

Unit-Based Student Success Teams: Transforming Community Colleges One Milestone at a Time

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Introduction

Located in the Inland Empire in California and as one of the two colleges of the San Bernardino Community College District, Crafton Hills College is designated as a “small-sized” community college—enrolling over 6,600 unique credit students in fall 2024 (Sosa, 2024). Like many of California’s community colleges, they serve students from diverse social contexts and backgrounds. Also like many higher education institutions nationally, Crafton Hills College adopted a variety of initiatives in attempts to better foster greater educational access, success, and equity, such as Student Equity Planning and Guided Pathways. A growing body of scholarship has explored the role that academic advising, counseling, and/or coaching services can play in improving student outcomes, particularly within the community college context (Feygin et al, 2022; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Karp et al., 2021; Valentine & Price, 2023). They highlight the value of comprehensive and proactive support services that meet students’ needs inside and outside the classroom. The value added of such approaches is important given the historical, structural, and systemic inequities experienced by the United States’ community college system. However, much is still to be learned about the approaches to advising/counseling/coaching services that are most impactful for students, for which students, and at what points/stage in their educational and career trajectories.

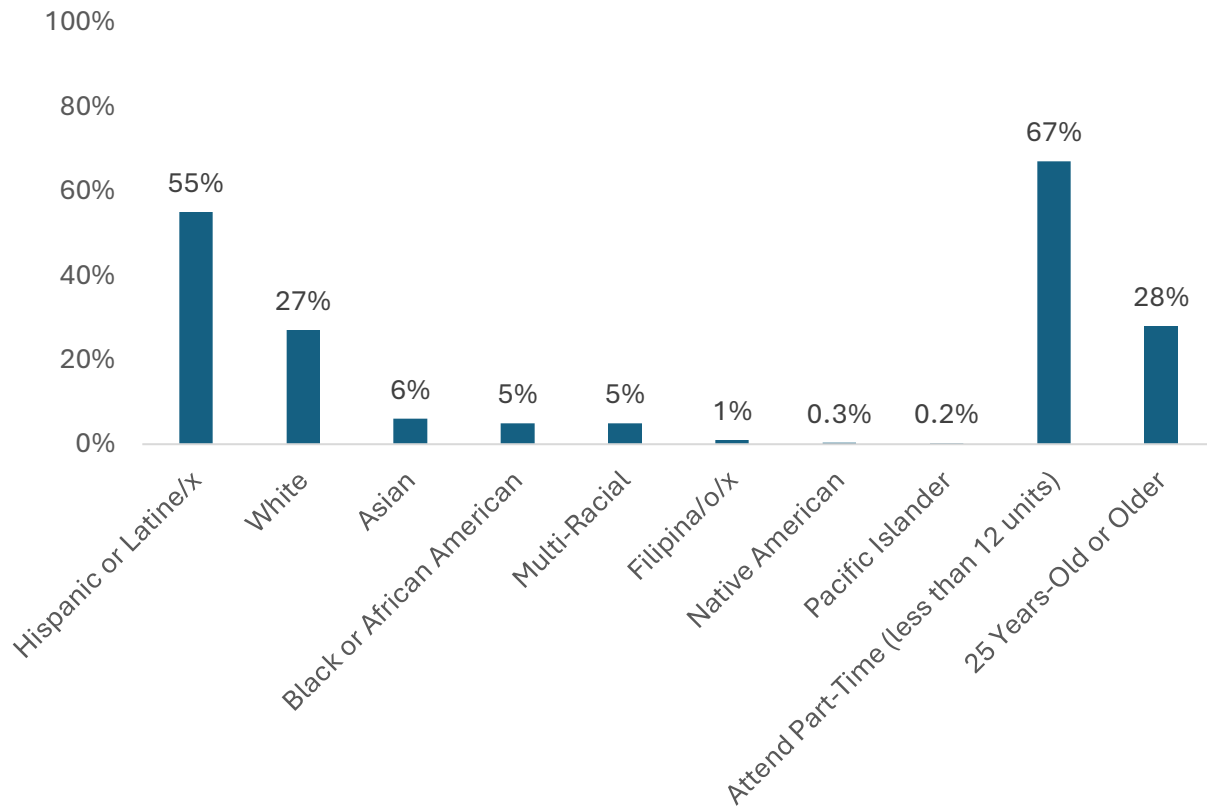
In winter/spring of 2025, the UCLA research team worked alongside practitioners and students at Crafton Hills College to better understand counseling and support services and how they can be improved to foster student success and equity. The information generated in this report is the result of 15 semi-structured 1-on-1 interviews with administrators, classified professionals, completion coaches, and counselors.

The results also represent the perspectives and voices of nine semi-structured one-on-one or group interviews with students. The UCLA research team generated analytic memos after each interview and reviewed these documents in the generation of this report. They also collected internal and external institutional documents to support their understanding and analysis of the educational contexts, practices, and policies at Crafton Hills College.

Building on existing educational practices and programs at Crafton Hills College, the Counseling team collaboratively designed an innovative approach to counseling and student services. They combined effective strategies from prior initiatives with emerging insights into student needs and patterns and adopted **Unit-Based Student Success Teams**. This document details the elements of how student-facing practitioners developed and implemented Unit-Based Student Success Teams to respond to students’ needs. Through shared ownership and this culture of iterative problem-solving, practitioners transformed how they could positively impact students, address equity gaps, support students’ college and career trajectories, and provide proactive, data-informed, and timely support to students. First, we **define Unit-Based Student Success Teams**. Next, we **identify and describe the roles of different core leaders** in the Unit-Based Student Success Teams approach. We follow that by **describing the core activities that supported effective implementation** of this approach. Finally, **we close with a vision for future implementation**.

Background and Context

Enrolling over 6,000 unique students, more than half of students at Crafton Hills College identified as Hispanic or Latine/x (55%). In fall 2024, nearly two-thirds of credit students were enrolled part-time (less than 12 units). The average age of students was 23.5 years old.



Like many California community colleges, the college administration is broken down by four broad functional areas: Administrative Services, Instruction, Student Services, and Institutional Advancement & Foundation. The Student Services wing is overseen by the Vice President of Student Services (VPSS). The VPSS has two Dean of Student Services. One Dean of Student Services & Counseling oversees the University Transfer Center & Career Center, General Counseling Services, Student Accessibility Services (SAS), Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), Cooperative Agencies Resource for Education (CARE), California Work Opportunities & Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs), NextUp, DREAMers Scholars Program, and Health and Wellness Center. The other dean oversees the Veterans Resource Center, Financial Aid & Scholarships, Outreach & Partnerships, Dual Enrollment, and Admissions & Records. The activities described in this technical report that detail the development and implementation of the Unit-Based Student Success Teams were primary under the supervision of the Dean of Student Services & Counseling, who oversaw Counseling Services.

Defining Unit-Based Student Success Teams

Unit-Based Student Success Teams is a student-centered and “equity by design” approach that intentionally structures various counseling and support services to community college students based on the number of credit units that students have completed. In California, completion of 60 credit units is a common credit unit threshold to fulfill general education, completion, and/or vertical transfer requirements. As such, Unit-Based Student Success Teams is an educational practice that is **guided by the idea that students, particularly those who are transfer-seeking, at different credit unit ranges will likely require different forms of college and career guidance**. As a student shared:

I want to transfer to a four-year [college]. So, every time I went to a Counseling office, I just want to make sure, am I doing a good job on transferring? And they make sure or they'll ask me again, 'which school I want to go to...' They want to make sure all the classes I'm taking are meeting the requirement for the school I want to go to... They give me the confidence of what am I doing.

This provides a foundation and minimum expectation of activities for both students and practitioners to work on together to ensure that students achieve their educational and career goals.

Core Goals	Core Leaders	Core Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fostering student success and equity via counseling and student services Allocating resources in a more efficient, equitable, data-informed, and proactive manner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrators Classified Professionals Completion Coaches Counselors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal collaboration and consensus building College and career guidance along students' educational journey Data-informed practices and supportive technologies Proactive engagement Peer support and workshops Professional learning and development

Parallels of The Unit-Based Student Success Teams Approach

- This is in contrast to how many community colleges have historically implemented counseling and student services where students are often expected to take initiative to meet with institutional agents. Often, students in community colleges may only meet with counselors at the beginning of their educational journey as part of orientation or if they are on academic notice due to their academic progress.
- However, this proactive approach is similar to how some high schools in California may structure their counseling services to students; high school students may have designated counselors during 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grade, respectively.

Core Leaders of Unit-Based Student Success Teams

The core leaders involved in actualizing Unit-Based Student Success Teams include counselors, completion coaches, administrators, and classified professionals. The development and implementation of the Unit-Based Student Success Teams approach at Crafton Hills College was a grassroots and practitioner-led effort. The initiative originated from the Transfer Center Faculty Coordinator, who raised concerns to the Counseling Department Chair about the lack of a systematic process to engage students early, specifically those with excess units who had not yet applied for transfer. Afterwards, a small working group formed that included the Transfer Center, General Counseling, and classified staff within those areas to brainstorm a unit-based approach. Informed by data, they found inequities in counseling practices and outcomes. Over time, the working group expanded to include Career Center Faculty Coordinator, Counseling Co-Chairs, Classified Administrative Assistant, the Dean of Student Services & Counseling, and the Vice President of Student Services.

Institutional partnerships, both on campus and external, played a critical role in the development, implementation, and institutionalization of the Unit-Based Student Success Team model at Crafton Hills College.

On campus, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Research, and Planning served as a primary partner by providing the data infrastructure necessary to guide decision-making. The research office worked closely with counseling and student services leadership to compile student-level data, develop dashboards, and identify key student populations requiring proactive outreach and support. Their work enabled the college to engage in data-informed decision-making, monitor progress toward key student success milestones, and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions aligned with the Unit-Based Student Success Team model.

Off campus, several institutional partners provided critical funding, evaluation, and technical assistance to support both implementation and long-term sustainability. The Kresge Foundation provided initial seed funding to support the hiring and implementation of completion coaches, enabling the college to pilot and refine this component of the model. Listen4Good served as an external evaluation partner and supported the college in conducting a structured assessment of the completion coach program. Through student feedback collection, survey analysis, and program evaluation, this partnership generated evidence demonstrating the positive impact of completion coaches on student engagement and access to support services. The findings from this study played a key role in informing the college's decision to institutionalize the completion coach positions following the conclusion of the initial seed funding.

Additionally, Growing Inland Achievement (GIA) provided ongoing technical assistance to support implementation and continuous improvement. GIA's support included facilitating process mapping, guiding strategic planning efforts, and assisting with program assessment to strengthen the

structure, effectiveness, and sustainability of the Unit-Based Student Success Team model. These external partnerships provided critical financial resources, technical expertise, and evaluation support that enabled Crafton Hills College to pilot, refine, and ultimately institutionalize key components of this equity-focused student success model.

Transformational change requires cross-departmental collaboration. The job titles and the number of individual members needed to execute the Unit-Based Student Success Teams approach may vary across local contexts and colleges. In this report, we elevate core leaders that were deeply involved in the development and implementation of this approach at Crafton Hills College.

Counselors

Instructional faculty counselors serve as the primary providers of academic counseling, career guidance, and transfer support within the Unit-Based Student Success Team model. They work directly with students to develop comprehensive educational plans, clarify academic and career goals, and ensure students understand the requirements necessary for degree completion and transfer. Through individualized counseling appointments, instructional faculty counselors help students navigate their academic journey, identify a major or career field of interest, make informed decisions about coursework and majors, and stay on track toward their educational and career objectives. Their work provides the academic foundation and long-term planning necessary to support student success, persistence, and timely completion.

Since completion of 60 credit units is a common credit unit threshold to fulfill general education, completion, and/or vertical transfer requirements in California, Crafton Hills College used this number to organize their full-time counselors. At Crafton Hills College, **half of the full-time counselors are assigned to be primarily meeting with students within the 0-29 credit unit range, and the other half are assigned to be primarily meeting with students within the 30+ credit units.** These unit-based assignments are used to guide proactive outreach efforts. Completion coaches, who are responsible for conducting targeted outreach campaigns to connect students with counseling services, use students' unit counts to determine which counselor to schedule appointments with. This structure helps ensure that students are connected with counselors who are best positioned to provide timely, developmentally, appropriate guidance based on their stage in their educational journey.

Counselors played an instrumental role in conceptualizing how a Unit-Based Student Success Teams approach could be developed and implemented at Crafton Hills College. As student-facing practitioners who interact with students frequently, they are positioned to be understanding and directly responsive to students' needs. At Crafton Hills College, the Unit-Based Student Success Teams approach was a grassroots effort. By drawing on the wealth of knowledge of counselors, this structured approach ensures personalized, ongoing support for students at various stages of their educational journey.

This structured system provides flexibility and does **not** limit counselors who are assigned to students in 0-29 credit unit range strictly to be able to meet with students in this unit range. Additionally, when doing walk-ins or scheduling appointments, students are not limited by which

counselors they are able to meet and are still able to request specific counselors. Given that the college counseling profession is often under-resourced, this is particularly relevant during high-traffic times where counselors who are assigned within the 0-29 credit unit range often times meet with students within the 30 and above credit unit range, and vice versa (i.e., counselors who are assigned to be primarily meeting with students with 30+ credit units can meet with students with less than 30 units). For example, during peak periods in spring 2025, 92% of counseling meetings involved counselors meeting with students outside of their unit range, compared to 38% during non-peak periods.

After Crafton Hills College adopted Unit-Based Student Success Teams, the number of student counseling appointments increased by 1,835 between spring 2021 and spring 2025. Students who have experienced counseling services both before and after the adoption of Unit-Based Student Success Teams reported more satisfaction with these changes. Counselors also make strategic and intentional efforts to provide college and career-related support to students that are customized and timely, based on where students are in their educational journey. In addition, at Crafton Hills College, there are two full-time counselors that each operate as career and transfer coordinators, respectively.

As of Fall 2025, Crafton Hills College employed 9 full-time counselors and 12 part-time counselors within the General Counseling, Career, and Transfer departments. Adjusting for part-time counselor workload, this represents approximately 14.4 full-time equivalent (FTE) counselors, resulting in an estimated student-to-counselor ratio of approximately 515:1 within these core counseling service areas. This ratio reflects the staffing structure directly responsible for providing academic counseling, educational planning, career guidance, and transfer support. The effectiveness of this model is strengthened by the integration of completion coaches and classified professionals, who expand the college's capacity through early alert response, proactive outreach, and administrative support. This coordinated, team-based approach ensures students receive timely academic guidance while enabling counselors to focus on helping students successfully navigate their pathway toward degree completion and transfer.

Completion Coaches

Completion coaches are part-time paraprofessionals at the college who play a complementary role by supporting proactive engagement and early intervention efforts. Completion coaches are Crafton Hills College alumni in their first or second year at a four-year university after successfully transferring, and they provide peer-informed support to students navigating the college process. Under the Unit-Based Student Success Teams approach, the completion coaches are assigned to credit unit ranges: 0-14, 15-29, 30-44, and 45+. They provide support to the full-time counselors and act as a bridge between students and the resources that are essential for their success.

Completion coaches monitor and respond to early alerts submitted through the college's Starfish student success platform, conducting timely outreach to students who may be experiencing academic or other challenges. They assist students with scheduling counseling appointments, navigating administrative processes, registration support, and connect them to campus resources. While they are not authorized to provide academic counseling to students, they are able to meet with

students one-on-one to support them with administrative, logistical, and technical challenges that students may experience along their educational journey, such as matters related to paperwork to change their majors, and filling out applications for vertical transfer, financial aid, and graduation. They are available to meet with students one-on-one virtually or in-person, and they take walk-in appointments.

Completion coaches also work alongside faculty across multiple disciplines. One way they do this is through the coordinated use of Starfish where they assist faculty with monitoring student progress in real time. In addition to this digital coordination, the completion coaches engage directly with faculty to provide brief in-class presentations on counseling and support services. These presentations are strategically timed, for example, when institutional data indicates that a significant proportion of students in a given course are approaching 60 completed units, coaches contact faculty to request classroom time to discuss transfer planning and next steps.

They also, in collaboration with the transfer and career coordinators, host workshops for students on various topics, such as interpreting financial aid, funding and award letters, and next steps for students after they have applied or been accepted for vertical transfer. By addressing logistical barriers and providing early intervention, completion coaches help ensure students receive timely academic counseling and remain engaged with the support services necessary for degree completion and transfer. Student workers further support this coordinated effort by maintaining front office operations, assisting with appointment scheduling, and answering department phone calls, ensuring students can easily access counseling services.

Administrators

The Crafton Hills College Counseling Department is overseen by the Dean of Student Services & Counseling, who is responsible for leading several departments on campus focused on student retention and completion. The departments include General Counseling, the Career & Transfer Center, the Extended Opportunity Programs & Services (EOPS), the Cooperative Agencies Resource for Education (CARE), the California Work Opportunities & Responsibilities to Kids program (CalWORKs), the NextUp Program, the DREAMers Scholars Program, Student Accessibility Services (SAS), Student Health, the Summer Bridge program, and Student Conduct. Reporting directly to the Dean of Student Services and Counseling, the Counseling Department also includes two co-chairs whose primary responsibilities include supporting the Dean, extracting the relevant student lists and distributing them to completion coaches, training the counselors, and working with various campus partners to ensure that counseling services at Crafton Hills College meet the needs of the students and communities.

Classified Professionals

Classified professionals play a critical role in supporting the implementation and daily operations of the Unit-Based Student Success Team model by providing operational leadership, direct student support, and coordination across key student success initiatives. They work closely with the co-chairs of Counseling and Career Services and report directly to the Dean of Student Services & Counseling. Crafton Hills College employs four classified professionals whose responsibilities are

aligned with ensuring students receive timely access to counseling services and career and transfer support.

One classified professional oversees the General Counseling front desk operations and supervises student workers, ensuring efficient appointment scheduling, front-line student assistance, and consistent access to counseling services. This role is essential in maintaining the structure and flow of daily counseling operations and serving as a primary point of contact for students seeking support.

A second classified professional focuses on supporting students on Academic Notice (formerly known as Academic Probation). This individual conducts targeted outreach, helps students understand academic standing requirements, and connects them with counseling and support services to promote academic recovery and persistence.

The third classified professional serves as the college's job developer, working directly with students to support major and career exploration, connect students with employment opportunities, and facilitate job placement. This role also helps students understand the connection between their academic pathways and career goals, reinforcing the alignment between education and workforce outcomes.

The fourth classified professional provides direct supervision and coordination for the completion coaches and supports broader Career and Transfer Center initiatives. This includes organizing university field trips, coordinating student workshops, and facilitating visits from employer and university representatives. This role ensures that students have access to experiential learning opportunities and timely information to support successful transfer and career transitions.

Collectively, classified professionals provide the operational infrastructure and targeted student support necessary to sustain proactive engagement, streamline service delivery, and strengthen coordination across counseling, career, and transfer services. Their work is essential to ensuring the effectiveness and scalability of the Unit-Based Student Success Team model.

Core Activities of Unit-Based Student Success Teams

The development and implementation of Unit-Based Student Success Teams at Crafton Hills College was a multi-year, iterative process that took approximately four years to fully design, pilot, and institutionalize. Initial conversations began in 2021, when counseling faculty and administrators reviewed internal data and identified gaps in student engagement and completion milestones, particularly among students who had accumulated units but had not yet applied for transfer or completed key academic requirements. From 2021 through 2023, a cross-functional working group developed student journey maps, defined unit-based milestones, and aligned counseling practices and outreach strategies. Pilot implementation began in phases during the 2022–2023 academic year, alongside the hiring and training of Completion Coaches in January 2023. By the 2024–2025 academic year, the model was fully operational, supported by strategic planning calendars,

proactive outreach campaigns, and integrated use of student success technologies such as Starfish early alert flags.

Crafton Hills College recognizes that implementation is not a fixed endpoint, but an ongoing, iterative process. The college continues to engage in cycles of continuous improvement, regularly reviewing data, refining practices, and incorporating feedback from counselors, completion coaches, faculty, and students. To formalize this work, the college has incorporated principles of Improvement Science to guide refinement and decision-making. Improvement Science is a structured approach to organizational learning that emphasizes identifying a specific problem of practice, testing small-scale changes through rapid Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles, analyzing data in real time, and scaling strategies that demonstrate measurable impact. Rather than relying on one-time reforms, this methodology encourages disciplined inquiry, collective learning, and adaptation based on evidence.

As a result, the meaning of “full implementation” will continue to evolve. Unit-Based Student Success Teams are continuously strengthened through intentional testing, reflection, and recalibration to ensure that practices remain responsive to student needs, reduce equity gaps, and improve outcomes over time.

Internal Collaboration and Consensus Building

As with any transformative change effort, it is vital to generate broad buy-in across one’s local context. Since Unit-Based Student Success Teams were a fundamental shift in how the college had historically provided counseling and student services, **core leaders had to generate broad buy-in, particularly among those who would be affected most: counselors.** There was increased credibility and authenticity to this innovative approach because the Unit-Based Student Success Teams approach was initially conceptualized and developed by counselors who recognized variations and limitations of their current approach to supporting students. A small group of counselors and classified professionals collaborated to reimagine how counseling and student services could function within a unit-based framework, working with administrators to secure the necessary resources and support.

Inevitably, any organization going through changes to their status quo—no matter how well-intended or evidence-based—will have its detractors. There will be misunderstandings, misconceptions, and tensions not only around whether Unit-Based Student Success Teams should be adopted or if it is an effective or equitable practice, but also around its definition and implementation. Developing buy-in takes communication, time, patience, and working alongside key constituents to understand and incorporate people’s perspectives on how to best center students’ educational experiences. As one of the administrators mentioned:

We had to get a lot of buy-in... What does a completion coach do? What does a counselor do? ... There are union contracts and everything like that. Some of our biggest detractors from the Counseling team, we actually invited them to become trainers because they brought up great points like privacy issues, counseling issues, so we actually flipped the script and said, “Those are all really good points. Like, can you train our completion coaches on these issues?” And, like immediately, it turned them into an ally.

At Crafton Hills College, counselors' tenure at the institution ranged widely, reflecting both organizational continuity and recent growth. Some counselors had been hired within the past two years as part of the college's expansion of student support services, while others had served the institution for more than 10 to 20 years. This combination of newer and highly experienced counselors strengthened implementation by bringing both fresh perspectives and deep institutional knowledge to the development of the Unit-Based Student Success Team model.

The development of the Unit-Based Student Success Team was a natural progression to how they would provide counseling and support services to students based on ongoing conversations among counselors, current/past practices, and findings from data. In the past, they had first-year experience programs that acknowledged the differential experiences of students at different points in their student journey. During this redesign, they saw the power of how customized and timely guidance for students could be an effective practice in smaller-scale student support service programs.

Additionally, the Counseling department knew that students in the 15-45 unit range—those who were in between completing new student orientation and nearing completion/graduation/transfer—would have differing levels of engagement with counseling and student support services. **The department also knew that there were longstanding equity gaps and that to address them, they needed to make changes.** As such, when Unit-Based Student Success Teams were proposed, many counselors were open to adopting this practice. For counselors who were skeptical, this required **actively listening to understand what their concerns were and maintaining an open dialogue of the potential and actualized benefits and challenges of Unit-Based Student Success Teams.** This also meant bringing in other partners, such as the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Research & Planning and Technology Services, to understand and build the necessary data and technology infrastructure to support this unit-based structure.

A major piece of fostering greater collaboration and consensus on the value of Unit-Based Student Success Teams involved the act of co-constructing student journey maps. Drawing upon the counselors' extensive experiences and knowledge from working alongside students, the Counseling department collaborated to identify key milestones along most students' educational journey. In other words, they identified a foundation and minimum expectation of activities that students and practitioners should engage in at each credit unit milestone to support progress toward educational goals. The development of these **key credit unit milestones involved identifying concrete action items for students to complete while they are at the four different stages of their educational journey—between 0-14 credit units, 15-29 credit units, 30-44 credit units, and 45+ credit units.** While most counselors intuitively knew what students needed to complete at different stages of students' educational journey, **the act of coming together and concretely co-constructing those key credit unit milestones was helpful for Crafton Hills College to not only envision a more directed, cohesive, and consistent counseling and student services experience for students, but was also a means of generating buy-in.** The success of transforming Crafton Hills College's counseling and student services approach stems from shared ownership and a culture of iterative problem-solving.

College and Career Guidance Along Students' Educational Journey

Unit-Based Student Success Teams work towards providing students with strategic college and career guidance at various points along students' educational journey so that they have cohesive and consistent experiences with counseling and student services. While the assignment of counselors and completion coaches to specific credit unit ranges provides an operational framework of how human resources are allocated within the department, Crafton Hills College also needed to identify the types of activities, content, materials, and outcomes that they wanted students and practitioners to cover. This included **defining the scope of college and career guidance that would likely be provided at different credit unit ranges, creating an annual strategic planning calendar with actionable and measurable activities for counselors and completion coaches, and creating a bookmark flyer with a checklist of "to-do" items for students and practitioners for each of the different credit unit ranges.**

Since counselors were primarily assigned to meet with students between 0-29 credit units or 30+ credit units, Crafton Hills College had to define the scope of college and career guidance that counselors would likely have to cover. Student journey mapping significantly supported this process. As such, it was established that **counselors primarily assigned to meet with students in the 0-29 credit unit range would tend to focus on matriculation, educational planning, career guidance, getting connected and building community. Counselors primarily assigned to meet with students with 30+ credit units would tend to focus on completion, graduation, transfer, and job development services.** Completion coaches, depending on their credit unit range assignment, would support counselors and students.

To concretely document and institutionalize the scope of college and career guidance that would be covered for students at different credit unit ranges, Crafton Hills College **created a Strategic Planning Calendar for counselors and completion coaches. This included mapping four actionable and measurable activities to support students in the 0-29 credit unit range and six actionable and measurable activities to support students in the 30+ credit unit range for the Unit-Based Student Success Teams to work on each month.** This included activities such as, ensuring that students in the 0-14 credit unit range have a comprehensive educational plan, that students in the 15-29 credit unit range have declared a major, that students in the 30+ credit unit range have enrolled in the Transfer Canvas shell, and that students in the 45-60 credit unit range will be contacted about completing a graduation or transfer check.

As another means to document and institutionalize how college and career guidance would be implemented under a Unit-Based Student Success Teams approach, Crafton Hills College created a bookmark flyer that included a checklist of "to-do" items for students at each of the four-unit ranges. This bookmark flyer was distributed to students but was also helpful to guide and orient the types of conversations that counselors would have with students. To be clear, this would **not** limit what types of conversations that counselors could have with students—as counselors are adaptive to meet students where they are at within counseling appointments. As famously reported and adopted in hospitals, the power of checklists to set expectations, establish shared language, and improve performance was in effect (Gawande, 2009).

Data-Informed Practices and Supportive Technologies

Unit-Based Student Success Teams is a conceptual and operational infrastructure that both supports and is supported by a data-informed approach to being student-centered and addressing equity gaps. At Crafton Hills College, the Counseling department partnered with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Research & Planning and Technology Services to construct and generate relevant data and information to support implementation of Unit-Based Student Success Teams. These data and information help inform the practices, such as how and when proactive engagement should take place, as well as how supportive education technologies need to be developed. These systems integrate with the college's early alert platform, allowing completion coaches to receive timely notifications from instructional faculty and initiate outreach to students needing additional support.

As part of student journey mapping, the counselors at Crafton Hills College collaborated and agreed upon a foundation and minimum expectations for students/practitioners. When they documented and institutionalized these key credit unit milestones, they **identified concrete actionable and measurable activities for counselors, completion coaches, and students to work on together**. By doing so, this helped **enhance the college's culture of engaging in data-informed practices by creating data metrics that are part of the department's program review, strategic planning, and program evaluation processes**. These data metrics are also set up in the educational technologies that the college has adopted. So, for example, when counselors or completion coaches meet with students, they are able to capture and identify which key credit milestones students have completed. Additionally, their education technologies are also connected to instructional practices as instructional faculty have the ability to provide direct comments and referrals to students and other practitioners about students' academic progress throughout the semester. The college also has **developed data dashboards to document and track students' course success rates and administer student surveys to better their experiences with the Unit-Based Student Success Teams model**.

Proactive Engagement

Intertwined and oftentimes guided by data-informed practices and supportive technologies, Unit-Based Student Success Teams take steps to proactively engage with students. Since the adoption of Unit-Based Student Success Teams, there has been a shift between counselors having a less "reactive" mindset in supporting students to a more "proactive" one at Crafton Hills College. Proactive engagement can take shape in different ways by both completion coaches and counselors. As one counselor shared:

One of our completion coaches [scheduled a student to meet with a counselor]... The student went to get accommodations, [but] the student didn't have a report for one of their classes... So, I was able to come to the student accessibility services to get them approved back. So, I truly believe that this [model] has been transformational for students, because instead of being reactive, there's a more proactive approach to counseling.

A cornerstone of Crafton Hills College’s data-informed approach is the development and use of a Strategic Planning Calendar, which has been integrated into the annual summer retreats of the Counseling Department for the past three years. The **Strategic Planning Calendar documents critical institutional and statewide deadlines, such as California State University (CSU)/University of California (UC) transfer application periods, registration start dates, and graduation petition timelines, while also embedding data from the prior year’s counseling appointment fill rates. By pairing key academic milestones with historical utilization trends, the calendar provides a dual lens: identifying when students are most likely to need support and anticipating potential gaps in access to counseling services.** During summer retreats, counselors, classified professionals, and coaches collectively review the Strategic Planning Calendar to identify peak periods for proactive outreach.

The Strategic Planning Calendar directly informs the design of targeted completion “campaigns” led by the completion coaches. Completion coaches launch campaigns aimed at students who are missing critical unit-based milestones (e.g., Student Education Plan completion, approaching transfer readiness status, or graduation petition completion). As part of these campaigns, completion coaches contact students through multiple modalities, such as phone, email, text, and social media, to encourage timely action and, when necessary, schedule counseling appointments on their behalf. Completion coaches also manage the follow-up process for early alerts, coordinating with referred department to ensure students receive the right interventions at the right time. Given how frequent administrative burdens can prevent students, particularly students of color, from achieving their educational goals (Gándara et al., 2024), completion coaches have been instrumental to student success and equity. They provide an additional layer of support for counselors by navigating the front-end administrative and technical work with students, such as navigating forms and processes, and connecting students to campus resources. As one student noted:

Whether it be like transfer counselors or just counselors in general...it was again, mostly just making sure I had everything ‘in line,’—that everything looked good... what I should apply for, deadlines that I need to make and, you know, what to expect throughout the summer, what I need to do with regards to figuring out housing in the future and jobs and stuff like that.

With key credit unit milestones embedded in their education technologies, counselors at Crafton Hills College can monitor and review students’ progress along their educational journey prior to meeting with students. Additionally, instructional faculty are connected to these technologies and can send proactive comments and referrals to the appropriate counseling and student services office as students progress through their academic journey. This allows counselors to prepare and proactively guide students to ensure that they are able to engage in important conversations that will help shape their college and career decisions and trajectories. Additionally, counselors are often grateful for the foundational piece of proactive engagement that is frequently executed by completion coaches. As one counselor shared:

I would just like to say that the completion coaches are a great addition to this college. They are the bridge from the staff to the student to the college. They are that perfect in the middle spot. They enhance the community building on campus.

The process resembles preventive healthcare models, where providers proactively engage patients for check-ups rather than waiting for patients to initiate care. By similarly adopting a proactive stance, the Counseling Department has alleviated historic “peaks and valleys” of student demand, such as long lines during registration or graduation seasons, while fostering a steadier, more sustainable flow of student engagement throughout the year. This intentional management of student traffic has not only reduced counselors’ workload but has also created a more positive and equitable student experience. Ultimately, the integration of the Strategic Planning Calendar and campaigns underscores how Unit-Based Student Success Teams at Crafton Hills College operationalize a data-informed, proactive counseling model that increases access and ensures students remain “on track” to reach their academic and career goals.

Peer Support and Workshops

The Unit-Based Student Success Teams model takes advantage of the positionalities of both counselors and completion coaches to provide peer support and workshops for students. As recent alumni of Crafton Hills College, completion coaches can provide more accessible peer support for students and provide another point of contact for students to receive relevant information about college and careers. The primary role of completion coaches is to be available to connect with students in a variety of accessible ways—in 1-on-1 settings, in group settings via workshops, and in virtual and in-person modalities.

Completion coaches work with key institutional agents across campus to advertise their peer support and workshops. They also, in collaboration with the transfer and career coordinators, host workshops on various topics a few times a month. The workshops are optional events for students and are facilitated by the completion coaches who are tasked with creating the workshop topics. The goal of the workshops is to support students through every step of the process. They are structured as both a presentation and a community building event where students can gather to eat, get informed, and connect with the coaches and counselors that are in attendance. It is an additional opportunity for the completion coaches to make connections with students outside of phone calls, emails, text messages, and social media.

Attendance varies and some of the more popular workshops, such as “Me and My Major,” the workshop for students who have not declared a major for example, can have 40 to 60 attendees. For smaller workshops, attendance is typically between 15 to 20 students. There are application workshops for students that need assistance with a CSU or UC application. There is a “Show Me the Money” workshop which guides students through their funding and awards letters, an “I’ve Applied, What’s Next” workshop meant for students who need assistance with next steps after they’ve submitted their applications, and an “I’ve Been Admitted, What’s Next” workshop for students to get information about what they need to do once they’re accepted and are getting ready to transfer. Other workshops cover topics such as stress management, mental health, and financial literacy. As one student mentioned:

I attended a lot of workshops...one of my favorites was financial wellness. They would also ask us, hey, is there anything that you guys would like us to have workshops on? So it wouldn't

just be, okay, we're going to provide you workshops, they would also ask us for our input on some type of workshops that we would want to see. And then that kind of helped out a lot, too, you know? Like, a lot. Because a lot of us didn't know what financial planning was.

Professional Learning and Development

The adoption of Unit-Based Student Success Teams has also invited new opportunities to strengthen and align existing professional learning/development efforts. Crafton Hills College had already established standing professional learning/development sessions every two weeks for both full-time and part-time counselors. These sessions have served as a consistent space to support counselor growth, collaboration, and alignment in serving students. With the implementation of Unit-Based Student Success Teams, these biweekly sessions have taken on an expanded and more intentional role in ensuring that counselors are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and shared practices needed to effectively support students within this structured model.

Biweekly professional development sessions for counselors focused on ensuring consistency, building shared practices, and strengthening capacity to support students within the unit-based model. Key topics included:

- Understanding the Unit-Based Student Success Team framework and counselor/coach roles by unit range
- Student journey mapping and defining milestones across credit unit ranges (0–14, 15–29, 30–44, and 45+)
- Use of student success technologies, including Starfish for early alerts, progress tracking, and proactive outreach
- Data interpretation and use of dashboards to identify students needing intervention
- Development and implementation of proactive outreach campaigns aligned with the Strategic Planning Calendar
- Best practices for educational planning, transfer readiness, and graduation planning
- Equity-focused counseling practices and strategies to address equity gaps
- Effective communication and collaboration between counselors, completion coaches, classified professionals, and instructional faculty
- FERPA, privacy, and ethical considerations in student support coordination
- Transfer requirements, CSU/UC admissions updates, and career readiness pathways
- Workshop facilitation skills and strategies for engaging students in group settings

These sessions provided a consistent forum for aligning practices, sharing lessons learned, and refining implementation strategies.

Core Activities in Action

One of the major strategic college and career activities that the Unit-Based Student Success Teams included as a key credit unit milestone was having students have a Comprehensive Student Education Plan (SEP). Comprehensive SEPs are official counselor-approved documents that students and counselors work on together. SEPs detail what courses students need to take and when they should take them to achieve their educational goal. While students are not bound to stick with their education plans—and they change often for a variety of reasons, such as course availability and scheduling or changes in majors—prior research and evaluation has highlighted that students who have an education plan early in their educational journey are more likely to experience vertical transfer (Bailey et al., 2007; Hayward, 2011). Counselors also purport the value of the education plan, as one counselor shares:

The educational plan... [gives students] an idea of what classes they need to do... The education planning tool, Starfish, [shows students what their education plan] and how to access it...They have a visual of what they need to do and how long it's going to take. And their eyes open up [and] a light bulb goes off.

To be data-informed, the Unit-Based Student Success Team set a goal of increasing the number of SEPs. Working with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Research & Planning, the Counseling department got a baseline understanding of what percentage of students received an education plan. They learned that in spring 2021, only 31% of students had an education plan on file. **Once the Counseling department understood the landscape of education plans at Crafton Hills College, they took action.** To increase the number of SEPs, the Unit-Based Student Success Teams **decided to execute a data-informed campaign to proactively contact students.**

Given the importance of obtaining SEPs early in students' education journey, counselors and completion coaches proactively worked with students in the 0-29 unit range to increase the number of students who had SEPs. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Research & Planning provided student lists that completion coaches could use to proactively reach out to students who had not completed an official, counselor-approved SEP. Under the Unit-Based Student Success Team model, SEPs were a key credit unit milestone and a checklist item. Like many data-informed campaigns that happen under the Unit-Based Student Success Teams approach, completion coaches called, emailed, and texted students who did not have an official SEP on record and counselors met with students to finalize an official, counselor-approved SEP.

While all students were all proactively contacted, the Unit-Based Student Success Teams prioritized students who have historically been minoritized to address potential equity gaps in education planning. Since spring 2021, **Crafton Hills College has seen a 44 percentage-point increase in SEPs—from 31% to 76% in spring 2024.**

This highlights how Crafton Hills College embraced a culture of data-informed practices and proactive engagement. The Unit-Based Student Success Teams have identified not only lagging data metrics that they hope to address, such as completion or transfer, but leading data indicators that can link specific key milestones in their education practices, such as SEP completion. To ensure success in classes noted in their SEPs, faculty are also connected to their educational technologies and can proactively connect to counselors. These data and infrastructures ultimately inform not only how counselors can be data-informed early in students' educational journey, but the same practices have been applied to students later in their educational journey. For example, a similar process and campaign was implemented to increase the number of graduation and transfer checks that students did to support their graduation and transfer requirements.

Vision for Future Implementation

Led by student-facing practitioners, Unit-Based Student Success Teams was a grassroots effort that has transformed how Crafton Hills College develops and implements counseling and student services. While this approach has led to many successes, there are many opportunity areas for future implementation. Components of Crafton Hills College's approach may not work under all contexts and should be locally adapted. As Crafton Hills College continues to work towards fostering improved student success and equity, their vision for future implementation should address six key areas:

- managing expectations,
- resource allocations,
- professional learning/development,
- partnerships to expand local and community investment to support college and career goals,
- streamlining data and technology to align with practices, and
- improving and understanding implications on long-term student outcomes and equity.

Managing Expectations

In the process of implementing Unit-Based Student Success Teams, it is essential to clearly delineate the distinct roles and responsibilities of the counselors and the completion coaches to effectively manage expectations. Defining and communicating these distinctions is important not only for facilitating smooth implementation, but also to prevent misunderstandings about the specific types of support each practitioner is intended to provide to students.

Students might mistakenly assume that completion coaches can offer the same type of support that counselors offer. To optimize Unit-Based Student Success Teams, it should be clear internally and externally what the role and function are of all core leaders. Internally, ongoing conversations and consensus have begun to ensure that the support services provided are streamlined and consistent. Externally, embedding consistent marketing in different facets of students' experiences, such as onboarding and orientation, continue to be a productive means of role clarification and definition.

Resource Allocations

Under a finite resource context, community colleges are constantly having to adapt to serve students with limited resources (Yuen, 2023). Like many other community colleges, students could benefit from more counselors and completion coaches, as this would increase the ability for the department to provide more effective and equitable college and career counseling and support services. While the adoption of Unit-Based Student Success Teams has afforded more effective and efficient resource allocations to optimize counseling and student services, there are many opportunities to improve the implementation of completion coaches.

Completion coaches are valuable in supporting counselors. As recent Crafton Hills College alumni, they have a breadth of knowledge having gone through the community college system recently but often need additional professional learning and development so that they have accurate information about college and career. Additionally, completion coaches contribute significantly to proactive

engagement, but additional resources, such as having enough phone lines for every completion coach, would also enhance their function, particularly in making phone calls for student outreach. Additionally, while workshops can be valuable to providing students with useful and timely information about college and career, there can be a wide range of attendance and interest among students.

Professional Learning/Development

As Unit-Based Student Success Teams get implemented, professional learning/development opportunities need to be ongoing to support their capacity to provide effective college and career guidance to students. For example, to address equity gaps, there is potential to establish a more intentional professional learning/development curriculum that centers how culturally sustainable and race-conscious approaches could be adopted to support students from diverse social contexts and backgrounds, particularly students identified as Black and Latine/x. Additionally, as counselors became primarily assigned to work with students in specific credit unit ranges, this has implications of which professional learning/development opportunities may be more relevant to some than others.

There may be tensions and inequities around who gets to attend which professional learning/development opportunities, and this is complicated by the fact that counselors may still be meeting with students across all credit unit ranges. The bi-weekly professional learning/development sessions among counselors have helped ease these tensions since counselors who are able to go to specific opportunities do report back what they have learned. This could also involve some counselors rotating their primary unit assignments to keep up with the ever-changing counseling landscape.

Partnerships to Expand Local and Community Investment to Support College and Career Goals

The Unit-Based Student Success Teams are also working to further expand and integrate local and community organizations into their approach. At Crafton Hills College, this involves working with the local public universities of the California State University (San Bernardino) and University of California (Riverside) systems and identifying potential activities that students could participate in at various unit ranges. This could include increased coordination between institutional agents at all colleges, field trips and campus visits, and priority and early admissions programs to support and streamline matriculation practices. The Unit-Based Student Success Teams are also working with Growing Inland Achievement (GIA), a regional K-16 collaborative, to support educational and economic equity efforts in the Inland Empire. To foster improved student success and equity, it is vital for community colleges and relevant partners to collaborate and take shared ownership in intentionally designing educational and career pathways for students.

Streamlining Data and Technology to Align with Practices

While the Unit-Based Student Success Teams provide a conceptual and operational way to structure counseling and completion coaches, streamlining the multiple data and technologies across the college will take time. This includes developing a data and information infrastructure and dashboards

that can provide the Unit-Based Student Success Team with timely updates of students' progress on their different key credit unit milestones. There is a need to balance this, ensuring appropriate securities and protections for students' identifiable information, particularly for completion coaches. Additionally, colleges will often have multiple educational technologies for instruction, counseling, financial aid, etc. These systems may not always speak to each other, so it is vital to ensure that key education leaders representing a broad range of constituents understand the role, function, and needs of Unit-Based Student Success Teams.

Improving and Understanding Implications on Long-Term Student Outcomes and Equity

In many ways, the Unit-Based Student Success Teams approach is data-informed, but there are still many additional ways to utilize and incorporate data and information to foster student success and equity. Still early in adoption and implementation, there is much to be learned about how and who is benefiting long term from the Unit-Based Student Success Teams model. For example, the Unit-Based Student Success Team is eager to evaluate whether students who have participated under the Unit-Based Student Success Teams approach have experienced better and more equitable completion and transfer outcomes relative to students who have not—holding external factors constant.

There are also opportunities to further communicate and expand practitioners' capacity to take a more data-informed approach in providing counseling and student services to students. This includes ensuring that all members of the Unit-Based Student Success Team have a strong understanding of the baseline data for key credit unit milestones, the extent that there are any equity gaps, and understanding how different members of the Unit-Based Student Success Team—within their scope of work—can concretely take action to ensure more effective and equitable counseling practices. For example, it is important to ensure that completion coaches and counselors understand which and why certain student subgroups may be prioritized in proactive outreach efforts.

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About Crafton Hills College

Crafton Hills College is a public community college located in Yucaipa, California. It is a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and is one of two colleges in the San Bernardino Community College District.

The college awards over 1,100 degrees and certificates annually and supports transfer pathways to four-year institutions, including over 289 students transferring to University of California and California State University campuses in the most recent reporting cycle. Crafton Hills College provides comprehensive academic and student support services designed to promote student access, retention, and completion. The Student Services division includes counseling, career and transfer services, financial aid, accessibility services, outreach, basic needs support, and health and wellness programs. The division has implemented innovative, equity-focused approaches such as Unit-Based Student Success Teams, which integrate counselors, completion coaches, classified professionals, and administrators into coordinated teams that provide proactive, data-informed support aligned with students' educational progress. This model reflects the college's broader commitment to Guided Pathways, student equity, and institutional transformation to improve student success outcomes.

About the ASN

The [Advising Success Network](#) (ASN) is a dynamic network of national organizations partnering to engage institutions in holistic advising redesign to advance success for all students, including Black, Latinx/a/o, Indigenous, Asian, and Pacific Islander students and poverty-affected students. The network develops services and resources to guide institutions in implementing evidence-based advising practices. Since its formation in 2018, ASN has supported over 250 institutions in 30 states and created more than 50 [open-source resources](#) for practitioners and students. ASN is coordinated by [NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education](#), and includes partners [Achieving the Dream](#), the [American Association of State Colleges and Universities](#), the [Center for Innovation in Postsecondary Education](#), [EDUCAUSE](#), [NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising](#), the [National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition](#), and [Young Invincibles](#).

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