

## A Packed Lunch: A Learning Case in Student Mindsets about College and Postsecondary Pathways

### Introduction

The postsecondary landscape in Chicago is changing. After years of growth, the college enrollment rate for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students has plateaued for 4-year and declined for 2-year institutions ([Source: To&Through PAI Report](#)), current students are still recovering from HS experiences disrupted by the pandemic, and we are improving access to more diverse pathways for students' lives after high school. These changes require new ways of thinking, particularly from professionals supporting and advising students to choose sustainable pathways that align with the aspirations they have for themselves.

The learning case you are about to read was developed from interviews and observations of current CPS College and Career Coaches and students currently wrestling with decision making about their pathways. This case provides an opportunity for reflection and discussion on your personal and your school community's beliefs and strategies when it comes to advising students to make informed decisions in this new landscape.

Names and some details have been changed, but the students' perspectives come from quotes from actual student conversations and represent real students. This learning case **is a narrative that presents a snapshot of a day in the life of a College and Career Coach** hosting an informal small-group advising session at a neighborhood high school on the South Side of Chicago. It is mid-March and the Seniors presented are currently in a place of indecision and facing some barriers as they make their choices.

### Learning Case

The 4th period dismissal bell blares over the loudspeaker as Ms. Davis finishes sending off one last email response to a student whose transcript hasn't been received by NIU yet. How many emails does she send in a day? It feels like thousands.

She glances up at the clock. It's Friday and lunch period for most of the Seniors. Last year, Ms. Davis had started hosting informal lunch gatherings in the postsecondary office with a handful of students to just talk— about college, their plans for next year, their struggles, their lives. She found that students tended to open up in different ways when they got to talk to one another. Over the last 7 years as a College and Career Coach, she has found that so many of her 1:1s are spent walking students through FAFSA or analyzing award letters or dealing with some other urgent logistical hurdle and there isn't

*This learning case was prepared by Alexandra Ritson, Senior Case Study Writer at The To&Through Project at The University of Chicago. Our cases are developed solely for group discussion and learning and do not necessarily illustrate most effective or ineffective practices. This material was reprinted with permission from The To&Through Project. If you have questions about permission to facilitate this case, please reach out to [toandthrough@uchicago.edu](mailto:toandthrough@uchicago.edu).*

enough time to talk about the deeper things that matter for students making their postsecondary decisions. These lunch gatherings provide a way to make some of those conversations happen.

With spring break in two weeks and Decision Day rapidly approaching, Ms. Davis is targeting the 27 Seniors (20% of the Senior class) who haven't made much progress on entering their completed applications and their acceptances. Ms. Davis is feeling good about the 65% of Seniors who seem on track to enroll in a 2-year or 4-year college, an uptick from what she saw last year. But these 27 Seniors seem lost on where they are heading next year. She wants to check in with where these students are and figure out what kind of support they might need. Is college still an option for them? Do they need help exploring other pathways? Today she has invited Alondra, Isaac, Jada, and Elijah.

Alondra and Jada walk in first and sit at the table in the center of the room.

**Alondra** is in the IB Program and an Honor Roll student. She comes off as quiet, but becomes a social butterfly once she feels comfortable. Alondra has recently been doubting college and wants to focus on working for her family's restaurant and someday taking over the business.

<b>A Packed Lunch: Student Snapshot</b>	
<b>Alondra</b>	Interested in taking over her family's restaurant IB program, Honor Roll student
<b>Jada</b>	Interested in nursing or cosmetology Formerly high GPA, but grades have dropped
<b>Isaac</b>	Interested in trades/construction IB program, Honor Roll student
<b>Elijah</b>	Interested in military (Air Force) Low to average grades

**Jada** was on the honor roll during the pandemic, but her grades have dropped this year, and she has recently stopped coming to school on time. Jada is caring for her sick grandmother and looking after her younger sister after school on top of holding a part-time job at her cousin's salon and she isn't sure what she wants to do next year. Ms. Davis worries about Jada and how much she is holding.

Ms. Davis pulls up Naviance as she asks Alondra and Jada how their big project in Ms. Carmichael's Theatre class is going. Ms. Davis looks at the clock. Maybe Isaac and Elijah aren't coming. She thanks Alondra and Jada for joining and asks them how they're doing.

"I'm just tired. I'm over it. I'm ready to be done," Jada. answers as she spins around in one of the office chairs. Alondra nods.

"It makes it hard to do all this college stuff, Ms. Davis. Like if I can't do this now, how am I going to keep going? I just want a break," Jada adds.

"I hear that. You've had a tough four years. With the pandemic and quarantining for so much of high school. You're burnt out. But you're in the home stretch. I know last time we talked, you were both still on the fence about your plans for next year....."

**PREVIEW COPY: FOR FREE FULL ACCESS, [PLEASE COMPLETE REQUEST FORM](#)**