

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

“Ayers Institute Lunch & Learn” Podcast Episode 13 – January 2018

Title: *Increasing College Access: One Kid at a Time*

SPEAKERS

JO	Julia Osteen	Technology Integration Specialist, Ayers Institute for Teacher Learning & Innovation
JD	Jill Denton	School Counselor at Grainger High School in East Tennessee
JM	Jerre Maynor	Director of Student Readiness in the Office of Research and Strategy at the Tennessee Department of Education

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INTRODUCTION:

JD: One of the things that we tried to do here at Grainger High School is we want to get to know the middle school student, and especially when they hit that eighth-grade year we try to take the opportunity to have individualized meetings with students and parents that prepare them not only for high school, but to go ahead and plant the idea of post-secondary in their mind.

JM: Now, you, really just have this overall philosophy of one kid at a time. And, you also have a clear plan for every step of that process.

JO: Welcome to the "Ayers Lunch and Learn" podcast presented by the Ayers Institute for Teacher Learning & Innovation at Lipscomb University where we're all about education. These podcast episodes are sponsored by Edsouth which promotes interest and awareness of higher education opportunities to students, families, and schools. Each Ayers Lunch and Learn podcast episode provides bite-sized portions of professional learning.

Today's topic is "increasing college access: one kid at a time." We'd love to hear your thoughts on this topic as well using the Twitter hashtags #AyersLunchAndLearn and #CollegeAccess. My name is Julia Osteen and I'm the Technology Integration Specialist for the Ayers Institute. Participating in the conversation today is Jerre Maynor of the Tennessee Department of Education and Jill Denton of Grainger High School.

Welcome!

EPISODE BODY:

JD: Yes. Thank you, Julia, very much. Grainger High School is actually located in East Tennessee. We have about 900 students enrolled at Grainger High School, and our student senior class normally makes up about 200. So, we're really excited to show them some opportunity as far as their college-going here in our area.

JM: Hi I'm Jerry Maynor. I'm the director of student readiness at the Tennessee Department of Education. I work with our district stakeholders on all aspects of student readiness for college and career.

So, Jill, your school was featured in the *Seamless Pathways* report that the Department produced to talk about bridging the gap between high school and postsecondary. And it seems like one of the

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recommendations there, you all have really embraced in terms of how you've created a culture of college readiness and that is communicating early and often. Can you talk to us about how you have integrated conversations about college and financial aid at all grade levels?

JD: Yes, one of the things that we try to do here at Grainger High School is we want to get to know the middle school student, and especially when they hit that eighth-grade year we try to take the opportunity to have individualized meetings with students and parents to prepare them not only for high school, but to go ahead and plant the idea of post-secondary in their mind to help them to understand that they have the option of going to college. So, we tried to do that very early and form those relationships so we can go ahead and start those conversations.

JM: As much as you as counselors are superheroes, you really can't necessarily see every student every day or every time that they need you. How have you built capacity within your counseling program to ensure that students have multiple opportunities to receive the advisement or the information they need to feel prepared for the process?

JD: Well, we try to just provide different types of opportunities for our students. We pretty much run the gamut as far as meeting with our students where they're at. We try to make ourselves accessible to our students, whether it be we go into a classroom and speak to them. We make ourselves available in the hallways. We try to also provide them with opportunities for a little bit larger group meetings, with maybe college representatives where they have the chance to ask questions and to find out information. And then of course we offer field trips all geared toward our local colleges and TCAP opportunities in the area.

We also utilize several different forms of media. We try to contact our students by phone call and websites and just make that information available to our students and their parents in whatever form that they can receive that.

JM: What have you found has been the most useful for reaching parents, especially those parents who did not go to college themselves and may not have the information or the familiarity with college going knowledge? How have you reached out to touch more of them?

JD: To be honest with you, we do a lot of phone calling and sending information home via the student. We find that, in that area that we live in, our parents like that phone call that you know "Hey we're helping students complete their Free Application for Federal Student Aid. Can you come in and we'll sit down with you and try to get that completed?" Just making ourselves available and letting that parent know that we are here to help you, and to help you go through this process. And we meet with our students in large groups pretty often. Just about every couple of weeks. We meet with those students and our kids are really pretty good about taking things home and sharing it with their parents. So, it's just that direct contact that has helped us the most.

JM: I love that you all are thinking about, "How do our stakeholders receive information?" and that's not necessarily going to be one strategy that just anyone could adopt, but as it should be relative to the context that you are in. So I think that's really important.

JD: Yeah, you just have to find out what works best.

JM: Right. I would like to know more about what the tone and the culture is like in those group meetings that you're having frequently. How do you kind of facilitate that in a way to keep a group of students engaged and to build everyone's buy in? That, okay, this matters we're going to- you know- we're going

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to pay attention; we're going to listen to our counselors and we're going to make this a productive conversation?

JD: I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that we share with them. It's a one student at a time plan. We start very early, of course as I said earlier, in eighth grade really talking about what their plans are and what they want to do and it becomes personal with them. We survey our students, quite often, to see what their needs are. And we use that information to cater and develop a program and a meeting that meets those needs and fulfill those questions and issues.

It's basically for us: we address each child where they're at. Whether they're planning to look at a two-year community college. We want to help them through that process and help them know exactly the steps in that process. Whether it's a four-year university and what's required. We try our best – no matter where they're going to go, and what they're going to do – to find out what they need.

JM: Let's zoom back out, and I wanted to talk about the overall school culture that you all have fostered around college access. I'd love for you to tell us about the specific ways in which you've made celebrating and recognizing student's progress toward college and career readiness as a whole school.

JD: One of the things that our students look forward to is we've posted all of our seniors pictures on a board. And beside their picture we list the kind of the milestones that they have completed through their senior year for college readiness everything from taking the ACT, completing the Tennessee Promise, completing their FAFSA, doing their orientation, all of those things. And, students are just trickling in and out of our offices all day checking to see, "Okay I've got this completed. What else do I have?" So, at the very end it's a great sense of pride. The more that they check off the better they feel about their progress.

Also, we highlight out in the hallway the students that have applied to college. We have created a little picture frame for them to hold, to show, that you know they've applied to either UT or Walter State- any of the schools that they would have applied to. And we joke all the time that they're going to be late for class, because they're out there standing and looking for their picture, or we see underclassmen looking for them. And so that, again, they're celebrating the fact that they're getting things accomplished for their college and plan and taking those steps.

We've also began to really stress the importance of the ACT and improving that ACT score. And we have helped our students buy into that by providing them with different opportunities and ways to earn achievement through higher ACT scores. We provide them with field trips and other incentives- because we- that is important that is so very important, and we want them to understand that importance. Our faculty has really bought in to a lot of the practices that we have started. Mainly because it just gives them the opportunity to talk about their college going experience and also share with students that, "Hey, this is something that is possible for you! The money is there, so we want to see this happen with you."

JM: Schools do a lot with ACT, because that's- you know- a very concrete number or level of achievement. But as you said, having the rest of your faculty and staff buy into the idea that they are informal advisers and counselors to talk to students about their college experiences, is key to having this overall culture where students feel like they're supported, others believe in their ability to do, to pursue their aspirations.

And I'll just mention that I ran a pilot for ACT preparation in which we were able to survey students at a state level about how they felt about the ACT and students who believed that their school celebrated ACT in a public, visible way were much more likely to believe that they were going to postsecondary. They

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indicated that more than other students, just by that one metric, that they were more likely to intend to directly enroll in postsecondary education. So, we see that being both a good practice; but also, something that makes a real impact.

I'd love to hear about how you approached partnership with local colleges. And one thing that I wanted to ask as a way for our listeners to think about how they can do this is: who owns that relationship? You know, is that a person in your building? Is that just a group of people? So, I think it's important to have this sort of ownership so that everyone knows who to go to.

JD: Right. Absolutely. Well- we basically- we had just decided, if we were confused about the process that our students and our parents would have to probably be confused about the process too.

JM: Right.

JD: And we felt it was very important for us to make that initial step. We wanted to address this with those admissions reps and say "How can we help our students in a way that is also going to help you?" We wanted to make it an appealing invitation to the admissions representative that we wanted to understand that process ourselves, and what we could do. So, we definitely initiated that. Myself and my co-worker here in the counseling office, we are the ones that primarily speak with those admissions reps and asked those questions. So, we wanted to be sure that they knew who we were. And, we wanted to make them know that we were available to them for anything that they need.

We request from our admission representatives: we would like for them to come in the fall and speak with our kids, talk to them about that enrollment process. And then, come back in the spring and talk to the students that have been admitted so they- kind of- know what the next step is through orientation, through making that schedule, and contacting the financial aid office. And I think they value that relationship because we try so hard to help our students get the things completed, which in turn makes their job easier.

JM: Absolutely, and I know at your school and contacts you as the counselors are really owning that relationship.

JD: We are.

JM: Yeah. And I think for other districts it might involve- it might need to involve someone else. You know if you're a very large district- let's say in Metro Nashville with a lot of universities like Lipscomb, TSU, Vanderbilt, etc.- you might need a principal or a director of schools to be the owner or at least the initiator of that relationship and then having great counselors and admissions counselors then carry on- you know- the actual work of that relationship.

JD: Yes.

JM: We want to talk more about how you are using data because no one is ever satisfied with where we are. Even though you are justifiably proud of the progress. You know we're all as educators looking to get better. So, how are you using data in your district to do that?

JD: I'm going to share with you that it is just about an everyday process of looking at data and adjusting and adapting. Seeing what the needs are, and how we can meet those needs. We look at our e*GRandS report pretty much on an every-other-day basis to see which of our students have completed their Tennessee Promise applications. Also, who have completed their FAFSA applications, all of that

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information. And then, adjusting our schedule to meet and speak with those kids. It even goes as far as we look at our ACT data and seeing what areas our students are needing to make those improvements. Kind of altering some of our classes or our content to try to meet those needs. Provide extra tutoring sessions, those type of things, in order to help those students, maybe, overcome some of the hurdles that they are having difficulties

JM: So, I want to finish with the theme that we started with, which you actually said it which was perfect. And it was in the report that you, really just have this overall philosophy of “one kid at a time.” And you also have a clear plan for every step of that process. How have you organized your own time as a counselor? That's- you know- that's your most precious resource.

You are an expert but you can only do so many things in a day. What have you found has been a helpful tool or just approach, for you as a professional, for you to best manage your time, to reach as many of those students, you know, each day or each week or month?

JD: Sharing our goal with our teachers, so that they understand that they are going to the time when, maybe, I'm going to have to have that child out of their class and I try to look at a child's schedule and see what would be the best time. And let that kind of dictate how my day. Sometimes, if I know that I need to speak with Johnny and the best time for me to get him is during second period - when we have our skinny block- then I try to rearrange some of my activities, where I can get him at a time that is best for him.

Making early deadlines: I have found that a great trick for me- whatever the deadline is with a college or a scholarship- I try to build a two week window in there- that I have ahead of that to try to make sure that students get things accomplished, and I get things accomplished.

JM: To summarize, you're talking about being proactive in how you intend to use the time everyday, knowing that at any point something might upend that; but also, managing exerting some ownership or agency over timelines by setting internal deadlines, rather than just letting someone else dictate the process. And that's a really important leadership role that you're taking as a school counselor.

CONCLUSION:

JO: In our conversation today, Jerry and Jill highlighted the importance of communicating early and often about college access, the need for celebration and recognition, and how partnerships can benefit college access efforts. They have certainly provided us with a lot to think about. A probing question for you and your colleagues to explore is: “What are the untapped resources in your school or community to support a college going culture?”

As we close today's episode, we would like to encourage you to continue the conversation on: "Increasing college access: one kid at a time" with your colleagues. There is a graphic organizer file available for download as you continue thinking about this topic. The graphic organizer, along with links to articles cited, are found on eduTOOLBOX – at eduTOOLBOX.org.

Don't forget: we'd love to hear your thoughts on "Increasing college access: one kid at a time" using the Twitter hashtags #AyersLunchAndLearn and #CollegeAccess. Also, follow and like the Ayers Institute on Twitter and Facebook at @AyersInstitute.

We hope your appetite for bite sized portions of professional learning was satisfied with this podcast presentation sponsored by Edsouth. Look for other episodes of the Ayers Institute Lunch and Learn Podcast at <http://podcast.ayresinstitute.org>.