



Data-Driven Support for Students on the Path to College: Identifying useful variables for college planning throughout high schools

Summary of Qualitative Findings: Understanding Gaps in the College Preparation Process

We collected open-ended survey data from 48 guidance counselors from across the Commonwealth of Virginia located at 43 unique schools. We also conducted in-depth interviews with 5 members of the Virginia College Advising Corps, who are recent college graduates placed in high schools across Virginia to help students prepare for college. Major findings are as follows:

- **Positioning Students for College**
 - Half of the respondents said that many students wait until their junior years to begin thinking about college, which is often too late to be able to influence academic portfolios.
 - Respondents suggested that parents and students often do not understand that the combination of curricular rigor and academic performance is important.
 - Some guidance counselors thought the Virginia Wizard helped at the front end of the college readiness process but then became irrelevant. Broadening the sector of students targeted by the Virginia Wizard or expanding its focus could be an opportunity for future development.

- **Data That Would Help Guidance Counselors and College Advisors**
 - Having a system that facilitates a quick view of students' ambitions and all data related to their college readiness would facilitate more streamlined and personally tailored advice.
 - Guidance counselors do not understand the college admissions decision-making process. They wanted more information on the factors that are valued by different institutions and how those factors are weighted in admissions decisions. VLDS data could be leveraged to retrospectively identify the characteristics of students admitted to those institutions, which may serve as a reasonable proxy for selection criteria.
 - VLDS could enable analyses to support guidance counselors in real-time, through benchmarking or longitudinal data about their former students' successes in college and employment, pervasive majors at different colleges, academic preparation required for each college, and the high school curricular rigor that is associated with different colleges.
 - Although aggregate admissions data from universities can be helpful, guidance counselors believe localized data (e.g., at the school or district level) would be much more insightful as they assist students in the college planning process. VLDS could be used to meet this need.
 - If a decision-support system were built to support the college preparation process, guidance counselor training workshops would facilitate its success.

- **Information and Resource Needs in the College Preparation Process**
 - Nearly half of the respondents said that students do not realize that the total performance (i.e., academic achievement in all four years) in high school impacts available options. Developing mechanisms to show students that what happens early influences potential decisions at high school graduation is a definite need.
 - Disseminating better information about how students can finance their postsecondary educations is an area in need of improvement. Such communication should target parents before high school.
 - If guidance counselors had endless resources, they would develop a system to facilitate the following: 1) help students begin planning earlier, 2) store and accumulate information in a single location over time so guidance counselor time can be directed toward students as opposed to gathering information from multiple locations, 3) match college and career goals with processes and decisions in middle and high school, and 4) reduce financial surprises.