



Postsecondary
Planning
and Success:
**Real Voices, Shared
Experiences**

Qualitative Research
Report

In collaboration with
UNITE-LA and LAUSD's
Division of Instruction



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Dr. Noelle Banuelos is an experienced educational researcher/program evaluator working in conjunction with ERC, a renowned organization providing evaluation, data management, and grant-writing services across California. Both Dr. Banuelos and the ERC team have over 20 years of experience in working with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) in support of various programs and meeting district evaluation needs.

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We would like to personally thank the school administrators, counselors, community-based organization members, college students, high school students, and parents who took the time from their very busy schedules to voice their knowledge and experiences with us. The information and stories shared depict the real-world successes as well as the challenges and obstacles faced in the pursuit of students’ postsecondary goals. The findings generated through our qualitative analyses and sharing of voices from the field will inform the district as they recommend strategies, resources, and support of postsecondary efforts.

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Executive Summary

The goal of this qualitative research effort was to bring to the forefront the many voices and experiences from those most directly involved with high school students through the milestones leading to postsecondary success. As high school students are generally informed of graduation requirements at their respective schools, the strategies and activities geared toward helping students decide their path for after graduation may vary due to staffing, funding, or the need for better organization.

For this project, researchers interviewed a sample of LAUSD high school administrators and counselors, as well as current LAUSD 11th and 12th graders and parents of LAUSD high school students. Community-based organizational (CBO) staff working within LAUSD high schools and college students (LAUSD alumni) were also interviewed. The findings showed that while all schools emphasized college attendance as a primary goal, the information provided through school-based activities was not always enough to fully address the questions and concerns about postsecondary options and finances that students and parent/caregivers had as they tried to develop meaningful plans and make the best decisions for their futures. Understanding and meeting the general eligibility requirements for financial aid was one specific aspect that impeded the postsecondary planning progress of many students. Keeping students on track after graduation was also a challenge to be addressed and overcome.

Based on a full analysis of the data collected, strategies incorporating comprehensive school-wide support and utilizing direct contact and communication with students and parent/caregivers were cited as the most effective in supporting meaningful postsecondary and financial aid planning. The researcher's recommendations provided at the end of this report are intended to inform district and school administrators and decision-makers toward improved postsecondary success of LAUSD students. These recommendations for the district include:

- Consider the benefits of instituting more comprehensive schoolwide approaches to postsecondary guidance and support.
- Provide opportunities for schools to share best practices.
- Conduct an inventory of schools to determine best allocation of resources.
- Provide as many resources as possible for schools to continue direct contact/communication with students and parents/caregivers.
- Maximize the current and future use of data for decision-making and strategic planning.
- Ensure that all postsecondary options are offered in a way that students understand the full spectrum of possibilities of pathways leading to successful career and economic mobility.
- Provide training to counselors, college-advising staff, and teachers in trust and relationship-building, social-emotional strategies, and youth leadership development.

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Introduction

This qualitative research report stemmed from the collaborative project involving the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and UNITE-LA, "Got a Plan for That? Removing Barriers to College and Career Success" through LAUSD and Community Partnership. The project sought to answer two overarching questions:

- How might we ensure that all LAUSD seniors complete a financial aid application prior to graduation, or complete an opt-out form?
- How might we ensure that all LAUSD seniors complete a meaningful plan for post-graduation that results in better-informed student decision-making around postsecondary education, and increased postsecondary matriculation?

The goal of this qualitative research effort was to bring to the forefront the many voices and experiences from those most directly involved with high school students through the milestones leading to postsecondary success. This research shares the voices and experiences of high school administrators, counselors, and community-based organizational (CBO) staff working within schools to advise and support students, college students, high school students, and parent/caregivers of high school students. It is through their experiences that we can understand what is working and what is needed to ensure greater success for our students.

The research findings are discussed in the following thematic sections:

- Effective Strategies in Place
 - Expanding Postsecondary Options
- Challenges Impacting Students
 - Financial Aid Form Completion
 - Family Capacity to Support
 - Summer Melt
- Wants, Needs and Support

The remainder of the report includes the researcher's recommendations for the district and general conclusions. The appendix presents a more comprehensive description of the research methodology.

Overview of Methods

Researchers conducted a series of interviews and focus groups during April and May 2022, with the intention of gathering real-world knowledge and experiences faced by multiple stakeholders as they support students in their postsecondary plans. Researchers incorporated an empathy interview approach to ensure that the lived experiences of the interviewees would be the central focus, especially for parents and students whose experiences may be overlooked in developing school or district-based recommendations (Nelsestuen & Smith, 2020).

The participants for the qualitative interviews and focus groups included:

- 5 LASUD High School Administrators
- 8 LAUSD High School Counselors (both academic and college-focused)
- 8 Members of CBO organizations currently working in LAUSD high schools
- 5 College Students (2-year and 4-year colleges) who are LAUSD alumni
- 15 Students currently enrolled in LAUSD high schools
- 8 Parents/Caregivers of students currently enrolled in LAUSD high schools (in grades 9-12)

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All data were analyzed qualitatively for emergent themes. Names and school affiliations of interviewees were kept confidential. A full description of the methodology, including proposed participant numbers, recruitment, and response, may be found in the appendix.

Research Findings

In considering the project's two overarching questions and the shared information and experiences, the researchers found that there were several overlapping themes relevant to both financial aid and postsecondary planning, regardless of the interview source. Therefore, the findings are presented here by theme with the intention of sharing the voices in a more meaningful way.

Effective Strategies in Place

The most effective strategies at supporting students in postsecondary planning and financial aid application fell into two mutually inclusive categories.

Strategies incorporating **comprehensive school-wide support** and utilizing **direct contact and communication** with students and parent/caregivers were cited as the most effective in supporting meaningful postsecondary and financial aid planning.

Implementation of a **comprehensive school-wide approach** involved a concerted effort across multiple levels of school staff engaged in college advising activities, often with each member having a specific role or set of responsibilities contributing to the larger objectives. The approach included school administrators, counselors (both college and academic), teachers, support staff, and campus-based CBO staff providing direct services to students during the school day, after, and/or before school, all working together in a coordinated fashion. Interviewees from schools that shared this approach all spoke about its benefits and successes, even those whose schools were just beginning or working toward making these efforts. These interviewees also shared how they were able to execute various strategies to reach and support students, more so than if it was just up to one or two counselors. Exercising a schoolwide approach allowed for more opportunities for students to have one-on-one meetings and guidance with one or more key staff (e.g., counselors, CBO staff, etc.). One counselor interviewee referred to this as the “all hands on deck approach.”

One component of the successful schoolwide approach is to incorporate postsecondary guidance and activities into the school day. This often happened during the school's Advisory classes. Advisory programs are intended to help youth make connections to adults, develop their sense of independence and responsibility, as well as positively impact the school climate.¹ Therefore, these classes serve as a viable venue for postsecondary and financial aid activities. Students and CBO interviewees shared how they found this strategy to be particularly effective in providing relevant information and guidance. The benefit of a schoolwide approach ensures that teachers also have the postsecondary knowledge to provide support during Advisory all year long, and not on the few times per year counselors or CBO staff could address the group. Allowing teachers to participate with counselors, or to be trained by counselors, in aspects of college advising would ensure that teachers had this knowledge.

¹ <https://achieve.lausd.net/Page/10127#spn-content>

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Not all schools had comprehensive or coordinated approaches in place. The primary reason was simply not having enough staff or support to share responsibilities. Larger schools had more staff and community partners, whereas smaller schools (such as continuation schools) often had only one or two people to carry the load. Nevertheless, interviewees from these schools compensated for this lack of staff in a variety of ways. At one school, a teacher took on the role of college advisor to support the academic counselor by focusing on college and financial aid activities.

After-school programs were also effective sources of postsecondary information and guidance for all schools, but especially for those whose support was not as comprehensive. For example, high school student interviewees spoke of specific after-school activities from CBO's (e.g., EduCare, Gear UP, etc.) such as workshops on applying to college, completing college and financial aid applications, and researching scholarships.

The second category in which effective strategies were included were any that included **direct contact and communication** with students as well as parents/caregivers.

Interviewed parents and students agreed that when schools offered informational opportunities in direct, accessible ways (e.g., in-person workshops, bilingual/translation, and Q&A), they were better able to support their children in postsecondary planning and decision-making.

Despite the growing use of technology, access to information links, and virtual assistance, interviewees described the direct, in-person communication as more effective.

Interviewees shared the ways in which this direct communication was made: in-person meetings, Zoom virtual meetings, phone calls, meetings during lunch, after school, and on weekends. School-based efforts to make this direct communication more accessible were also shared, including scheduling workshops to accommodate parents.

CBO interviewees described hosting workshops in English and Spanish, as well as inviting parents to take part in activities and workshops alongside their students, particularly those that involved completing college and/or financial aid applications. Parent and student interviewees who participated in these types of events found them to be highly effective, in terms of sharing information, having questions answered, and learning about different resources that were available. At one school, a CBO staff member shared how they focused on promoting family engagement through college fairs and community events, including local partners in addition to the school community.

"The intent is not just to get the numbers in but to really help the community – it's what makes the difference."

- CBO staff member

"We hold workshops on the weekend to accommodate the working parent that can't come during the week. They stay late and come in early to accommodate the parents with whatever they need."

-School administrator

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CBO staff also described the importance of schools creating **partnerships** with outside organizations as well as leveraging community partners and agencies. One CBO staff member explained how they were able to invite local tax agencies to parent workshops and provide referrals to parents for low-cost tax preparation as a means to promote financial aid form completion. Some interviewed parents found it particularly helpful when they were notified of resources offered by outside organizations, especially virtual workshops and presentations.

"At my school, students are assigned to a counselor and if you don't complete things in your portfolio like a financial aid application, they will hunt you down."

-High school student

Putting **structured, mandatory tasks** in place with deadlines was a strategy that interviewed high school students and school staff both described as effective. Descriptions of these tasks included, but were not limited to, completing college applications, essays, and financial aid forms. Some schools set up a portfolio system with checklists required for students to complete. College student interviewees also described how counselors use of evolving, updated tasks kept them focused.

Senior portfolios also allowed counselors and college advising staff to monitor activities and track which requirements have been met. Many school-based staff and counselors discussed the positive results associated with portfolios, as students were diligent in meeting requirements so they could "walk the stage." One counselor shared how there were often 11th grade students at their school who learned about portfolios and wanted to get started early. Another counselor shared how this system, along with checklists and senior contracts, "put the responsibility in their hands." Aligning to the coordinated support theme described above, the counselor added, "It can only work if everyone is on the same page."

Schools in which staff are able to **use data to inform, monitor, and track** completion of requirements and forms have also been effective at getting students on the pathway to successful planning and goal achievement. Schools varied in their methods, using internally-developed spreadsheets or resources from other support organizations, and incorporating information (or data) from internal as well as external sources. One counselor interviewee spoke of an Excel sheet used for tracking, which was portioned out to various staff each with specific responsibilities for oversight. A CBO staff interviewee spoke of how they worked with their high schools to build the internal capacity within their schools to use data in areas such as FAFSA completion, college application, and enrollment rates to develop "plans of action." CBO interviewees also used available school and student data to plan activities and provide support. Those staff that had access to more individualized data were able to be more intentional and could target students more directly, especially those with disabilities, were unhoused or foster youth, or were struggling to meet requirements. Counselors and CBO staff used internal data systems but many shared that data from Naviance (a college, career, and life readiness platform available in the district) was not always useful as it was not consistently implemented within or across schools. In fact, the staff at one school shared that it was used by less than 25% of 11th and 12th graders at their school. School-based staff at one school described how data was effectively used to follow-up with students who missed financial aid form deadlines via non-completion of forms. They conducted follow-up interviews and assigned adults for specific and intentional support to targeted students who were struggling.

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Expanding Postsecondary Options

All school-based interviewees described the extent to which other options (e.g., community colleges, vocational schools, military, and/or careers) are emphasized in their postsecondary information and planning strategies. All reported that opportunities tied to **community colleges** were shared with students, often accompanied by resources for California's College Promise Grant and Cal Grant Awards, and information about transitional, bridge programs offered by the colleges. Administrators stated that there was no real difference in counseling by college type, as one administrator asserted, "To us, college is college." Counselor and CBO interviewees shared efforts made to create bridges to community colleges by offering field trips and hosting presentations with college representatives. Continuation school administrators shared that their students were more likely to apply to community colleges due to lower GPAs and credit deficits, so connections to local colleges were important.

Interviewed parents of 11th and 12th graders reported that they received information about community colleges, especially about the costs in comparison to 4-year schools. At least half of them also stated that they learned about transfer opportunities from community colleges to 4-year schools. Parent interviewees of 9th and 10th graders revealed that they had not yet received enough information about colleges to fully understand the differences between the types.

While there may be an abundance of information available to students, they did not always perceive the community college option as equal to pursuing a 4-year school. One high school student interviewee explained that at their school, counselors were primarily focused on 4-year schools and would require a specific appointment to discuss any other option. Community college interviewees shared that the emphasis on college during high school was mostly for the 4-year schools, so initially they did not hold much regard for these schools. One student described the difficulty in committing to a community college due to the "stigma" attached to community college.

"My school really focused on academics, and they really pushed the UCs, CSUs, and universities. Not that they didn't support community college, but it was just like at the bottom of the list."

- College student

Nevertheless, all student interviewees currently attending community colleges were happy with their decisions. They recommended that high schools should host community college fairs on weekends for students and families so they could learn more about the options, financial aid, and transition programs, which would also change the mindset.

The emphasis by counselors, college advisors, and/or CBO staff on careers, vocational schools, and military options varied across the schools.

Information about **vocational schools and training** was most often connected to schools and vocational certificate programs in the community college sector, such as LA Trade Tech, as opposed to private, for-profit schools. Little information was shared about **military** options. One CBO staff explained to their students that military options such as ROTC or Reserve can benefit college attainment, educationally and financially.

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"This week we did a mock interview for different careers so we can practice...so it's not only about college but about getting a job in the future."

- High school student

Several high school student interviewees (11th and 12th graders) shared how their schools focused on **career planning** as well as promoted vocational options. Nevertheless, they all agreed that these discussions could be more intentional and specific. Interviewed parents agreed that more opportunities to discuss and learn about careers would benefit their students.

These students recommended holding group sessions with counselors to discuss specific majors, what each major covered, and which majors aligned to particular careers. Additionally, they believed future students would benefit from these discussions as early as 9th grade. Students would like more information on career, vocational school, or military options, as some reported that they had not received any information at all on these opportunities.

Challenges Impacting Students

As high school students prepare for graduation and their futures, there are challenges that present themselves from a variety of different reference points. These challenges may arise at the schools, due to limited staff and/or resources, in the students' home environments with parents/caregivers, or within the students themselves as they face impending independence and adulthood. Nevertheless, all high school student interviewees were positive that they would fulfill their postsecondary goals, despite any minor concerns with grades or finances.

At the school level, principals, counselors, and CBO staff interviewees all shared challenges they faced as they worked to support students. The most common was **not having enough college-advising staff or college counselors** to "do the work." While not always having up-to-date college or financial aid information was also noted as a limitation, the primary need was for more staff.

"My suggestion is not training. It's people power. We need more people to help with the work."

- Counselor

"People need to know these students are intelligent. They're bright. They're willing to learn, and deserve even more - that same education and attention others receive."

- Continuation high school administrator

Continuation schools and smaller schools without CBO partners and/or college counselors had staff (teachers, administrators, etc.) wear college advising hats to ensure students and families were supported. Many schools did not have intentional planning time or systems built in during the year for college advising; instead, functioning week to week.

Counselor interviewees shared how **time** was a related challenge. Due to a limited number of staff, there was not enough time to spend with students. This was true even at schools that shared or collaborated with CBO staff on college advising. Further, CBO staff that targeted **specific subgroup populations** (e.g., foster youth, justice involved, or unhoused youth) shared that they did not experience the same level of collaboration with counselors (only referrals) or have access to the same opportunities as the larger CBOs. This imbalance was described as a

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disservice to students with these special needs as they often did not receive the same level of college counseling or information as other students.

Financial concerns about college costs and financial aid weighed heavily on many students and their parents/caregivers.

Interviewed parents were very concerned about the costs of attending college and discouraged their children from taking on student loans, as they worry about long-term debt and high interest.

Some college student interviewees shared how they were less concerned about paying for college once they had completed their financial aid applications and learned what was available. Two students added that because of Covid-19, they had been unable to work and supplement their finances for college. For other college interviewees, seeing what was available and comparing it to the cost of a 4-year college informed their decision to enroll in a community college. This appeared to be a relatively common occurrence as parents of 11th and 12th graders spoke of their children making similar decisions. One parent shared, "Because of the costs, my son is considering community college like my older son and then transferring to a university. They want to do this because they say it is a lot of money and they don't want to take out loans." These same parents were also concerned about long-term loans, rising interest, and added debt. One parent stated, "It's difficult especially when someone is low income like us." Two parents elaborated on this point and explained that their students sometimes put too much pressure on themselves, with respect to the families' finances, and made decisions about college finances on their own.

"I know I would like to say that I will pay for college, but I don't know if I will actually be able to pay because there is so much uncertainty."

- High School Parent of 9th grader

Parent interviewees of 9th and 10th grade students all shared the hope that scholarships would be available for their students but were not sure of how to go about applying and would like more information. They explained that the uncertainty of funding and not knowing actual costs was worrisome.

All the interviewed high school seniors had already completed their financial aid applications but expressed concern that the aid would not be enough to cover living or transportation expenses. High school junior and seniors also reported a desire for more specific information, such as differences between loan types, grants, and scholarships. They also shared that much of the scholarship information they did receive came from CBO program staff in school or after school, as opposed to counselors.

Financial Aid Form Completion

Achieving 100% financial aid form completion is a goal set by LAUSD for all high school graduates. Despite the available resources from the district and strategies in place at many schools by staff and CBO partners, there are obstacles that still need to be overcome. As parent and student interviewees have shared, there are concerns with paying for college. Additional

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concerns are tied to completing the financial aid forms, either the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the California Dream Act Application (CADA).

All interviewees, including parents and students, spoke of the need for greater information, explanation, and guidance as the first step toward form completion. Opportunities that involved more direct, in-person communication vs. online links, flyers, or packets were desired.

Administrators, counselors, and CBO interviewees understood the need for parent outreach and education on financial aid, particularly as students needed family tax and income information to complete the forms. These school-based staff shared various experiences and scenarios around parental hesitation and concerns with providing the tax information required by financial aid applications. This was especially true for undocumented students or those in “non-traditional” situations with their families. For example, one CBO interviewee shared firsthand experience in working with students over 18 years of age whose parents lived in another country, or those whose parents had different surnames and multiple jobs. These scenarios were not often easy to address and required a trusting relationship between the student and the advisor to resolve. This CBO staff member also explained that some students were fearful of asking parents for sensitive or personal information and saw it as being intrusive or disrespectful.

It is for these reasons that there is no limit to the amount of parent/caregiver outreach and information that should be made available, to dispel negative assumptions and alleviate concerns standing in the way of this important step in the postsecondary process. Many schools and staff employed effective strategies in helping students complete financial aid forms, through step-by-step guidance during school (e.g., in Advisory sessions, assemblies, and workshops) and through after-school and weekend application events. Some schools included form completion as a mandatory requirement for “walking the stage” during graduation.

Family Capacity to Support

Most student interviewees shared that their parents/caregivers do not (or did not) have a major support role in their postsecondary planning or decision making, other than emotional support and encouragement. This was unanimously attributed to the limited college-related knowledge and experience of the parents, as many of the students are or will be first-generation college students. Some of the students had siblings in college who offered realistic support and guidance while the remainder had to rely on what was offered through school and community programs.

Regardless of their own personal experience, all interviewed parents expressed a desire to support their children in college planning but required more information and guidance. Not all parents had access to what was available or offered (e.g., workshops) due to work or other scheduling challenges. Further, not all had the ability to understand and navigate through the information that was accessible to them.

“I was at a meeting at the parent center of my son’s school, and we talked about things like the FAFSA, but we need more information because I still don’t know where to start.”

- High School Parent

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"Sometimes the flyers are confusing because they make everything look so simple and easy and it's not."

- High School Parent

Some working parents were limited to receiving flyers and trying to navigate electronic resources and links, because they could not attend workshops. Some have shared that they regularly contact the school office for additional information or try to connect with the school's Parent Center. However, these sources did not always provide enough information or explanation for these parents to fully support the students in their postsecondary planning.

Challenges can also arise directly after graduation that impact students' postsecondary decisions. This set of challenges is often referred to as "Summer Melt."

Summer Melt

According to the National College Attainment Network (NCAN), "summer melt" happens when high school seniors have been accepted to college with the intention of enrolling (and maybe even paid a deposit for school) but fail to matriculate to that college (or any other college) in the fall after graduation.² This melt appears to be a common problem especially for those from low-income families, if they do not have adequate support to stay on track, meet deadlines, and obtain enough financial aid.³

Summer melt, the **challenges** that can lead to this phenomenon, and the characteristics of students experiencing summer melt have emerged as a focus of study within the past 10 years. Castleman & Page (2014), for example, found that high school graduates from low-income families, who intended on attending college in the fall, were particularly vulnerable to the melt.⁴ Rall (2016) explored the role and implication of race as a factor contributing to students experiencing summer melt, and promoted incorporation of the student-centered perspective when designing and implementing interventions.⁵

Many administrators, counselors, and CBO staff interviewees all agreed that summer melt was often brought on by the "shock" of going from an environment of support and guidance to being left on their own. This loss of support often led to lack of motivation.

Administrators, counselors, and CBO staff agreed that students often suffered from a lack of motivation during the summer after graduation – leading to missed deadlines, waning confidence, and not seeking out guidance or information on enrollment and financial aid.

Students who did not know how to navigate the new environment often just gave up. A CBO interviewee explained that not having an additional "touch point" to receive guidance, support, or information often increased the likelihood of "rash decision-making." Another CBO interviewee shared that some students were initially committing to schools they can't afford "so

² Ash, A. (2021). Stopping Summer Melt Starts in the Spring. National College Attainment Network. Available: <https://www.ncan.org/news/559403/Stopping-Summer-Melt-Starts-in-the-Spring.htm>

³ Strategic Data Project. Summer Melt. Harvard University Center for Educational Policy Research. Retrieved June 6, 2022. <https://sdp.cepr.harvard.edu/summer-melt>

⁴ Castleman, B. & Page, L. (2014). A Trickle or a Torrent? Understanding the Extent of Summer "Melt" Among College-Intending High School Graduates. *SOCIAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY*, Volume 95, Number 1, March 2014

⁵ Rall, R. M. (2016). Forgotten Students in a Transitional Summer: Low-Income Racial/Ethnic Minority Students Experience the Summer Melt. *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 85, No. 4, pp. 462-479

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they decide, without guidance, to just not go." Counselors and CBO staff shared that financial concerns about debt and lack of understanding about financial aid and awards contributed to some students not following through with plans after graduation.

Some of the counselor and CBO interviewees were able to reach students over the summer through various means (e.g., texts, emails, and Zoom meetings) but it was not an easy task, mostly due to limited access to accurate or reliable contact information.

"The district said they would keep their emails for a year after graduation so we could keep in contact, but they were gone in two weeks."

-School counselor

"With 20 hours, there is no way that we can support all of the students. We have to recognize that we are serving first generation students going to college. So not only are we educating them, we are also educating their parents."

-School counselor

Very little time was spent during the school year working on planning time and activities for after graduation as time is consumed with preparing for graduation and testing. While some counselors are provided with "summer melt hours," it was shared that there was not enough time allotted to them and it was not always made clear to them how that time was to be spent.

College student interviewees spoke of their own experiences of the summer transition to college. One student shared that fear of a new environment with different expectations became an obstacle. He was able to overcome this fear and enroll by reaching out to his high school counselor over the summer. Another student shared how she had been accepted to Cal State Los Angeles, but as the summer progressed and due to financial concerns, she did not enroll. However, through the support of her siblings she ultimately decided to enroll in community college first and transfer to a 4-year college later.

"It was a kind of a shock to me that I was on my own now and that if I miss a deadline, no one is going to feel sorry for me... you have to make the effort."

-College student

Some counselors and CBO staff believed that students might also be confronted with parental, cultural, or peer influences on their postsecondary plans. For example, they spoke of gang culture, parental resistance to leaving home, and immigration status. Some students, such as foster youth, unhoused youth, or those with special needs, may be facing additional challenges and need specific counseling and support. Interviewed counselors at one school suggested that more education for staff on individualized needs, options, and available resources would be useful. Similarly, a "cheat sheet" for parents/caregivers on resources specific to their students' needs would be a benefit.

Parent interviewees of students still in high school were positive about their children's ability to move forward after graduation and attributed their future success to them maintaining a "focus" on their future. One parent of a current high school student shared, "I think my son needs to focus on what he really wants his career to be and what he wants to study. I think this is his biggest challenge right now, he needs that focus."

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Effective strategies to combat summer melt that students experienced after graduation fit well within the theme of direct contact and communication.

Interviewees, specifically counselors, CBO staff, and college students, shared how the most effective strategies for addressing summer melt was through direct, and ongoing communication efforts.

College student interviewees shared that having a high school counselor available to them over the summer to communicate with directly was very helpful. Counselor and CBO interviewees confirmed that being able to “keep in touch” or maintain contact with students over the summer was very helpful to getting them through this sometimes challenging period. They were able to provide students with information on necessary requirements, such as confirming intent to enroll and payment deadlines, helping them figure out who to talk to/where to go on campus, and advising them on summer classes and available resources. A CBO interviewee shared how they created opportunities on campus for students without computers, internet, or reliable WiFi to attend virtual college orientations and worked with the school’s parent center on ways to support students through the summer. At one high school, the counselor shared how they held “What’s Next” presentations for seniors right before graduation. Counselors and CBO staff also shared their efforts in finding out what support was offered at the colleges and universities in which their students had enrolled in. This enabled them to be more intentional with informing seniors and encouraging participation in bridge programs, first-year experience programs, and first generation centers if available. Two college students described how their time spent in college summer programs and classes helped them to become familiar with the campus.

Some of the counselor interviewees specifically worked with students, during school and in the summer, on helping to clarify college acceptance letters and financial awards. They did this to help students fully and realistically understand their options and affordability, as this lack of comprehension sometimes led to students not enrolling or moving forward with their postsecondary plans. One counselor interviewee explained that sometimes students committed to schools they could not afford and did not attend, often without asking for help.

Interviewed school-based staff offered several **recommendations** to alleviate some of the challenges associated with summer melt: creating a summer counselor position with clear responsibilities, paying counselors or college advisors (someone students knew and trusted) to support graduates throughout the summer, and extending the summer melt counselor hours. Staff also recommended, as much as possible, gathering and sharing information about bridge and first-year experience programs, and counseling resources at colleges students have been accepted to. One college student interviewee suggested that college visits (to accepted schools) be encouraged before or during summer for students to become familiar and comfortable with the campus.

Interviewed college students recommended that more information on community colleges, especially about opportunities to transfer from community college to 4-year schools, were shared before graduation. It would have relieved some of their stress during the summer before starting college.

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More information about community colleges was also a recommendation. One CBO staff shared that at their schools, they encouraged all students to complete an application for California community colleges, and add them to their financial aid applications, even if they had applied to or had been accepted to 4-year schools. This staff member shared how they started this practice initially as a “back up plan” but it eventually became an effective summer melt strategy. Finally, some college student interviewees shared that time-management workshops might make a difference in students’ transition over the summer.

Wants, Needs, and Supports

The overarching theme of the wants, needs, and supports shared by interviewees align to the concept of **a school-wide, coordinated system**. As seen through the previous discussion of effective practices, some schools are already on their way toward implementing a more comprehensive approach.

The notion of a comprehensive school-wide system shared by interviewees included hiring more counselors, increasing CBO support, expanding training opportunities to include teachers, and sharing data with CBOs working directly with students.

Interviewed administrators, counselors, and CBO staff described the need to build school-wide systems with strategic and intentional planning, collaboration, roles, expectations, and responsibilities for all staff. The system would be inclusive of both supporting students with graduation requirements, financial aid information and application processes, college guidance and applications, and postsecondary planning. As one CBO staff shared, it was important that “students know who the advisors and support staff are and why they are there.” The clear message interviewees sent was that to best support the students, the siloed approach was not working.

The need to **hire more staff** was expressed overwhelmingly by interviewees. LAUSD’s revisions to the counselor staffing ratios for the 2021-22 school year did not seem to positive impact, as administrators, counselors, and CBO interviewees all described this need.⁶ Specifically, they noted how more college counselors with dedicated counseling responsibilities were necessary, as it was shared that counselors were sometimes assigned additional responsibilities that took them away from actual student counseling. Administrators also conveyed the desire for greater autonomy in decision-making regarding staffing, to have more say in who was hired and for what responsibilities.

Administrator interviewees also offered their feedback on the introduction of a potentially new school-site position offered by the district, a **financial aid coordinator**, whose responsibilities would be specific to all aspects of financial aid counseling and form completion. Overall, the response to this position was favorable; however, not without some reservation. Shared concerns included not having space at the school site for such a position and that smaller schools or continuation schools would not have access to this staff member.

The biggest concerns, expressed by most interviewees, were related to the qualifications of this position and how much autonomy the school sites would have in deciding specific

⁶<https://achieve.lausd.net/cms/lib/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/185/Senior%20High%20Staffing%20Ratios%20FY%202022.pdf>

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responsibilities that would best support their staff and students. In terms of qualifications, all agreed that the person in this position should be an experienced and credentialed counselor. Further, the role and responsibilities of this position should be as a “hands on” or support role.

One administrator explained that this position “won’t be necessary if all they do is coordinate strategies or act like a coach.” It was believed that this position would really only be effective if schools had a voice in outlining the role, responsibilities, and hiring. Another administrator added, “Just placing someone in a school could be counterproductive.” Others agreed with this sentiment that schools should have this decision-making power.

“It would be much more beneficial if they could give us the money and say, ‘Hire somebody for your counseling team,’ and let us decide who that person is and what the job position should be.”

-Administrator

Increasing CBO partnerships to more schools also brings in dedicated staff and support to the goal of a comprehensive system. **Specific, ongoing, and coordinated training** was another need shared by all school-based interviewees. They spoke of coordinated, school-wide training on college/career information as well as how to support and engage students. This latter piece was emphasized by several CBO staff who explained that it was not enough to have available staff, but what was needed were “caring adults” capable of building trusting relationships with students. Interviewees also described how expanding training opportunities to more staff would greatly increase the support to students.

Specifically, they shared how inviting teachers to participate in college-related trainings would allow them to better support students through activities such as using Naviance, understanding financial aid and college applications, and writing college essays, and becoming another source of information when they could not meet with counselors.

“One teacher can really influence students, if given the right information.”

-Counselor

Coordinated training would help ensure that everyone at the school was on the same page and provide consistent information to the students, since staff reported that information and support (within the school and from the district) was not always well-organized or consistent. This may be particularly necessary for counselors, since not all school counselors (e.g., academic, or A-G counselors) are dedicated to college counseling or have received any training for postsecondary advising. Administrator interviewees at two high schools shared how this coordination allowed all of the counselors at their respective schools to support one another in carrying out various postsecondary guidance and activities. It also allowed for more direct support to students.

The need to strengthen counselor training was also recommended, as interviewees described the necessity for more “well-rounded” training to support students from the beginning and end of the process. Counselor interviewees added that training in social-emotional development and strategies would be helpful, particularly for those who may have new or continued personal challenges compounded by the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Further, they shared the need for all counselors to have the “same training by the same trainers” to ensure consistent messaging across the district. Trainings should be made available during the school day with common

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professional development opportunities for counselors and teachers to collaborate and share resources. Training should also include more information on postsecondary options such as community college, vocational schools, and certification programs, as well as traditional 4-year college options.

Sharing **access to data** in support of graduation and postsecondary planning also contributes to the concept of coordinated school-wide support. CBO interviewees shared that they had access to some data, mostly if they requested it from counselors. Nevertheless, many of these staff work directly with students more often and more consistently than the counselors during the school year and would benefit from having greater access to specific data. Examples shared by interviewees included access to parent contact information for direct outreach and support, attendance data to review patterns to support students and schools, demographic information to support specific subgroups (e.g., unhoused youth, foster youth), and National Student Clearinghouse data on college enrollment and outcomes.

Increased parent outreach, engagement, education, and communication was described across all school-based interviewees as a prominent need to support postsecondary success in schools. Parent and student interviewees confirmed this by recommending more information, support, and engagement opportunities.

An effective strategy used by some schools to **engage and inform parents/caregivers** involved hosting events with students and parents attending together, engaging in activities such as form or application completion, and offering virtual and bilingual opportunities. All school-based interviewees recommended this type of engagement as a district-wide practice, particularly around financial aid information, guidance, and form completion. It was suggested that inviting parents to the application process and having them observe while students completed financial aid forms, would increase their understanding of the process and allow them to ask questions, which parents reported to be an infrequent opportunity.

Interviewed students also believed that hosting workshops for parents and students simultaneously helped to increase parent knowledge and awareness, as students may not always be capable of reliably relaying, transferring, or translating the information to their parents. Several students agreed that some parents would benefit from a greater understanding of how their tax information was used and that there was no risk to their residency.

“When I was applying for college, the hardest thing was the taxes part... I couldn’t translate it to my mom, so I think a translator would help.”

-High school student

Planning early or preparing for postsecondary planning as early as 9th grade was recommended by all interviewees. Suggestions included folding in college information and guidance “robustly” throughout all years and offering training in the summer to be ready each fall and building relationships and trust with parents as early as 9th grade. Interviewed students also believed that it would be meaningful to 9th grade students to begin college discussions early, offer exposure to possible careers, and allow them access to college field trips. Early introductions to paying for college, including the financial aid process, the requirements, and what would be done with the information was recommended as a way to alleviate some of the concerns and hesitations parents may have by the time applications were due.

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More in-depth information on the various **college majors and related career opportunities** was a need expressed by both parents/caregivers and students. In fact, several interviewed parents expressed more concern that their students did not know what major or career to pursue than college expenses. They attributed this uncertainty experienced by their students to not having enough real-world career information.

Recommendations

The following recommendations come directly from the researchers' analyses of all qualitative data collected and are structured to inform district and school administrators. They do not encompass every individual recommendation or suggestion offered by each stakeholder group. As much as possible, those are incorporated within the body of the report as they aligned to the themes.

Consider the benefits and effects of instituting more comprehensive schoolwide approaches to postsecondary guidance and support. There are multiple states and districts who have guidelines for district-level and school-level toolkits, including action steps, roles and responsibilities, templates, and assessments to readiness and self-evaluation.⁷ The findings have shown that the schools already moving toward such coordinated approaches have demonstrated success in guiding students toward meeting requirements, postsecondary planning, and successful postsecondary outcomes. An advisory group of school administrators, counselors, and college-advising staff could be formed to review toolkits to inform districtwide implementation. Collaboration will have a positive impact on buy-in and implementation at the school level.

Provide opportunities for schools to share best practices. There are several beneficial ways that this could be implemented by the district to target underperforming schools or those who traditionally do not have access to the support or resources of larger schools. For example, for schools of similar size and demographics, facilitate support partnerships with highly effective schools in which administrators/staff could shadow, visit, and/or collaborate. This would be especially useful for continuation schools, which may benefit from learning effective strategies from similar schools.

Conduct an inventory of schools to determine best allocation of resources. This would include CBO partnerships as well as additional staff positions and funding. Working with smaller schools on how to find and sustain community partnerships (or providing temporary staff to build this capacity) would go a long way, especially in schools in which one or two administrators are wearing all of the hats without all of the necessary time, training, or knowledge of resources.

Provide as many resources as possible for schools to continue direct contact/communication with students and parents/caregivers. As the findings have shown, in-person (or even Zoom) opportunities for sharing information and working through guided activities as well as allowing for real-time questions and answers, translation, and clarity are effective. Further, they are recommended across every stakeholder group interviewed. Hiring more college-advising staff with dedicated responsibilities is a recommended solution shared by all school-based interviewees. As we move toward greater availability of technological tools and resources, such

⁷ Examples include Chicago's Learn.Plan.Succeed, Arizona's Education and Career Action Plan (ECAP), and Colorado's Individual Career & Academic Plan (ICAP) Toolkit

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tools should be considered as supplements to providing greater access to information, not as a replacement for direct, face-to-face communication.

Maximize the current and future use of data for decision-making and strategic planning. A key step under this recommendation would be to identify common metrics and performance indicators to be measured that would lead to setting goals and tracking progress at the district and school levels. Related suggestions include: establish systems for data sharing of student surveys and other college/career information collected by the district with school administrators, counselors and other college-advising staff; inventory which data are collected at school sites and how it is used; form data advisory groups to review all current data collected and determine best ways to disseminate and use at school and district levels; consider contracting with external evaluators/data analysts to take on the extensive workload of survey data analysis and reporting at district and school levels to maximize sharing and use of data and results; use external evaluators/analysts to host professional development on data use, and more importantly, to build capacity for schools to analyze and use their own data.

Ensure that all postsecondary options are offered in a way that students understand the full spectrum of possibilities of pathways leading to successful career and economic mobility. As the findings show, while community college application and enrollment are addressed at schools, students' motivation and decisions are sometimes impacted by perceived negative or "less important" inferences by school staff. Similarly, not having enough knowledge about careers impacted students' motivation toward college. Community colleges, career pursuits, and military options should all be viewed and shared with students with the same deference as a 4-year college option, as they all have the potential to lead to growth careers and upward economic mobility. There are various pathways to achieving successful educational, career, and economic goals that do not have to start with a 4-year college.

Provide training to counselors, college-advising staff, and teachers in trust and relationship-building, social-emotional strategies, and youth leadership development. As the findings show, students and families may face a variety of challenges that impact their postsecondary planning. In order to support students and families in overcoming these challenges, they must first have an indication as to what they are. This may be sensitive information which may not be easily shared or given to adults with whom the students had not yet developed some type of trusting relationship. Interviewed CBO staff, in particular, described the need for the presence of "caring" adults at schools. Counselors and administrators also described how support was most effective when coming from a source students trusted. This is also true as students, families, and staff are still dealing with the mental and environmental effects of the global pandemic. Finally training youth to be leaders of others, and the ability to serve as peer mentors, also helps students develop the confidence to open up, ask for help, and move forward.

Conclusion

This research effort was guided by the following questions:

- How might we ensure that all LAUSD seniors complete a financial aid application prior to graduation, or complete an opt-out form?
- How might we ensure that all LAUSD seniors complete a meaningful plan for post-graduation that results in better-informed student decision-making around postsecondary education, and increased postsecondary matriculation?

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In response to the first question, the state's mandate for financial aid form completion (or opt-out) as a graduation requirement for the Class of 2023 and beyond will likely increase the number of LAUSD seniors fulfilling this goal. However, this requirement does not negate the positive outcomes that come from schoolwide, coordinated approaches and direct communication that support students and families in this effort. Any and all strategies to educate and inform students and their families leads them toward more meaningful postsecondary planning, decision-making, and achievement of goals. It also provides them with enough information, resources, and confidence to mitigate or overcome challenges. Therefore, we see that the response to the second question is inclusive with the first. The more students and their families know, they better they can plan. The more informed the plan, the more likely to follow through to matriculation.

Students and their families need to learn all their options and how these options can work in combination with one another toward matriculation and completion. The reality is far from the expectation that a degree-seeking pursuit must begin two to three months after graduation. We have seen how students who were stressed or initially unhappy with community college as an option, expressed relief and motivation once they learned about transfer programs. Exposure to careers or spending time in vocational training can lead to higher education outcomes as students learn skills and gain experience. Exposure to a broader array of postsecondary options helps make planning and financial concerns less anxiety-provoking for students and families and supports students in finding the best fit for themselves after graduation.

The voices, experiences, and recommendations shared in this report are presented to LAUSD with the goal of informing the next steps toward improved postsecondary success across the district. We encourage future and continued conversations, empowering students and families, to be heard and regarded, as they are the keys to their own success.

Appendix A

Research Methodology

Researchers followed the formal LAUSD proposal process and received approval from LAUSD's Committee for External Research Review (CERR) prior to scheduling and conducting interviews with LAUSD school administrators, counselors, students, and their parents.

Researchers began question development by incorporating an empathy interview approach. This approach helped ensure that the lived experiences of the interviewees would be the central focus, especially for parents and students whose experiences may be overlooked in developing school or district-based recommendations (Nelsetuen & Smith, 2020).⁸

Once the researchers created an initial draft of the questions in relevant thematic categories, the questions were presented to both the Advisory Group and LAUSD's DOI staff for review and feedback. Researchers reviewed all feedback and made appropriate revisions to the questions. Finalized questions specific to high school students, parents, and LAUSD staff were submitted to LAUSD's review board (CERR) for approval.

Prior to recruitment and selection, researchers worked with UNITE-LA to establish lists of potential schools to ensure representation across the district. In addition, criteria such as FAFSA completion rates and school type (e.g., traditional school vs. continuation school) were used in establishing the list.

UNITE-LA prepared recruitment flyers for all stakeholder groups, except school administrators. The flyers were distributed to DOI staff and Advisory Group members who were able to assist with dissemination. School principals were contacted directly by DOI staff, as an introduction to the project and to establish contact. UNITE-LA created interest forms and offered incentives to parents and students for their participation. CBO members and LAUSD staff were not offered incentives, as their participation took place during the school day. UNITE-LA coordinated the selection and scheduling of all interviews.

The following table presents the proposed number of participants and the actual number recruited. Given the time allotted to complete the interviews and meet necessary protocols for contacting school-based administrators, the recruitment process could not be extended to meet the proposed numbers.

Interviewee Group	Type of Interview	Proposed	Actual
School-based Administrators/Staff (Principal, counselor, other college staff)	Group Interview (1-3 people)	School-based Administrators/Staff from 6 schools (6-18 participants possible)	School-based Administrators/Staff from 5 schools (Total 9 participants)
High school Counselors (college and/or academic)	Focus Group	2 Focus Groups (6-8 counselors in each)	1 group with 3 counselors, 1 interview with 1 counselor (Total 4 participants)
CBO school-based members	Group Interview (1-3 people)	Members from 4 CBOs working across multiple high schools	Members from 4 organizations (Total 8 participants)

⁸ Nelsetuen, K. & Smith, J. (2020). Empathy interviews. *The Learning Professional*, 41(5), 59-62.

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		(4-12 participants possible)	
College students	Focus Group	1 Focus group with students at 4-year schools (6-8 students) 1 Focus group with students at 2-year schools (6-8 students)	1 group with 3 students (2-year) and 1 interview with 4-year college student (Total 4 participants)
High school students	Focus Group	2 Focus groups of current students (6-8 students per group)	Total of 15 students participated in two groups
Parents/Caregivers	Focus Group	2 Focus groups (6-8 per group)	Total of 8 participants in two groups with bilingual facilitator

Research conducted empathic interviews and focus groups virtually through Zoom. Each interview and focus group took between 60-75 minutes to complete. Except for the high school student focus groups, all sessions were recorded after requesting permission from all participants, for transcription purposes only. In addition, an LAUSD staff member was present during each focus group with high school students. A bilingual researcher conducted the parent focus group, to facilitate through any language barrier or need for translation. Recordings were housed on the researchers' password-protected computers and were deleted once the interviews were transcribed. Neither recordings nor transcriptions of actual responses were viewed or shared outside of the research team to ensure confidentiality.

Researchers qualitatively analyzed and coded all transcriptions for emergent themes and categories. The data and findings were synthesized both within and across participant groups. Preliminary findings were presented to the Advisory Group members to inform the development of the comprehensive recommendations found in this report. For the final report, researchers conducted a more nuanced analysis and organized findings in the best way possible to promote understanding for all audiences. Quotes were used to give voice to all of the participants and provide context for the narrative. The recommendations developed and presented in the stand-alone report were based solely on the qualitative findings. These recommendations were also shared with the Advisory Group to inform the more comprehensive recommendations developed in response to the LAUSD Board resolution.