



As the number of students pursuing higher education increases, so does the number of students whose families lack experience navigating the college-preparatory landscape.

To help increase college access locally, the Virginia College Advising Corps is trying to make the transition to higher education easier for Charlottesville High School students and their families.

“As a college advisor, my goal is to break down the steps into something a lot more digestible,” said Staige Davis, the Corps member assigned to Charlottesville High School.

A joint effort by the University of Virginia and the National College Advising Corps, the initiative — which was established at UVa in 2005, and has since been adopted as a national model — places recent UVa graduates in high schools around the commonwealth. These advisers work alongside school counselors and assist students with everything from college searches to essay writing to financial aid paperwork.

Currently, 17 advisers serve in 19 Virginia high schools, and in 2013-14 they helped deliver \$6.9 million in institutional aid and \$1.7 million in scholarships to students.

Between 2008 and 2013, Charlottesville High School’s post-secondary enrollment figures jumped 13 percentage points, from 63 percent to 76 percent.

This school year, Davis already has met one-on-one with 610 CHS juniors and seniors — including almost 80 percent of the senior class — and 60 percent of all CHS seniors have submitted financial aid paperwork — a number that is expected to rise as community college enrollment begins.

But Davis said the work is more than just pointing students toward a school. Because CHS is home to a diverse student body with diverse needs, she interacts with students and parents who are at various stages of preparing for higher education.

“Some students who come through my door are at step one in the college prep process, and some are going early decision to Yale,” Davis said.

“They have bought the message that pursuing higher education is a pathway to success,” she said, “but some have a clear path and others don’t know how to navigate the step between the last year of high school and the first year of college.”

A pivotal element of the Advising Corps model is what it calls “near-peer” mentoring — advisers will be near in age and background to many of the students they will serve.

Joy Pugh, who directs the Virginia College Advising Corps, said the “near-peer” component is crucial because students can speak with college graduates who have had similar experiences.

“Many of [the advisers] were first-generation [college students] and/or come from low-income backgrounds themselves,” Pugh said. “This provides a relatability factor that can make the difference in students believing that they can succeed in a post-secondary education setting.”

While Davis is housed in a school, she doesn’t act as a peer only to students; she finds parents asking questions, too, especially for advice.

“They just want a professional to sit with them and say, ‘This is overwhelming and we’re not sure if we’re advising our student the right way,’” Davis said. “They just want someone to say, ‘Yes, you are doing the right thing,’ or, ‘Have you thought about this?’”

In fact, Davis said that she encourages students and their parents to meet with her together, as doing so often results in clearer communication.

Alexis Taylor, a CHS senior bound for Virginia Commonwealth University, said Davis’ help was invaluable.

“Ms. Davis really helped me with the application process and the essays,” Taylor said, noting that Davis also helped her locate scholarship opportunities.

What’s more, Taylor said having a college adviser was a relief to her mother.

“It made is easier on her because Ms. Davis is someone I could go to if my mother didn’t have the answer or didn’t understand something,” Taylor said.

Sana Tauchi, a CHS senior who emigrated from Japan, agreed.

“They definitely have a different college system in Japan, so my parents didn’t know anything about college in America, so I was kind of on my own,” Tauchi said.

Additionally, Tauchi — who plans to attend Piedmont Virginia Community College — said Davis was especially helpful analyzing financial aid packages different schools offered her.

In the big picture, Davis said she just hopes to inform people about the variety of higher education programs that exist.

“I do want people to know that even if you don’t think you’re the type of student who wants to go to college, there are a lot of other options out there,” Davis said.

“You’re not doing something wrong if you don’t know the next step in the process,” she said. “The sooner you call and the sooner I develop a relationship with your child, the better, in terms of how I can serve them.”