Navigating Partnerships: Engaging Families through College and Career Readiness

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Time Frame 60 minutes

Essential Question(s)

How can we begin to view and implement family engagement as a strategy to achieve student success?

Summary

Counselor Academy is a workshop-style training for GEAR UP cohort counselors. It offers a formal introduction to GEAR UP and how GEAR UP partners with secondary schools assist with resources, support, and a sustainable path to build a college and career culture. This session, Navigating Partnerships, is a stand-alone training within Counselor Academy. It reframes family engagement as a strategy for student success, not simply another outreach task. The session equips counselors with research-based tools that enable them to partner with families in postsecondary planning.

Learning Goals

Attachments

- Card Sort Key—Navigating Partnerships.docx
- Card Sort Key—Navigating Partnerships.pdf
- Card Sort Mat—Navigating Partnerships.docx
- Card Sort Mat—Navigating Partnerships.pdf
- Card Sort—Navigating Partnerships.docx
- Card Sort—Navigating Partnerships.pdf
- Forbidden Phrases—Navigating Partnerships.pdf
- Slide Presentation—Navigating Partnerships .pptx

Materials

- Slide Presentation—Navigating Partnerships (attached)
- Forbidden Phrases—Navigating Partnerships (attached, one copy per group, laminated and cut)
- Card Sort—Navigating Partnerships (attached, one copy per group, laminated and cut)
- Card Sort Mat—Navigating Partnerships (optional, attached, one copy per group, laminated)
- Card Sort Key—Navigating Partnerships (attached, one copy for facilitator or optionally one copy per group)

15 minutes

Engage

Facilitator's Note

This resource was originally part of a 1-day workshop in conjunction with two other related resources. However, it can be conducted on its own. For more information check out the Counselor Academy Collection: Navigator Network.

Display **slides 1-4** using the attached **Slide Presentation**, welcome participants, and present the Essential Question and Learning Objectives as you see fit. Explain to participants that this resource will achieve the following goals:

1. Equip the participants with ready-to-use tools. Quick, energizing activities and resources that can be adapted and duplicated will be modeled.
2. Strengthen college and career readiness by actively engaging families as partners. We will explore meaningful family involvement that supports students' long-term academic and career success.

Display **slide 5** and prepare to play Forbidden Phrases. Arrange participants in pairs or groups of 3-6 participants. Alternatively, depending on the size of the group and the amount of time you have, you could play as a large group and call a volunteer for each round.

Make sure a "Describer" or clue giver has a **Forbidden Phrase card** or stack, face down. Instruct them to not turn the card over or look at the card until after instructions are given.

Explain that Forbidden Phrases work like Taboo or Password. In each round, the Describer gives clues to their teammates in order to guess the target word on a card—without saying any of the four related words listed below it (or any part of it, if it's a compound word). The Describer may not act out the word—charades-style gestures aren't allowed—but minimal hand gestures are okay. The group has 60 seconds to guess the target word; then, rotate the Describer role after each round (or every 2 minutes, if playing as one large group.)

You may want to model the first card yourself. Use and reset the timer as needed.

When time has elapsed or all the cards have been played, display **slide 6** and facilitate a discussion using these prompts:

- Which terms were more difficult to explain without using the typical "insider" words or descriptors?
- What did you typically revert to – using acronyms or educational jargon or giving an explanation?
- How do you think this mirrors what a family hears when we use this language without "translating" it?

15 minutes

Explore

Display **slide 7** and introduce the research behind Family Engagement. Parent engagement and shared leadership roles result in higher achievement in high school, increased graduation rates, increased PSE (post secondary education) admission rates, and a higher percentage of students enrolled in PSE. (Plagens, 2011; Velez, 2020).

Facilitator's Note: Framing the Presentation

You might choose to frame the research and introduction to the reading for the I Notice, I Wonder by mentioning the following notions:

- GEAR UP does not have the definitive answer to family engagement, nor does it seek to add another family engagement initiative.
- The goal is to provide resources and tools to incorporate in any family engagement activity your school has and model how GEAR UP can partner with your school to support family engagement activities that promote College and Career Readiness (CCR).

Consider adding recent family engagement pictures and GEAR UP events that have had large turnouts —and one with a small turnout—to reiterate that there isn't a magic answer as long as every event is welcoming and informative.

Move on to **slide 8** to continue presenting the research.

- Despite the challenges we often face with family engagement in schools, research has shown time and again that parents/families who are engaged in their child's learning are one of the ingredients in academic success for students.
- Over the last decade, family engagement research has helped change our thinking around defining what it looks like for parents/guardians/family members to be involved in their student's education.

Display **slide 9** to introduce the I Notice, I Wonder strategy. Have participants download a copy of Flamboyan Foundation's "Five Roles Families Play" by using the link or QR code. Explain the strategy and set the timer for five minutes.

Tip: Staying Involved

The goal is for participants to think about how parents are involved and to identify ways schools can support that involvement. For example, if parents help their students explore postsecondary options after high school, they need to access accurate information about those options. Schools can use a variety of strategies to engage and inform families, helping them support their students' postsecondary planning and decision-making effectively.

Allow a few minutes for group discussion about their observations from the "Five Roles Families Play" reading. Field any questions that come up.

10 minutes

Explain

In preparation for this activity, break participants up in groups of about 4-6 people. Display **slide 10**.

Instruct participants that they will participate in a Card Sort activity. After grouping participants, hand out the **Card Sort cards** and **mat** to each group. Inform participants that this activity is connected to the GEAR UP: College and Career Preparation Family Standards.

The card mat has three categories: Knowledge, Skills, and Attitude. The cards have a variety of family engagement activities. As a group, participants are to place each card in one of the three categories. If needed, briefly define:

- Knowledge: information families need to understand college and career planning and preparation.
- Skills: actions or abilities families practice to support their students.
- Attitude: beliefs, confidence, and mindsets that encourage college and career readiness.

As a group, read each family engagement activity card and discuss whether this activity mainly builds knowledge, develops skills, or influences attitude.

Place each card under the category where group participants believe it best fits.

10 minutes

Extend

When participants have had time to complete the Card Sort activity, display **slide 11** and ask them to take 3-5 minutes at their tables to discuss the following questions.

- Which category had the most activities?
- Are there any categories your school's family engagement programming tends to emphasize more than others?

If desired, unhide **slide 12** to see a key and continue the discussion. Alternatively, supply copies of the **Card Sort Key**.

10 minutes

Evaluate

Display **slide 13**. Guide participants to use the Think-Pair-Share strategy while posing the questions on the slide. Begin with “Which category could your school strengthen?” Tell participants then to pick one of the activities in that category and think about how they could implement that activity in their school. Allow time for participants to think quietly, then turn to a partner and share. Ask the following questions to facilitate discussion.

- Why did you pick this category and activity?
- How would you go about implementing this activity?
- Would you make any modifications to the activity?

Use the art on **slide 14** to shift from family engagement as an add-on task to family engagement as a strategic partnership. Encourage counselors to treat family engagement as a deliberate strategy for advancing their school's goals.

In closing...

Remind participants that school counselors wear a lot of hats. A variety of school initiatives fall in their laps. Explain that the goal of this session is to help them shift family engagement away from being another add-on — a newsletter, a conference, an occasional event — and instead make it intentional, strategic, and directly tied to the goals their school is already working toward.

Explain that this means shifting from asking "How do we get families involved?" to "How do our school's goals become shared goals with families?" When a school is focused on improving attendance, academic achievement, or social-emotional growth, families aren't just people to update — they're partners who can help drive those outcomes forward.

Note that this shift changes how outreach is planned. Instead of generic events, counselors can design activities that speak directly to what the school is working on: a workshop on supporting reading at home when literacy is a priority, a family session on navigating course selection when college and career readiness is a focus, or casual check-ins that build trust before a crisis ever happens.

Emphasize that the goal isn't more events — it's more alignment: connecting what schools are already trying to accomplish with families who are ready to help make it happen.

Research Rationale

Researchers have reported that school "counselors are a source of social capital for students, providing a supportive relationship from which information and resources flow to facilitate students' pathways to college, especially for low-income and first-generation students" (Bryan et al., 2022, p. 39). They also stressed that "throughout college admissions and financial aid support, counselors provide students with critical college-related information" (pp. 4-5), such as knowledge about the FAFSA, other financial aid information, and assistance applying and enrolling in college. Researchers also emphasized the critical role of parents in students' academic success (Paolini, 2019; Chan et al., 2023) and viable pathways into PSE. Chan et al. (2023) reported that "parental involvement in a child's education is one of the central mechanisms that prepares the child for academic success" (p. 1217).

School counselors are viewed as key stakeholders who connect parents to available college-related resources and information. They may act as empowering agents and the only source of social capital for disadvantaged families who experience difficulties in accessing valuable information and social networks outside schools. School counselors often lack the skills necessary to build valuable parent/school/community partnerships that increase student awareness of PSE options (Kim et al., 2017; Velez, 2020). Project staff will work with learning support developers to integrate American School Counselor Association's (2019) professional learning standards, both in-person and micro credentialing, in *METRO*'s Counselor Academy. The Academy will unite counselors for one to two days per semester to engage in critical discussions about the latest college readiness research and activities, understand how to help students and families access financial aid, plan a PSE campus-based activity, and coordinate career-based activities for their students. Special efforts will be made to ensure counselors align activities to streamline a systematic expansion of strategies and best practices at key transition points (e.g. middle to high school). Parent engagement and shared leadership roles result in higher achievement in high school, increased graduation rates, increased PSE admission rates, and a higher percentage of students enrolled in PSE (Plagens, 2011; Velez, 2020).

Resources

- Bryan, J., Kim, J., & Liu, C. (2022). School counseling college-going culture: Counselors' influence on students' college-going decisions. *Journal of Counseling & Development,* 100, 39-55. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12408
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- Velez, E. D. (2020). How can high school counseling shape students' postsecondary attendance? Exploring the relationship between the high school counseling context and students' subsequent postsecondary enrollment. *National Association for College Admission Counseling.* ED608301.pdf