Determining Students’ Postsecondary Plans: A Program Evaluation of the Tools Used by Grinnell High School’s Counseling Department

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IRB required disclaimer: This project represents a program evaluation and, as such, its results are not generalizable.
Research Director's Commentary

Since I began publicly archiving reports produced as part of my Practicing Anthropology course, I have found it useful to provide brief commentary on the strength of the research and data presentation. The reports produced as part of this course are first and foremost part of a learning experience, and often represent the first major research students have undertaken. As such, things don't always go as planned. Sometimes this is due to poor time management or planning, fear of talking to others, data mismanagement, or some other factor affecting the students' success. Just as often it is due to factors beyond the students' control. Key informants or clients don't return messages, it rains on the days when street intercept interviewing is planned, the IRB requires multiple revisions before approval, or the research population proves harder to reach than expected.

In the case of this report, Determining Students' Postsecondary Plans: A Program Evaluation of the Tools Used by Grinnell High School's Counseling Department, I think that the research team mostly did a good job. The team experienced delays getting started with the project, and had difficulties getting many interviews. Some of this was due to the difficulties of doing research at the High School with individuals under 18 years of age. I do think the research would have benefitted from more interviews with recent alumni. In the end, however, the team gathered some interesting and valuable data and wrote a strong report that well presents the data they collected. Interesting, I think that they actually undersell the value of their research by overemphasizing the limitations at the end of their methods section. While the data is a small snapshot, it does reflect the views of those who provided the information, and as such, merits consideration.

Executive Summary

This report represents the methods, findings and recommendations resulting from a program evaluation conducted at Grinnell High School this semester about the effectiveness of the tools used by the school’s counseling department to determine students’ postsecondary plans. This research was conducted by two students in Monty Roper’s Practicing Anthropology course (ANT293) at Grinnell College, wherein students theorized, researched, interviewed and analyzed their data with the intention of benefitting the greater Grinnell community with their findings.

Our research aims to provide our client, Kevin Seney, principal of Grinnell High School, with a comprehensive evaluation of the tools his counseling department uses to interact with
students and determine what their plans are for after graduation. Grinnell High School currently faces a data discrepancy: more students are saying they are going to enroll in a post-secondary institution than are actually doing so. Eighty six percent of students declare to GHS in the month before graduation that they will enroll in a school the following fall, while the National Student Clearinghouse database indicates that only 70% of students, on average, are actually doing so. This data is concerning to the high school administration because it could indicate a lack of preparation on the part of the high school curriculum, and suggest that students are not being honest about their postsecondary intentions to their counselors. There is an assumption, however, that the specific tools being used by the counselors to determine students’ plans are accurate and meaningful; this may not necessarily be the case.

Rather than doing a one-time research project on where these 16% of students are actually going after graduation, our research team decided to do a more all-encompassing program evaluation of the specific tools and interactions used by the high school counselors to gather information about students’ plans for after graduation. We wanted to know if these counseling tools are really as accurate and effective as the school administration is relying on them to be in terms of determining students’ post-secondary plans. Our specific research question is stated as: **Is GHS (as a high school administration) using the most effective tools available for determining students’ postsecondary plans as they progress through high school and beyond?** These specific findings, we hope, will guide the administration on how they can improve their “tracking tools”, and move towards closing the current enrollment gap in the coming years.

All of the research conducted for this program evaluation is methodologically ethical and IRB-approved. The researchers met with client Kevin Seney for a principal interview, and subsequently interviewed Grinnell High School counselors Jill Allen and Dan Keller to get a firm understanding of the background and infrastructure of this research. Next, the researchers held a focus group with nine current GHS seniors which investigated the effectiveness and reception
of the college counseling tools from a student’s perspective. With the same interview guide as a reference, researchers proceeded to conduct interviews with four alumni of Grinnell High School and 13 current GHS seniors individually. Additionally, and as the final component of research, both student researchers observed a meeting with Kevin Seney, Jill Allen, Dan Keller and Dave Ford, National Student Clearinghouse expert, about the value of NSC data in improving counseling and tracking strategies.

Our research findings include 1) the Junior/Senior meeting is by far the most effective and established tool used by college counseling. 2) Kids who don’t know what they want to do after high school feel the most pressure from the tools used by college counseling. 3) GHS counselors do a great job of providing students with lots of scholarship opportunities. 4) There is definitely a ‘college-going culture’ at Grinnell High School. 5) Students don’t feel inclined to and are never asked to stay in touch with GHS after graduation. Based on these findings and our body of research, our team suggests that 1) All counselors should participate in formal training about understanding and interpreting National Student Clearinghouse data. 2) College-going culture should start in middle school in the form of an advisory group used for developing students’ soft skills. 3) Counselors should request further contact information from seniors before they graduate. 4) Meetings about improving college counseling need to be more inclusive, with school board members, K-12 faculty/staff and administration all present, and 5) Offer specific college counseling advice, events and tools to students based on whether they are planning on applying to (or enrolling in) two-year or four-year schools.

**Background and Purpose**

Grinnell High School’s mission statement reads: “The Grinnell-Newburg School District, in partnership with the entire community, will empower every student to become a lifelong learner who is a responsible, productive and engaged citizen within the global community” (grinnell.k12.org) This institution educated 561 students in the 2012-2013 school year, and
graduated 144 students in its senior class (US News and World Report). This year, Grinnell High School has 129 seniors who are planning to graduate in May. In concordance with the “lifelong learning” language in its mission statement, Grinnell High School endeavors for all of its students to create some sort of stimulating post-secondary plans for themselves, no matter whether that includes a post-secondary institution, personal travel, joining the workforce, or some other individualized goal. The counseling department at Grinnell High school meets twice with each student over the course of their high school careers, once in their junior year and once in their senior year, to discuss and conceptualize these plans. These meetings are designed to ensure that each student is as prepared as possible for their life after graduation.

However, despite these efforts (among many others) made by the counseling department, Grinnell High School still experiences difficulties with keeping track of what students are planning on doing, and whether or not they are actively following up and actualizing those intentions. These difficulties manifest themselves in the enrollment data provided by the National Student Clearinghouse. National Student Clearinghouse is a non-profit, non-governmental, national organization that acts as “the leading provider of educational reporting, data exchange, verification, and research services” in the United States (studentclearinghouse.org). This database reports on more than 3,600 US institutions and 98% of students, and provides information, such as enrollment data, to high schools and colleges that they can track their students’ progress with. Using this information from NSC, Grinnell High School has determined that there is an enrollment gap in their school’s data: 86% of GHS seniors every year, on average, declare that they have intentions of going to a post-secondary institution in the fall after they graduate high school. However, the data shows that only 70%, on average, are actually enrolling in the post-secondary institutions they declared they would. This 16 percentage point gap suggests that students are either a) not following through on their plans, or b) never intended to follow through on their plans to begin with, and therefore were dishonest with the counselors they talked to in high school. Either way, the high school is
concerned with preparing its students more rigorously for post-secondary life, and improving the tools they use to track students’ plans in order to hopefully close this enrollment gap in coming years.

It is worthy to note that there are a couple of potentially confounding variables with regard to this enrollment gap. Firstly, a policy called FERPA (Family Education Rights and Privacy Act) protects students’ privacy in their educational records. Any student or any parent of a student may specifically request to withhold their child’s educational records from National Student Clearinghouse’s database. This would leave these students unaccounted for in the enrollment statistics, and enlarge the enrollment gap. Secondly, it is possible that some students are taking a semester off, or a year off, before enrolling in college and therefore at first glance the NSC enrollment statistic would look inflated. However, it is always possible to run the enrollment data again after six months, and again after twelve months. Theoretically, by that point even the kids who had decided to take a gap year after high school would’ve matriculated into their respective institutions.

This program evaluation addresses the effectiveness of the college counseling tools used at Grinnell High School with the hope that, by investigating these tools closely, we can determine how to make them more precise in their ability to gather accurate information about students’ post-graduation plans. Our sample populations are drawn from students who either currently attend or used to attend Grinnell High School. Principal Kevin Seney recruited the GHS seniors we interviewed, both for the focus group and individually, with the intention of procuring students from a range of backgrounds and experiences. Our samples are small and non-random for this program evaluation: we interviewed 13 current GHS seniors individually, 9 GHS seniors in a focus group, and 4 GHS alumni, three of which attend Grinnell College. The researchers understand the inherent bias that comes with interviewing students who were sampled non-randomly, but the data is still valid in that it is ongoing and could contribute to further research at a later time.
**Evaluation Methods**

This program evaluation required an array of methodological strategies including key informant interviews, focus groups, individual student and alumni interviews, and participant observation at the high school. Our client, principal Kevin Seney, was a crucial asset to our research team in the role he played as primary communicator and recruiter for our interviews and focus group with students.

**Principal Interview**

We initially met with our client and key informant principal Kevin Seney to learn the necessary background needed to approach this research, and to discuss the nature and focus of our research question. We remained in steady contact with him whenever we had a question or a request pertaining to the next step in our project. Principal Seney helped us get in contact with the guidance counselors for an interview, and with the high school students for our focus group and for individual interviews. All interviews with counselors and students, as well as our alumni interviews, were recorded by iPhone, and each researcher took notes on each interview either in person or from the recording after the live event had taken place.

**Counselors Interview**

After the principal interview with Kevin Seney, researchers proceeded to interview both of the GHS college counselors, Jill Allen and Dan Keller, using the interview guide attached as Appendix B in the Appendices section of this report. Researchers asked questions about what tools and resources the counselors use for tracking students’ postsecondary plans, as well as what means they use for staying in touch with GHS alumni. This interview helped researchers create a reference list of tools, resources and opportunities used by the counselors, and this list was used later as a comparison to the resources and opportunities listed by students in interviews. This interview lasted 37 minutes, and took place in a private, closed classroom in Grinnell High School.

**Focus Group**
Researchers conducted a focus group with nine current GHS seniors. Principal Seney non-randomly recruited these students for the focus group with the intention of achieving a range of experiences and socioeconomic/educational backgrounds. Researchers used an interview guide (see Appendix A) to lead the focus group, and asked students questions such as: What specific tools to counselors use to find out what students are planning on doing after high school? and Do students feel pressure, when asked by the counselors, to say they are going to college? Does GHS have a college-going culture? This focus group lasted for 31 minutes, and took place in a private conference room in Grinnell High School. The interview was recorded for the sake of the researchers needing to listen to it multiple times; both researchers were present for the focus group. Students were all paid ten dollars for their time, and this money was funded by Susan Sanning at the Center for Careers, Life and Services at Grinnell College.

**Individual Student Interviews**

Researchers conducted thirteen individual semi-structured interviews with current GHS seniors on November 23. The notes from these interviews made up half of the student data collected. The students selected for these interviews were also recruited non-randomly by Principal Seney for the sake of time and diversity among students; however, researchers do understand the implicit bias inherent in a non-random sample. Each of these interviews lasted anywhere from 5-15 minutes, and the same interview guide used for the focus group was used to interview each individual student about their relationship with Grinnell High School College Counseling. Students were asked questions about the quality and quantity of their time spent with the counselors, if they felt like students took the counselors seriously and answered their questions about post-secondary life honestly, and whether or not they would have any desire to stay in touch with their high school after graduation. The results of these interviews varied student to student, and will be analyzed in the Results section.
Each of these interviews were recorded by iPhone; one researcher was present for the live interviews, and one researcher could not attend and took notes from the recording. All of the interviews took place in a private, closed classroom of Grinnell High School.

Alumni Interviews

Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with four GHS alumni using the same interview guide used for the focus group and the individual student interviews with current GHS seniors. These interviews were useful to our research because alumni have the experience of a full senior year, and therefore a retrospective approach to their counseling experience, while current GHS seniors are only halfway through their final year and have not had as much time to process their experience.

Getting in touch with alumni proved very difficult: we reached out to almost twenty alumni, all of whom apparently still live in the town of Grinnell, and only received word back from four people--three of whom go to Grinnell College, and one who interacts frequently with Grinnell college students. We interviewed no students who no longer live in the town of Grinnell, no students who attended a public university (which a large number of GHS alumni end up doing), and no students who attended any kind of two-year institution. Researchers understand that this kind of sample biases our research greatly towards a very small percentage of GHS student experiences, but we believe that the research exists and should still be shared for what it is.

These alumni interviews were all recorded by iPhone for the sake of researcher collaboration, and took place in private rooms at Grinnell College. One of them took place in a closed room at the Drake Community Library in town.

Participant Observation

Researchers engaged in two hours of participant observation at Grinnell High School in the form of an informational meeting with statistics expert Dave Ford from the National Student Clearinghouse, Principal Kevin Seney, and GHS counselors Jill Allen and Dan Keller. This
meeting served as an introduction to the National Student Clearinghouse for the counselors and demonstrated how valuable of a resource this data can be to the counselors as they help students develop their post-grad plans. Dave Ford also gave examples of how other schools have used NSC as a tracking resource in their administrations. Principal Seney brainstormed with Dave Ford and the counselors about how GHS can make the most use of this data.

**Analysis and Limitations**

The researchers analyzed the body of data and coded it for the most frequent, salient, and pertinent responses to the research question. We especially tried to compare student responses to counselors’ responses to see if there were any notable discrepancies among the two. Researchers looked for trends in students’ responses as they described how tracking techniques work, both in theory and in practice, and how effective they are at determining students’ plans and eventual decisions (as well as the follow through on those decisions).

This data contains two glaring limitations. Firstly, the sample sizes used are much too small to be considered statistically significant. This can be attributed to the fact that this program evaluation was conducted within the context of one four-credit undergraduate class, and that time was severely limited for the researchers; there was a severe time crunch that limited the quantity of data collected severely. The second major limitation to our research is the non-random sampling method used for our student and alumni interviews. These small, non-random samples undoubtedly produce a substantial bias within our research, but again, there is only so much two researchers can do within the time constraints of one class, for one semester.

**Results**

When we interviewed the counselors at the beginning of our research, they gave us a long list of the tools and resources they use to help students with their post-secondary planning process. This list included but is not limited to the mandatory Junior and Senior Meetings, the
Iowa Department of Education program I Have A Plan Iowa (an online, state-mandated program that begins for students in eighth grade), college visits for freshmen, college fairs, career day for sophomores and juniors, Seminar (high school advisory group), emails and postings about scholarship opportunities, and the Independent Learning Center for students who want to develop job skills. With these tools in mind, researchers then developed an interview guide that would probe students and alumni with sub-questions that could determine how effective each tool is at 1) preparing students to make their post-graduation plans, and then 2) determining what those plans are for the sake of tracking. In the following dissemination of our results, we will organize by sub-question, and relay the findings related to each question from our interviews with students and counselors.

When does college counseling start? How do counselors determine students’ plans?

Counselors told researchers that the state-mandated Department of Education program called I Have a Plan Iowa technically starts in eighth grade; that year, all students are required to take an aptitude test to start understanding their strengths and career interests, and they are also asked to fill out a four year plan to begin thinking about their high school career. I Have a Plan Iowa was also mentioned in 20 of our 26 interviews with students as one of the preliminary steps of college counseling, but each student emphasized how ineffective and unhelpful they found this tool. One said that it was like “a dumbed-down version of the Common App,” while others simply referred to it as something they were made to do in Seminar and never returned to again. Instead, all 26 students interviewed remarked that the individual Junior and Senior meetings with the counselors were the real beginning (and sometimes also the end) of college counseling; it is in these meetings that counselors directly find out what students are planning to do. Counselors would ask students about their plans, or help them come up with a plan if they didn’t yet have one, and assist with any logistics that may be involved in the execution of the plan, such as filling out the Common App or the FAFSA. These are the only two meetings that
students are guaranteed to have with the counselors; beyond that, it is up to the student to schedule a meeting if they need help. Most students stated that they had never done this, but that their Junior/Senior meetings made them feel more comfortable and secure in their plans moving forward.

**Does Grinnell have a ‘college-going’ culture?**

All 26 students unanimously agreed in their interviews that Grinnell High School does participate in a ‘college-going’ culture. This means that the high school environment is conducted in such a way that students feel expected to go (or at least consider going) to college in some capacity. One student remarked that one would feel “awkward and stupid if they didn’t know what they wanted to do”, while 15 out of 26 others specifically stated that they definitely felt pressure to go to college from the counselors and their peers.

**Scholarships**

Unprompted, 14 out of 26 students specifically mentioned that counselors do a really good job of providing scholarship opportunities to students and that this is what they do best.

**Do students answer counselors’ questions about post-secondary life honestly?**

**Do students feel pressure to say they are going to college when they actually aren’t?**

Researchers found a correlation in these two questions: of the 13 individual student interviews we conducted, 9 students said that they felt like students answered counselors’ questions about college honestly, and the same 9 students also said that they didn’t feel pressure from counselors or peers to answer counselors’ questions untruthfully. Conversely, two students responded that they don’t think students are honest with counselors about their postsecondary plans, and that they do think students feel pressure to give the “right” answer to counselors’ questions about college. This pressure, for both of these students, seems to have stemmed from not having a concrete plan about what they wanted to do when they graduated:
“The pressure is to have an answer about where you’re going to go; no one wants to not know what they’re doing next year.” 2 students didn’t comment on this subject. See Appendix C for a graphic illustrating this correlation.

**Do you feel inclined to stay in touch with the high school?**

*(for alumni) Have you stayed in touch with GHS in any way since graduation?*

In the focus group, students commented that “no one would really want to do that [keep in touch with the high school]. They said, “no one really wants to go to high school necessarily; we want to get away from it”, and “it doesn’t matter anymore”. These sentiments echoed throughout all of our student interviews except for one alumni researchers interviewed, who told us that he still co-coaches the debate team at the high school, and therefore returns there once a week. The counselors said that they don’t request any further contact information from students before they graduate from high school. In June after graduation, the seniors’ school emails are deactivated, and the administration no longer has any mode of communication with these students. One alumni mentioned that she had received a “Where Are You Now?” postcard in the mail at her parents house, during her first year of college, but that it was thrown away without being returned to its sender.

It is worth noting here that the post-graduate communication aspects of our research were investigated in much less depth than the evaluation of the tracking tools. These findings, therefore, are much less definitive and require significantly more research to be considered conclusive.

**Discussion**

Individualized, personal counseling is valued highly by students, according to our interview responses. The way each student spoke about the Junior and Senior meeting specifically indicated that these were the college counseling opportunities that made the biggest
impact on them as they designed and reasoned through their plans. Many students commented that they wished they had had more chances to meet with the counselors, because they were very helpful in meetings, but these meetings were so infrequent that they didn’t amount to any significant counseling in the long run. This request for more direct communication with counselors was echoed in various student responses, and leads researchers to believe that the counselors are spread too thin in their jobs. They have approximately 260-300 students to meet with individually each year (the junior class and the senior class), and there are only two counselors who conduct these meetings. This is a very high volume of work for one person, and the counselors can’t be expected to do more than they possibly can in a given year. Therefore, it is very important to make sure that these Junior/Senior meeting times with students are maximized to their absolute fullest potential: counselors need to ensure that they have had all of the formal training and education they need to counsel a student right then and there in their meeting, without further research. If each student only gets one meeting per year, then that meeting needs to be immensely helpful to the student or it is not worth it for either party.

Another important aspect of our research is hearing from the kids who do feel some sort of pressure to have a post-secondary plan, and trying to understand the dynamics of how more average students may potentially get left behind in terms of the high school counseling department. In interviews, many students referenced that kids who feel financial pressures at home most likely end up going to community college--this is a good option for them because they can get a two-year degree inexpensively, and then transfer to get a bachelor’s degree. However, there appears to be some dissonance in terms of how these ‘at-risk’ kids are counseled vs. how more financially supported kids are counseled. One student, talking about the GHS curriculum said: “It’s all tracked...the tracked kids know what they’re doing, they don’t need to see the counselors”. Another student said that “if you don’t know what you wanna do they always tell you to go to community college...I think that’s mostly for financial reasons...especially if you don’t make straight As, if you’re just in there being very average, then
you get treated like an average kid going to community college until you figure out what you wanna do with your life”. A trend in our research suggests that the kids who have external support systems (parents, financial, etc) don’t make as much use of the counselors, while the students who don’t have these support systems rely more on the counselors to “tell them what to do”. These students are often presented with “realistic” options for them, such as community college or a 2-year school, based on their grades, but they feel like they are only “going through the motions” with the counseling department and that they aren’t prepared for such a post-secondary plan. Steps need to be taken to combat this anxiety and lack of preparation for college, especially for these students, who may lack support systems that others have available to them.

A final important aspect of our results is that the counselors are doing lots of things really well. Students resoundingly agree that the counseling department has all the resources and scholarship opportunities they could ever need to be successful, and that if each student took advantage of the wealth of information they have at their disposal, they would be well-prepared to take on their college application process. Grinnell High School has also done a great job of cultivating a ‘college-going’ culture among their students: everyone we interviewed agreed that most students are at least considering going to a post-secondary institution, if not applying for one. However, a significant number of students discussed how easy it is to ignore the counseling department; they said that it is really up to the individual student’s sense of initiative and motivation to pursue the resources that the counselors have to offer. This seems like one of the department’s major shortcomings; if counselors could find ways to make their opportunities and resources more integrated into a student’s academic life in the classroom, rather than requiring each student to come searching for help, then perhaps students would take better advantage of all of the education and opportunities that exist for their benefit, ultimately resulting in a smaller enrollment gap.
**Recommendations**

Firstly, we believe that all counselors should receive formal training about how to use National Student Clearinghouse to its fullest extent. Based on our meeting with NSC expert Dave Ford, it has come to researchers’ attention that this database is an invaluable resource to counselors and administrators. There are innumerable analytical tests to be run, statistically significant data points to be found, and crucial insights to glean from the StudentTracker reports NSC can provide. Fully understanding this data will help counselors to concisely and professionally counsel students in their Junior and Senior meetings about which classes would be best for them to take their Senior year based on college preparedness statistics, and how to navigate their first year of college smoothly and successfully.

Secondly, we suggest that GHS’ ‘college-going’ culture start even earlier, in middle school, in the form of a middle school advisory group similar to high school Seminar. The purpose of this advisory group would not at all be to start drilling the college application process into middle school-aged kids, but rather to provide an extra support system through which kids could work with a faculty member and fellow students to develop soft skills, like creativity, initiative and communication. Especially for potential at-risk kids, we believe that these middle school advisory groups could be really helpful in terms of making kids feel more confident and supported in an academic setting; it will hopefully make the idea of college less frightening and unfamiliar to them later on.

Thirdly, in a similar vein to the previous suggestion for younger advisory groups, we suggest that the responsibility of improving student’s postsecondary plans and levels of preparedness does not lie solely on the college counselors in the final year of a student’s high school career; rather, this is a curricular process, and therefore all faculty and staff, K-12, should feel some responsibility for their students aspiring to post-secondary education. We suggest that a K-12 committee should be created with the intention of meeting regularly to discuss strategies for students’ long-term success in post-secondary life, and how this success can be affected by
their curriculum now, no matter what grade they’re in. This committee will bridge gaps between the school board, the district, and Grinnell’s elementary, middle and high schools to help educators understand how the entire school system really does need to work together to ultimately prepare students for postsecondary success.

Fourthly, we recommend that GHS counselors provide separate counseling events, advice and resources for students who are planning on attending two-year schools, rather than 4-year public or private schools. The reasoning behind this suggestion came up during our meeting with NSC expert Dave Ford when he was discussing persistence, and how difficult it is for some students to make it through their first year of college. “At Grinnell College, if you don’t come back for your second semester, someone is calling you to find out why,” Ford explained. “But at a community college, if you don’t show up for class, no one really even cares or contacts you to find out why...these are two very different school environments, and kids should be counseled specifically according to what kind of institution they plan on attending”. We believe that this advice is especially relevant considering the large percentage of GHS students who do go to 2-year schools, community colleges, and large state schools: they should receive site-specific counseling in order to succeed to the fullest extent.

Finally, our research team recommends that the GHS counselors request further contact information from seniors on their declaration forms they fill out in May before graduation. Currently, Grinnell High School has no formal method for acquiring further contact information from its graduates. This is a really simple way to stay in contact with more GHS alumni, and hopefully begin have a better idea of how they are succeeding in pursuing their declared post-secondary plans.

**Conclusion**

This project only examined a tiny part of what is a much larger issue, both within the Grinnell-Newburg Community School District and within society as a whole. However, we were
able to gain some valuable insights into the specific question we set out to investigate, namely “Is GHS (as a high school administration) using the most effective tools available for determining students’ postsecondary plans as they progress through high school and beyond?” In our investigation, we discovered that some factors, like student motivation and financial difficulties, were still outside the guidance department’s control to some degree. However, we also identified some key areas for improvement that can be implemented almost immediately, especially the increased utilization of the National Student Clearinghouse, as well as opening discussions about post-secondary planning to all faculty/staff, K-12. Although our research only examined a small portion of this issue regarding high school students’ success after graduation, we were still able to identify some strategies that will significantly improve the school’s ability to track its students. Improving tracking methods will create answers to some of the high school administration’s questions about why some students seemingly go against their intended plans to pursue postsecondary education, as well as why not all students succeed in or complete their postsecondary education.

References

National Student Clearinghouse

Grinnell-Newburg Community School District

U.S. News and World Report

Appendices

Appendix A. GHS Student Focus Group Guide
Introduction:

- Researchers and participants will exchange names and introductions.
- Researchers will review the previously provided informed consent form for the group and collect the signed consent forms.
- Researchers will hand out contact information for school counselors (in case students experience stress or concerns concerning their futures as a result of the discussion).
- Researchers provide additional clarification on the project and the reason for the focus group.
- Researchers will clarify that there are no wrong answers. We simply want to hear whatever it is that the students have to say. They are welcome to talk about their own experience, but there is no expectation that they do so. They may speak more generally.

NOTE: many of these questions are intended as possible prompts. This is not a structured group interview.

1. **How does GHS determine students’ post graduation plans?**

   **Possible Prompts**
   - When are students first contacted by the counseling department at GHS?
   - How does the high school find out what students are planning to do after high school?
   - How often does the high school try to determine post-graduate plans?

2. **Do you think the high school has a good handle on what students are planning to do after high school?**

   **Possible Prompts**
   - Why/why not.
   - Is the high school asking the right questions in appropriate ways?
     - Is there sufficient choice to answer accurately?
     - Are the questions clear?
     - Are they doing a good job of understanding students’ goals?
   - Do students know what they want to do?
     - Do students have the resources and information they need to start developing post-secondary plans?
       - How many times do students get to meet with GHS counselors? Was this sufficient?
     - Do they have resources and information for students who aren’t planning to go to college?
   - Are students answering honestly?
     - Do students take the relevant surveys/questionnaires seriously?
     - Do students answer truthfully?
     - Do students feel pressure to answer in particular ways? (If so, how?)
       - Did students feel pressure, when first asked, to say they are going to go to college? What is the ‘college culture’ like at Grinnell High School?

3. **Are they getting accurate information from the students on what students plan to do?**

   **Possible Prompts**
   - Do students have the resources and information they need to start developing post-secondary plans?
   - How many times do students get to meet with GHS counselors? Was this sufficient?
   - Do they have resources and information for students who aren’t planning to go to college?

Conclusion:

- Is there anything anyone would like to add that we did not ask about or you didn’t get a chance to mention?
- Thank you for participating!

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**Appendix B. GHS Faculty/Staff Interview Guide**

Introduction:
• Researchers and faculty/staff introduce themselves
• Researchers introduce the project
• Review terms of consent form: interview content is kept confidential, you can withdraw from the project at any time

Questions:

1. How does GHS approach post-secondary counseling and tracking?
2. When does counseling and/or tracking begin?
3. What kind of information and resources are provided to students who intend to go to college? How do counselors advise students who are not planning on going to college?
4. For what reasons might students who intend on going to college not end up enrolling?
5. Is the guidance department or the administration in contact with or tracking students after they graduate? In what ways?
6. How might you go about contacting one of your former students after they leave Grinnell High School?
7. Is there anything else you wish to include in this conversation that you have not been asked about or have not had the opportunity to mention?

Conclusion:
• Thank you and exchange of contact information in case of further questions/comments.

Appendix C. Chart Illustrating Student Responses (p. 11)
Do you think students answer counselors' questions about college planning honestly?

Do students feel pressure to answer counselors' questions a certain way because GHS students are expected to go to college?

Individual Student Interview Responses

(n=13)

- Did you think students answer counselors' questions honestly?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Didn't mention

- Do students feel pressure to answer counselors' questions a certain way because GHS students are expected to go to college?
  - Yes
  - No
  - Didn't mention

Number of students