

INSIGHTS

When Nicholas Senn High School leaders examined their 2014 student attainment data, they were pleased with many of their outcomes. Graduation rates had increased annually for four consecutive years, ACT scores had improved, and a significant majority of freshmen (87 percent) were on-track to graduate. However, when they assessed their college enrollment data, they found:

- A significant gap between international baccalaureate (IB) program and non-IB program students in college enrollment: 76 percent of Senn's IB program students enrolled in college in 2014 compared with only 49 percent of its non-IB program students.
- Many of Senn's graduates who did enroll in college didn't enroll in "match" schools. Senn's high-achievers, in particular, were enrolling in schools for which they were academically overqualified.

STRATEGIES

Senn decided to focus on giving all students equal support for college preparation by providing students not enrolled in the IB or fine arts magnet program with greater access to rigorous courses and other resources to ensure they are equipped to enroll in and persist through college.

Senn added four advanced placement (AP) courses and a dual-credit partnership with Loyola University, giving students who weren't enrolled in its IB program opportunities to challenge themselves and demonstrate advanced learning in their college applications.

Realizing that many students had not been exposed to college, Senn also leveraged internal teams and external partners to help foster a college-going culture. Through an existing partnership with Loyola University, Senn initiated "Think Week: March to College" — a week in March in which students at each high school grade level have the opportunity to visit Loyola University for a day to experience and receive advice about college life. Additionally, Senn added two more academic counselors, expanded enrollment in senior seminar, established schoolwide use of Naviance, and further strengthened partnerships to more strategically offer field trips and college workshops. Finally, Senn formalized its Postsecondary Leadership Team (PLT) and added a "summer boot camp" to make sure that rising seniors establish an actionable college plan (FAFSA, college essays, applications, etc.) before they enter their senior year.

Senn leaders and staff also began to build parent-counselor relationships early on, starting in students' sophomore year, so parents are trustful when counselors recommend that students enroll in "match" schools, which may be farther away from home.

RESULTS

In just two years, Senn increased its college enrollment rate by 20 points, from 52 percent in 2014 to 72 percent in 2016.

Senn's graduating seniors have been enrolling in more competitive schools and programs for which they are academically better qualified. In 2015, 20 percent of Senn's graduates enrolled in the University of Illinois at Chicago, and 15 percent enrolled in Loyola University. Also, three members of Senn's most recent graduating class won the highly selective Posse scholarship, which provides especially qualified high school graduates with the resources they need to succeed at highly selective colleges.