

Does your campus need academic navigators?

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Academic navigators have a critical role to play throughout a student's time in college--here's why you need them on your campus

For those of us in higher education, access to college feels second nature. We are intimately acquainted with the ins and outs of the system. It can be challenging for us to step outside of our context enough to realize how opaque the process of applying for, matriculating within, studying for, and graduating from college can be.

Each step along the way is replete with protocols and decisions. These are stressful for any student and their family. Those headaches are amplified when the student is the first person in their family to attend college.

Understanding the challenges

First-generation college students have lower overall graduation rate and lower academic attainment than their peers with a parent who has completed a post-secondary degree. In spite of the additional obstacles they can face, first generation college students are less likely to utilize support services that could provide valuable resources than continuing generation students. The differences persist after graduation as well. Pew research has found "college graduates without a college-educated parent have lower incomes and less wealth, on average, than those with a parent who has a bachelor's or higher degree."

Secondary schools have begun to attune to the needs of first-generation college students. They play a foundation role in bridging these gaps, laying the groundwork for a student's success before they ever set foot on your campus. High school guidance counselors work with students and parents to explore career paths, complete the FAFSA, gather necessary materials, and begin their application process.

Once a prospective student reaches out to your college, you have a host of support services in place, from admissions counselors to tour guides to student ambassadors. College leadership may look at those structures and believe they have the necessary aids in place. However, a first-generation college student may be less adept at navigating this ecosystem and making use of the helps available. That's where an academic navigator can bring clarity, engagement, and support that will enable a first-generation student to thrive at your college.

Providing essential services

There are three primary functions that academic navigators can provide. First, they provide students and their families information. In the midst of the complex system of higher education, academic navigators can leverage expertise to make the system more accessible to those without prior experience. From awareness of key dates, to understanding unfamiliar terminology, academic navigators can translate the higher education code for first generation students and their families.

Second, academic navigators can assist with problem solving. Whether a family is evaluating how to pay for college, or a new student is struggling in their classes, or a soon-to-be-graduate is considering career options, academic navigators can help connect students with existing resources. Robust services exist to help students succeed. An academic navigator can bridge the gap between the need faced by the student and a path forward.

Finally, there is a crucial emotional component that academic navigators can offer students. College is hard and often frightening for students of all stripes. We often look to our role models to assure us that we can tackle something. Academic navigators can help to fill that key role for first generation students and their families, assuring them that they are not alone.

Intervening at critical junctures

Academic navigators have a role to play throughout a student's time in college. There are four key junctures during which academic navigators can help.

1. **Enrollment.** From campus visits to application processes, getting into college and deciding to attend involves many nuanced steps. An academic navigator can augment the role of admissions counselors as students apply for and select a school.
2. **Acclimation.** Transitioning to college life is a significant change. Academic navigators can be available to students as they find their stride.
3. **Persistence.** Most students encounter detours and obstacles at some point during their college career. An academic navigator can be the difference between a student surmounting these challenges or abandoning their studies.
4. **Graduation.** Moving from campus to career or further education is another sensitive time in the life of a student. Academic navigators can provide support and direction during this key season.

Success is a group activity

Consider the support of those along the marathon course for a long-distance runner. Complete strangers get up early in the morning to hold encouraging signs, cheer, and ring cowbells in support of the racers. The fatigue of a marathon can lead to vulnerability. Those simple kindnesses and positive messages have a profound impact. Academic navigators are a lot like those altruistic spectators. By standing along the course with support and resources, they help first generation college students stay the course and finish strong.