



COSUMNES RIVER COLLEGE

OFFICE OF RESEARCH & EQUITY

2023-2024 Counseling Department Study

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Report authors:

Katrina Bell McDonald, Adjunct Faculty Researcher

Katy Wilson, Faculty Researcher

Office of Research & Equity, Cosumnes River College

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Executive Summary

In September 2023, Cosumnes River College (CRC) researchers Dr. Katrina McDonald and Katy Wilson conducted a review of Counseling Department practices and structure at the college. The research objective was to ***investigate the structural and systemic issues that may be contributing to the barriers students report experiencing at the Counseling Department and to utilize the findings to craft recommendations for future department planning and management.*** The study was initiated in response to repeated survey responses on the annual Graduate Exit Survey which assesses graduates' experience at the college. Year after year, graduates expressed their dissatisfaction with the quality of information received from Counseling and the accessibility of counseling appointments. This issue was perceived by the Department leadership to be systemic in nature, rooted in the practices and policies of the college and Department rather than in any failure by counselors or staff to execute their duties. Hence, an in-depth analysis of these practices and policies was needed.

This research project was extensive and encompassed the better part of three college semesters. It offered the opportunity to dive deep into the day-to-day operations of a large department on CRC's campus. This would not have been possible without the implicit trust of all research participants in the work that was being conducted. Research participants – faculty, staff, and administrators alike, as well as the students who gave consent for their counseling sessions to be observed – afforded researchers full and unedited access to their work. This is indicative both of the strong commitment of the Counseling Department to serve CRC students, which cannot be understated, and also of the Department's great need for campus and District support of its efforts to do so with limited resources. The research team is grateful for the experience to work with their peers on this project.

This study relies on a triangulation of 29 in-depth interviews, one focus group, workplace shadowing, and document analysis, all qualitative research methods that help to unearth the underlying principles and values of an organizational structure such as that of the Counseling Department. A qualitative approach enables researchers to observe the day-to-day workings of the Department that might otherwise go overlooked by practitioners who are involved in these functions. All members of the Counseling Department were invited to participate in the interviews; ultimately, 70% of faculty and staff were included in the sample, including 11 full-time faculty members, nine adjunct faculty members, and nine classified staff members. Given the interactive nature and close relationship among the Counseling, Financial Aid, and Admissions & Records Departments, the research team also organized one interview focus group that comprised all three areas.

A notable part of this study is the inclusion of workplace shadowing in the data collection. Shadowing is a qualitative research methodology that has been developed and used effectively in the study of organizational culture, such as that of the CRC Counseling Department. It is a method that allows the organization, rather than individual actors, to serve as the unit of analysis. It assists with uncovering both the practice of organizations (i. e., the actions that are performed therein) and the subtleties of how, where, and why these practices are experienced. Shadowing involves hours of "real-time" observation of organizational actors at their desks, attending meetings, or exchanging ideas at conferences or retreats. It can be performed over one or more days, consecutively or nonconsecutively. Further, observations can be focused on a single organizational role or on several interactive roles within an organization. Since behavior is driven by a set of values, these values must also be a focus of the shadowing process. For this review, workplace shadowing at the Department was used to better understand the organizational processes and practices that were described in the interviews and counseling documents.

After systematic documentation, interview transcription, and two rounds of inductive coding and data analysis, researchers landed on five primary findings that may be associated with the structural and systemic issues that contribute to the barriers students report experiencing at the Department. These findings are as follows:

1. A clear lack of Department staffing and resource capacity.
2. A call from counselors and staff to extend the default counseling appointment length beyond 30 minutes.
3. A need to clarify and strengthen the relationship between counselors and success coaches.
4. Lack of integrated case management technology.
5. Specific areas for improvement in the Department climate, including clear communication of policies and procedures, integration of counselors and adjunct counselors in special programs, and representation of student demographics among the counseling faculty.

The most pervasive finding from this research is a lack of capacity on the part of counselors to perform the myriad duties within their scope of practice, including managing a caseload of 900:1 students (in many cases) with minimal or unideal tools for tracking student case files. Counselors describe feeling constantly rushed during 30-minute appointment sessions where they learn about a student's background and prescribe a path forward. They then lack the time to follow up on any student cases because they must immediately move on to the next student and have minimal "office time" in which to attend to emails, phone calls, and the filing of paperwork. In addition, counselors describe convoluted paper and electronic processes, the status of which is not clear to any party – the student, the counselor, or otherwise – from start to finish. Many of these difficulties could, indeed, be interpreted by students as a failing of the Department, when they are in fact attributable to collective decision-making and resource allocation across departments.

As part of the Guided Pathways initiative and the creation of Career and Academic Communities (CACs) in Fall 2019, CRC implemented a structure called Student Success Teams. Student SSCSuccess Teams were formulated around each of the CACs and include faculty, administrators, and counseling staff pertinent to each CAC. As part of this work, CRC Counseling hired student success coaches (SSCs)¹, classified professionals, to help assist students with understanding the higher education environment. Findings from this study revealed that the Department is still figuring out how to best implement the success coach role to effectively serve students while maintaining the counselor workload. Success coaches and counselors alike expressed that the counselor/success coach relationship seems to work best when the two are in lock-step with one another. However, not all counselors work closely with a success coach or even trust that they *should* do so.

It is clear that the Counseling Department at CRC attempts to employ case management best practices while still remaining agile in responding to the just-in-time needs of its large student caseload. With the advent of Guided Pathways and the Student Success Teams, counselors were assigned a caseload of students based on CAC. However, due to staffing limitations, counselors are clear that they often end up advising students outside of their CAC. Some counselors express the desire to actually work with a specific group of students in order to better employ their expertise in counseling and provide more intrusive advising. Some of the practices that go along with the case management model are not systematically employed, such as keeping a running record of students' interactions with the Department. Counselors each have their own unique system for student case management. While

¹ Hereafter referred to as "success coaches."

some utilize the “notes” feature within the SARS software, others leverage Google Drive to share student case information from one member to another. Still others construct personalized Microsoft Excel sheets. Ultimately, the Department seems to attribute this incohesive system both to a lack of software that works for each individual and a lack of time for training on any new software that is introduced. Case management tracking is equally as varied among success coaches, making the passing of information about a student from success coach to counselor just as unsystematic.

The capacity issues described above have led to a deep feeling of being overwhelmed and burnout among counselors. While counselors do feel they have the opportunity to discuss potential solutions to their capacity issues, the impression is that these conversations can be circular, particularly when solutions involve decisions at the district level. Some sort of action on pervasive issues might help move the sentiment from exhaustion to progress. Particularly, counselors and adjunct counselors placed in student support services feel the additional burden of isolation from the rest of the group. They are not often able to attend the Department meetings where discussions take place about alleviating workload and barriers to student success. This can intensify the inherent feelings of otherness felt by adjunct faculty. One faculty member described not feeling like they were even encouraged to apply for full-time positions, to the point that applying felt futile. Making the internal professional development path clear to adjunct faculty is imperative to retention and morale. Additionally, though there was mention of the general diversity of the Department compared to other departments on campus, there are nonetheless underrepresented groups of faculty among the counseling body. Ensuring that all faculty members feel supported in their individual needs and in their efforts to represent the voices of students who are similar to them was a direct ask from counselors.

Finally, while the research team received no outright descriptions of lack of trust between success coaches and counseling faculty, they heard rumblings that not all such relationships were positive ones. Ensuring that trust exists between these two groups of employees is imperative to addressing the delineation of duties between them. Success coaches and counselors both serve essential roles in assisting students. Thus, clear communication and relationship building are vital to this shared goal.

Introduction

In September 2023, Cosumnes River College (CRC) researchers Dr. Katrina McDonald and Katy Wilson conducted a review of Counseling Department practices and structure at the college. The research team formulated and proceeded from this research objective: ***to investigate the structural and systemic issues that may be contributing to the barriers students report experiencing at the Counseling Department and to utilize the findings to craft recommendations for future department planning and management.*** This report describes the research questions, methodology, and findings of this study.

Background ²

CRC Counseling Organizational Structure

Counseling at Cosumnes River College (CRC) comprises academic, career, personal, and crisis counseling. Students can book in-person or online appointments to see a counselor. For the purposes of this study, CRC Counseling comprises regular and drop-in counseling appointments, workshops, and other services offered by the Counseling Department, but not mental health counseling services, which are offered at the Los Rios Community College District level. Counseling appointments are

² Cosumnes River College. (n.d.) *Counseling*. Retrieved October 15, 2024, from <https://crc.losrios.edu/student-resources/counseling/>

provided by full-time and adjunct Counseling faculty. Counselors provide appointments either 1) for students within a Career and Academic Community (CAC) or 2) for general counseling services. Counselors assigned to a specific CAC are trained in the specific program and transfer requirements for programs within that CAC. All counselors, whether assigned to a CAC or not, are broadly trained to serve all students as general counselors.

CRC Counseling also provides tailored counseling services to various student support programs on campus, including Puente, DSPS, EOPS/CARE, NextUP/Guardian Scholars, UMOJA, Athletics, Veterans Resource Center, Mi Casa, and more. This tailored support typically involves one or more full-time or part-time faculty being dedicated full- or part-time to exclusively advising students in these programs. Some of these programs (EOPS and Athletics, for example) also have a counseling requirement, wherein students must meet with their dedicated counselor one or more times throughout the semester.

Full-time and adjunct counseling faculty are all tasked with managing a caseload of CRC students. These students are offered “academic, career, personal, and crisis counseling necessary to successfully reach their goals.” The Los Rios Community College District has established a general student to counselor ratio of 900:1, a ratio that has not changed in about 22 years.³ For counselors serving within a special program (usually categorical, or grant-funded, program), that ratio is smaller due to legal or funding requirements.

The Los Rios Community College District relies on a mix of full-time and part-time counselors to serve students’ counseling needs. The research team spoke with a number of CRC adjunct counselors to gain some insight into ways in which their roles and experiences might differ from those who counsel full time. Researchers learned that adjunct counselors perform more or less the same tasks as full-time counselors, the primary difference being the number of work hours allotted. Most adjunct counselors the researchers spoke to are at the Counseling Department or their respective office only a few days per week. Similarly to full-time counselors, some adjunct counselors are situated in a number of CRC student support programs.

Career and Transfer Counseling

It appears, then, that academic counseling is the bedrock of the Department’s work; however, the department also offers counseling specific to both career and transfer planning. Counselors shared that if students express interest in career exploration or are in need of college transfer counseling to help in obtaining degrees above the Associate level, they will refer them to the Transfer, Internship, and Career Services Center (TICC). Transfer preparation and planning services at CRC are “geared toward assisting students in exploring post-secondary educational options while providing support and guidance on the steps necessary to transfer to a four-year college or university.”⁴ This department also assists students with finding internships and jobs. There is a dedicated full-time Transfer Counselor who also serves as the Transfer Center Coordinator, along with a work experience and internship counselor who also serves as Department Chair for Work Experience courses, which are primarily taught by adjunct counselors. The Work Experience chair, while also a general counselor, primarily

³ Academic Senate for California Community Colleges. (2003). *Consultation Council Task Force on Counseling*. Retrieved 2003, from <https://www.asccc.org/papers/consultation-council-task-force-counseling/>

⁴ Cosumnes River College. (n.d.) *Transfer Center*. Retrieved September 13, 2024, from <https://crc.losrios.edu/academics/transfer-internships-and-career-services/transfer-center/>

serves as the college's Career Counselor, working with students on "self exploration and self awareness." (Cosumnes River College, 2024).

Personal and Crisis Counseling

The CRC Counseling Department website statement on Personal Counseling is: *"We recognize that life does not always run smoothly. Going to school and dealing with obstacles that sometimes get in the way, can be a stressful experience. For that reason, we provide confidential short-term counseling. Mental Health Services can treat issues including but not limited to: Relationship issues, Worries/Anxiety, Depression, Transitions in Life, Conflict, Stress, Grief and Loss, Parenting, Addiction. Services are strictly confidential and there is no fee charged for enrolled Cosumnes River College students."* CRC General Counselors can provide short-term counseling (6-8 sessions) for CRC students or, if needed, refer them out to the District mental health team. A counselor clarified for the research team that oftentimes counselors' caseload necessitates that they refer students to the District team.

An additional service offered to CRC students is Crisis Counseling. This is designed for "students experiencing non-life-threatening emergencies."⁵ The research team learned that tending to such cases begins with a designated counselor being called to speak with the student, quickly assess the problem, and then work to swiftly ensure that the student is referred to the appropriate resource, such as the District mental health counselors. It is implied that all counselors are equipped to serve in the crisis intervention role due to their having fulfilled the minimum qualifications of their role, though the District mental health team offers ongoing training in crisis intervention.

Success Coaches (Support Specialists, Classified Staff)

As part of the Guided Pathways initiative and the creation of Career and Academic Communities (CACs), CRC implemented a structure called Student Success Teams in Fall 2019. Student Success Teams were formulated around each of the CACs and include a classroom faculty lead, counseling faculty, administrators, and a success coach pertinent to each CAC. Guided Pathway(p.s is a nation-wide effort towards systematic reform in the community colleges to help all students "choose, enter, progress through, and complete community college programs that enable them to secure sustaining-wage employment or transfer with junior standing in a major" (p. 3).⁶ As part of this work, CRC Counseling hired student success coaches, classified professionals, to help assist students with understanding the higher education environment. SSCs are supervised by the Dean of Counseling and, similar to the counselor structure, success coaches are each assigned to one or more CAC or are situated within a student support program, and they sometimes backfill for others if needed. The job description for the Student Support Specialist (broader job classification for a success coach) is to "coordinate student success and support related programs, components and activities; assist in the planning, implementation and delivery of support programs and services associated with the college plans; and provide support."⁷ The CRC website informs students that success coaches "provide [students] with resources to support [them] in [their] educational goals. One of our main goals is to

⁵ While the Counseling Department's homepage states that crisis intervention is used for non-life-threatening emergencies, counselors clarified that they are trained to manage self-harm situations, which could be life threatening.

⁶ Acevedo, N. and Minaya, V. 2024). *Whole-College Reforms in Community Colleges: Guided Pathways Practices and Early Academic Success in Three States*. Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia/>

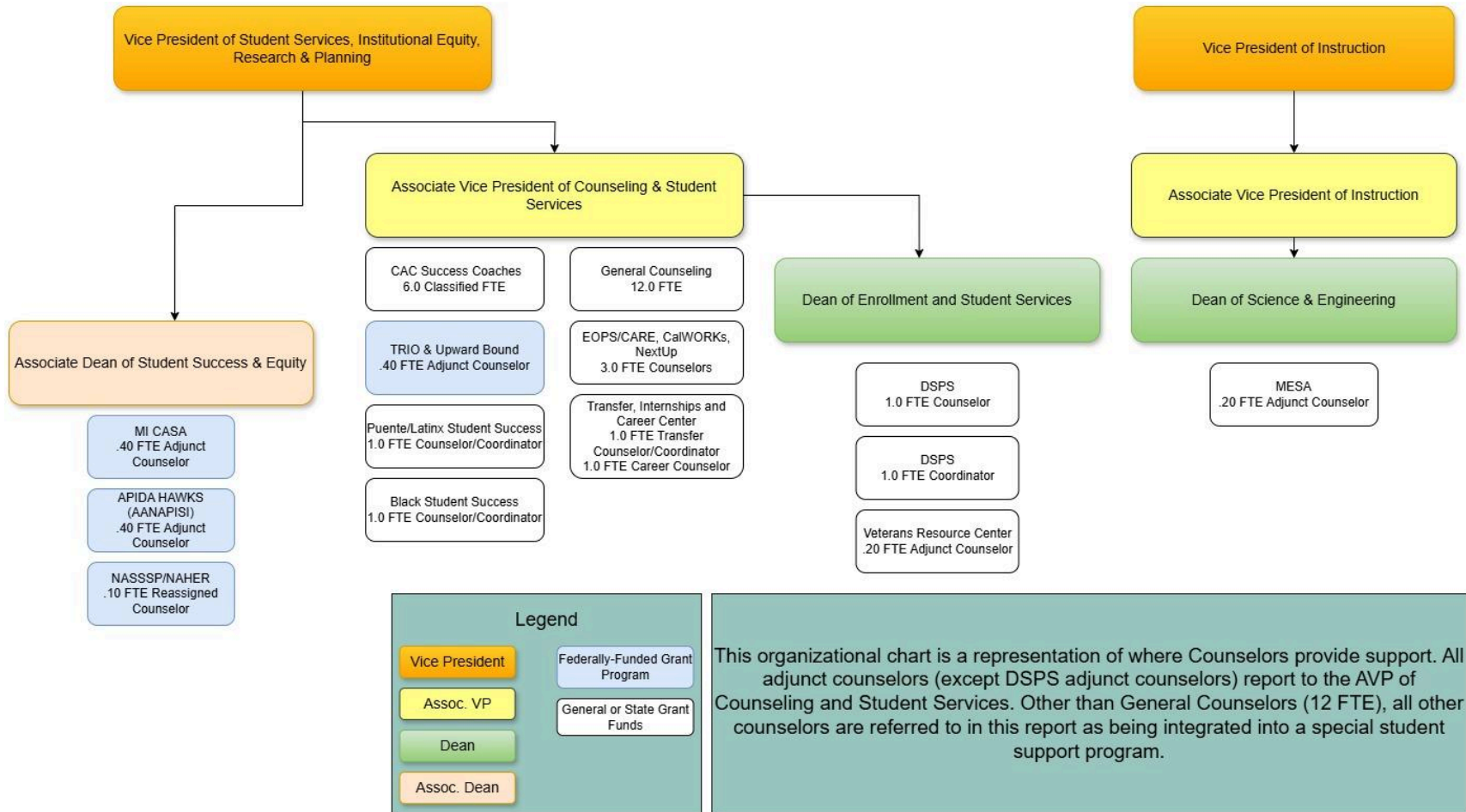
⁷ Los Rios Community College District. (2023). *Student Support Specialist*, by Los Rios Community College District, 2023, <https://employees.losrios.edu/lrccd/employee/doc/hr/job-descriptionsclassified/StudentSupportSpecialist.pdf/>

assist [students] in successfully enrolling and completing [their] classes throughout [their] first year at CRC."⁸ Success coaches assist primarily with helping students enroll and succeed in courses in their first year of college. Success coaches also serve as a bridge between students and other departments on campus, such as Counseling, Admissions & Records, and Financial Aid, connecting students where further support is needed.

The aforementioned roles – CRC counselors, success coaches - and their various organizational ties (i.e., CAC's and categorical programs) are situated within the typical administrative hierarchy of the college, reporting first to a dean and then a vice president. The Vice President of Counseling and Student Services supervises both counselors and success coaches. The specific organization of roles within the Department is displayed below in Chart 1.

⁸ At the CRC Success Coaches website, it reads: "The Success Coaches focus on high touch support on first-time new students in our Career and Academic Communities (CACs) during their first year. We also support new and returning students in our CACs through coordinating programming and connecting students with resources." Who Do Success Coaches Serve? <https://crc.losrios.edu/student-resources/counseling/success-coaches/>

Chart 1: CRC Counseling Department Organizational Chart



Past CRC Research on Student Experience with Counseling

Community College Survey of Student Engagement

In recent years, Cosumnes River College has conducted several student surveys where preliminary insights about students' experiences have surfaced in regards to its counseling services. In 2019, the college participated in the national Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)⁹, which includes several items related to academic and career advising. Results from this survey administration revealed that, as with national findings, CRC students highly value both academic and career advising. When asked "How important are [academic advising/planning] services to you at this college?," 68.8% of respondents (n = 338) said "Very important," 22.7% "Somewhat important," and 8.6% said "Not at all important." Additionally, 60.9% (n = 295) of respondents said that "career counseling" was "Very important."¹⁰ These responses are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: 2019 CRC CCSSE Responses: Item 12.3: *How important are the services to you at this college?*

	Not at all important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Academic Advising/Planning	8.6% (42)	22.7% (111)	68.8% (338)
Career Counseling	15.1% (73)	24.0% (116)	60.9% (295)

Despite the high value CRC respondents place on academic and career counseling, when asked "How often have you used [academic advising/planning] services during the current academic year?" 22.1% of respondents said they had "never" used these services, and 28.1% said they had used them "one time," with the remaining 49.8% stating they used them two or more times. An even greater percentage of respondents said they had not used career counseling services, with 51.1% of respondents saying "never," 20.0% "one time," and 28.9% two or more times.

Table 2: 2019 CRC CCSSE Responses: Item 12.1: *How often have you used the following services during the current academic year?*

	Never	1 time	2-4 times	5 or more times
Academic Advising/Planning	22.1% (114)	28.1% (144)	42.6% (219)	7.2% (37)
Career Counseling	51.1% (260)	20.0% (102)	24.4% (124)	4.5% (23)

For those respondents who had used academic advising/planning services, 25.3% reported being "very satisfied" with those services, 42.2% "somewhat satisfied," and 10.9% "not at all satisfied." For career counseling, 18.3% of respondents were "very satisfied," 22.9% "somewhat satisfied," and 11.2% "not at all satisfied."

Table 3: 2019 CRC CCSSE Responses: Item 12.2: *How satisfied are you with the services?*

	Not at all Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Very Satisfied	NA
Academic Advising/Planning	10.9% (54)	42.2% (208)	25.3% (124)	21.6% (107)
Career Counseling	11.2% (54)	22.9% (109)	18.3% (87)	47.6% (227)

⁹ From *The Community College Survey of Student Engagement*, by The University of Texas at Austin, Retrieved Sept 20, 2024, <https://cccse.org/ccsse/survey>.

¹⁰ From *The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). Overview of 2019 Survey Results*, by B. Muranaka, 2021, Cosumnes River College, <https://employees.crc.losrios.edu/crc/employee/doc/4-equity-research/research/19-CCSSE-Overview-Report-Final.pdf/>

Findings from the CCSSE reveal that, while CRC students place high value on academic and career advising/counseling services, about half of respondents report infrequent use of and limited satisfaction with those services. The CCSSE instrument, however, is purely quantitative and does not ask students to share the rationale behind their responses.

The Graduate Exit Study

Cosumnes River College has also administered the annual Graduate Exit Survey since the 2017-2018 academic year. This survey assesses the quality of graduating students' experiences across a number of different campus domains. Among the survey items are those related to students' experiences with specific student service areas, among which is listed "counseling services." In addition, there are several open-ended questions, including "How else could we have made your experience at Cosumnes River College better?" Though only a small proportion of students elect to respond to this question, respondents frequently mention dissatisfaction with the quality of information received from the Counseling Department and the accessibility of counseling appointments. Students frequently report receiving conflicting information from different counselors, not being able to schedule a timely appointment with a counselor, and following guidance from a counselor that is perceived to have lengthened the student's journey at the college. In spring 2022, the term prior to the commencement of this study, 22% of the 50 responses to this question (n = 11) mentioned some aspect of counseling. An excerpt of these responses is below:

I did not have a great experience with planning courses with a counselor. I wish they were more aware of the difference between UC and CSU transfer requirements. I eventually started planning courses without assistance because the counselor I talked to unintentionally misled me.

Have more counselor availability.

Every counselor I talked to told me something different and it caused me to register for classes that were unnecessary.

The online system to make counseling appointments never worked when I tried.

After reviewing the results of the Spring 2022 Graduate Exit Survey, the CRC Counseling Department leadership determined that it should take a closer look at the nature of these concerns. This leadership highly rejected the idea that students' dissatisfaction was tied to counselors' execution of their work, and instead believed such evaluations to be more likely due to structural and systemic issues stemming from state-level, college-level, and department-level policies and practices. Thus, it was requested that CRC Research & Equity Office construct an in-depth investigation into the systemic issues driving student dissatisfaction.

The CRC Counseling Department Study

Methodology

Researchers Wilson and McDonald began this research by meeting with the Counseling Department leadership: the Dean of Counseling and the Counseling Department Chair. That meeting led to a plan of action for gathering the data needed to "get under" the Graduate Exit Survey comments, with the primary goal being to clarify the nature of the dissatisfaction that students express with CRC

Counseling Department. Given the need for the researchers to gain a bird's-eye view of the daily practice of the Counseling Department, and also the lack of existing literature in this space, the researchers confirmed what the Research & Equity Office had assumed would be the research method best suited for this subject matter: **an intensive qualitative approach**. A qualitative approach would also enable researchers to observe the day-to-day workings of the Department that might otherwise go overlooked to practitioners who are involved in those motions on a daily basis. Both researchers are highly trained in qualitative research methodology.

Findings from survey research studies – like those discussed above – are highly credited for being *generalizable*; the statistical (quantitative) data they draw from their survey samples can be highly representative of the wider group or groups for which a given survey is designed. On the other hand, qualitative research methods are valued for their ability to study a topic or phenomenon “in context.” By gathering data from actors in their workspace – in this case, from where counseling largely takes place at CRC – researchers can better connect what they are told by the research participants to what they observe directly. Thus, for the program review requested it was deemed more appropriate to employ qualitative methods where rich descriptive data regarding the inner-workings of the Counseling Department could be collected. From among the variety of ways that qualitative data are drawn, the research team thought best to employ in-depth interviews, workplace shadowing, and small-scale document analysis.

In-Depth interviews¹¹

In-depth interviews are designed to encourage participants to speak openly and freely about the topic under investigation. Researchers employed a semi-structured interview format. In semi-structured interviews, while a set of predetermined discussion prompts are used to initiate the discussion and keep it moving forward, these prompts are quite malleable so as to match the “rhythm” of the interviewee’s narrative. The researchers must listen carefully throughout the session and be prepared to offer unanticipated prompts that may be needed to urge the interviewee to expand the scope of their response. In-depth interviews can be conducted with one interviewee, or with a small group. A *focus group interview* is a semi-structured, moderated exchange among a small group of individuals who are asked to explore their perspectives and experiences on a given topic.¹² In-depth interviews of both sorts are often used as a stand-alone method of data collection or in combination with another qualitative method. For this review, in-depth interviews provided the bulk of the data, while workplace shadowing and document analysis were also employed for secondary analysis.

Workplace Shadowing¹³

Shadowing is a qualitative research methodology that has been developed and used effectively in the study of organizational culture, such as that of the CRC Counseling Department. It is a method that allows the organization, rather than individual actors, to serve as the unit of analysis. It assists with uncovering both the practice of organizations (i. e. , the actions that are performed therein) and the subtleties of how, where, and why these practices exist. Shadowing involves hours of “real-time” observation of organizational actors at their desks, attending meetings, or exchanging ideas at

¹¹ Given, L. M. (2008). In-depth interview. In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 423-423). SAGE Publications, Inc. Retrieved November 10, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909/>

¹² Danner, M. J., Pickering, J.W., and Paredes, T.M. (2018). *Using Focus Groups to Listen, Learn, and Lead in Higher Education*. Taylor & Francis Group.

¹³ McDonald, S. (2005). Studying actions in context: a qualitative shadowing method for organizational research. *Qualitative Research*, 5(4), pp. 455-473.

conferences or retreats. It can be performed over one or more days, consecutively or nonconsecutively. Further, observations can be focused on a single organizational role or on several interactive roles within an organization. Further, since behavior is driven by a set of values, these values must also be a focus of the shadowing process. For this review, workplace shadowing at the department was used to better understand the organizational processes and practices that were described in the interviews and counseling documents.

Shadowing begins with a brief introductory session where certain questions are uniformly asked of each research participant, such as, "What exactly is your title and what are your primary responsibilities?". Additional questions are generally asked here and there over the course of the shadowing period. Examples are: What is the meaning of that acronym? How often do meetings like this occur? Who was that person I saw you chatting with? The shadower takes a continuous set of field notes that serve as a record of the participant's conversations, questions, answers, verbal and non-verbal expressions, actions, and behaviors. At the end of the full shadowing period, the researcher has gathered a richly-compiled collection of experiences that provide details of the roles and tasks associated with these persons.

It should be noted that even before all of the methodological details were established for this review, the Counseling Department leadership invited the research team to attend their Spring 2023 retreat in order to help foster a relationship of trust and to assist the researchers in becoming familiar with all of the roles and responsibilities assigned to various members of the Department. This provided the research team's first opportunity to "shadow" a formal meeting. The Researchers then determined that shadowing would provide the opportunity to better understand the day-to-day functions of the Counseling Department and proceeded to develop a shadowing methodology and application, as described in the data collection section of this report.

Document Analysis

Document analysis refers to a procedure for reviewing and/or analyzing document content. Both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material can constitute the collection of documents examined. Normally, as for all other analyses of qualitative data, document data are "examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge."¹⁴ However, for this review, the researchers decided to perform this analysis on a relatively small scale given the volume of other data that needed to be intensely analyzed. Here, document analysis was used primarily to better understand the type documents that were available and shared among Counseling Department personnel and with the student body, and for what purposes. Thus, document analysis helped the researchers to view from an outside perspective how internal messaging about the department's processes and practices are conveyed publicly to students.

Data Collection

The Research Interview

The interviews for this study were conducted from September 2023 through February 2024, and each lasted approximately one hour. Wilson and McDonald each led about one-half the interviews, though both were present at most interviews so that copious notes could be taken to accompany the fully-recorded sessions. Among these interviews, researchers included one focus group representing members of both Counseling and Financial Aid departments, after hearing from members of the

¹⁴ Bowen, G. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 7-30.

Counseling Department that many of their processes intersect with those of the Financial Aid Office. The focus group methodology, which differed slightly from the research interview, is described in the following section. Both the individual and group interviews were semi-structured and were guided by a set of broad questions that were crafted to best meet the Counseling leadership's broad research objective. The interview questions were crafted to embrace the topics in Table 4 below. When needed, each question was slightly reworded to better match the general roles and responsibilities of counselors versus staff and of those who were serving within student support programs.

Table 4: Research Interview Topics

Counselor History and Background/ Knowledge of CRC Counseling Organizational Structure and Practice	Interviewee's formal education, employment, and training in counseling; understanding of CRC Counseling's basic organizational and management structure and practices, division of roles and responsibilities among Counseling leadership, faculty counselors, administrative staff, and success coaches (SSCs).
Standard Operating Procedures	Interviewee's understanding and access to documented and undocumented standard operating procedures, including those for booking counseling sessions and for student case management; how routine counseling practices vary from counselor to counselor; what opportunities exist for the sharing of best practices and/or ideas for simplifying or improving the Department's counseling processes; opportunities to hear about programmatic or other important developments and changes.
Challenges	Interviewee's description of specific challenges that counselors and staff face daily in their work (<i>other than with scheduling and holding counseling sessions with students</i>); any challenges that have been particularly disruptive in recent years.
Computer Technology	Interviewee's assessment of the quality and sufficiency of counseling-related computer software and training; which software has been employed and which best serves student case management needs.

The Focus Group Interview

From the first few research interviews conducted, the research team became aware that some of the barriers that students were encountering primarily involved three departments on campus. Thus, Counseling, Admissions and Records and Financial Aid leadership were asked if the researchers could conduct a joint focus group interview in order to better understand the processes that jointly involve these departments.. The focus group interview, like the counselor interview, was semi-structured and guided by the research objective. Its focus was to better understand the shared processes among the three departments and how students move through those processes. There was a particular emphasis on course applicability and financial aid overrides, as these topics came up in multiple interviews with counselors. Special attention was placed on hearing from all three departments about the ways in which they collaborate through these processes and what methods they use to communicate this interplay with students. The topics of this focus group are described in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Focus Group Interview Topics

Processes that require collaboration between Financial Aid and Counseling	Course applicability, financial aid overrides, consortium processes
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Computer Technology and Communication	Methods for tracking students' progress in a shared process; shared policies and procedures
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Workplace Shadowing

Researchers had the opportunity to shadow a wide range of Counseling Department interactions: a department-wide retreat in spring 2023, two department meetings in Fall 2024, both drop-in and regularly-scheduled one-on-one counseling sessions¹⁵, three workshops offered by the Counseling Department on specific topics, and a half-day of drop-in help offered in the Student Welcome Center.

Researchers observed three workshops offered by Counseling: a joint workshop offered by success coaches and Counselors that helped students establish and education plan; an enrollment workshop offered by a counselor in one of the special population programs; and a spring 2024 flex workshop offered by the success coaches to faculty and staff about the role of success coaches on campus. In addition to the aforementioned workshops, researchers made observations at two different types of regular drop-in hours. The first was a period of drop-in Counseling appointments during Fall 2023 open enrollment period for spring 2024. During this enrollment period, researchers shadowed two counselors during almost a full day of drop-in appointments, primarily pertaining to spring 2024 enrollment.

A researcher also observed a half-day of student interactions with the CRC Welcome Center, where students may drop in to get assistance with enrollment. Because the Welcome Center is staffed by staff from the Enrollment Office, this shadowing event was not considered in data analysis; however, it did provide some context as to the types of questions students have about the enrollment process and how students are directed from the Welcome Center to Counseling, Admissions & Records, Financial Aid, and other departments.

Researchers took copious notes at shadowing events and discussed them in detail following their conclusion. These insights were used to help provide larger context to the interview data and to inform the creation of data themes. In a few places in the report, some shadowing details are referred to as field notes.

Document Analysis

Document analysis was utilized in a fashion similar to workplace shadowing: researchers supplemented interview information with document analysis in order to better understand the type of documents that were available and shared among Counseling personnel and with the student body, and for what purposes. Sometimes, researchers requested examples of documents that were referenced in interviews or during workplace shadowing in order to better understand their content and purpose. The primary documentation analyzed was the CRC Counseling Department website, which includes many subpages and links to video recordings, such as online orientation sessions. Researchers also observed counselors utilizing the SARS information system or their own tracking mechanisms (hand-written notes, Excel spreadsheets, Google sheets, and email filing systems). Some interviewees also proffered documentation, such as their student intake forms, that they thought might help researchers understand their work or the department functions.

¹⁵ The researchers observed two counselors as they conducted regularly-scheduled student appointments, one working with the general student population and the other working with one of the special population programs.

Research Sample

The research team set out to organize a triangulation of the four research methods discussed above. The first step was requesting a full list of Counseling Department personnel, both full-time and adjunct. Once obtained, the research team – with on-going assistance from the Counseling Dean – reached out to each person on that list and requested their informed consent to be interviewed. Given the interactive nature and close relationship among the Counseling, Financial Aid, and Admissions & Records departments, the research team also organized one interview focus group. Several representatives from each area participated in this focus group, specifically to discuss some of the challenges their departments face in coordinating efforts to collectively advise students smoothly through their academic programs. A summary of the resultant research sample is given in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Research Sample

Position/Role	Sample Size	Total Counseling Department Personnel at Time of Interviews	% of total Counseling Department Personnel
Counseling Leadership/Administrator?	1	1	100%
Full-Time Faculty	11	14	79%
Adjunct Faculty	9	20	45%
Classified Staff	9	12	75%
Success Coaches (included in classified staff count)	7	8	88%
Financial Aid; Admissions & Records	3	N/A	N/A
Total	33	47	70%

Data Analysis

There exists a variety of perspectives on how qualitative data analysis should proceed. But as Srivastava and Hopwood¹⁶ appropriately state, ultimately, “the qualitative data analyst is constantly on the hunt for concepts and themes that, when taken together, will provide the best explanation of ‘what’s going on’ in an inquiry. The process requires a skillful interpretation and handling of the data, and relies on a systematic and rigorous method” (2009, p. 77). From the first day in the field to the last, Wilson and McDonald¹⁷ conversed regularly about what themes appeared to be arising from the

¹⁶ Srivastava, P. and Hopwood, N. (2009). A practical interactive framework for qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1).

¹⁷ Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), pp. 237-246.

conversations they were having at CRC Counseling. As time progressed, this solidified into what is known as an iterative data analysis process. At its core is *induction* – deriving concepts or themes through interpretations made directly from the raw data collected and not imposed from some prior theorizing or set of assumptions. This report is the result of a constant revisiting of the data in order to arrive at what would become the emergent substantive themes that shaped the research findings.

Following each data-gathering session, the audio-recorded interviews and accompanying fieldnotes, shadowing field notes, and relevant CRC documents were stored on a secured computer drive at CRC the Research & Equity office. As soon after as was possible, Wilson and McDonald transcribed the interviews and fieldnotes they collected. QDA Miner Lite, a computer software product for the analysis of qualitative research data, was employed for the two major data analysis phases of this project. It required the research team to first name – or create “codes” - for each of the major themes that emerged from the data. QDA Miner Lite provides an accessible platform that allows researchers to highlight passages from the interview transcripts and group them under these codes. Codes can then be exported along with their corresponding passages. Researchers divided the interviews and each coded about half of them, and then came together several times throughout the coding process to review the codes they had developed and the passages within them. From these conversations, a shared codebook was agreed upon and utilized for the final coding stages.

A preliminary round of coding was conducted in order to provide initial findings to the Counseling Department in May 2024. The purpose of these early findings was twofold: to gather feedback from the department as to whether the early findings resonated with their experiences, and to provide just-in-time data so that it could be used in any ongoing decision-making processes. Researchers then conducted a second round of coding and developed a final set of themes from the data in Fall 2024. The findings from each of these stages are outlined below.

In preparation for the planned Spring 2024 meeting with Counseling to provide *a preliminary report* of the research findings, the research team performed a preliminary analysis that encompassed data collected from 24 of the 33 individuals interviewed. These 24 individuals were reflected in all of the research material that had been transcribed to date. The first-round, preliminary themes were reported as follows (Table 7):

Table 7: Preliminary Codes (Research Themes)

1	Division of Labor (titles and roles; Counseling Faculty vs. Success Coaches)
2	Student Case Management and Supporting Technology
3	More Attention to Standard Operating Procedures
4	Adjunct and Student Support Program Faculty Integration and Inclusion

Soon after the preliminary report was presented and feedback received, the nine remaining interview transcripts were produced and delivered by a contracted outside source. With the complete dataset in hand, as well as insights from the Counseling Department on the first set of themes, the research team performed an even deeper analysis. This second phase required a moderate revising of the preliminary coding scheme and resulted in a slightly expanded version of the first set of codes, from four to five

schemes. The revision was based on new and/or additional insight that surfaced from the full dataset. This result is displayed in Table 8:

Table 8: Final Data Coding Scheme

1	Division of Labor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specifics of Counseling faculty's role; scope of Counselor work • Better use of Counseling faculty's professional skills and training • Clarification of Success Coach roles
2	Standard Operating Procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need for more initial and ongoing Counselor training • Better communication, documentation, and storage of SOPS and best practices • Need for procedural changes in a timely manner • Better management of storage and maintenance of SOPS material
3	Student Case Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to address inefficient case management practices • Better cross-department coordination of student cases • Better use of existent case management technology
4	Workplace Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better department inclusion and integration of adjunct counselors and counselors situated in student support programs • Need for more diversity and representation of marginalized-groups among Counseling faculty and staff • More clear and consistent relations between success coaches and counselors
5	Counselor Workload	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heavy workload, counselor burnout • Understaffing of Counseling Department • Difficulty balancing workload and personal time (carry-over work after hours) • 30-min Counseling appointments (too brief) • Overburdening of counselors with students from other LRCCD campuses • Optimal performance hindered by "lack of capacity" – need for more counselors, heavy workload, insufficient budget, insufficient technology

The research team then recoded the entire dataset, accordingly. Next, separate documents were generated *by code*, meaning that each document only contained Counseling data content relevant to that research theme. Many hours were then spent combing and re-combing through each page of these documents, paying close attention to what specific ideas and experiences appeared to be most salient and pronounced. The findings discussed in the following section are the result of this essential, highly-focused, and immersive process, and they are supported in large part by voices of the research participants themselves – one of the many beneficial characteristics of qualitative research reporting. These findings reveal potential structural and systemic issues giving rise to certain barriers for matriculating CRC students.

Findings

The findings reported here are the result of data analysis performed in accordance with the coding presented in Table 8. It is important that this report begin by highlighting the one thing that virtually

everyone contributing to this study voiced: the unquestionable dedication shown by each member of the Counseling Department to the academic success and holistic well-being of all students who are served there. Such dedication is said to be conveyed by their “empathy,” “compassion,” “humility,” “competence,” and “attentiveness.” These, they say, are the central qualities of a successful counselor. And they also attest to the Counseling staff and their diligence in helping to support counselors’ needs and those of CRC students. All other findings from this study are organized below per the final data coding scheme presented in Table 8: division of labor, student case management and supporting technology, standard operating procedures, and workplace climate. Some workplace climate topics are also addressed in the Conclusions and Recommendations section of this review.

Division of Labor

Academic Counseling and the Onboarding Experience

Academic counseling occupies the greatest portion of counseling faculty members’ work day. Students are encouraged to make their first contact with a counselor before they begin attending CRC to help them gain a better understanding of what it will be like to attend college there. The Counseling Department runs a computer-based appointment scheduling system called SARS that can be accessed by the Counseling team, success coaches, and students in order to schedule appointments. Once in a counseling session, the counselor and the student understand and solidify the student’s goals. With goals fairly well established, the counselor documents the student’s educational plan.¹⁸ Students come away from this meeting with a semester-by-semester course plan to help them complete their CRC award, be eligible for transfer to a four-year college, or both. Part-time students are also aided by this process; it can help them plan their course-taking based on the number of units for which they wish to enroll each semester. Sometimes, as is the case with shorter appointments or when students are undecided on their major, students may only establish an abbreviated education plan with their counselor. An abbreviated education plan only covers one year of coursework, and students are encouraged to return to develop their full education plan. It should be noted, however, that the student onboarding process is not always as orderly as counselors would like. For example, one full-time counselor made a point to stated:

Oftentimes, students come into Counseling and they might say, I need to add my classes to my schedule, I'm here to add things. And it's like, but we're here to build out an Ed Plan for you of what you should take. The next step is going to the Welcome Center. So, they almost feel like, instead of stopping at the first stop, they come straight and hop to the second.

Researchers observed several students who had never onboarded with a counselor meet with a counselor for the first time at the end of their journey at CRC. These students had scheduled this appointment to ensure that they had fulfilled the requirements of their education goal in order to petition for a degree or certificate award.

Student counseling appointments are kept to 30 minutes in order that, on any given day, as many students as possible can be accommodated. Some appointments, such as initial intake or appointments in the categorical programs, may be longer. Researchers were able to observe a handful of such appointments as they occurred. It did not take long for them to understand the counselors’

¹⁸ Some students may have already attempted creating an educational plan via the online Degree Planner and are seeking advice from a counselor about the choices they made. (See <https://crc.losrios.edu/academics/programs-and-majors/degree-planner/degree-planner-faq>)

concerns about this 30-minute interval being too brief; counselors were observed typing, researching, and asking students' questions about their plans all at the same time. Almost every counselor shared with researchers that they feel this appointment length is not long enough to holistically serve students. One counselor said,

General counseling is not gonna have that time and knowledge base to do things in 30 minute appointments...It's too much to go over for just a 30 minute appointment. I don't think it's beneficial at all, but that seems to be where colleges are going...It's more like an assembly line—get them in, get them out, get them in, get them out. But you've got to take into account the personal aspect. A lot of these decisions are very personal. Where are they gonna go to school? I can create an [ed plan] for you to go to San Jose State, San Diego State, but you're telling me about, you're here helping your mom with her business.

A success coach added that the pace of 30-minute appointments may be particularly intimidating to historically underrepresented populations, saying, "those counseling meetings are really short, 30 minutes long is not enough. And it's very intimidating for someone, maybe especially for our first generation students." The pace of 30-minute counseling appointments can be dizzying; the counselor generally needs to consult a number of paper and digital resources for clarification on how to best assist the student. Further, capturing all of the specifics of these consultations in a set of reliable case notes is challenging. Case notes are discussed later in this report under the section on case management practices. The topic of appointment length is also discussed further along, in the section about workplace climate.

It is worth noting that when counselors were asked how well their education in counseling prepared them for managing the modern intricacies of academic counseling, many said that, while it provided an excellent and crucial background to holistically serve students, it did not prepare them for the specific, often convoluted, technological and academic nuances of the California Community Colleges. One full-time faculty member admitted that while they are now adept at helping students navigate the technology students use to manage their education, "that kind of competence only comes, as far as I know, through working on a community college campus. I wasn't taught this in my Counseling program."

Though all of the counselors contributing to this study found serving primarily as an academic counselor very fulfilling, there was frequent sentiment expressed about the Department not taking greater advantage of their professional skills and training. To be clear, there is a subset of counselors servicing CRC programs with a smaller student-to-counselor ratio and funded by grants. This reduced caseload is reported to allow these counselors to be more holistic in the counseling they provide. These programs are:

- Athletics
- Disabled Student Programs and Services (DSPS)
- Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS)
- NextUP/Guardian Scholars
- The Multicultural Innovative Community for Academic Success and Achievement (MI CASA)
- The Puente Project
- Transfer, Internships and Career Services (TICC)
- TRIO Student Support Services SOAR (SSS-SOAR) and Student Support Services STEM (SSS-STEM)

- The Umoja ("oo-Mo-jah") Diop Scholars program
- The Veterans Resource Center

However, the majority of counselors expressed that they have limited opportunities to execute the full breadth of professional counseling practices taught in their specialized program of study. One counselor described their daily work as most often “dealing with issues that are only routinely, peripherally connected to counseling” in the broad sense. An adjunct counselor shared that “understanding of functions of financial aid, understandings of college transfer,” and such, are certainly things that general counselors need to attend to, and that counselors “understand that there's an institutional responsibility to teach.” However, this counselor also mentioned that this responsibility “falls a lot on counselors to provide that information, where sometimes a counseling session is not as effective because we're doing so much of that introduction.”

One other thing to note is that some counselors expressed their preference, or at least desire, to be assigned when possible to students whose academic majors match with their own areas of specialization. The college's development of Career and Academic Communities (CACs) in Fall 2019 did bring counselors closer to this opportunity. Each CAC was designed to have its own Student Success Team (SST) specific to the community's meta majors or cluster of disciplines, and this group was comprised of peer mentors, paraprofessionals (success coaches), faculty, *and counselors*. The SST was intended to guide students' matriculation in a number of different ways, with its focus always on the academic speciality within which they were operating¹⁹. The full-time counselors that researchers spoke with shared that they were still designated as a counselor for one or more CACs. It appears, however, that the COVID-19 pandemic upended SST plans; at least two counselors shared that one or more of their SSTs had not met since the transition to fully remote work during Spring 2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team heard many concerns over the course of this study about the waning existence – or at least, severely reduced functioning – of the Student Success Teams. However, it seems that counselors still highly support the idea of Student Success Teams and the CAC-centered counseling structure. One counselor shared that they feel students are best served by a counselor within their CAC, “they can see any general counselor; but because of these major-specific things that happen...they definitely need to meet with the CAC counselor.”

Holistic Counseling (Serving the Whole Student)

Though personal and crisis counseling are typically reserved as District functions, they are still something that counselors inevitably manage in their regular appointments. One full-time faculty member offered this in regards to counselors addressing students' personal issues:

There is a misconception about the work that counselors do in terms of just providing support with academic planning. I feel like academic and career planning goes beyond just the prescriptive educational plan. Like, this is literally someone's life that we're assisting. And, you know, we're not one-dimensional. We're multidimensional. And there's so many identities that we hold.

¹⁹ Cosumnes River College Guided Pathways Steering Committee. (2017). Staying on the Path [PowerPoint Presentation]. <https://employees.crc.losrios.edu/crc/employee/doc/5-guided-pathways/Staying-on-the-Path-Presentation2.pdf>

This counselor goes on to add that students seem to understand that counselors can also assist with personal issues but may not realize that counselors are also invested in helping them navigate

“the hidden structure, which is, like, inequality, right? And institutional racism. And we know the fact that a lot of our students are coming from low-income, first-gen backgrounds. We, as counselors, actively try to provide that cultural and social capital that they don't have, and/or they've never had the opportunity to really advocate for themselves, or like, know how to navigate college in general. Where I feel like that often gets overlooked. And that goes back to your original question like, what do you see as a successful counselor being able to identify that. This is beyond just academic planning.”

Many of the counselors and staff that the research team spoke with shared the sentiment of identifying in one or more ways with CRC students. Some identified as having been themselves first-generation, low-income, or otherwise underrepresented and underserved students in the education system. Counselors viewed this empathy and relatability as being key to their ability to serve students or to their desire to pursue a career path in counseling. Some of the counselors who moved from general counseling to one of the student support services stated this as their reason for doing so. A success coach said, “I think a part of me is I don't know if it's like survivor skill or like I made it because I do, like where I was coming from, you know a low-income first-generation background and I made it so it feels like I have to pay it forward because I'm like, I can see myself in the students I've worked with.”

The Counselor/Success Coach Distinction

Success coaches all seem to understand their role as serving as the “first stop” for students looking to engage the Counseling Department for the first time. One success coach described their role as “a big sister for the students”, particularly focused on students new to CRC or who are looking to enroll. They described their goal as “empowering the students to be able to speak up for themselves.” Another success coach said they tell students “you have a go-to person...to be able to ask questions. And so that's usually how I try to, like, pitch it, especially if they (the student) are not in a support program.” Success coaches also organize workshops for students, send out email reminders about important deadlines or topics (such as registration), and introduce students to resources such as tutoring services. More concretely, two success coaches shared how they define this work:

As a success coach, I help our first time new students in just, I mean, we'll start with making the enrollment process smooth, removing holds, teaching them what it means to enroll in classes, helping them read their opt-out, which is a list of courses that are suggested by the counseling department and instructional faculty.

I think of it as when you have a question about CRC and you're not sure who do I even go to to ask this question, you can start with me. And if I can help kind of explain it to you where you got the answer, you're like, that's it, I got it. Or versus, this is something that you need to take care of at a different department, then I will refer you that way, but I'm going to coach you, so you know what questions to ask once you arrive at that department. Because the last thing I want the student to experience is to be referred somewhere, but not be able to get their ask out in a way that reflects what the challenge that they are experiencing, and be sent away, or to be referred somewhere else.

If you're finding yourself on a wait list, like your next step would be, you need to reach out to the professor and the thought of...where do I even find their email? What do I even say in the email? So we have a sample...to even teach them that...it's just email etiquette, like include your ID number, let them know the section or the class number.

I have a lot of conversations like, well, where do your interests lie? What does it mean? And what does it mean to be undecided? There's a lot of shedding of guilt and shame, because they come in saying, I'm so sorry that I don't know what I wanna do for the rest of my life. And I have to tell them like, let's normalize that first and then let's get to the academic portion of explaining what general education is... So enrollment, barrier removal, and then ultimately throughout the semester, it's just making sure that they're connected to support, and just trying to demystify the education system.

As such, Student Success Teams and individual success coaches offer an additional layer of support for students through assistance with enrollment, guidance toward appropriate resources to answer their questions, and regular communication to help students stay on track toward their educational goals. All of the success coaches were clear that their role was limited to the initial information-gathering phase; they shared that when students' questions become more complex or dip into education, career, or financial aid planning, they refer them out to the appropriate professional. One success coach said,

There's specific things we can help the students with, and then there's things that we can't. So we can't, you know, advise them what classes to take. We can go off...first year Opt-Outs²⁰. We can, you know, use the general education sheets to help them, but we can't make an education plan with them.

Success coaches also collaborate with CAC counselors to share information pertaining to their assigned CAC. They shared that there was a varying degree of collaboration between the SCCs and counselors, typically dependent on the SCC's tenure/experience level at the college. One counselor told researchers,

As far as success coaches are concerned, they would be in a position to be able to support the success of students by helping them to understand processes within the college, as well as referring them to services and resources in general. And that's my understanding of what they're supposed to be doing, as well as collaborating with us to try to figure out how to support students. So maybe they get a referral or a student walks in and they're having some struggle, they are here to help and collaborate with them on that.

Success coaches are privy to learning information about an array of student needs that are beyond their expertise to attend, such as building an educational plan or assisting with personal matters. In such instances, they are trained to direct students to the Counseling faculty who then can help by offering any of the four counseling services they provide (described above). However, in collaborating

²⁰ Opt Out course schedules are pre-selected full-load (15-unit) schedules based on students' majors. They are designed to help students complete their degree in a two-year timeframe and offer choices for fulfilling elective requirements. One example of an Opt Out schedule (referred to for students as "program maps" can be found on the Broadcast Journalism webpage: <https://crc.losrios.edu/academics/programs-and-majors/broadcast-journalism-aa-degree-map>.

with counseling, success coaches referenced needing to navigate over-booked counseling schedules with their students, "Getting a comprehensive student education plan is one of our first-year milestones, right? So, we push for appointments with their counselor to get it. But then there's no counseling appointments." This might sometimes result in SSC's feeling the need to assist students beyond their scope of work.

Success coaches not only work very closely with the Counseling faculty, they also require good knowledge of how other CRC departments coordinate with Counseling to best attend to students' needs. One SSC summarized this complexity as follows:

I try to look at it as, if I understand your job in Admissions and Records, in Financial Aid, or in Counseling, if I understood it better I could explain this to the student so I can deescalate a certain situation, or emphasize the urgency of how this is gonna negatively impact the student. So, I need to understand how this all works...But then I don't want it to come off as, why is she in my business? Why does she need to know this stuff? Like, that's not her job, and why is she trying to insert herself? So, lots of relationship-building with the other areas as well...If I explain this to the student, and if I'm knowledgeable enough to explain it, then that's one less student trying to get into the financial aid drop-in line.

This, also, however, highlights some of the ambiguity that plagues the role of success coaches and counselors. The research team found it concerning to have heard frequent talk of the somewhat nebulous line separating the counselor and success coach roles. There were reports of both counselors and students regularly expressing their not fully understanding the purpose and/or boundaries of success coaches, in particular. This role obscurity is not something the team detected from the formal job descriptions for these two groups. It did emerge, however, as one of the most common topics volunteered by the research participants. One counselor stated, "at times it can be confusing, because I've had students who come to me and [reference] 'my counselor'. But then it's not their counselor, it's their success coach." Success coaches, too, describe students having confused them for counselors and needing to explain this difference. Additionally, one success coach shared that students sometimes book appointments with them when they cannot get a timely appointment to see a counselor.

Success coaches were fairly consistent in noting that their training included making it clear that counselors do the counseling and success coaches lay the foundation for that counseling. One was sure to clarify this in stating that success coaches know where to draw the line:

So yes, there's things outside of this scope that I can't help the student with, as far as you know, cause there's specific things we can help the students with, and then there's things that we can't. So we can't, you know, advise them on what classes to take. We can go off with a first-year Opt-Out. We can, you know, use the general education sheets to help them, but we can't make an education plan with them. So those are the kind of things, like, if they're in their third year and beyond that they should already have it; the comprehensive education plan, you know, moving forward. So those are the kind of things that, you know, we need to reroute them to the counselors. But as far as, like I said, the Opt-Outs go. You know, we work very closely on those, so there's a lot of input from the counselors, the faculty and the success coaches.

However, there was also admission from other success coaches that the blurring of lines *does* occur, and that this is primarily spoken from the student's perspective:

[Success coaches] can be helpful and help with, you know, connecting the student to resources. But I feel like that's where at times it can be confusing. Because I've had students who come to me, but then it's not their counselor, it's their success coach.

Interviewer: Tell me about the kinds of challenges that you face in your role as a success coach.

I think differentiating, like students being able to differentiate what the counselor does and what the success coach does. Because I feel like from my experience, they're like, You're so helpful. So you're my counselor, right? So I'm gonna come to you for next semester. And then I go, Oh, you know, actually I'm not your counselor. I'm your success coach, so let me make sure that you meet with a counselor to talk about this, or something like that. Like, I would love it if you got this ED plan done. And it's like, I can't do it right now in this capacity, but I know the counselor can and stuff like that. So for the students, I think that a lot of them, because of the population we work with, when they're fresh out of high school, first time new students, the language of like, my counselor is the one that I go to and I talk to about this in high school and they help me pick out classes for my schedule. I don't understand how you are not that person?

Another success coach echoed this concern: students ask, "What the heck is a success coach supposed to do?"

During researchers' observations of one-on-one counseling appointments, they witnessed a counselor preparing for a meeting with a student. The counselor, in reading case notes in the student's file, was concerned about the student's inability to distinguish a counselor from a success coach. The limited documentation available to the counselor about the student's interaction with their success coach suggested that the SSC *did* advise a bit beyond their bounds. The counselor lamented the fact that there is no way for counselors and success coaches to view a student's complete counseling record from an integrated student case management database. This, the counselor stated, makes it difficult to know, at any given time, what exactly was said to and done for a particular student.

And this was offered by an adjunct counselor:

I do know that sometimes there are questions as to what are the boundaries of a success coach and counselor. I believe we both need each other. But I know, just from my knowledge, there should be just a better boundary set for all of us, the counselors and support specialists. But yeah, I know they help first-year students onboard and they do a lot of projects, like retention campaigns. I do know now that the support specialists eventually, I think they wanna extend the case management to second-year. But I'm not too sure.

This mention of possibly extending success coach student case management beyond the first year is somewhat reflected in the "Welcome to Careers and Academic Communities" video posted at the Counseling website. There, the speaker states that success coaches "assist you with enrolling and completing your classes at CRC" and "act as your guide while you navigate your educational journey."

It is possible that this wording may contribute to students' misunderstanding of student coaches as counseling faculty who are tasked with holistically managing the student's educational process.

Standard Operating Procedures

The statewide Academic Senate's "Standards of Practice for California Community College Counseling Faculty and Programs," revised and adopted in 2008, states as follows:

"This paper asserts that there should be a set of universal standards of practice for all community college counseling programs, regardless of institutional or departmental size or fiscal constraints. Complying with these standards requires both adequate staffing and support. These standards are set out in six areas: A. Core Functions, B. Ethical Standards, C. Organization and Administration, D. Human Resources, E. Physical Facilities, and F. New Technologies."²¹

The research team developed a series of interview questions about counselors' knowledge of, access to, and experiences with the documented standard operating procedures outlined in table 9 below.

Table 9: Interview Questions on Standard Operating Procedures

- Are there any documented Standard Operating Procedures that counselors follow in providing counseling for students? Where are they stored should you need to review them?
- What kinds of changes to SOPS do you think are important for counselors to know about, and how do they receive that information about such changes?
- Have you ever experienced a counselor or someone else in the department coming up with an idea to simplify or improve counseling processes? How did that play out?
- What opportunities are there for counselors to share their best practices with one another?

Training

Overall, counselors seem well informed about the proper procedures for servicing CRC students. This included knowledge about ethical standards, the college and Department's organization and administration, human resources, and their physical workspaces. This finding reaffirms the decision to focus the study on policy and procedural matters rather than best practices. However, researchers did find that adjunct faculty seem less confident in their knowledge about the Department's workings, primarily because of how quickly their onboarding was conducted. Some counselors speak to having gone through a two-week shadowing period when they started at CRC, but others shared that it was shorter. Several counselors expressed gratitude for having undergone training at a prior institution that

²¹ Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (2008). *Standards of Practice for California Community College Counseling Faculty and Programs*. https://www.asccc.org/sites/default/files/publications/Standards-of-Practice_0.pdf

they felt was more comprehensive than it is at CRC, at least at the time they were hired. Field notes from an interview with one adjunct counselor state the following:

They lamented having very little training from the Counseling office when they first began at CRC. They said they only had two shadowing sessions with their appointed counselor before being assigned their first case. They used the word "scary" in referring to having been thrown into the counseling process after only interacting with one counselor. They felt "lucky" to have had the one counselor-partner they did. They called this introduction process "overwhelming," and said that they believe that there needs to be more regular, ongoing interaction among counselors where they can engage in information sharing.

Another adjunct faculty member gave a more mixed review. They stated that there was a lack of training on the "academic side" of things, like the mapping of courses – the "various components for the community college." They went on to say, "we are well trained in the personal crisis, all of that cultural counseling... But I feel like the other pieces of the academic side. No, that's something that's usually learned at the institution where you are. ...I will say I was also very blessed and fortunate, because [at] my first community college had a whole training program and schedule where it was intensive."

In one other instance, field notes capture an adjunct stating that counselors cannot intelligently do their job when they are not "seen enough on a day-to-day" basis. She said that not always being able to attend departmental meetings is an issue, and that many counselors (including herself) have expressed that they are frustrated with these meetings. They also felt that Counseling should improve the number of hours that are offered to adjuncts and to have adjuncts coming in regularly for training.

Though Counseling Department meetings may be "frustrating" to adjuncts at times, they are still valued for being one of the few places where counselors can discuss department needs. Counselors – full-time and adjunct alike – point out substantive inertia, where, as one adjunct stated, "discussions go on and on and on and on and on, [instead of] at least picking something and following it through." They go on to suggest, "I think a lot of that is because we're all spread so thin, and we're all juggling so many things."

Most counselors shared that ongoing training is typically a facet of department meetings and is accomplished through on-the-spot, collegial consultations among counselors on a daily basis. However, some counselors said that their participation in these activities can be very limited, causing them to feel isolated. This appears to be particularly relevant for adjunct faculty. One counselor situated in a student support program not housed in the Counseling Department shared that they are unable to simply "walk to general counseling and ask someone a question." Another counselor shared, "Sometimes it can feel that unless you were on top of it, attended the meeting, read the meeting minutes, or heard by word-of-mouth, you may not actually, necessarily know what's going on. And I know that's been a challenge a lot of times for our part-timers. I've heard that from them." Additionally, several counselors shared that practices vary from person to person, due to varied expertise and counseling style. This is exacerbated by a perceived lack of ongoing training. One counselor shared, "We have a combination of adjunct and newer counselors that go through a short period of training or, maybe, might have been here for quite some time, and maybe there hasn't been training since then. I feel like we can all be on different, you know, spectrums regarding best practices."

Storage and Distribution Standard Operating Procedures

Counseling faculty and staff often expressed a desire for greater communication and documentation of standard operating procedures and best practices. One counselor stated, “an area of growth for our department is that there is not really a working manual. In our last meeting, we talked about some best practices for certain things. I don't necessarily know where that's kept after we talk about it.” Another shared that in Fall 2023, counselors used a department meeting to discuss best practices, saying that it was “helpful...knowing where everyone stands with how they approach certain processes.”

Counselors frequently stated that they primarily share information of both sorts in their monthly department meetings and then as needed via email and impromptu conversation. A few counselors stated that common departmental forms are stored in “the shared drive” (a hard drive accessible to all counselors), and others stated that they received a training manual when they started but that they were uncertain if it had since been updated. One adjunct counselor stated,

It would be nice if we had a document just outlining the actual processes for each scenario for each petition. Who to send it to, where to send it to. That information has been shared with us in a meeting, in an email. I think we have the information available to us. It just needs to be more centralized, maybe in a more visually friendly capacity. I thought the other day, how amazing would it be if we had a Canvas shell for the counselors?

Another counselor was dubious as to whether or not a manual could be accurately maintained, saying, “We could write a book or a manual stating, ‘here's how we do stuff’, and it would literally be out of date by tomorrow. So, we really utilize community email to communicate as much as possible that changes have occurred. But there's no central place to get it.”

Updating Practices and Policies

Despite the wealth of policy and procedural information that is shared with faculty and staff during department meetings, several counselors expressed disappointment in what might be called an incomplete cycling of that information:

Sometimes, unfortunately, I'm not able to make the Counseling meetings because of my schedule. But when I have gone, we do engage in conversation of, like, what could be better. But, then I don't hear. Sometimes, I don't hear, like, a follow-up, right? Then – I don't know what it is – where we're just so busy but we want this change.

They also argued that once new information is introduced, it is in the best interest of students and the department to allow counselors time to offer and document their input. These counselors saw this as particularly pertinent when such information is also relevant to other departments or to the Los Rios District Office, thus requiring collaboration. It was reported that there are several ways that the Counseling Department organizes around an emergent issue. It may elect to form a committee that involves a subset of counselors, to overload or reassign time for individual counselors to draft proposals, to discuss the issue at department meetings, and/or to initiate requests for changes with management. Still, some counselors felt uncertain about actions that had taken place from employing any of these tactics. One counselor stated,

"If someone does have a good idea, what happens is, we'll create a committee for, kind of, wanting to execute that change. And/or maybe the department chair will follow up with some of those thoughts that get brought up during meetings. In terms of closing the loop, I'm honestly not sure how complete that looks."

Several counselors shared that they thought the counselor workload was too dense to accomplish anything more than brief discussions about potential changes to SOPS, and that change was potentially complicated by the many policy changes that would inevitably also touch upon the work in Admissions & Records, Financial Aid, counseling offices at the other District colleges, academic departments, and other entities. Counselors also shared that, given the rigidity of the educational policies and practices they must follow, it would be difficult to make the changes they feel are necessary to better serve their students.

Student Case Management

While community colleges have a certain niche among colleges and universities, the purpose for student case management is fairly universal:

*"Student Case Management strives to encourage student success and retention, foster a sense of belonging, reduce risk, and enhance overall community well-being and safety by identifying student needs, removing barriers, leveraging resources, and promoting self-efficacy. Student Case Management staff provide a solution-focused, holistic, and strengths-based approach to support students experiencing basic needs challenges, medical concerns, emotional/psychological distress, academic issues, and/or social difficulties."*²²

The Center for Community College Student Engagement also refers to "intrusive advising" or "inescapable advising", meaning that "advising doesn't stop after the first semester or after a student has even registered for classes in the second term. Students [are] clear that they [want] to meet regularly with advisors" (O'Banion, p. 21).²³ In the same work, Klempin, Kalmakarian, Pellegrino, and Barnett further share that "in a personalized case management model, advisors are assigned to work with the same students over time and given access to a comprehensive record not only of students' academic standing but also of any results of nonacademic assessments (e.g., results from surveys about career interests or from questionnaires about interests in student services) or case notes that exist. As opposed to a system of drop-in advising where all advisors serve as generalists and primarily focus on immediate requests for assistance from students, a personalized case-management model calls for getting to know students and following the same students' progress over time. Using this approach, advisors have the opportunity to address not just short-term needs such as course registration for the following semester, but also longer-term goals" (O'Banion, p. 48).

Case Management Practices at CRC

It is clear that the Counseling Department at CRC attempts to employ case management best practices while still remaining agile to respond to the just-in-time needs of its large student caseload. With the

²² University of Chicago (n. d.). *Student Case management*. UChicago Help. Retrieved December 5, 2024. <https://help.uchicago.edu/student-case-management/#:~:text=Student%20Case%20Management%20staff%20provide,%2C%20and%20For%20social%20difficulties>.

²³ O'Banion, Terry. (2019). *Academic Advising in the Community College*. Roman & Littlefield.

advent of Guided Pathways and the Student Success Teams, counselors were assigned a caseload of students based on CAC; however, due to staffing limitations, counselors were clear that they often end up advising students outside their CAC. This appears to be less true for success coaches, who only discussed meeting with students outside of their assigned caseload when they were filling in for a sick or occupied colleague. The caseload for full-time CRC counselors hovers around 1,000 students to each counselor, based on enrollment of about 15,000 students in a given Fall semester²⁴; this is presumably assumed to equate to 900:1, the district-wide negotiated maximum²⁵, when adjunct FTE is allocated. Many counselors expressed that they could be more effective when counseling students within their CAC(s), but were unsure of how to guarantee this given the large caseload. In addition, they shared that students sometimes chance upon a counselor outside of their program of study, but elect to continue scheduling appointments with that counselor because they have already developed good rapport. The most persistent solution proposed during this research was to reduce the student-to-counselor ratio.

CRC counselors generally shared that their department allows them a significant degree of autonomy to counsel and monitor their students' progress. Some degree of autonomy is also allowed for student success teams, success coaches, and others who are anchored in student support programs. This includes establishing their own unique systems for student case management. For example, while some utilize the "notes" feature within the SARS software, others leverage Google Drive to share student case information from one member to another. Still others construct personalized Microsoft Excel sheets.²⁶ One counselor described their practice:

The SARS and the Outlook thing is challenging, of course, because I primarily use Outlook to keep track of all my appointments. So you know, I have my checklist of things to do every morning and every afternoon, so, like, I take what's on my SARS, and I copy the info to my Outlook. Go back and forth. That does take time. But it's kind of helps me to make sure there's no duplicate double scheduling.

And, a counselor situated in a student support program had this to offer:

So I have, like, a hard copy for when I meet with my students. And then when they come back, I'm able to quickly refer to "Ask about this?" Yeah. So how did you hear about (this CRC office)? Counseling services? Like I said, it's on here. But I usually don't have the time to go back and look at all my little bits and pieces of data. I have a super good memory about my students. I just have to, like, have something that jots my memory. And so, that's why my intake forms are so helpful; all I need is a couple of keywords, and I can almost just go right back into that conversation.

For counselors positioned in student support programs, case management may be more uniformly practiced. In fact, one such counselor stated as much. One thing noted was that such counselors "highly encourage and expect that students meet consistently with the same counselor." In addition, these counselors are apparently required or make it routine practice to write running case notes for every student contact so that they do not have to ask the student to remind them of any details. One

²⁴ CRC HawkDash. (2024). CRC Office of Research and Equity. <https://research.crc.losrios.edu/HawkDash/>

²⁵ Los Rios College Federation of Teachers. (2023). *Article 4: Workload*. Retrieved December 19, 2024. <https://www.lrcft.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Article-4-Workload.pdf>

²⁶ A discussion of case management software and technology will follow in this section of the report.

categorical counselor made the point that keeping student case information tidy “strengthens the relationships that we have [with students].” Another of these counselors shared,

You get to see the students multiple times a semester and really do case management rather than just them popping in when they need something and then they have a whole laundry list 'cause they didn't have a chance to see a counselor, right. So down there they're like, "Okay, I need this this, this and this." And here because we see them so often they get their needs met all the time, right, and so they're not here freaking out about like all the things. It's like, "Oh, I need this one thing." And so you can spend more time with them in that meeting to really get to know them and their goals and their challenges and successes and so there's more to that relationship.

Success coaches were particularly eager to share with the research team their personalized methods for keeping track of appointments and logging case notes. One success coach had this to say:

So, it's kind of like an Excel sheet that I keep. If I'm meeting with the student, I will kind of prep that, you know, whatever I can do ahead of the meeting and I kind of put my notes in there. My follow-up notes. So, if I schedule them a counseling appointment and that's kind of a reminder for me, I'll flag it. You know, I need to go back and follow up with the student... So when we're booking those appointments, we send them emails and let them know.

Interviewer: And do you know, by chance, if that your process is similar to what the other success coaches do? Or is that kind of your own worked out for you?

Well, as far as, like, keeping notes for the case management and prepping, that's a similar process (among the success coaches). I don't know that all of them do, who goes in and then checks to see if the student actually attended their counseling appointment and follows up with them. That's something I just started doing because I realized that my students were missing their appointments. So I kind of built that extra step just into my payload... But, as far as you know, I think every success coach kind of has that process of making sure that they're documenting or prepping before their meeting.

The variation in the practice of student case management between counselors and success coaches may have some drawbacks. While everyone has done their best to create a case management system that works with the resources they are given, the result is that case notes are not always easily shared from person to person. As described earlier, this may result in lack of clarity surrounding what a student has discussed and with whom, particularly when students move from their success coach to their counselor, who each employ different case management systems. This may be relevant to the blurring of lines between the roles of counselors and success coaches discussed earlier in the “Division of Labor” section.

Lastly, adjunct counselors described having their own hurdles related to student case management. One interviewee shared, “because adjuncts have had so few experiences in CRC Counseling and such brief contact with students, there really is no follow-through with case management.” Another adjunct said that it is a problem for students “when you have people constantly rotating; they're not getting the same content and quality.”

Case Management Technology

Some interviewees pointed out flaws in the decentralized nature of documentation and management of student cases in the Counseling Department. When discussing course waivers, a process by which a student needs to receive confirmation from several different departments across campus, one senior Counseling staff member stated,

It's understandable that counselors get however many emails per day; and then it gets lost. And then there's no way for me to track where it is in the process, so I don't know if they've opened it. They've looked at it. Unless they let me know, I don't know if they've reviewed it at all. So then, let's say a couple of weeks pass and then a student hasn't heard anything. They will likely email me or make a follow-up appointment with me, even though it's completely out of my hands. Then I have to send a secondary email to follow up. It is not a great process. It is not good.

While some counselors openly expressed that they prefer to be more intimately engaged with students rather than focused on interacting with computer technology, the Counseling Department – like most other workplaces – has over the years acquired computer software to help make their work more efficient and effective. The Department's appointment scheduling software seems to work well for everyone. However, the research team was informed of a number of other student case management software acquisitions that are now either used inconsistently or sparingly, or have been discontinued completely. Below is what is believed to be the full list of software packages to which counseling faculty and staff have had access at one time or another:

- Starfish
- eServices
- SARS
- PeopleSoft
- Degree Audit
- Early Alert

Despite the software challenges the Department has faced, one counselor said that they feel that anything is better than the pre-pandemic "stack of folders of all student appointments" from which student cases were managed.

One counselor, who called their personal student tracking system "archaic," informed the team that they do have access to such case management software but have stopped using it for reasons they could not recall. Another counselor said, "all the tools we have to use are all a little bit broken. I'm the only one here who uses [one of the programs], as far as I know, which I find to be a great tool but it's glitchy and it has quirks." Other terms like "outdated," "tedious," and "not accurate" were also used to describe the various software.

One counselor seemed to suggest that SARS is a suitable piece of case management software for the Department but could be better utilized among counselors. They gave a brief demonstration of SARS' strengths:

Interviewer: Is there case management software of some sort where there is a running record from counselor to counselor on a given student?

Yes, so right here it says "student history." We know the student saw me today at 9 o'clock. The students said the reason; and then if you look at the comments I wrote in there for her, I saw her in person... I shared info about the SCC pre law program; scheduled an appointment with a SCC counselor. Those are my notes that I put in there because this ends up with somebody else two weeks from that. Will that person see that and pay attention to those comments? If they look historically, they might, but I did do a student Ed Plan, I did a student educational plan for this student... And when the counselor looks at it they'll see that the plan is based on that... So this student has seen many people. But you have to be conscious to look at those comments, right? If you're flying here, you don't see those.

This counselor summed up well what several others had to say about this:

They did roll out, like, a case management software at CRC - I'm forgetting the name - where instructors can make referrals, and they will go to the support specialists. You know, like, let's say a student is in Mi Casa, and then they meet with an instructor, and the instructor sees that they need support with basic needs or tutoring, they send that referral to the Mi Casa support specialist. However, to be honest, it's been hard to check that platform because it's not in the same place as SARS...We have so many different platforms where we have to check.

The research team also learned, however, that though counselors placed with student support programs can see any case notes entered by the general counselors, it is unclear whether the general counselors can see theirs. Additionally, one counselor shared that, even when one counselor utilizes the SARS system to take notes, other counselors or departments who the students see subsequently may not study those notes in detail, if at all. Nonetheless, some members of the Department reported that the SARS "notes feature" is something they continue to use. But they could not dispute the fact that, even when case management systems are used in one way or another, they do not always have great effect on the work they must do.

And, this adjunct counselor, having worked with case management software elsewhere, offered these insights:

I feel that technology is really important for our job, because it just helps us do our job better... [Counselors can] write in the comments on the scheduling part. Like why they're meeting with their counselor; and after the students meet with a counselor, the counselor can go in and put in the outcome section what they talked about, what was covered, what petition was filled out. The reason why that is so helpful is because we meet with so many students every day, and sometimes they'll come back to see us. And it's not even that we weren't paying attention, but it's like, ok, what did we talk about (laughter)? And so I feel like if there's so much power in having technology like that, that I wish we would have a little more at Los Rios, specifically CRC, because not only would that make our life easier, but also the student... A lot of the time these students come to us for help, and sometimes it is like extenuating circumstances. Sometimes it is like a different thing, different topics that won't be covered in one meeting. And so to save them time and energy [and not to have them] repeat themselves, I think that's why it's so helpful for kind of more advanced technology in that area.

Thus, one of the major findings from this research is that the Counseling Department lacks a computer-based student case management system that meets the needs of all of its faculty, staff, and students, and that intensive, ongoing software training for all relevant personnel is essential. Research participants evoked a number of successful outcomes from this at other California college campuses. In addition, best practices in the field support strong case management practices and the necessary resources for achieving them. Having not yet settled this matter may very well have had – and continue to have – implications for how students perceive the quality of care they have received. A potential case in point:

Interviewer: So, you can't see a Degree Planner at all for your students?

We technically can run a Degree Planner. But it's not accurate.

Interviewer: Is it accurate for the student?

Not always. Yeah. And that's where it becomes troubling. Because then they fall and they're like, "I thought I was on the right track."

And another case (focus group member):

Interviewer: Is there a pretty good system for tracking the override requests...they go to a counselor that determines they need an override? Are they able to monitor that process at all?

No. That's probably one of the biggest hang-ups with both processes. That's for the overrides and the consortiums, [that] there's nothing for them to indicate anything. Nowhere for students to track in PeopleSoft their changes unless they're going and looking at their award letters. I think at one point we discussed, you know, to see, because I think sometimes counselors were like, I don't know sometimes I don't know if a student has an approved double major form on file. And I offered to see if they wanted, like, a view-only access to this Excel. And they expressed that they were not interested in having access to that. Just the annoying part about PeopleSoft is there's nowhere for us to put, like, notes so that other people could see it, you know? It's just why? Why?

It is worth noting that this person followed this with, "So, it's, like, embarrassing to talk about."

It should also be noted that case management technology issues also impact counselor workload. Needing to spend time rehashing details of a student's journey that were already recounted, but not documented, elsewhere, might very well occupy precious appointment time. There is a tradeoff, however; in *Academic Advising in the Community College*²⁷, Klempin, Kalmakarian, Pellegrino, and Barnett emphasize that the case management approach requires extra time and resources:

Using a case management approach can often mean that advisors need additional preparation for advising sessions to make sure they are familiar with each advisee's interests and issues. They must be familiar with the technology required to review

²⁷ Klempin, S., Kalmakarian, H.S., Pellegrino, L., & Barnett, E.A. (2019). A Framework for Advising Reform. In O'Banion, T. (Ed.), *Academic Advising in the Community College*. Roman & Littlefield.

students' academic standing and to maintain good advising records. Ideally, advisors should prepare for sessions by reviewing multiple data sources as well as their own case notes to identify where students may be struggling and what types of guidance or resources might be most appropriate. After the session, advisors typically use technology to document the main issues discussed, make referrals to other student services, and follow up on whether students use the services (O'Banion, 49-50).

Strategic planning for new case management software training of Department personnel would certainly be necessary, but not without its complications. Counselors and staff have very packed schedules, and any time away from their desks for anything other than counseling means fewer students they can serve. Some adjunct counselors particularly expressed concern about whether, given their limited work hours, they would have the time and energy to learn to maximize the virtues of a new software system. They found their past training at CRC had been sparse and that there might still be insufficient time for them to learn new software:

I don't have time to learn something new. I'm probably not utilizing that as much as I should. So that's the harder thing. When new systems come on board, that can be difficult. Even when I first started, sometimes it's just like awareness of the systems out there [lacking]. So, many of us have to interact with others in order to do your job, right? And some are mandatory like SARS, like you need to know the schedule and who you're meeting with and it seems like second nature now. But when you're first coming, you don't know that.

Adjuncts in student support programs may have even less time for training; they must attend meetings and training in those spaces as well. And some CACs are busier than others. Nonetheless, a strong effort to improve the capacity of the Department's case management technology could prove to alleviate much of the daily struggle of managing students and, in turn, the student experience with the Department. Committing to making it easier for students to track their personal information, requests, and resolutions via case management software would also be valuable.

Cross-Department Coordination

Recall that one way in which college counseling is defined is by its "solution-focused" and "holistic" nature. This, in part, requires that Counselors must be well aware of what benefits and constraints await their students based on other departments' policies that must be followed. Much was said by research participants about how cumbersome it can be to coordinate student case management across departments. What was commonly described is the inability to ascertain whether, or within what time frame, these other departments consistently update a student's information on their end.

This necessitates that counselors and success coaches take the initiative to follow up with relevant other CRC departments to obtain up-to-date information. Inter-departmental coordination can create moments of frenzy during the workday, particularly if the student is present and in urgent need of a solution to their problem. Most often, the other departments in question are Admissions and Records and Financial Aid. Therefore, in order to better comprehend the issues that are commonly discussed among these three departments, the research team requested that a focus group interview be held with department representatives.

Many Los Rios Community College District students qualify for financial aid at the federal and/or state level. But there are certain restrictions on what courses a student can take based on whether or not

their financial aid package will cover that cost. These restrictions are meant to help students fulfill the requirements of their college major successfully and in a timely manner. To be clear, students are free to take any courses they choose; however, if that course is restricted given the guidelines for their specific financial aid package, they would be forced to weather that cost on their own. As the CRC “Course Applicability”²⁸ website demonstrates, students are able to see if the courses they are choosing are each eligible for payment via their financial aid, whether they can formally make a case for a course to be deemed eligible if it is, in fact, required for their major, and how to know if their case for an “course override”²⁹ has been resolved.

Counselors shared that despite all that Counseling offers students as they onboard, students generally lack an understanding of the complex federal financial aid restrictions placed on what courses they choose. The research team also learned that administrative flags placed on students’ course enrollments based on these restrictions may or may not be accurate due, for instance, to changes in academic major requirements that have not yet been noted in the eServices software. Further, what often arises from these issues is *lag time* between when a student needs to settle their semester courseload and when they learn whether an exception to course restrictions can be made. Here, one adjunct counselor addresses this matter:

So, at the beginning of the semester, there's a phase where we do all of [these] forms called course overrides and consortium requests. So, those have to do with Financial Aid marking students' specific courses as not eligible for financial aid. And so then, counselors are responsible to research -- well, the student is responsible to find us and let us know. And many times, a student doesn't even think to do that. They just think, oh no, those counselors, they don't know what they're doing, they gave me this class and it's not financially required.

The consortium request mentioned above, which requires cross-departmental coordination, is a required mechanism for CRC students who elect to take one or more courses at another Los Rios campus and want their financial aid package to pay for those courses. A success coach further explains:

The consortium one is slightly different. . . I want to say this was 2019 or 2021 that that process was even initiated. Because prior - and Tony could attest to this - there was [were] zero system checks for consortium. So, the counselor always had to submit the consortium for that. Now, we've had it built so the system is checking it just like a home class, which is great. But the way that we kind of tell students is a little bit different. Like, it's not as cut and dry as looking for that page and seeing the green check mark. They basically will get an email showing them, you know, what courses are counting, which ones are not. And then again, kind of a vague message about maybe seeing counseling if it's not correct.

²⁸ Course applicability means a course is able to be paid for with federal financial aid.

²⁹ Cosumnes River College (n. d.) Course Applicability.

Retrieved [December 10, 2024], from <https://crc.losrios.edu/admissions/financial-aid-and-fees/financial-aid-policies/course-applicability#:~:text=Visit%20the%20Counseling%20office%20if,will%20complete%20an%20override%20request>.

There is a reasonable degree of frustration among counselors in finding themselves serving as the central player in resolving these matters; they cannot seem to escape this uncomfortable role. A representative from the Financial Aid office confirms this:

I don't, of course, have access to see what a student sees. But it'll just basically say, "Hey, some of these classes aren't eligible for financial aid. You may need to see a counselor."

It was interesting to find that the same financial aid associate also offered a bit of explanation for why counselors, like with the course override issue, have become frustrated with consortium requests and with students having to repeat courses:

So, there's a regulation for financial aid that basically says that if a student takes a class and passes, or once they take a class and pass it, they're allowed to retake that class one more time with financial aid. Now whether, let's say, they got a D the first time they took it and then the second time they took it they got an F. That was their one allowed repeat that's eligible to be funded. Or, let's say they only get a C the [third] time, or they get another D, they still can't retake it again and get financial aid. But in our system, there's nothing to indicate that a course is a repeat for the consortium classes. And I don't believe the counselors are even really looking at that page for the override ones. So, there may be a lot of times that they are overriding a class or submitting a consortium for a class that is a repeat - let's say, English 300 - and they're, like, this should be covered. And in theory it was, it's just that (financial aid) paid for it twice and we can't pay for it a third time.

This Course Applicability website also states the following:

We tested eligibility for Fall 2016 students and found that approximately 25% of students receiving financial aid had at least one class that did not meet course applicability requirements.

Note here that this statistic is from the year 2016, eight years prior to this review. Assuming, however, that this proportion may still be fairly accurate, it seems rather high. If so, then it helps to explain the frequency with which counselors struggle with such matters and their frustration. Further, it is fair to assume that both counselors and students may be perplexed about why the eServices database cannot itself play the "override" role that counselors do. It is unclear whether this is because the database contains incomplete or inaccurate information about which courses are indeed applicable to a student's required courses. This would suggest another instance of time lag between when updated information about what courses are eligible and when that eligibility is flagged in eServices.

The most serious ripple effect of weak student case management, due to a lack of cross-department coordination and by inefficient technology to support it, is what the research team heard many times over the course of this study: CRC students often find themselves taking longer to complete their degree or certificate and having to pay more for that extension. While the Course Applicability website states that "The results of the override will post to your eServices account the next business day", it is difficult to predict how long it takes for the student to initially learn of this ineligibility, to then schedule and meet with a counselor, then for the counselor to submit the override request, and then for the student to learn whether that request was granted." The "next business day" gets a bit lost in the shuffle. By the time a student fully understands that they must enroll in a different course or

courses that *do* meet their financial aid criteria, there may not be any alternative courses with open seats. Not only might a student have wasted their time sitting in an ineligible course for one or two weeks into the semester, they now must defer and take those required courses the following semester, assuming those courses will be offered. One might find it reasonable for students to come away from this experience feeling as though they are victims of inadequate advising.

The commitment to continue discussing ways in which the Counseling, Admissions and Records, Financial Aid Departments can work together to overcome the obstacles that currently make CRC student case management cumbersome was undeniable. This was evident from the lively, engaged, and collegial attention given to this matter by the four department representatives who participated in this study's focus group interview. Their inter-group dialogue gave the research team the opportunity to better understand the wide scope and complexity of the matters they must oversee on a daily basis.

It is clear that some of these issues are not only tied up across multiple departments at CRC but are also dependent on district-level decisions. Researchers heard from several counselors that conversations about technological, capacity, and coordination need to be heard at the district level. However, such conversations are slow-moving and do not always yield results. Nonetheless, these district-level conversations may be imperative to resolving some of the critical issues that students experience with counseling services across the four colleges in the District.

Workplace Climate

Overall, there was a positive sense of the work climate within the Counseling department. One counselor said, "We help each other in every sense we can. I think the moral climate of the department is exemplary, compared to [other organizations]." However, interviewees also shared some areas for improvement. These suggested improvements mostly extended from a sense of burnout on the part of counselors. These are discussed in the "Counselor Workload" section below. It is also noted that three other areas for improvement rose to the top of the list: better inclusion of adjunct counselors and counselors placed in student support programs; more diversity and representation in the counseling body; and consistent relations between success coaches and counselors.

Inclusion of Adjunct and Categorical Counselors

Several adjunct counselors shared their feelings of not being fully integrated into the counseling team. One adjunct counselor added that they did not feel their experiences or knowledge were valued by full-time counselors, and that they did not feel comfortable going to every full-time counselor for information, "There's definitely some tenured counselors that, unless I have to specifically ask them a question, I won't, because kinda have to go in and swallow your pride and be really humble because you're gonna be really quickly made to feel a certain way. So that's kind of challenging. So you just kinda, you know, learn where to go and who to ask for help."

Adjunct counselors and counselors situated in student support programs alike both spoke about scheduling issues that prevented their attendance at the monthly department meetings. One counselor shared that these meetings were not always welcoming and inclusive to counselors who were not full-time, but that they felt this has improved over time. Another adjunct counselor shared that they were not invited to those meetings; whether true or a miscommunication is unclear.

Hiring and professional development are also areas of concern for adjunct counselors. One counselor shared that the processes surrounding hiring were unclear; they had heard that they should put their name on a priority hiring list, but did not know how to do so, and felt as though they were perhaps discouraged from doing so. Overall, the adjunct counselors that researchers spoke with did not seem to feel that there were well-developed professional development opportunities to help them successfully apply to full-time positions at the institution. It is clear that adjunct counselors *want* to advance at the institution, but feel their circumstances prevent them from doing so. One counselor shared, "I love working there. I wish adjunct was more consistent and you know more valued but it is what it is."

Diversity and Representation in the Counseling Body

There were some concerns from counselors of color that not all counselors can relate to the experiences of students of color. One counselor suggested that these students might be paired with counselors based on their relatability to students, "oftentimes, students need specialized attention in order to cope with home-life and personal issues that interrupt their ability to focus on their academic activities." Another counselor of color shared that they felt a responsibility to work in the department until another counselor with their same cross-section of identities was hired. Yet another counselor shared that they did not feel the department sufficiently accounted for the *retention* of good employees, including employees of color specifically, "[diversity] is also part of the challenge of recruiting and retaining good people."

Success Coach/Counselor Relationships

Finally, some issues emerged relating to the relationship between success coaches and counselors. For the most part, success coaches and counselors who work together serving students in the same CAC said that they have a positive working relationship. However, a few success coaches shared that they had heard that not every success coach and counselor had a trusting relationship, though no one shared that specifically about themselves. It will be important to address this matter when unpacking the delineation of responsibilities between these two roles.

Counselor Workload

The largest theme that arose from office climate discussions relates to counselor workload and feelings of burnout. Counselors describe working in a fast-paced environment. This was also observed by researchers when shadowing drop-in appointments for a day. In addition to daily responsibilities, counselors are additionally burdened by external mandates. One counselor said,

Even if we get what we feel dialed in, a new initiative comes down the pipeline, and now we gotta re-figure something else out or what we think are important goals have to change to meet this checkbox that so-and-so wants. So it's just this constant like little rubrics cube and Tetris, like at the same time.

A counselor shared that the onus of keeping up-to-date with initiatives inside their CAC(s) or the college often falls on the proactivity of the counselor and their desire to stay informed for students' sake:

Actively being informed about changes, I feel like...we change week to week. But just being in the know of updates that are very critical, that impact our students. Because I feel like that directly correlates to their degree completion, and also transfer completion."

Another counselor shared that they have to stay informed about every major, not just the ones within their assigned CAC: "There's those times where maybe you'll meet with the student who's not in your interest area...So we also do have to maintain knowledge of essentially every major."

Counselors, particularly full-time counselors, also have additional responsibilities, sometimes tied to their assigned CAC,

My CAC usually has their own meetings, department meetings, that they invite me to attend, and I go just so I can hear updates. And then, if they have any questions, I provide feedback. And if they have, like any events going on, I try my best to be present in those. I also do like graduation workshops, and also make myself visible there to help students.

The of what is mentioned here appears to boil down to an immense feeling of burnout among counselors. This was a resounding theme in all of the counselor interviews. One counselor shared,

I feel like we're expected to do so much more and be so much more with less and less and less. And I can see it, I can see...the wear and tear it has on my colleagues that we're expected to be a financial aid person. We're expected to be a crisis person. We're expected to be an academic advisor. We're expected to do, oh, well now you have to do all of this and do all of that because this needs to happen. And it just keeps piling up on counseling.

Often, counselors attributed their feelings of being overwhelmed to understaffing issues. Some counselors shared that this sentiment can be "demoralizing" for the department: "It can be demoralizing to feel like we are constantly under-staffed and under-supported and have to fight for positions." One counselor shared that, other than staffing, a solution to the feeling of burnout might be more office time on counselors' schedules: "I'm in my office but I'm eating my lunch, I'm checking my email real quick. Sometimes it does kind of get in the way of me, you know, decompressing...So, what I feel would be helpful is like advocating for not just adjuncts. I'm sure full-timers would love putting an office hour block of email time so that we can just focus on emails." However, one counselor with an hour of office time scheduled on their calendar shared that this was perhaps not enough time for their workload,

It's pretty tough trying to do...multiple CACs at once because the department, meaning CACs, may have some requests...maybe a list of students that they may want to double check about their requirements, and like just following up to make sure they're graduating. And I know we only have, like an hour of office time where we split it up [between CACs]. But then we're also needing to answer emails. And we get multiple emails, either from follow up students that we need to do during our regular sessions, whether it be through drop-in or regular sessions. And then we also get phone calls as well.

Another counselor with a longer tenure in the role describes having established a rhythm and time to squeeze work into their schedule: "So today, I had an hour appointment, but the student didn't show up. So I had an hour, so I will do a bunch of stuff, other stuff. Some appointments that are 30 minutes long will only be 10 minutes or whatever; so, then I'll do a bunch of stuff."

Most counselors touched upon the difficult balance between properly responding to student inquiries, and respecting their own personal time. One adjunct counselor, when discussing the amount of emails they exchange with students outside of appointment times, shared,

Even though I don't get paid for that, it is more of a service to them. Because if we don't get things done in a timely manner...they may not get paid on time. Again, everything's very timely, especially if they are dependent on the income. So I respond throughout the week to a lot of the questions.

Counselors often shared that they were encouraged not to work while “off-contract” (outside of their contracted working hours), but that they often did for students’ sake. One adjunct counselor shared that, even when California changed legislation to allow adjunct faculty to work up to a .85 load, Los Rios opted to keep load capped at 60%.³⁰ This counselor said they would quit their other jobs to focus on their students if they were permitted to work an 85% load.

Several counselors, both adjunct and full-time, shared that they feel they do not have enough time to do the necessary follow-up work with students, such as answering emails and phone calls. In addition, counselors shared that keeping on top of best practices in the office often requires great attention to emails, and that sometimes these emails get overlooked. One counselor shared, “we're informed a lot of the time via email; they send professional development opportunities, upcoming training. And that in itself requires us to be checking our emails and staying up to date and registering for that Zoom Meeting, you know. It's a lot.”

Most counselors felt that a factor contributing to their feelings of burnout is the amount of time allotted to student appointments. While appointments vary in length from 30 minutes to one hour depending on the student’s reason for visiting, counselors shared that most appointments are 30 minutes long without any time between appointments. Researchers observed this in action during drop-in hours, when appointments were limited to even less time (15 minutes). There, counselors saw students back-to-back, eating or drinking in the passing time between appointments. A few counselors shared that they have scheduled office time that is allocated for responding to emails or other administrative tasks, but that often student appointments run over into this time. When asked how they are able to meet students’ needs in a time perceived to be too short, one counselor said,

My simple answer is a follow-up, follow-ups. And again, it's tough, right? Because clinically we're not case management. So meaning we're not like EOPS or TRIO where it's categorical, where you can have a caseload of students where you can constantly follow up. And that is the intent for those programs. But there's also restrictions with how many students they can accept. And we all know that there's a population that goes beyond what they can accept that needs support. A high level of support to assist with, like, wraparound services.

Counselors listed a number of reasons for why they feel 30 minutes is not a sufficient appointment length, including:

³⁰ AB2277, “Community colleges: part-time faculty”, which would have increased the .6 load cap for part-time faculty to .85, was vetoed due to ‘fiscal implications’ and not put into effect.

- Not being able to properly research program requirements for programs outside their area of expertise
- Not being able to get an in-depth understanding of students' goals and plans
- Not being able to establish rapport with students
- Not enough time to review high school transcripts, especially if they were not already submitted
- Not being able to establish multiple education plans when students are undecided
- Not being able to review prior case notes
- Not being able to connect students to wraparound services and/or community resources.

It was also suggested that the CRC Counseling Department may be overburdened by appointments with students from other colleges in the District, who, when unable to find an appointment at their own institution, schedule one with the CRC Department. Researchers did not explore these claims further.

One counselor suggested a compromise, saying:

I think what I learned from the pandemic is the 45-minute sweet spot. I'm not even asking for an hour, but I think 30 minutes is too short, and an hour is what is usually required. So if I had it my way, it would be 45-minute long appointments.

Counselors offered a few other ideas for alleviating some of the stress of appointments. One such idea was employing computer software for evaluating student transcripts. A counselor shared that they have seen this task performed within Admissions & Records at another college, and that they have seen software advertised that might make such a task easier. Of course, researchers also heard that A&R is itself very busy and unlikely to take on new responsibilities. Another solution offered was to tackle some of the workload related to course substitutions and the financial aid overrides. A counselor shared, "I feel like those eat up a lot of our time, where other campuses have...found a solution for that already." At the time of writing this report, researchers heard that a district-wide committee that included counselors was addressing this issue.

Conclusions and Recommendations

At the request of the Counseling Department leadership, a team from the CRC Research & Equity Office developed, implemented, and performed data analysis to document the challenges – such as those spoken above – faced by the CRC Counseling faculty and staff. It also sought to capture the degree to which these challenges largely stem from structural and systemic issues plaguing the Department. That is, researchers operated on the assumption that reports of "student success barriers" experienced by students when interacting with the Department reflect macro-level processes at CRC that may need to be addressed. The findings from this rigorous, intensive qualitative research study yielded a wealth of detailed information that supports this assumption. Here two research participants weigh in on this matter:

There's just turnover, turnover, turnover, because it's too much work with not enough resources behind it... that's on top of [counseling] already being a challenging subject and thing to do. That added layer [of insufficient resources] is always fun.. And at this point, I feel like we're expected to do so much more and be so much more with less and less and less. And I can see it, I can see the wear and tear on people. I mean, we're

expected to be a financial aid person. We're expected to be a crisis person. We're expected to be an academic advisor. We're expected to do all of this and do all of that because this needs to happen. And it just keeps piling up on Counseling.

*There's just so many things happening in higher ed; it's really caused mass turnover, right? People are leaving and going to other places of hire... all the community colleges that I talk to. Everybody's kind of just, like, "I've had enough"... So people have been leaving higher ed or going to other institutions at alarming rates. And so, what I'm realizing is that we're losing so much knowledge... every time I turn around, some high level person is moving on. So, you lose a lot of institutional knowledge when someone who's been there a long time leaves, right? And so, now you're having to train a relatively new workforce all at one time. And then that's how you find out a lot of our processes; like, **the systems** don't talk to each other. Things are antiquated, the communication is poor.*

Both of the testimonies offered above reveal serious issues pertaining to what was regularly flagged as the Counseling Department's "lack of capacity" to make needed improvements. Comments about capacity covered faculty employment and faculty workloads, faculty onboarding, ongoing training, synchronized practices, and integrative case management software. And while members of the Department most readily made budgetary restraints the overarching complication to achieving these matters, they also looked to solutions that were more a matter of *narrowing the scope of counselors' responsibilities*. This admittedly, however, could create new capacity issues for those serving in other CRC departments, like Admissions and Records and Financial Aid.

Recap of Major Findings

Below is a summary of the major research findings outlined throughout this report, including the major issue of capacity in the Department. Recommended solutions are non-exhaustive and take into account possibilities for hiring, reducing responsibility creep, deepening department relationships and internal skills development, and tightening up student case management. Some of these findings are more easily implemented at the local level, while others will likely involve coordination with District stakeholders. One recommended route of action might be to start with the easier, local implementation while continuing district-wide conversations on larger decisions.

Finding #1: Need for Increased Department Capacity

Given the enormous student caseload that counselors must bear and the myriad of activities necessary to execute their jobs effectively, the research team wonders whether it may be possible to revisit the 900:1 student/faculty ratio as the maximum caseload for all counselors. Similarly, to address the need for adjunct faculty to receive ongoing training and to give more time for them to attend to their students' needs, it might be useful to revisit the 0.60 FTE (vs. the 0.85 FTE) limitation for adjunct counselors with the appropriate stakeholders (LRCFT and LRCCD). Researchers recognize that these topics may not be within the control of the college; in that case, other solutions discussed in this report, such as the delineation between counselor and success coach roles, might be viewed with a lens for increasing department capacity. Certainly, to execute any of the other recommendations in this report, the issue of capacity for training and change management would need to be addressed.

Finding #2: Call for Expanded Appointment Lengths

Many counselors attribute small mistakes in working with students' files to the rushed feeling of managing a student's entire history within a 30-minute appointment. One proposed solution is to consider *securing additional full-time and/or adjunct counselors* in order to expand counseling appointments to an improved "sweet spot" of 45 minutes. Anything less than this seems to result in students feeling "intimidated" given the session's "dizzying" nature. However, it is unclear how many new hires would be necessary to allow both for more time per student and for more students to be served overall. Further, it is noted that expanding this appointment period could lead to less time that counselors have to complete other tasks—such as responding to emails and phone calls—that they have in a given day. However, it is possible that the volume of inquiries they receive be reduced with added attention to each student appointment. The downstream repercussions of such a change would need to be considered and trialed. Alternative solutions might be found in the tightening of case management practices outlined in findings 3 and 4 below.

Finding #3: Unclear Delineation of Roles between Success Coaches and Counselors

While the training of success coaches includes clear communication about the boundaries separating their roles from that of counselors, there were many expressions of concern about these lines having become quite blurred. Students often think that consulting with a success coach serves the same purpose as academically and professionally strategizing with a counselor. In the "Welcome to Careers and Academic Communities" video accessible at the Success Coaches link on the CRC Counseling website, some of the words used by the presenters could be interpreted as students having a choice to remain with their "first-year" SSC and receive all of the services they need. It is also problematic that counselors are not always sure as to what success coaches communicate to students. An improved, integrated case management system would certainly help counselors better understand what communications and actions preceded their first encounter with students.

Additionally, the research team imagined an alternative arrangement of the counselor/success coach relationship that could make student case management and the delineation of duties more concrete and effective. This was imagined as intentionally assigning each success coach to a certain number of counselors so as to be sure each party is clear about what role they will play in managing the specific needs of that set of students. Both parties, then, would be following the same case management procedures and utilizing shared case notes. There are a myriad of ways in which this relationship might be clearly delineated, and this is just one for consideration.

Finding #4: Lack of Integrated Student Case Management Technology

CRC Counseling has yet to acquire a technology-based student case management system that best meets its need to not only document in detail counselor-student activity but also to immediately access relevant information involving other CRC departments. In particular, coordinated decision-making and documentation among Counseling, Admissions and Records, and Financial Aid appear to be crucial to helping students settle in at the university and then matriculate in a timely manner. The SARS' notepad feature could serve as an intermittent solution or support if utilized by if counselors, success coaches, and even relevant personnel at Admissions and Records and Financial Aid. By providing the same inter-departmental access to student client information and constructing a uniform format for entering SARS information, case management could be significantly improved. However, there may be other software that handles this much more smoothly. Given that integrated student case management emerged as somewhat haphazard and time-consuming, it would now seem

reasonable to explore the cost effectiveness of shoring up existing software versus purchasing a new software system.

This finding in many ways also addresses the need for better *Cross-Departmental Coordination*. That is, if this coordination is managed more efficiently overall, it would very likely save time usually spent navigating poorly implemented case management software. Additionally, addressing technological challenges within the department may ultimately reduce the time spent during each appointment combing through various platforms to retrieve student information. However, meeting these challenges will require effective, long-term, and time-saving efforts. And this will certainly impact the up-front cost of resources and training in a department that is already at its capacity.

Finding #5: Improvements in Department Climate

The capacity issues described above have led to a deep feeling of overwhelm and burnout among counselors. While counselors do feel they have the opportunity to discuss potential solutions to their capacity issues, the impression is that these conversations can be somewhat circular. Some sort of action, however small, on pervasive issues, might help move the sentiment from exhaustion to progress.

Adjunct counselors and counselors placed in student support services, in particular, feel the additional burden of feeling isolated from the rest of the group. They are not often able to attend the aforementioned department meetings where discussions take place about alleviating workload and barriers to student success. This can intensify the inherent feelings of otherness felt by adjunct faculty. It has and will be difficult to find a meeting time that works for all schedules, particularly when adjunct faculty need other employment to sustain a living. Some effort to integrate these faculty, or to compensate for their ongoing professional development and participation in the department, might help partially alleviate these sentiments. One faculty member described not feeling like they were even encouraged to apply for full-time positions, to the point that the action felt futile. Making the internal professional development path clear to adjunct faculty is imperative to retention and morale.

Additionally, though there was mention of some diversity within the Counseling Department compared to other departments on campus, there remains underrepresentation of certain groups. Ensuring that all faculty members feel supported in their individual needs and in their efforts to represent the voices of students who are similar to them was a direct ask from counselors. This is a topic that merits further discussion as a department.

Finally, while the research team received no outright descriptions of lack of trust between success coaches and counseling faculty, they heard rumblings that not all such relationships were positive ones. Ensuring that trust exists between these two groups of employees is imperative to addressing the delineation of duties between them. Success coaches and counselors both serve essential roles in assisting students, and clear communication and relationship building are vital to this shared goal.

Research Caveats

The research team set out ***to investigate the structural and systemic issues that may be contributing to the barriers students report experiencing at the CRC Counseling Department and to utilize the findings to craft recommendations for future department planning and management.*** The findings from this research are limited by the scope and methodology of the project and, therefore, should not be generalized beyond the institution without consideration for CRC's context as a community college

situated within a four-campus district in north-central California, and with its own unique experiences with processes, management, and technology implementation. Importantly, this research makes no claims about best practices in counseling or advising ethics, such as best practices for advising students on decisions related to their career or life planning. Rather, the research's focus is on the systems, structures, and framework put in place to support counselors in that work.

Because this research stemmed from existing quantitative and qualitative research with CRC students, no additional feedback was solicited from students in the course of this project. Receiving such feedback could be recommended as the next steps for the research findings. The objective here would be to examine whether any resultant changes to systems or processes could have a positive impact on the student experience with CRC Counseling. Similarly, this research makes no claims about causality; no experimental studies were conducted to test the claims that any proposed solutions would indeed have positive effects on CRC students' experiences navigating campus systems.

Finally, the research team took great lengths to reduce biases in their interpretation of the data. However, there are always known and unknown biases at play in any given interaction in life, including institutional research. While the research team consisted of one full-time and one part-time faculty member, who identify as college-educated cisgender White and cisgender African American women, it is possible that their social positionalities influenced the rapport built in interviews or the data interpretation. Both researchers are highly trained to be aware of their biases in this work. To the extent possible, both researchers attended most interviews in order to reduce any interpretation bias. There is also the possibility of self-selection bias of the research participants. For example, counseling staff and faculty with greater issues with the Department's workload could have self-selected to participate at a higher rate; however, given that the researchers ultimately sampled 70% of the department, this possibility is unlikely to bear significant weight on the findings.