted a FAFSA, with an increase of 906 students in 2014-15 compared to the 264 completed in 2013-14.
- ▶ To date, 1,242 students served by the NPMP have enrolled in some form of postsecondary education. The 2014-15 school year saw another increase in this category compared to 2013-14, as the number of enrollments rose from 248 to 871.

Thanks to legislation that was passed during the 2015 session, Idaho's NPMP should be able to expand into new rural locations in the upcoming year. HB 313, signed by Governor Otter on April 10, 2015, will allocate \$120 per classroom unit for grades eight through 12, or \$10,000 per school district (whichever is greater) for enhanced college advising and career counseling, including near peer mentoring.¹⁰

"Don't have any assumptions about students and what they're capable of figuring out on their own. Many of them really do need you to sit down next to them and tell them exactly what to put in each field on an application. Even if it seems self-explanatory to you, it probably isn't to them."

– Tiffanie Beebe, Post Falls High School
Near Peer, NPMP

"[A] highlight [of the school year] was meeting with a student at the beginning of the year who told me he wasn't going to college, didn't know what he wanted to do, and didn't really care. We continued to process through it all and I had him apply to North Idaho College, just as a backup. After countless meetings and help along the way I, just a couple days ago, helped him sign up for orientation at NIC, where he is going to start his criminal justice studies so he can become a police officer. Students like him make me feel like I helped make a difference!"

– Sarah Clausen,
Sandpoint Near Peer, NPMP

"One of the parents [at a FAFSA night] was in tears because she was so happy. We helped her daughter do the FAFSA and gave her scholarship applications to fill out. After seeing that her daughter qualified for the full Pell grant and had so many resources available, she was so happy because she could see that college was actually possible."

– Tyler Parkinson,
Bonneville High School Near Peer, NPMP

"Spring is a time of hope, but also a time of fear for many high school seniors. Many realize that real life is just around the corner. It also shows which students have worked hard and planned. Those students that have been active in our program are not in panic mode right now, they are simply planning their next steps."

– Darci Peterson,
Weiser High School Near Peer, NPMP

"Students have been asking me more and more about college. There is a lot more excitement here about college because of your program."

– Teacher at Sandpoint High School
talking to Sarah Clausen, Near Peer, NPMP

North Idaho: The Cost-Share Model

While CACG funds were exclusively used to fund the two pilot sites in western Idaho and one in North Idaho, to facilitate further expansion, OSBE developed a “cost-share” model with an eye on current expenses and future sustainability. The model allowed Lakeland, Sandpoint, and Timberlake high schools to join Post Falls High School as locations serving students in the northern region of Idaho in 2013. Under the cost-share agreements with the three new sites, the local school district, a postsecondary institution – including Northern Idaho College (NIC) and Lewis-Clark State College (LCSC) – and OSBE all contribute an equal amount of funds to pay for mentor time and benefits in addition to materials and supplies. This model eases the financial burden placed on the state to administer the program in the near future and has the potential to both attract new schools in other regions and increase K-12 and postsecondary collaboration. Using this approach in North Idaho freed up grant funds and allowed the NPMP to expand into more rural locations in eastern and southern Idaho in 2014 and 2015, respectively.

Sandpoint High School is a good example of a site that has seen a great deal of positive change since implementation of its program in the fall of 2013, change that would not have been possible if not for the cost-share approach. The number of college enrollments rose from eight in 2013-14 to 38 in 2014-15. The school’s current near peer has also developed a number of activities related to college and careers such as increased participation in college and finance fairs and conducting workshops for students during breaks, lunchtime, or open periods. Further, the original cost-share partners have created a mutually beneficial network of stakeholders in North Idaho that has led to the initial development of a college-going culture. As a student at Post Falls told the school’s near peers after being accepted into a technical training program at NIC, “You guys are the only reason I am going to college.”

Strategies for Success

Even with early program success, both Alaska and Idaho continue to face significant challenges as their near peer programs move forward. The college-going rate in both states, while showing improvement in locations that have a college guide or a near peer, still remain among the lowest in the nation and program staff face obstacles as they attempt to address the needs of first-generation or low-income students and families. Both the ACAC and the NPMP share certain characteristics that have led to positive outcomes, addressed the challenges of creating a college-going culture, and could be replicated in other states.

- ▶ **Plan, plan, and plan some more.** Alaska’s CACG program took its first full year of grant funding to develop a peer mentor program that would be prepared to hit the ground running and succeed. After investigating the CAC and Dream Project models, ACPE staff decided on the CAC approach and established a positive working relationship that continues to this day. At the same time, ACPE staff began researching potential sites that aligned with carefully crafted program goals. Because both states participated in WICHE’s CACG Consortium, Idaho was able to benefit from Alaska’s experience and assistance during the development of its program, including training for OSBE staff and the sharing of program documents including policy manuals and data collection dashboards and spreadsheets. Additionally, both the ACAC and the NPMP use site capacity assessments, originally developed by the ACAC in 2010, to determine if a certain high school is a good fit for the program. The assessment helps determine core environmental characteristics (i.e., student demographics, ongoing access efforts, counseling staff commitment, ability to track student data) and the organizational background and structure of the school (i.e., per-pupil spending, staff-to-student ratio, counseling staff resources, current targeted interventions) to ensure a school’s readiness and capacity to benefit from participation in a near peer mentor program.

- ▶ **Take advantage of existing resources.** As noted above, there are several established approaches and models to near peer mentoring, and there is no need for states to create a program completely from scratch. After using a planning process to determine the organizational model or approach that best fits the needs of your state, establish and maintain an ongoing relationship with those same organizations. Alaska has been a formal member of the CAC since 2010, after spending the first two years as an informal member. Membership in the CAC provides the opportunity for up to 40 percent of annual program funding to be covered, in addition to providing yearly national training and other program supports. There are also numerous state-level partners that can provide resources and support, including state policymakers. As mentioned previously, legislation passed in Idaho during the 2015 session includes funding for enhanced near peer mentoring, which will allow the NPMP to survive once CACG comes to an end.
- ▶ **Keep oversight as centralized as possible.** Out of necessity and concerns about sustainability, both Alaska and Idaho have entered into agreements with other entities – school districts, postsecondary institutions, or sources of additional grant funding – in order to keep their near peer programs afloat after the CACG carryover year ends. Despite these new and often complex partnerships, both the Alaska and Idaho programs have kept core activities like hiring and training, in addition to performance evaluation and ongoing supervision of the guides or near peers, under the purview of ACPE and OSBE. This allows for program continuity and enables both programs to continue tracking progress in the hopes of finding additional funding and establishing additional partnerships in upcoming years.
- ▶ **Find the right fit.** With oversight of the hiring process comes the ability to find near peers who are capable of reaching students who typically fall through the cracks and to establish positive working relationships with existing counseling staff. Programs that take the time to advertise, interview, and select the best available candidate have seen the most success. While obviously not always possible, hiring a guide or near peer who attended and graduated from a site has proven to be ideal in a number of cases. College guides at places like Bethel and vice High Schools in Alaska and near peers at places like Post Falls and Weiser Weiser High Schools in Idaho are examples of mentors who came into the job with an understanding of the local culture and experience in navigating a path to college from their respective communities. While not necessary, students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds also have a unique understanding of what it takes to make it all the way through the education pipeline. No matter what, a near peer mentor must be outgoing enough to identify, track down, and talk to students who might not otherwise seek counseling or consider going to college.
- ▶ **Take your time.** It might be tempting to replicate the success of your pilot program in as many locations as possible, as soon as possible. But growing your near peer program slowly and deliberately is a better way to ensure long-term success and sustainability. Not only did Alaska spend a solid year planning the launch of the ACAC program, once the pilot phase was completed it added only one school to ensure that both current and future students received the attention they needed. Idaho followed the same path when it expanded its program into another region of the state. Once both programs had two solid years of activity at three locations, they had the necessary infrastructure and initial outcomes to facilitate expansion into multiple sites over the next three years. The last point to consider is that program staff also has to grow accordingly due to the amount of oversight needed to ensure near peer mentors are getting the support that they need to carry out their duties more effectively.

Endnotes

¹ Section 137 of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, established a "maintenance of effort" (MOE) requirement whereby states are required to "demonstrate a commitment to affordable higher education." For more information please see "FY 2014 CACG Application Package" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2014) 5, accessed 5 October 2015 at <<http://www2.ed.gov/programs/cacg/2014-378.pdf>>.

² College Advising Corps, "Mission & History," (Chapel Hill, NC: College Advising Corps, 2015) accessed 11 October 2015 at <<http://advisingcorps.org/our-work/mission-history/>>.

³ University of Washington Dream Project, "2013 Accomplishments," (Seattle, WA: University of Washington, 2013) accessed 11 October 2015 at <<https://www.washington.edu/dreamproject/files/2012/10/2013-DP-Accomplishments.pdf>>.

⁴ iMentor, "iMentor Impact Summary 2013-2014," (New York City: iMentor, 2014) 1.

⁵ Benjamin L. Castleman and Lindsay C. Page, *Summer Nudging: Can Personalized Text Messages and Peer Mentor Outreach Increase College-Going Among Low-Income High School Graduates?* *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, vol. 115 (July 2015): 144-160.

⁶ Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE), "Alaska College & Career Advising Corps (ACAC)" Fact Sheet, (Anchorage, AK: ACPE, 2015) 1.

⁷ Beth Bragg, "NBA star, rapper visit Bethel High School in reward for student's college prep," *Alaska Dispatch News* August 29, 2013, accessed 11 October 2015 at <<http://www.adn.com/article/20130829/nba-star-rapper-visit-bethel-reward-students-college-prep>>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ HB 313, 63rd Legislature, State of Idaho, accessed 29 September 2015 at <<http://www.legislature.idaho.gov/legislation/2015/H0313Bookmark.htm>>.