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'Seamless counseling' can stay the course

By DAVID JOHNSTON

Danny was doing OK in high school, a B and C student and good athlete, vaguely content to plod along in his city high school. But when a teacher asked him if he was going to college, he said that he was not sure and that he could not really see himself as a college student. No one in his family had ever gone to college, although his mother and uncle told him to try.

College was a "ticket" and they knew he was smart.

As he entered his senior year, he began to worry about his future, his teacher's question lurking in the shadows of his so far unimpressive academic path. Then this savvy teacher recommended that he apply to become a part of Career Beginnings at the Hartford Consortium for Higher Education. He was accepted and soon met agency staff who seemed familiar with his worries and type of background, and then shortly thereafter met an agency-trained adult mentor pledged to help him for at least two years.

By the holidays he was applying himself up to his potential in school, and he realized that his Career Beginnings counselor and mentor were committed to helping him find an appropriate higher education choice, securing financial aid, finding resources - in and/or out of school - to help him overcome his academic "achievement gap," helping him matriculate at a community college, four-year college, or technical program where they eventually decided he should enroll, and to continue to help him, as needed, through his freshman year and perhaps beyond.

Although the exception, not the rule, such sustained support, called "seamless counseling" by some, is growing, mostly in cities where many underrepresented, first generation and otherwise challenged students live. It has already proved successful, through careful evaluation, at those agencies that have been doing this for more than a few years, such as Career Beginnings in Hartford, Higher Heights in New Haven, Higher Edge in New London, Bridgeport Public Education Fund, College Visions in Providence,

Bottom Line in Boston, On Point for College in Syracuse, Beyond 12 in Oakland, Calif., and others around the country.

Such success is not surprising. Thoughtful, informed support over time works, often complementing or even substituting for substantive family support. Like many similar students, Danny will graduate from high school, likely graduate from college or from a solid technical program, with a supportive team behind him. His family will be proud, and he will be on his way to a productive, even happy future.

Seamless counseling programs are not cheap but not unsustainably expensive. Typically, they are not supported by public funds at the local or state level, nor by federal education funding, but by private and foundation funding aimed at supporting new approaches to helping students like Danny succeed beyond high school.

Legislators and public agency staff, not to mention parents of such students, need to support and advocate for the creation and expansion of such programs - taking them "to scale" to serve many more youth and to dramatically increase their retention in higher education. Such support often complements the work of high school counselors and on-campus but overworked support service staff.

The alternative, fewer students of diverse backgrounds getting into and succeeding in higher education, means frustration, even anger, and lost potential for such students, and less contribution to our workplaces and economy. While seamless counseling is not the only new tool needed to reduce the number of challenged students needing such support, its emergence as an innovative way to improve the transition of these young people from high school, into and through higher education, and into the workforce, has great promise.

David Johnston is the director of the Center for Higher Education Retention Excellence. It will present a workshop on the seamless counseling approach from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Wednesday at the Coast Guard Academy, New London. Call 203-640-6201 or visit educationRwe@gmail.com for more information.