

UW DIVERSITY OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT

Site Counselors in the Schools 2000-2001

Laura J. Collins, Ph.D.

April 2001

INTRODUCTION

The University of Washington (UW) Site Counselors in the Schools Project, launched in 1999, was designed as an outreach and recruitment project to encourage minority students to attend the UW. Site counselors were to develop programs at their assigned high schools to inform and support students during the processes of admission to the UW. The project, at the end of the second year, is transitioning through staff changes and reorganization of site counselor training and oversight.

During the second year, the Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) continued the evaluation of the Site Counselor Project by surveying high school principals about their perceptions of the project, by interviewing high school resident counselors about project activities, and by interviewing each site counselor for indicators of progress.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Funded centrally by the UW administration, the Site Counselor in the Schools Project was viewed as an avenue of outreach and recruitment in the UW efforts to encourage diversity on campus. In Washington State with the passage of I-200, colleges and universities were restricted from offering admission based on racial preferences. UW President Richard McCormick established the Advisory Committee on Diversity to envision means of encouraging and supporting an intellectually and ethnically diverse campus community. Using funds specifically earmarked for this initiative, numerous projects were initiated and other projects were offered continued support.

One project, the Site Counselors in the Schools, was envisioned as a means of outreach and recruitment for minority students through their high school counseling offices. Two site counselors were hired especially for this project and were assigned to Seattle, Tacoma and Renton high schools with large minority student populations. Site counselors were to maintain a presence in the schools, offer information on UW requirements for entrance, and support students during their processes of admission.

Continued development of programs at each school and heightened supervision have fostered the evolving process of improvement. Although not always an easy process of development, the project is transitioning and placing itself as a promising method of outreach and recruitment. This report chronicles the second year of the project and provides suggestions, especially from high school resident counselors, for further development.

METHODOLOGY

Multiple data gathering methods were used to complete this project evaluation. Beginning in February of 2001, each site counselor was interviewed concerning activities initiated in each assigned high school, schedules of contact for high schools covered, and perceptions of the project impact on minority student admission to the UW. The high school principal in each of the schools was sent a survey to establish an indicator of the site counselor presence and impact, plus allow an opportunity to convey personal thoughts on project improvement. As another venue of information, visits to two schools in each site counselor's area were arranged and personal interviews were held with the high school resident counselor. Throughout the process, constant contact was maintained with the site counselors supervisor on the UW campus. Qualitative data were analyzed using constant comparative methods and survey data was analyzed with descriptive methods and reported as frequencies of responses and means.

The three sections of this report detail the exact methodology and outcomes for each data-gathering method. The final section synthesizes the information, reports the state of current knowledge of the project, and suggests avenues for further development.

Site Counselor Interviews

In January of 2001, the OEA gathered background information on the development of the site counselor project and the current state of activities. With this information as the basis for doing so, the evaluator developed questions for interviews with each site counselor:

- 1) What is your agenda for activities during the second year? What are your priority activities this year? What do you enjoy doing the most? The least?
- 2) What additional training have you received for your position?
- 3) What improvements have you made from the first year?
- 4) What impact have you made this year that was different from last year? What is your biggest success?
- 5) Describe your efforts to collaborate with school personnel in coordination of schedules, presentations and student meetings.
- 6) How did you communicate/report to UW on your student contacts and outcomes?
- 7) How could you incorporate the Student Ambassadors into your activities?
- 8) How can we assist you in being more effective?

In February 2001, each site counselor was informed of the purpose of the evaluation and was interviewed for personal perceptions of the project. During the interview, the evaluator took extensive notes on the conversation. Immediately after each interview, the evaluator reviewed the notes, added notations for clarity, and wrote a reflective piece for qualitative impressions. Data from this component of the evaluation fall into two categories: 1) site counselor activities and 2) hurdles encountered.

Site Counselor Activities

When interviewed, site counselors listed multiple outreach activities. Most often they talked about educational opportunities with students and informed them of financial aid and scholarships available. Other activities cited by the site counselors included one-on-one contact and high school bulletin announcements.

Both of the site counselors stated that there was too much to do in too little time, even if they spent a half day at each school. High schools have come to expect the presence of the site counselor, even though

there might be peaks and valleys of need for their services. Scheduling difficulties still seemed to be a problem, with a variety of school schedules to meet and little or no collaboration in creating a workable timeline.

The site counselors mentioned that they were not treated in the same manner at each school, and that it seemed like everyone tells them what to do but they have had little guidance. With little formal training, according to their perception, the site counselors have helped each other with ideas and activities. They also felt that some of the best mentoring they were receiving was from the resident counselors at their high schools. Site counselors stated that "UW higher-ups tell us what to do but don't realize what's going on in the schools." The feeling seems to be that if more UW faculty or staff would visit the high schools it would make a difference in recruitment efforts.

Site counselors enjoy their interactions with students and take steps to correct misperceptions of high school students regarding admission to college. One site counselor commented that he "brings the world back into perspective" for students and helps them view their applications in the same manner as admissions counselors at the UW would view them. Students are usually surprised when they learn what classes they need to take in high school. For example, students do not understand that pre-algebra is not accepted as a math course in their admission materials. Students do not seem to know that they are evaluated on their grades in their freshman through junior years of high school, not just their senior year grades.

Hurdles Encountered

One major point of clarification that site counselors deal with during student interactions is understanding realistic expectations for UW entrance requirements. One site counselor revealed that "most students don't meet entrance requirements" and that some students with grade-point averages (GPA) of 2.2 think it is a competitive GPA for entrance to the UW. Many high school students are unaware of competition to get accepted at the UW. Site counselors encourage these students to apply to community colleges first and then transfer to the UW.

Another site counselor mentioned feeling successful when three students were admitted to the UW, but was disappointed when the students went elsewhere for college because of the financial aid packages they received. Also mentioned was how awkward they feel when students do not get admitted to the UW after mentoring them through the process. On the other hand, when students do get accepted for admission to the UW, it is a real confidence builder for them.

What site counselors have discovered is that "everyone has heard of this place" (UW) but that it might not be the most popular place to go to college in students' perceptions. Students ask site counselors, "What support do I get when I get there?" The "UW fraternity system does not recognize minority fraternities" and the "Ethnic Cultural Center is off campus," are two comments often heard from high school students. Site counselors believe that the UW image must be changed so students "want to come here."

High School Principal Surveys

The day after each site counselor was interviewed, the principals of the assigned schools were contacted and were asked to complete a survey mailed to them. Items on the Principal Survey were developed from a review of the previous Site Counselor yearly report. Special emphasis was placed on Site

High School Resident Counselor Interviews

With input from Enrique Morales and Stephanie Miller from the Offices of Minority Affairs and Admissions, two schools from each site counselor's region were chosen for site visits and interviews of the high school resident counselors. Interview questions were developed after a review of the previous year's report.

Resident counselor interview questions included:

- 1) Describe how you collaborated with the site counselor on the schedule, class presentations, and student meetings.
- 2) What impact has the site counselor had in your school this year?
- 3) What supporting data do you have for your perceptions of the impact?
- 4) From your perspective, what proportion of the student population received services/contact with the site counselor?
- 5) What suggestions do you have for further improvement of the project?

Resident counselors were contacted by telephone and asked for an interview. Interviews took place at their high schools and lasted almost an hour each, although originally scheduled for thirty minutes. Besides responding to the prepared questions, resident counselors were free to express their opinions of the project.

On-Site Activities

High school resident counselors seemed to appreciate the presence of the site counselors and the time devoted to the project. At the beginning of the academic year, the resident counselors reported the main interactions were with upper class students in assisting with the process of admission, emphasizing the importance of test scores, and helping with the personal essay for their applications. One-on-one counseling with students was reported as very beneficial, as students need support and encouragement when deciding to apply for college admission.

As the school year progressed, the resident counselors commented that the site counselors then had time to make presentations to the younger students on the importance of doing well in their classes and on the specific classes needed for entrance to college. Many students do not even think they are eligible for admission to college, and therefore require considerable information and support.

One resident counselor made specific comments regarding the first-hand, timely information the site counselor gave him as updates to requirements for college. As he stated, "As UW goes, so goes the state," indicating that the UW is a leader in the state college system.

Suggested Activities

The resident counselors shared ideas for outreach to students, ideas that could be implemented at the high school. For example, an assembly could be arranged to introduce the site counselor and give introductory information. Then students would know who to contact when the site counselor would be available. It was suggested that the site counselor share information about UW programs in which high school students could participate, like health sciences programs and accounting programs.

The resident counselors, with advance notice, can arrange campus visits for their students. They felt that campus visits would be beneficial to their students because some of them have never left their neighborhoods before. As an example of a successful campus visit, when one resident counselor took

her students to a competing college, all of the students but one applied for admission there. Resident counselors send newsletters to parents in which the site counselor's schedule could be published, as well as when special programs are offered on the UW campus. One high school's College Night could include the site counselor and their College 101 class for parents would be a perfect venue to deliver information.

Since the process of admission to college is so foreign to the students, they felt that a step-by-step tutorial would help students too paralyzed to fill out the application. Examples of personal essays for the admission application would also be helpful for students. High schools need UW materials for display and for information. They also would like to have more UW people available for hands-on contact with students.

Resident counselors suggested that the site counselor be at their school at least one full day per week, and suggested that each site counselor have four schools assigned to them, one per week day, and then use Friday to review students' personal essays for their college applications. Some resident counselors have a schedule of informational units they plan to deliver to students in 9th, 10th, and 11th grades, in which they could include the site counselor.

A pipeline program through the local community college should be established to connect these students with the UW, for many of them do not meet UW entrance requirements upon high school graduation. The resident counselors stated that some of these ideas have already been established by competing Washington colleges, and the resident counselors felt they have a good connection with these other schools. The resident counselors also stated how damaging the report in the *Seattle Times* is when charts of students attending the UW are linked to their high schools. If only two students from this high school attend the UW, the high school's image is hurt. The *Seattle Times* report evidently does not mention the students who eventually attend the UW through the community college transfer program.

The resident counselors wanted to make sure that we know that the person the UW hires for their new site counselor is a critical decision. The site counselor's "attitude and work ethic are critical," and the site counselor "must like working with kids." The resident counselors noted that there are good models of the type of person to hire and named several of their contacts who have the personality and determination to make this program work.

CONCLUSION

In summary, three major points need to be emphasized:

- The concept of the Site Counselor in the Schools Project is a good one, but what is needed is thoughtful, effective action. Schools need the additional support that site counselors can provide. Improving the site counselor project by targeting specific goals and continually checking for goal attainment is necessary. The question needs to be asked: What is the number of schools a site counselor can cover well? The resident counselor suggestion that each site counselor be responsible for four high schools and then use the remaining day of the week for follow-up could be a positive change. Possibly targeting the new Washington State Achiever High Schools would be a good use of site counselor time and energy. When checking for indicators of success, supervisory involvement and support, not only on campus but out in the schools, should be an additional stimulus for collaboration. The additional contact by the UW supervisory staff would also reinforce the public relations aspect of the project.
- Is the longevity of the program in question? From analysis of the data this year, it looks as if the first two years of the site counselor project have not had the effect the UW would like to see. With the hiring of new counselors late this year, movement toward a more robust program is evident. With increased emphasis on creating a pipeline to the UW through the state community college system, enrollment numbers are likely to increase. For those students not initially eligible upon high school graduation, the community college transfer agreement is a primary way to enroll at the UW.
- A critical piece of the project is the personality and ambition of each site counselor. Over and over, participants in the interviews mentioned "passion," "enthusiasm," and "wants to work with kids" as ingredients in the success of the project. "Personality counts." Role models were cited from other programs, so the pool of potential site counselors should expand to include them.