

NEACAC Community Conversation- May 19, 2020
Equity Gaps in The Digital Divide: Reconfiguring the College Admission Process
(IDEA Sponsored)

Section 1: Initial Questions and Concerns from the IDEA Brainstorm

- ★ Device access
 - Unreliable wifi connections
 - Ability (or lack thereof) to live stream
 - Access to printers, scanners
 - Device access - not all students have their own device
 - Will families rack up big data fees trying to use hotspots or services?
 - Students without access may be embarrassed to speak up - how do we broach the conversation with care and sensitivity?
- ★ Home environment - do all students have a conducive work environment?
 - Does the student have other responsibilities, like work or sibling care?
 - Parental support?
 - Do students have a safe space at home?
 - Do students feel comfortable with sharing their backgrounds/a look into their homes?
 - Access to food - what about the students/families who relied on school lunches?
- ★ Applications
 - Understanding deadlines
 - How to visit?
 - Deciphering financial aid forms
- ★ Resources/staff/high school team for students often depend on the economic resources from that town
- ★ How do you communicate when it's difficult/impossible to do so in person or digitally?
- ★ If universities cannot recruit in person, will students miss out on being able to learn about colleges and add colleges to their lists? How do we reach the students who rely heavily on programming put on by their counselors and schools?
- ★ Addressing bias in the reading process, making sure to incorporate the digital divide into that bias training
- ★ Should we be emailing important documents instead of or in addition to hosting zoom or digital web/video events?
 - Additionally, can colleges still focus on calling and sending snail mail to students in addition to the online "stuff"?
 - If we are hosting zoom events, how do we host inclusive events that can connect to students from a variety of learning backgrounds and styles?
- ★ If/when students matriculate to campus and classes are online this fall, how do we ensure our incoming students all have equal access?
 - What can we do beyond loaner laptops and hotspots? Can we lobby for better internet coverage, especially for students from areas with limited coverage?

- Additionally, what do we do if we want to send a loaner laptop, etc. to a student, but that student can't get mail because mail is being held or there is no safe place to leave a package at the student's home?
- ★ How are we going to look at GPAs and consider how they may have been impacted?
 - Example: a student who does not have wifi at home sits in a parking lot all day where they can get wifi access - this is greatly impacting their GPA
 - For institutions that directly correlate GPA to scholarship amounts, how are we going to address the inequities this year and beyond?
- ★ What about students who have not had a good experience with online learning this semester while still in high school and possibly have to learn online this fall? How will we support them, whether from the high school or college side?
- ★ How do we support students who are applying to institutions that have not gone test optional for the fall?
- ★ Can we connect with CBOs to understand what challenges they're facing - both with their students and in general within their organizations?
- ★ Best practices for college counseling online?
- ★ As higher education institutions, what is our overall responsibility to under-resourced students? How do we find them? How do we help them?

Section 2: Breakout Room 1 (Jules Bannister + Jami Silver)

- ★ How is the digital divide showing up in people's spaces?
- ★ Test-optional/test-flexible - testing in general, and looking ahead.
 - How should we advise students, esp. students who may have obstacles to test-taking?
- ★ Events and recruiting online
 - Time/availability/scheduling
 - Students who are working, who have family responsibilities - they're not just sitting at home. Some are helping to support their families financially, too.
 - Most likely, we won't be recruiting "on the road" this fall. How do we reach rural communities, when typically the first exposure may be a required college fair that now doesn't happen? Many rural areas have inconsistent access to devices and/or reliable internet.
 - Different types of devices and familiarity with technology we are using
 - Some families are sharing one or a couple of devices among many family members
- ★ Tracking demonstrated interest
 - Risk and safety. Ethically, we don't want to encourage students to do things that may put their health/safety in jeopardy. Be careful in our messaging.
- ★ Equity of secondary education students are receiving and how that will impact application review
- ★ Access to computers, teachers, reliable/high-speed internet
- ★ Time zones and how that impacts testing, classes, events, and more

- ★ Students who are immuno-compromised - what will institutions do and what is in place to protect students? How will they be able to feel safe?
- ★ What are the things we might not be thinking about/might be missing?
- ★ How are we getting in touch with students if they're not in school? Who are we missing when we send emails? How can we meet students where they're at, while being mindful of the resources they have?
- ★ CBOs
 - Are they even part of the conversation we're having?
 - Students rely on CBOs for access, but what if the CBOs themselves don't have the access/resources they need?
 - How can we partner with and support CBOs?
- ★ How do we reach the most marginalized of the New England community?
 - Margins → mainstream. When we support those in the margins, we support everyone.
- ★ How can we support school districts that need assistance?
- ★ Students falling "out of the loop"
 - Time of year - finals, projects, APs
 - Zoom fatigue - seeing high engagement with online efforts at first, but engagement is falling off for some. What are some alternative ways to engage and reach them?
- ★ Student voices!
 - How can we bring their voices and opinions to the table, and ask them what they need?
 - Students have connections with other students within their communities. These interactions may feel more trustworthy, and genuine.
 - Mutually beneficial - allow college students to work and be paid, and disseminate information out in an authentic way.
 - Ask students what they need, and meet them where they are.
- ★ Changes in summer programming that would typically be offered/available to students. Lack of an on-ramp to the college experience.
- ★ What are our areas of impact? What do we have control over in our offices/communities?
- ★ Recorded sessions vs. live can increase accessibility
- ★ From a college counseling perspective - don't have the programming fall off just because students may not be engaging at this time of year. Keep going!
- ★ Repetition of information and opportunities outside of the normal timeline may be needed
- ★ Who ARE around these students? What DO they have access to?
 - I.e. libraries, schools, places where people are able to gather.
 - Let's get creative.
- ★ If we are part of panels or events, ask - are we recording this? Can we share with public schools, CBOs etc.?

- ★ Partnering with organizations/departments who are doing things virtually (i.e. summer programming) to learn what they are doing, how they are doing it, what goes well/poorly... how they deal w/ access issues.
 - Let's learn from people who are doing things that are working well.
- ★ Colleges/universities want to know, from school counselors, what we can do best - counselors want to share that info, but are also "swimming upstream" with the shift to remote learning, end-of-the-year stuff, mental health/anxiety in students, in addition to all the access issues we're discussing.
 - Let's all bring authenticity, empathy, and compassion into our conversations and processes.
- ★ Should these conversations about college start earlier (i.e. younger) so we can help build expectations appropriately and ease anxiety?
- ★ Schools/institutions that have more access to resources (time, financial, etc.) could find a way to share resources with schools that do not. Let's pool ideas and resources.

Examples:

 - What worked and what didn't in this year's yield season?
 - Language/information about how to access and use Zoom on a mobile device (for students)
- ★ Accepting P/F grades for credit (inc. dual enrollment), accepting course grades for AP credit (not just the exam scores)

Section 3: Breakout Room 2 (Sharonda Dailey, Jobita Mao + Courtney Kipp)

- ★ What do we know, and what have we observed from where we sit? Sharing out our observations and experiences
 - Working with rural communities in Maine; working with clients who are strapped financially - "one more missing screw!" → what COVID 19 is!
 - One school in town has insisted on maintaining a normal school day, but online - making it difficult for some students who may have extenuating circumstances
 - There's a lot below the headlines that are more damaging than the test inequity that we so often hear about
 - Outreach to the state rep (!) and GearUp - how do we reach the students who have been left behind?
 - One counselor, in a conversation with another counselor from PA, heard that some students have become the essential worker in their family because both mom + dad have lost hours - how is the student supposed to attend class and think about college when the student now has to be the breadwinner of the family? Working at an independent school, this had not come up.
 - Worried about the gaps that students might have coming into college in the fall or next year - what if the student didn't get through the whole curriculum for math?

- Worried about schools that are still doing synchronous learning and students who now have to work - “invisible home lives” - things may have now done a complete 180
 - Noticing that when students engage in admission activity, they are engaging with their cell phone...leads her to wonder if students have access to a laptop or a desktop in the home. If there is a computer at home, the access might not be unlimited.
 - Noticed that the students joining online meetings/webinars with a cell phone were primarily students of color
 - Using virtual backgrounds to hide what is going on at home, or what home looks like
 - Making sure that resources provided to students are offered on-demand and not just live. It’s one small way to continue providing access.
 - Counselor who works with transfers + adult students - students are often nervous about online learning because they have tried it in the past and it hasn’t worked for them
 - Students also facing challenges with getting basic internet access - some students live in more remote places and have to drive to use wifi somewhere else
 - Students who are also parents - the work/life balance piece has become even more challenging
 - Concerns about students’ mental health during this time - lack of personal interaction, perhaps feeling like they don’t have anyone to go to talk about things with - will students get to a breaking point eventually?
 - Concerns about students who use school/external things as outlets - maybe students who don’t have great home lives...what is happening to students who don’t have school or sports as their escape anymore? This could be having an impact both on their education and also on their mental health.
- ★ What do we hope, want, and need to see in the future? What has to change?
 - Assumption of resources when working at an independent school, even when that is not always the case - not all students have resources just because they go to an independent school
 - Wishes they could be hearing from students more - are schools having focus groups with students? Surveying them? There are a lot of adults making decisions without hearing what the students have to say
 - Worried about the unwillingness of schools to change expectations:
 - Schools should go test optional this year - there are students who haven’t tested yet and might not get a chance by the fall
 - What about the demonstrated interest piece? What if a student can’t register for a live event online - how do I show my interest if I can’t access those opportunities?
 - Missing an opportunity by relying on the “old way” of doing things

- Related, the sticking point with programs that still require testing for entrance - there needs to be a complete test optional across the board, not just for MOST programs
 - Big divide between students who have the test prep AND options to take the test, versus those who do not
 - This is a learning point for both sides of the desk, and we can learn a lot from what's happening - this has forced our hand, for the better
 - Test optional versus no test needed - WHO had the resources to take the test, who has a good or not so good environment at home that might impact their score, positively or negatively
 - Making admissions decisions with less information - how do you make decisions with less information with which to model those decisions, and how do you also remain ethical?
 - What do test scores mean for specific students? Trinity College has had good conversations about some of these issues, including implicit biases and how to unpack what staff might be “carrying” around with them
 - Making an ask to think about the humane side of things. Some students will see devastating ripple effects because of this virus - within their families, their communities, etc.
 - We should make counseling available to students who may still need to grieve as we move into the fall
 - CommonApp, optional COVID essay - encouraging juniors to think about how they were impacted by the virus.
 - Students who are essential workers
 - Everyone has gone through SOMETHING because of this virus. Use this space to tell your story
 - Recognizing how students (and other community members) are changing and interacting with each other - can we use this to create some new community spaces?
 - Allowing students to create communities in ways/places that are comfortable for them but may not be as familiar to us as administrators
 - Hoping that we can really think through “what are the essential pieces of education” and therefore we can cut back on busywork, “testing for the sake of the test”
 - Berwick Academy did away with AP and moved toward more project and collaborative learning - this has hopefully made students more independent and self-directed rather than need directives/lectures from teachers all the time
 - Coming up with a model that serves students from all learning styles
- ★ How can we, as admissions professionals, work to ensure equity during and beyond the era of COVID 19?

- Finding places where our voices can be heard - College Board, ACT level? - helping others to understand the inequities, because there are others who still believe that these inequities don't exist or don't have a huge impact
- Continuing to bring up the conversation! We all have a lot going on at our institutions but we can't let this particular topic get lost in the shuffle of many other topics
- There are some conveniences to online learning - SAT fee waivers will come electronically now! Let's keep that going!
- Managing upward - trying to flip the position from being an admissions gatekeeper to being a student advocate
 - Escalating challenges that we hear from students
- We can all be power brokers, no matter where we "sit" on the ladder of the profession
 - These conversations are a good example of that!
- Test-optional - does that mean that we won't use test scores AT ALL, including with merit scholarships and honors? This information is often hidden, both from counselors and from students
 - Can we collectively start building a list of the schools that will give merit without considering tests for the students who cannot take the test
- Recruitment - can we use this opportunity to reach students that we don't normally see during our travels?
 - Are there opportunities for schools to collaborate (i.e. independent schools partnering with other schools) to offer additional programming/free up time to work with other schools?
- Are there webinars that we, as NEACAC, can host and put forth to students for free? A lot of the content out there is NOT free - we hold so much information and knowledge, so why shouldn't we make it readily available to students!

★ Looking ahead...

- Note there will be a session (likely June 10th at 3pm) for virtual AMC on test/test optional with an eye on college fit, equity, affordability and the fall app timeline (this session is combined Current Trends / IDEA committee effort)
- We are starting a NEACAC College Access + Success Listserv (CASL for short!)
 - This will provide a platforming for info and idea sharing for other professionals working throughout New England
 - Open to ANYONE within the New England region, not just NEACAC members
 - Link to learn more:
<https://neacac.memberclicks.net/neacac-college-access-and-success-listserv>
 - Link to join:
<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeuyC1SOSRqp42yRIHJ3ypKObAeIBLV3wTDe6AnHdhZ6At0EQ/viewform>