

UW DIVERSITY OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT

Site Counselors in the Schools 1999-2000 ¹

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ABSTRACT

The Office of Educational Assessment (OEA), commissioned by the University of Washington (UW) President's Advisory Committee on Diversity², completed an evaluation of minority outreach and recruitment efforts at the University (UW). During the K-12 1999-2000 school year, the UW placed two site counselors in 11 Seattle, Tacoma and Renton high schools, with the goal of increasing enrollment rates for qualified, underrepresented minority students at the UW. Questionnaires were administered to teachers and resident counselors at participating schools to assess the effectiveness of the project and changes that could be implemented in the 2000-01 school year. Results from the resident counselor surveys indicated that the majority of schools would like to have UW site counselors at their schools more often and that contact with the students seems to be causing an increase in interest in attending college. The most valuable services provided by the site counselors were assistance with college applications and personal essays, one-on-one contact, and general support and encouragement in the process. Results from the site counselor surveys indicated that site counselors were making an impact in their schools, as well as developing relationships with teachers and other school personnel. Recommendations based on the findings suggest that collaboration is essential and it would be helpful if school districts and individual high schools work more closely with the site counselors to coordinate schedules and plan activities to increase visibility and reach the objectives of the project, and formal training of the site counselors would be beneficial to reach consistency in site counselor activities and reporting.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the K-12 1999-2000 school year, the UW placed two site counselors in 5 Tacoma (Curtis, Foss, Lakes, Lincoln, Stadium) and 6 Seattle and Renton high schools (Chief Sealth, Cleveland, Franklin, Garfield, Rainier Beach and Renton) as part of outreach and recruitment efforts. These individuals interacted with all students, but particularly with underrepresented minority (URM) students whose application and enrollment rates at the UW are disproportionately low. Placements of site counselors were initiated in hopes of increasing enrollment rates for qualified URM students at the UW and other institutions of higher education. The site counselors were selected based on their desire to improve the participation of URM students in post-secondary education and their ability to effectively represent the UW and college-student life, as well as their potential to work well with culturally diverse groups of individuals. Throughout the year, site counselors offered classroom presentations; workshops

¹ Submitted as part of the evaluation of Minority Outreach and Recruitment Efforts at the University of Washington.

² The survey discussed in this report was developed and administered by Stephanie Miller, the Assistant Director of Admissions for Student Outreach and Community Relations, and Enrique Morales, the Associate Director of Admissions and Assistant to the Vice President for Minority Affairs at the University of Washington. Only those items useful in the evaluation of this project were included in the report.

concerning college applications, minimum requirements and criteria for admission; Scholastic Assessment Test/American College of Testing Assessment (SAT/ACT) preparation; one-on-one counseling, and general encouragement and support to the students. Site counselors were in each of the various schools one-half day per week, and were available on an appointment or drop-in basis. Following the completion of the 1999-2000 school year, UW site counselors and resident counselors were asked to complete distinct surveys regarding their experiences and thoughts concerning improvements needed in the next year.

METHODOLOGY

Two distinct surveys were developed to gather project evaluation information: the [Resident Counselor Survey](#) and the [Site Counselor Survey](#). The Resident Counselor Survey was developed by the coordinators of the Site Counselors in the Schools Project, Enrique Morales and Stephanie Miller, and administered to resident school guidance counselors and teachers. The Site Counselor Survey was developed by the OEA, with input from the coordinators of the project, and administered on-line to the two site counselors.

The Resident Counselor Survey included open-ended questions regarding the effectiveness of the UW site counselors, the manner in which they communicated their presence in the schools and how they might improve student awareness. Teachers and resident guidance counselors had the opportunity to indicate the services that should be added, modified or discontinued, and any additional suggestions concerning the efficacy of the site counselor project. Of the 34 individuals polled, 25 teachers and resident guidance counselors from Tacoma, Seattle, and Renton high schools completed and returned surveys (74% response rate). Their comments were coded and reported as the percent of individuals offering a particular response. Methodological limitations include the fact the project was underway prior to the involvement of the OEA and the OEA was not involved in the development of the survey. The findings discussed and recommendations made must be interpreted with these issues in mind.

The Site Counselor Survey, developed by the OEA, was e-mailed to the two site counselors to complete and return on-line. The survey included open-ended questions regarding the training and preparation for the position, the compatibility of their expectations of the experience and the realities of being in the schools, and their perceptions of the effectiveness of the project. Site counselors discussed how they were perceived by the students, teachers, and resident counselors and whether those relationships changed over time. Plans for the upcoming year were elicited, and the site counselors discussed what they had learned over the last year that might help them prepare for the 2000-01 school year.

FINDINGS

This report presents information in two separate sections: Resident Counselor Information and Site Counselor Information. The closing section of the report, Recommendations for Project Development, provides recommendations considering both sets of information.

Resident Counselor Information

Resident counselor surveys were coded and reported as [response frequencies](#). A majority of the respondents (56%) reported that more than half to essentially all students were aware that a UW site

counselor was at the school. However, some resident counselors (32%) also indicated that less than half of their students were aware of the UW presence. When asked to indicate the most effective manner in which the presence of the site counselors was communicated, the majority of respondents reported that classroom presentations (40%) and bulletins/posters (32%) were the most successful in increasing students' awareness. Individuals also suggested that involving teachers and resident counselors as a medium for reaching students was particularly useful and important (40%). In response to how the UW site counselors project might improve the communication of their presence, the most common response was to increase the time spent in the schools. In fact, 48% of respondents indicated that they would like to see the site counselors spending an increased amount of time in their school. Other common suggestions for increasing students' awareness of the site counselor project included more personal contact (e.g., at lunch times, assemblies) (24%), and contact earlier in the year (20%). Respondents also indicated that it might be useful to increase the number of posters, advertisements, flyers and mailings (36%) to reach the maximum number of students.

Teachers and resident counselors reported that the most valuable services provided by the UW site counselors were assistance with college applications and personal essays (48%), SAT/ACT preparation (36%), one-to-one contact (32%), general support in the process and encouragement (28%), presentations to students (24%) and giving college and financial aid information (16%). Many respondents indicated that there should not be modification or discontinuation of any services (44%). Suggestions for improvement included increasing regular visits to the UW for high school students (16%) and a variety of college information should be presented (20%). Counselors also suggested that students with special needs have increased access to site counselors via after-school programs (12%) and that there be increased parental involvement (8%). Resident counselors' suggestions of activities for students for each of the four years in high school ranged from identifying student interests in the early years, planning for post-secondary education, and then implementing the plans in the senior year by applying to colleges and completing the necessary forms. Illustrative resident counselor comments include:

The personal approach was excellent. The attitude that you were here to help them first was evident. Recruitment was not in the forefront. However, I know your presence at [the school] resulted in more UW applications.

Your presence and availability were so very important to our students.

The fact that you came and discussed UW programs with [the students] and how each one of them could make it was valuable to them.

Thanks for lending [the counselor] to us. I have no other suggestions. [The counselor] really cares for the students. Thanks.

We really like working with [the counselor] and would like [that counselor] to be our UW liaison.

We were happy with how it went...More of the same. Thanks.

Obviously, we would like you here full-time!

Although the majority of the surveys indicated very positive feelings toward the UW site counselor project, there were some, albeit few, negative comments that warrant mention. Some respondents indicated that further training of the site counselors was necessary (8%) and a few indicated that they felt the project was not effective this year (8%). It was also noted in resident counselor written comments that the times and availability of the counselors need to be dependable (12%), and that site counselor time in the schools should be increased (32%). Most resident counselors would be willing to meet and plan the continuing program (56%). Resident counselor comments included:

We need consistent visitations to school so students know when to connect with the UW outreach worker.

The UW needs to pay careful attention to selection of staff.

There really wasn't any [communication] from the UW [counselors to the students].

Start earlier in the year.

Conclusions and Recommendations from Resident Counselor Surveys

Analysis of the Resident Counselor surveys indicates that the most effective means of reaching students in the schools is through a consistent on-site schedule and classroom presentations. This allows for an introduction to the counselors and what they offer, a chance for students to hear about the project, and follow-up contact. It appears that the more exposure via posters, bulletins and word of mouth, the better, and that teachers and resident counselors must be involved in order for the effort to be maximally successful.

The site counselors should increase their visibility by being present during some breaks and lunchtimes, as well as after school. It would also be worthwhile to reevaluate the project yearly, and adjust if necessary, to ensure the project is equally effective in all schools and tailor site counselor training according to the information gathered.

It is clear that the Site Counselors in the Schools Project must be in place and ready to begin at the start of the K-12 school year. In addition, the presence and availability of the site counselors must be consistent and reliable throughout the year. The wide variation in student awareness of the site counselors across schools indicates that counselor projects and involvement is not standardized.

The most valuable site counselor services include assistance with applications and essays, as well as SAT/ACT preparation, but the importance of site counselor support and encouragement cannot be overlooked. Letting students know what its like to go to a university and that doing so is within reach, while offering the resources to achieve that goal, has the potential to significantly improve minority enrollment at the UW. The project administrators might consider increasing the amount of time site counselors spend at the schools and the scope of services offered. Some schools even requested a site counselor full time, to be available to the students with the greatest need.

If only one thing is taken away from this investigation, it should be that high school students could use assistance with the process of college application and that it would be very beneficial to have site counselors in the schools more than one half day per week. It appears that there are many qualified

students who would not otherwise get the assistance and support necessary to apply to a post-secondary educational institution without the intervention and efforts of this project.

Site Counselor Information

The site counselor survey was composed of fourteen open-ended questions and administered to the two site counselors on-line. Since there were only two respondents, data were not coded and presented as frequencies, but are presented in paragraph form with supporting quotations.

Expectations and Realities.

In discussing whether their perceptions matched the realities of the position, both site counselors indicated that they expected to provide assistance with college applications and college planning in general, while one also thought that URM students would be especially important to reach, as those students are not always as aware of the process and requirements of college applications as other students in the high schools. Both site counselors reported that the actual experience of being in the schools and dealing with the students was very positive and far exceeded their expectations. They indicated that they were asked to be involved in a number of important and influential activities and decisions within the school, and that the impact they were able to make with the students was very rewarding.

The realities of counseling far exceeded my expectations. I did not realize the impact I could have on a student getting admitted to college.

The grateful thank-you of students who were admitted, and referrals from one student to another are nice pats on the back.

The negative impact of my presence in the school would be that some teachers/students thought that I was there in a recruiting capacity, because of I-200, and if it were not for that, I wouldn't be there. Proving my worth through workshops and such, whether because of I-200 or not, was a challenge.

Unfortunately, some uninformed persons thought that I was at the school strictly to help minority students

Perceptions of the Site Counselors.

When the weekly visits to the schools began, students assumed that the role of the site counselor was as a UW recruiter, and thus only considered contacting the site counselors if they were interested in attending the UW and/or were confident of their qualifications. Over time, students' perception of the site counselors appeared to change from that of a recruiter, to that of an asset in reaching their aspirations to attend college. Students realized that the site counselors were available to help with college applications, SAT/ACT preparation, and that the counselors could help them reach their educational goals.

Responses of the site counselors indicated that while they were welcomed into the schools, many teachers and resident counselors were unsure of how to best utilize their skills. In fact, some school staff members called the presence of the site counselors "overkill," considering that the UW already

maintained a strong presence in the schools. However, over time it appeared that teachers were allowing the site counselors more time in the classrooms for presentations concerning the process of college application, and resident counselors began to refer students requiring assistance to the site counselors.

The students learned that I could assist them with their college application process...I would help them even if they had no intention of attending the UW. Before I knew it, I had students asking me to help them with writing essays for both college applications and scholarships. Word of mouth really helped to increase my exposure to other students.

Unexpected Impact in the School.

According to the site counselors' responses, the most unexpected and positive impact they made in the schools was to give students who would not have otherwise pursued post-secondary education an opportunity to take inventory of their skills through one-on-one interaction with the site counselors. The students who took the time to meet with a site counselor realized that they could apply and be admitted to a post-secondary institution. This allowed students who may have been overwhelmed or uninformed to realize their academic potential. Site counselors were both pleased and surprised at the effect they had on the students' lives and the difference they could make in developing a path of success for students.

I think my one on one contact with the students made many of them feel that they really were capable of succeeding at the UW or other colleges of their choice. I really tried to have the students take inventory of their skills and show them the link to their future success in education. I just didn't realize how much a little advice impacted them.

Site Counselor Training.

Under time constraints during the implementation of the project, very little formal training was available to the site counselors. Site counselors indicated that it was clear to them from their initial interviews for the position that training and preparation for the position would be left to their own initiative. Site counselors were invited to shadow seasoned counselors and admissions directors in their workshops and presentations and were encouraged to ask questions. Some instruction was provided on the use of the UW student database, and a variety of reading materials were available for review. However, structured, formal training was not provided to the site counselors, and they were free to vary in their approaches within the project.

Effective and Ineffective Components.

Both site counselors agreed that their services were most effective for those students who were proactive in the pursuit of their education. Because the project was voluntary, students willing to take the first step had the first contacts. In some cases, students self-assessed their skills and potential, and concluded that they were not good candidates for college. Individuals who took the time to understand what post-secondary institutions are looking for in an applicant were most likely to apply and be admitted to the UW, community colleges, and colleges throughout the state and nation. Students who were not interested in attending the UW did not seek the advice of the site counselors in their application process to other institutions and may not have been as successful in attaining admission.

According to the site counselors, the most valuable services they offered were assistance with college applications and personal statements for application materials. In addition, addressing the high school to college transition, defining requirements, and helping students choose institutions that were right for them were all very useful. The SAT/ACT preparation workshops did not appear to be as successful, were reported as poorly attended by the students, and were frustrating to one site counselor.

Three students that I counseled brought their personal statements to me...They were your basic B average students. At first, they were not going to write on all of the topics because they had no idea of the importance. However, after some strong encouragement, they all agreed to write on all of the topics and showed their final rough drafts to me. Fortunately, they all were admitted for this fall.

Thoughts on Next Year.

One important component of success for this project that was missing during the 1999-2000 K-12 school year was coordination of the schedules of the UW, the site counselors, and the high schools. One counselor, in particular, indicated that it was difficult to provide a calendar of planned events for the reference of the students when teacher and classroom schedules were not available to the site counselor. Arrangements to offer presentations concerning college application and preparation were also difficult to organize considering the fact that different school districts operated on different schedules. The implementation of the project and communication with the students could be more successful in the coming year if schedules were more aligned and site counselors were given additional information concerning district scheduling. For continued improvement of the project, site counselors should operate on school district schedules, should arrive before school begins to work with students, and should be available after school to provide additional help.

In addition, site counselors recommended that in order to improve the operations of the project in the upcoming year, high schools should ensure that the UW and the site counselors have access to the most effective forms of communicating with students and parents. It was suggested by one site counselor that school district and UW administrators meet formally to determine the most effective manner in which to work within each school.

On the high school staff side, I would love to have better cooperation from certain personnel on certain campuses.

In the upcoming year, site counselors also planned to get an earlier start in meeting with the students and offering workshops so that applications for college could be completed as soon as possible. This was not possible in 1999, as implementation of the project did not commence at the start of the K-12 school year.

Conclusions and Recommendations from the Site Counselor Survey

Considering that 1999-2000 was the first year of the Site Counselors in the Schools Project, site counselors appeared to be satisfied with the progress made over the last 10 months. One of the most distinctive components of the project is the lack of training and preparation provided to the site counselors. Considering that one of the goals of the project is to allow equal opportunities to all students, standardizing the communication styles, preparation and knowledge of the site counselors through training may ensure that students from all schools have the best opportunity, resources and support

possible. Efforts should be made to provide training concerning effective communication within the schools, methods of maximizing site counselor visibility, and problem-solving skills in managing the diversity of high school schedules and staff personalities.

Site counselors appeared to be relatively comfortable allowing the students, teachers and resident counselors time to adjust and become familiar with the services available from the UW counselors. However, educating all individuals involved earlier in the year may increase the number of students willing to contact the site counselors and allow teachers and resident counselors to make informed recommendations in referring students to the site counselors. Possibly incorporating the project into a school-wide assembly to introduce the site counselors and allow them to outline the value of their services may serve this purpose and enable the high school community to become more familiar and comfortable with the presence of the site counselors in their schools. Additionally, this sort of activity should ameliorate confusion regarding who can take advantage of the site counselors and their availability to assist individuals interested in applying to a variety of colleges.

Based on what the site counselors experienced during the 1999-2000 K-12 school year, there are several issues that they reported would make the project more successful. Coordinating schedules in order to improve availability to students and communication with others in the school is necessary to advance the project. Site counselors have indicated that they are working more closely with the teachers and resident counselors to improve the scheduling conflicts, and this will allow better planning of activities and student interaction.

Although unexpected by the site counselors, making such a difference in the lives of students is one of the most important outcomes of the project. Being able to provide an opportunity for success through encouragement and support in the process of college application is something that is not always possible in many schools without the aid of UW site counselors.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

Continuing to gather feedback from school personnel and site counselors and attending to recommendations stemming from that feedback are integral components of the project's success. Continuation of the project, the relationships, and the experiences of those students who have used the help of the site counselors will contribute to the success of this intervention.

From the first-year findings of this project, two major recommendations emerge:

- School/University collaboration is essential. Collaboration, in the form of resident counselors and site counselors coordinating daily schedules, time commitments, presentations, and one-on-one meetings, will increase site counselor visibility and contact with students.
- Training for site counselors is vital. Training should address uniformity in responsibilities, consistency in activities, and reliable reporting on contacts and outcomes of actions.