



BEYOND High School

Student-Centered Transition
Supports During COVID



Photo by Hannah Busing

“COVID affected me emotionally and took away my motivation to go to college. But I talked with a teacher who helped to motivate me to keep on going to college.”

Three Days Together

With their high school counselors listening intently, small groups of students who graduated in May 2020 shared their stories about planning for life after high school. For some students, the unprecedented global pandemic had either changed their college-going plans or put them on hold.

“ COVID made me really want to think about what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. It gave me an opportunity. It was a late reality check. I am seeing a lot of people struggling and I don't want to work for anyone. I want to be an entrepreneur.

I was going to go to Texas A & M. I had time to think through COVID. I asked myself, do I want to spend all this money or take it slower and go to community college first and then transfer.

COVID let me figure out what I want to do. I am going to work on my career now. At first I was going to go to college but I realized how much I like hands on things and so I am pursuing my career now.

Other graduates still planned to go to college, although they worried about attending college in a new context of online or hybrid learning.

“ COVID-19 did not affect what I planned after high school. I'm still going to college.

When COVID hit I wanted to wait to go to college because online is hard. My family pushed me to still go and so I am going. A part of me is happy but I am really scared because I struggle with online.

The students who shared these stories were part of Design Camp, a three-day virtual experience in Dallas, Texas held in August 2020. Design Camp brought together recent high school graduates, high school counselors, and staff from Dallas County Promise. Together, they explored the question: **How might we personalize postsecondary advising in the current context of COVID?**

Dallas County Promise is a coalition of school districts, colleges, universities, employers, and communities that have joined forces to help more Dallas County students complete college and begin careers. They support students by providing tuition assistance, success coaching, and advising for students to earn a career certification, associate degree or bachelor's degree.

What Is Design Camp?

The Design Camp project is an effort to look more deeply at the day-to-day experiences of students and, with their engagement, to design prototypes to test in virtual, hybrid, or re-entry school settings. Centering the stories and experiences of adolescent students—especially students from historically underserved groups—and inviting them to the design table alongside adults is at the heart of this project. Design Camp was conceptualized as student-centered, anti-racist, and highly interactive, utilizing the tenets of both Design Thinking¹ and Liberatory Design.²

The initial Design Camps engaged students and educators from three school districts across the country—in Maryland, Oregon, and Texas. This publication focuses on the Dallas, Texas experience, in which 2020 graduates, their counselors, and staff members from Dallas County Promise focused on collaboratively designing postsecondary supports. The first publication, *What if School Looked Like This? Centering Students in Virtual Learning Design*, highlighted themes and recommendations from Maryland and Oregon, where Design Camp focused on redesigning middle and high school classroom experiences for virtual learning.

The Dallas Design Camp met virtually for three consecutive days in early August, totaling 12 hours of meeting time. The student:counselor ratio was deliberately 3:1. The majority of student participants were Latinx and, for those planning to attend college, the majority would be first-generation college students. (See the **Tools and Tips for Student-Centered Design** section for a behind-the-scenes look at Design Camp.)

WHY DESIGN CAMP?

The stories that students and their counselors shared during the Dallas Design Camp reflect what's happening across the country about the impact of COVID-19 on secondary and postsecondary milestones. When COVID-19 required most of America's school buildings to close, educators were faced with the daunting and dramatically under-resourced task of shifting learning, supportive services, and counseling to a virtual environment.

It is clear that online or hybrid models will be the reality for many schools for the near future. At the same time, high school students and their families are observing the effect of the pandemic on college campuses. Public health and economic concerns, combined with fewer in-person supports, have particular consequences for older students' postsecondary planning. The situation is exacerbated for those who would be the first in their families to go to college. As one college access expert wrote in August: "For many, the slowing economy and potential exposure to COVID-19 in academic environments have added multiple layers to the question, *is college for me?*"³

What do graduating students themselves say they need to plan for their future? What strategies and practices could improve students' experiences and outcomes related to postsecondary planning? Perhaps most importantly, how might the current moment in the United States offer an opportunity to design or re-design support systems in ways that create greater equity and access, rather than continuing to widen historic divides?

The Design Camp described here explored these questions from the perspectives of Dallas students who graduated last spring and their counselors.

¹ For a few examples of how Design Thinking has been used in education, see www.edutopia.org/blog/design-thinking-empathy-challenge-discovery-sharing-susie-wise

² Liberatory Design combines design thinking principles with an emphasis on equity. See, for example, dschool.stanford.edu/resources-collections/liberatory-design.

³ Nancy Lee Sanchez, "For Our Survival's Sake: Lessons from The Denver Scholarship Foundation on How to Seize the Moment to Ensure College Students Weather the COVID-19 Educational Storm," August 24, 2020. Retrieved from [Forbes.com](https://www.forbes.com).

Student Experiences and Needs: Five Themes



Photo by Ronny Sison

On day one of Design Camp, counselors met in small virtual groups with students to ask questions like “How, if at all, has COVID-19 impacted what you planned to do after high school?” and, “Tell me about a time you felt engaged in distance/virtual advising.” They listened deeply to student stories to learn how schools, families, and the community supported students’ postsecondary planning when school became virtual last spring (see the **Tools and Tips** section for the camp schedule and interview questions).

Five themes emerged from students’ stories, which became the basis for students and counselors to design prototypes together. Many readers will recognize that the themes and prototypes reflect good practice, regardless of the mode of connection.

1 The overwhelm is real. Navigating postsecondary planning during a global pandemic meant that many students felt overwhelmed or unsure of their future. The impact of moving from in-person to virtual spaces—both for classes and advising—was significant.

“ I did not feel engaged in distance advising. It was hard because I have to see the person to learn and I struggled and asked for help.

I felt overwhelmed. I was not engaged second semester and did not want to continue my education [to college] because of money.

2 Adults can help with the overwhelm. The same student who said she was overwhelmed by postsecondary planning continued her story by describing how she eventually approached her advisor at school who helped her “become more engaged.”

Relationships with counselors and teachers mattered to students. They spoke candidly about what it looks like and sounds like for adults to truly support them.

“ You can understand your students and know them and how they want to be approached. Take the time. Don’t force it. Really open up.

Students shared how their counselors and teachers played a critical role in helping them continue their postsecondary planning despite the pandemic.

“ Teachers were helpful and supportive, especially when I had money issues.

My counselor always believed in me and shared lots of things with me.

3 Current supports for postsecondary planning often aren't enough, even when they come from multiple sources.

Students described receiving advice about postsecondary planning—both broad and specific—from different sources, including:

- **Counselors.** *When I had college questions, I would go to my counselor.*
- **Teachers.** *At first it was difficult to finish the application process. Then my AVID teacher gave me information.*
- **Family members.** *My father would take me to work to show me some of what he did to help me understand more of what I was getting into.*
- **Peers.** *My friends have taken a role to push me to help us get where we want to go in life. I am a procrastinator and my friends will tell me to stop procrastinating and it brings me up.*

Despite these supports, a common experience among students was figuring out many things about college or careers “on their own.”

“*Virtual school made a lot of things harder because now I had to figure it out all on my own; the process for the military, orientation, everything. I am hands on and engaged and this is very hard for me.*

I had been on my own, learned on my own, no one knew how to help me with school work. I had to teach myself. I had to research college by myself. I always took the initiative myself.

For some students who were the first person in their family to go to college, they relied on school and peers for information about college—noting that family members did not have the knowledge that other students might take for granted.

“*I honestly don't have any other resources in my family [to answer questions] because I am first generation and my family can't help me.*

4 Families have a significant impact on students' postsecondary plans.

Two themes emerged when students were asked to describe the role their families had played in postsecondary planning. Some students described their families as “supportive of anything I wanted to do.”

“*My parents were like, do what is going to make you happy. Do something you love and are passionate about. Something that is going to make you happy. My father has a business and he could have told me that I had to work for him but he didn't.*

My family wanted me to focus on my studies and not work. I never felt unsupported as I came from an immigrant family and they always wanted me to achieve more than they ever had.

There are people in life that doubt you. But your family will always be there for you. Even if they don't agree with you.”

Other students described how their family members influenced or changed their postsecondary plans.

“*I wanted to go to one school because I was accepted there, but my family wanted me to go to another school. I was disappointed; I didn't see anything wrong with it since it isn't that far.*

My family expected me to go to college; I got accepted into two universities and I showed them that. I know that if I'd gone to college, I would have failed, be in debt and be in lots of stress. I decided not to go.

Personal and family financial worries about attending college was an issue raised by several students.

“*My mom had an idea about finances for college and was like “we can't afford it.” College is not for everybody. I knew this was what I wanted to do. I knew this since I was a little girl. My mom said, “what are you going to do if you do not get the money to go to school?”*

5 Friends provide essential support and encouragement.

When students were asked about the role their friends played in postsecondary planning, their answers were direct and clear.

“*My friends, we push each other through the big things. Two are going to college and one is going to the navy; they are pushing me to be the best. It makes me feel great because we are almost like parents to each other.*

I had this friend who went to barber school and started his own business. Now, I am pursuing construction because of seeing how successful he is. We both influenced each other by wanting to own our own business.

My friend encouraged me not to be afraid. I didn't want to leave home and they told me that I can come back and be with everyone. I felt supported.



Photo by Juan Ramos

Postsecondary Supports: Prototypes to Test

Students and counselors used the themes that emerged from students' stories to move into the design phase of Design Camp. Together, they brainstormed more than one hundred ideas and chose their favorite seven ideas to prototype.

This section details seven prototypes that emerged to support virtual postsecondary planning. Educators will recognize that many of the prototypes are not unique to virtual spaces; they can be applied to postsecondary planning regardless of the mode of connection. Some schools that have practices similar to these prototypes already in place can explore whether all students and families—particularly those from historically underserved groups—have access to them. Additionally, they may be of particular interest to adults supporting first-generation college-goers, given that those are the voices that informed the prototypes.

A **prototype** is an early, inexpensive version of a change idea that is ready for testing. Testing them includes studying how they work in different contexts and then deciding to adapt, adopt, or abandon the idea based on what is learned along the way.

Strengthening Student-Counselor Relationships

PROTOTYPE

Reality Chit Chat



1:1 Student and counselor virtual sessions



Counselors have open door hours in their schedule. Advertise these hours in multiple ways and have students sign up on a platform like Google forms. Use the appointment time to discuss any topics relevant to the student's perspective and experience. Topics might include: college admissions support, how to balance college and work, where to find resources, or what college life is like.



STUDENTS SAY: "This will help create a bond between student and counselor so the student can open up and trust you more. The student will give a certain type of respect."

Family Involvement in Postsecondary Planning

PROTOTYPE

Parent University



Culturally relevant parent and family immersion into the knowledge, tools, and process to attend college



Create virtual or in-person opportunities for families to learn about college. The school can reach out to find out what topics families want to learn about and ensure there are translators and varied times to meet different schedules. Bonus ideas: Use the Remind app to recruit parent alumni to share their stories, provide incentives to attend, provide childcare, and/or show sessions on local television to overcome connection issues.



STUDENTS SAY: "This helps first generation college students get support with the process of going to school from their parents."

PROTOTYPE

First Gen College Tours



College tours with your family



Organize virtual or in-person college tours for first-generation college students with their families. Make sure the tour is tailored to the needs, questions, and language of the participants. Include a high school administrator on the tour so they can support the implementation or follow through afterwards.



STUDENTS SAY: "This will help decrease the stress of going to college for everyone because they will get to see how it is, talk to future teachers, advisors, current students, and see the culture of the school."

Postsecondary Information and Planning

PROTOTYPE

Parent University



Graduates come back to share college experiences



Schools pick a social media platform to connect current students with recent graduates around topics such as registration, college advising, strategies for successful remote learning, or specific majors. Bonus additions: Connect students with a graduate who can act as a mentor because they go to the same college or share the same major interest. Ask family members of alumni to connect with high school students' families to support their understanding too.



STUDENTS SAY: "It motivates high school students to hear how others overcome similar struggles."

PROTOTYPE

Smart Money



Supports for financial literacy in the real world



Begin with a virtual or in-person tour at a bank where bank staff share information about all banking services available. Create a class or ongoing seminars about how to make, manage, and be responsible with money. One example for a topic might be what jobs produce what financial outcomes.



STUDENTS SAY: "Money is essential and we want support with a plan for postsecondary sustained living expenses."

PROTOTYPE

Postsecondary Avenues



Career inventory and matched mentor



Use Google forms to administer a personality test and career aptitude test. A counselor and student would explore the results together. Counselors would then match students with a mentor that has lived experiences that match the student's interest.



STUDENTS SAY: "This idea will support what youth need and want in life."

PROTOTYPE

Helping Heroes



Students access educators by texting



Choose a texting platform and connect students with a counselor or teacher. Options: (a) Adults reach out by text at least once per month while students reach out as often as they need; (b) Counselors could be assigned or selected by students; (c) Provide texting connection to parents, too.



STUDENTS SAY: "Students need to easily access help in a way that feels more comfortable."

Toward Stronger Support for the Class of 2021

While some readers will take away themes to consider or prototypes to test from this publication, the voices of Design Camp participants suggest that perhaps the most important take-away is the importance of centering students in the design—and redesign—of systems that support their postsecondary planning. Students are eager for more of the kind of connection and creativity that a collaborative design experience can bring.

“ I got to participate in something for the first time that will actually leave a legacy.

I liked how everybody was just open minded about the ideas. I loved everything.

The best part of Design Camp was being able to talk about my experiences, share with someone else and maybe find out that the other person might've gone through a similar thing and be understanding of each other.

Counselors, too, are missing their students:

“ The best part of Design Camp was getting to see and talk to students. I have missed them during this pandemic. Their ideas are always priceless.

The events of spring 2020 left little time to plan for how to best support young people's transitions. As schools and support organizations enter a unique school year, lessons learned from the spring and summer can give all youth-supporting adults an opportunity to offer the class of 2021 more of what they need for a successful transition.



Photo by Antreina Stone

FOR FURTHER READING

- [Ensuring Equitable Pathways for the Class of 2020 Amid the Coronavirus](#), from the Center for American Progress, makes specific recommendations to states and districts about policies and practices for equitable, inclusive high school graduation requirements, supportive resources for students, and postsecondary pathways.
- Last year, the American Council on Education released a [comprehensive status report](#) on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education. [This recent opinion piece](#) from the Council's president references the report and argues for staying focused on ensuring access for students of color and low-income students during the pandemic, to guard against widening gaps in economic opportunity.
- [Peer Forward](#) offers a wealth of [youth activation resources](#), including a Youth Activation Guide and a College-Going Culture Framework, adults who want to engage young people as leaders and partners in tackling community challenges.
- [An article](#) by a longtime college access and success advocate offers reflections, lessons learned, and practical advice for supporting students' goals from the perspective of the Denver Scholarship Foundation.
- [Rethinking How to Support Males of Color for Postsecondary Success](#), by Imah Effiong, offers insights about the mindsets, systems, and programs that can help close persistent equity gaps. [The August 2020 blog](#) from the National College Attainment Network highlights the research brief's value to the field.



Tools and Tips for Student-Centered Design

Design Camp was inspired by the commitment to center students' voices and involve them in the design of their own learning experiences. Whether you are returning to virtual instruction or in-person classes, we invite you to **Bias Towards Action** (a key mindset of Design Thinking) by using the tools and tips in this section to center student voice and involvement.

We invite you to visit the companion publication, *What if School Looked Like This? Centering Students in Virtual Learning Design*, for the full set of Design Camp tools and tips. In this section, we share a few things that were unique to the Dallas Design Camp.

CONNECT WITH US

We look forward to hearing about what you do and what you learn. Please feel free to reach out to Julie Smith or Kari Nelsestuen at Community Design Partners by emailing info@communitydesignpartners.com.



Inviting Students to the Design Table

The practice of being aware of who participates and who does not participate is central to Liberatory Design. In fact, the most important consideration is not how many students—but which students are invited and included. Carefully considered, a small group of participants might reveal as much or more as a large group.

Extending invitations to Design Camp was an intentional process. Dallas County Promise intentionally recruited students from historically underserved communities by targeting high schools with low college enrollment and college persistence.

Participating high school counselors helped to recruit students. They were asked to consider students who were: (a) unengaged in their postsecondary planning before school went virtual; (b) were considering alternate postsecondary plans because of COVID; (c) adapted well to virtual advising; (d) could help elevate the experiences of their peers. Before the Camp began, each student received individualized support to make sure they had the technology and access to participate.

Participating Design Camp students all graduated in spring 2020. Three students were Black and eight were Latinx. The majority were first-generation college-goers.



Agenda

The Dallas Design Camp used Zoom to connect for 2.5 hours a day for three days. The support and facilitation team that hosted the Camp included three educators, two staff members from Dallas Promise, and a facilitator from Community Design Partners. The agenda is below.

DAY 1: EMPATHIZE	DAY 2: IDEATE	DAY 3: PROTOTYPE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Warm up and get ready (15 min) ▪ Land Acknowledgement (5 min) ▪ Agreements (10 min) ▪ Empathy review & intro to empathy interviews (25 min) ▪ Breakout session 1: Educators interview graduates about supports from school (20 min) ▪ Break (10 min) ▪ Breakout session 2: Educators interview graduates about supports from home (20 min) ▪ Breakout session 3: Educators interview graduates about supports from peers and community (20 min) ▪ Reflection and gratitude (20 min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Warm up, get ready, review agreements (20 min) ▪ Ideate/brainstorm practice (15 min) ▪ Review what came from empathy data (10 min) ▪ Breakout session 1: Ideate like crazy (35 min) ▪ Break, then energize activity and quick write (20 min) ▪ Narrow our ideas, elevate favorites (35 min) ▪ Reflection and gratitude (15 min) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Warm up, get ready, review agreements (20 min) ▪ Review top change ideas and model prototyping (20 min) ▪ Breakout session 1: Prototype (30 min) ▪ Break (10 min) ▪ Breakout session 2: Continue prototype (25 min) ▪ Share prototypes (25 min) ▪ Reflection & celebration (20 min)



Empathy Interviews

Empathy interviews use open-ended questions to elicit stories about specific experiences that help to uncover unacknowledged needs. They usually are one-on-one conversations that are conducted with humility and awareness of the potential power dynamics at play. A semi-structured protocol allows the interviewer to probe more deeply into stories than a more traditional interview.

Planning empathy interviews includes attention to questions such as:

Whose stories need to be heard?

Choosing to listen deeply to students and families who have been historically marginalized by our systems is a way to work towards operationalizing equity. It is important to be intentional about who you include in interviews and be aware of who is not included. Listening to diverse stories can help provide critical information about the ways systems need to change to meet the needs of students whose stories have not historically informed change.

What questions could reveal those stories?

A typical empathy interview protocol has 4-8 open-ended, story-based questions. Use question stems such as:

- Tell me about a time when...
- Tell me about the last time you...
- What are your best/worst experience with ____?
- Can you share a story that would help me understand more about...?
- A key to empathy interviews is to allow space for deeper story telling. Often it takes two or three rounds of probing questions before someone reveals a new insight or unacknowledged need. Use open-ended prompts like:
 - Tell me more.
 - Why?
 - What were you feeling then?

Using more specific prompts—or focusing on the aspect of the story that most interests you—means that *you* are controlling the direction of the conversation and potentially inserting your bias.

How will we create trust and comfort for the interviewee?

- Consider strategies such as:
 - Start with a positive, personal connection
 - Use body language that signifies deep listening and care
 - Describe the purpose of the interview and what will happen with the data
 - Offer wait time after a question. Thinking of a story to share can take time; look away and give people space and time to think
 - Follow up if necessary. Sometimes, asking questions can bring up intense emotions or memories. Follow up with the person you interviewed—or find someone else who can—if you think they need follow-up care.

How will we capture notes?

It may feel like note-taking is rude or impacts the rapport, but actually it is an important safeguard against bias and inference. Share that with the person you interview. Then, without inference or judgement, capture as much as possible in your notes, including direct quotes.

How might we debrief and learn from the process?

Collect empathy data as a team, as the experience of listening to a story is as impactful as the data itself. Save time for the team to share stories and reflect on the experiences before, during, and after interviews. Include questions such as:

- What was easy? What was hard?
- What would we do differently next time?
- What might be some unintended consequences of the empathy interviews?
- How did/didn't relationships and power differentials affect the stories that were shared?
- Did this process create space for people to bring forward their full selves and identities?

EMPATHY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

These questions were used on the first day of Design Camp in small groups (2-3 students and one counselor). A note-taker captured notes and the support team met after Design Camp to analyze the notes for themes.

Questions about School

- How, if at all, has COVID-19 impacted what you planned to do after high school?
- What does higher education mean to you?
- Tell me about a time you felt engaged in distance/virtual advising
- Tell me about a time you did not feel engaged in distance/virtual advising

Questions about Family

- What did/does your family think you should do after high school? Does that ever conflict with what you want to do?
- Tell me about a time you felt your postsecondary dreams were supported by someone in your family.
- Tell me about a time you felt your dreams weren't supported by someone in your family.

Questions about Community

- What role did your friends/peers play in what you are currently doing now that you have graduated?



Community Design Partners is a team of facilitators, coaches, and advisors. We partner with organizations and schools dedicated to a wide range of social justice issues such as accessing postsecondary options, diversifying the teaching workforce, and advancing student success by removing systemic barriers. We work with teams to deeply understand a problem and see the systems where the problem is rooted. We collaboratively design system change ideas, measure implementation and monitor outcomes. We take a strengths-based approach and help teams center the voices of those they aim to serve.

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