

Extensive Career and Postsecondary Encouragement Services

A Universal Foundation for Education and Career Development

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Purpose

Extensive career and postsecondary encouragement services provide developmentally sequenced guidance to all middle and high school students and their families, while equipping educators to reinforce that guidance. Delivered through school activities, print materials, websites, telephone conversations, email, text messages, and other appropriate channels, these services connect encouragement with practical steps toward educational and career goals.

The intended outcomes are stronger student motivation, more informed course choices, purposeful career exploration, timely completion of applications and financial aid requirements, and improved participation and success in education and training beyond high school. Postsecondary opportunities include certificates, apprenticeships, technical education, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees. The aim is to help every student prepare for a meaningful future through a pathway suited to the student's interests, abilities, circumstances, and goals.

Introduction: Making Guidance a Universal Opportunity

Students need both a reason to prepare for the future and a clear understanding of how to do so. An aspiration becomes more useful when connected to a course choice, a conversation with someone in an occupation, a job-shadowing experience, an application, or a manageable next step.

Information technology makes it possible to deliver such guidance repeatedly, at relatively low marginal cost, to large populations. Yet availability alone is insufficient. Students and families must be able to recognize the information's relevance, understand what to do, and obtain assistance when a task exceeds their knowledge or resources.

An extensive encouragement system therefore combines universal access with targeted follow-through. Every student receives a foundation of guidance; additional communications respond to expressed interests and needs; and students facing substantial barriers receive personal assistance. This is a proposed service design informed by research on related interventions, rather than a claim that the complete model has already been demonstrated effective.

Intensive Services: Essential, but Limited in Reach

Individual counseling, mentoring, advising, and specialized college-access programs can provide sustained relationships and assistance with complex problems. A recent multisite randomized

study by Andrew Barr and Benjamin Castleman found that intensive advising during high school and college increased bachelor's degree attainment among lower-income students. Their abstract reports that advising "significantly increases bachelor's degree attainment among lower-income students." [1]

The practical challenge is capacity. Programs differ considerably: some use income or other eligibility criteria, some serve school cohorts, and comprehensive school counseling is intended to serve all students. Nevertheless, staffing, funding, time, and program boundaries can constrain how much individualized attention students receive.

ASCA reports a national student-to-school-counselor ratio of **372:1 for 2024–2025**, compared with its recommended **250:1**. This is an aggregate across school levels, not a national high-school-only ratio. It illustrates the importance of extending access while strengthening professional counseling capacity. [2]

Universal encouragement can help schools address routine guidance needs consistently and identify students who need additional attention. It should complement investment in counselors and other support professionals. Financial hardship, academic difficulties, disability-related needs, and family responsibilities often require resources and sustained human assistance.

What Research Contributes

Research supports several components of extensive encouragement, while identifying important limits.

Targeted information can expand students' choices. Hoxby and Turner's Expanding College Opportunities experiment combined application guidance, information about net costs, and application fee waivers for high-achieving students from low-income families. Participants applied to and enrolled in colleges with stronger resources and higher graduation rates. The authors concluded that "a low-cost, fully scalable intervention can help many high-achieving, low-income students recognize their full array of college opportunities." These results concern a particular population and intervention; they should not be generalized to every student or messaging system. [3]

Information becomes more effective when paired with practical help. Bettinger and colleagues' FAFSA experiment found that application assistance combined with aid information increased financial aid applications and college enrollment. Information alone did not produce comparable gains. The implication is that communications should make it easy to begin a task and obtain help completing it. [4]

Timely reminders can help at critical transitions. Castleman and Page's summer-melt research found that personalized text messages connecting students with enrollment tasks and assistance improved college enrollment in some settings. Effects varied across sites, underscoring the importance of local context and available support. [5]

Broad reach does not guarantee improved outcomes. Bird and colleagues' national and state FAFSA campaigns found no effects on aid receipt or college enrollment. These findings caution against equating messages sent with students helped. Relevance, timing, credibility, practical assistance, and evaluation must be part of the design. [6]

The Institute of Education Sciences captures a useful organizing principle: “Engage and assist students in completing critical steps for college entry.” Its practice guide rated that recommendation as supported by moderate evidence when published. It also recommended strengthening financial awareness and helping students apply for aid. [7]

Together, these studies support a cautious design inference: extensive encouragement is most promising when communications are actionable, responsive to student circumstances, and connected to people who can help.

A Culture of Possibility and Preparation

An extensive system can help establish a school culture in which every student encounters credible opportunities for further learning and meaningful work. Teachers, counselors, families, and community partners can reinforce a shared expectation: students deserve opportunities to explore, prepare, and revise their plans.

Encouragement should explain the relationship between present choices and future possibilities. Students can see why a mathematics course matters for a technical program, how volunteering can test an occupational interest, or why comparing net prices matters when choosing a college.

Messages should recognize real barriers without treating them as evidence of limited potential. Transportation, affordability, caregiving, academic preparation, and access to technology affect what students can do. Effective encouragement connects those concerns with available resources and brings unmet needs to the attention of responsible adults.

Developmentally Sequenced Guidance

The following sequence is a proposed implementation framework. It should be adapted to local opportunities and student readiness.

Stage	Guidance emphasis	Examples of next steps
Grades 6–8	Curiosity, strengths, work habits, and awareness of occupations	Explore careers; discuss interests with a trusted adult; develop an initial education and career plan.
Grades 9–10	Course planning and intentional exploration	Review electives and prerequisites; participate in career activities; investigate technical education, dual credit, and training options.
Grade 11	Comparing pathways and preparing applications	Visit programs in person or virtually; investigate costs and financial aid; arrange job shadowing; identify application requirements.
Grade 12	Completing decisions and transition requirements	Complete applications and aid forms; compare offers; confirm enrollment or

		apprenticeship steps; plan transportation, housing, and support.
After high school	Persistence, adjustment, and renewed access	Seek academic or workplace assistance; maintain required aid steps; revise plans; reconnect with education or training if participation is interrupted.

At every stage, students should be encouraged to update their plans as they learn more about themselves and their opportunities. A plan provides direction while allowing change.

Using Student Guidance Data to Direct Services

Universal access becomes more responsive when schools ask students about their interests, experiences, concerns, and requests for assistance. A guidance needs survey can reveal students who want help selecting courses, exploring occupations, finding a tutor, understanding costs, or arranging a postsecondary visit.

Individual reports can support conversations with students. Aggregate reports can identify needs for workshops, partnerships, staffing, and new services. Repeated assessment can help schools determine whether expressed needs have been addressed.

The Universal Encouragement Program offers an organizing mechanism for this work: connecting student-reported interests and guidance needs with individual and group reports and appropriate follow-up. Its guidance-assessment approach has been described in an article published through the National Career Development Association. That description establishes the program's purpose and approach; it does not establish effects on educational attainment. [8]

Survey responses should initiate inquiry rather than label students or determine their opportunities. A student's uncertainty about college preparation is a request for clarification. An expressed occupational interest provides a starting point for exploration and may change with experience.

Career resources should also reflect current frameworks. Advance CTE's modernized National Career Clusters Framework contains **14 clusters**, replacing the earlier national framework of 16. Local adoption and alignment should be checked before changing survey categories. [9]

Comparing Intensive and Extensive Services

These approaches differ primarily in reach, service intensity, and delivery. Both can be personalized, strengths-based, collaborative, and informed by systematic assessment.

Dimension	Intensive services	Extensive services
Main contribution	Sustained relationships and assistance with complex needs	Consistent access to guidance across a large population
Typical delivery	Individual advising,	Schoolwide activities, print

	mentoring, counseling, and small groups	and digital guidance, reminders, and referrals
Reach	Limited by available staff time and program capacity	Designed to reach all students and families
Cost pattern	Generally greater staff time per participant	Lower marginal distribution costs, with continuing development and support costs
Personalization	Conversation and detailed understanding of circumstances	Guidance tailored to stage, interests, needs, and completed tasks
Main limitation	Difficulty providing sustained attention to everyone	Messages may be missed or insufficient to resolve barriers
Evaluation	Participation, service quality, and student outcomes	Reach, completed actions, resolved needs, and student outcomes
Relationship to the other	Responds to needs identified through broad outreach	Connects students with deeper assistance when needed

Turning Encouragement into Action

A useful guidance message answers four questions: Why does this matter? What should I do next? When should I do it? Who can help?

For example, a student concerned about paying for education should receive a clear explanation of grants, scholarships, net price, and borrowing, followed by an invitation to a financial aid workshop or individual appointment. A student exploring health careers might receive links to occupational information and an invitation to meet a professional, visit a training program, or participate in an appropriate volunteer experience.

Every referral should identify a service that is actually available. Schools should establish responsibility for responding to requests and following up when students remain uncertain or do not complete an important step.

Universal delivery also requires accessible communication. Schools should offer understandable language, translated materials where needed, accessible formats, and alternatives for families without reliable digital access. Parents and guardians can reinforce guidance when they understand both the opportunities and the actions involved. Students who lack an available family advocate should have another dependable adult connection.

Linking Schools, Families, and Community Resources

An extensive system can coordinate existing resources around student needs. Counselors can use reports to prioritize appointments and group activities. Teachers can connect coursework with occupations and further study. Colleges, technical providers, and apprenticeship sponsors

can explain requirements and opportunities. Employers and community organizations can offer career conversations, job shadowing, volunteering, and work experiences.

Student information should be collected and used for clearly stated educational purposes. Appropriate access controls and school-approved procedures should guide its use and any sharing. Expressing interest in a program should lead to useful guidance without automatically distributing a student's personal information to outside organizations.

Measuring Success

Evaluation should distinguish communications delivered from actions completed and outcomes achieved. Useful measures include:

- **Access:** Which students and families receive guidance, and who is being missed?
- **Action:** Do students update plans, participate in exploration, complete applications, and meet deadlines?
- **Responsiveness:** Are requests for assistance answered, and are reported needs resolved?
- **Outcomes:** Do students enter, persist in, and complete education or training aligned with their goals?
- **Equity:** Are opportunities and improvements reaching students who have historically faced barriers?

Where feasible, phased implementation or a suitable comparison group can help distinguish program effects from other influences. Results should inform revisions to content, timing, referrals, and service capacity.

Conclusion

Extensive career and postsecondary encouragement services can provide a universal foundation for guidance: repeated opportunities to explore possibilities, understand requirements, take practical steps, and request assistance. Intensive services supply the sustained relationships and problem-solving needed when barriers require more attention.

The strongest system brings these contributions together. It makes guidance available to everyone, listens to students' expressed needs, connects them with appropriate resources, and follows through. Its ultimate purpose is to ensure that every student can develop an informed plan for a meaningful future—and receive support in pursuing and adapting that plan.

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