



Stories from the Field

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Ladders
Project

Merced College

Piloting New Practices and Programs

Equitable Counseling Approach

When Merced College sought to expand the reach of their dual enrollment program, they turned to the counseling departments at their high school partner, Merced Union High School District (Merced Union HSD). Merced Union HSD includes six comprehensive schools and two alternative schools. Working in partnership with the local high schools, the college and school district developed a Pathways Counselor position at every high school in the district. Each Pathways Counselor is also an adjunct counselor at Merced College. This dual role enables the counselors to support high school students through the process, from initial interest to enrollment in college courses, with fewer slowdowns or hang ups.

“The partnership is really strong. There’s a lot of communication between Merced College and our counselors.”

This reimagining started with a desire to support high school students who were planning to attend Merced College to develop an abbreviated Education Plan before they graduated high school. As dual enrollment began expanding and it became clear that high school students were facing barriers to accessing college courses, Merced College

shifted the role of the counselor to focus more on supporting dual enrollment students. With that change in focus, Merced College worked to hire a counselor at every high school as an adjunct college counselor. These counselors support students directly and train their high school counselor colleagues in the processes required for dual enrollment.

Call to Action for the Field

- **Focus on developing strong partnerships.** Making the connections and removing barriers opens up opportunities for students.
- **Take the politics out of dual enrollment and center what is best for students.** Give students individual voice and choice in planning their educational pathway.
- **High schools and community colleges are not the same organization, but we are one community.** Work together to understand the students’ experiences and build from there to leverage each organization’s strengths.

The focus on removing barriers to dual enrollment has opened up opportunities for many more high school students to take college courses. Merced Union HSD counselors noticed a big increase in student interest. Students were getting the information—including the fact that they could take college courses for free—and they started asking their high school counselors about how to get started.

Once students are enrolled in the Merced College courses, the Pathways Counselors help them get ready for their college experience. They work with students to understand the difference between high school and college, make sure they know how to access their college course records and the Canvas learning platform, and send reminders when the course starts and how to log in. They also send both students and parents “how to” videos on key topics to help students navigate college or troubleshoot potential technology issues.

Merced College and Merced Union HSD have also developed college and high school

equivalent [course lists](#) that are shared publicly and provided to parents. With these lists, students can see which Merced College courses count for both high school A-G requirements and college general education, enabling students to make progress in both their high school graduation and college degree and transfer requirements.

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These efforts have dramatically increased the number of students taking dual enrollment courses with more than 25% of students in the class of 2024 earning college credit. At the core of the success is the partnership and communication between Merced College and Merced Union HSD leadership and counselors.

The Transformational Practices

The Merced Union HSD counselors and Merced College adjunct counselors are championing these efforts at their high schools through a variety of strategies:

- **Identify barriers and remove them.** “Before, the process was a mystery even to the high school counselors. Students had to get our signature and a college counselor’s signature to take the class. Their offices closed at 4:00; our kids got out at 3:15. It was too difficult. Now we can support them through the entire process.”
- **Keep iterating. Transformational change requires reflection and agility.** “It has been eight years now that we’ve been working through this, and there have been some changes and some growing pains.”
- **Develop communication feedback loops.** “The partnership is really strong. There’s a lot of communication between Merced College and our counselors.”