The Georgia College Advising Corps helps high school students realize their college dreams.

The Georgia College Advising Corps—an outreach program of the Institute of Higher Education—is beginning its ninth year of sending recent college graduates into high schools in targeted communities to help low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students get to college.

From a modest beginning of placing four advisers in four high schools, the program has grown this year to 20 advisers in 15 schools.

Since many of the advisers are first-generation college students themselves, they have a unique understanding of the challenges facing the students they work with, and they are trained to help with college searches and the nitty-gritty work of completing admissions and financial aid applications.

"GCAC advisers understand that it’s not necessarily a lack of effort that keeps students from pursuing a college degree," says Yarbrah Peeples, an IHE alumna and director of the program. "Often it’s a lack of information and guidance on how to prepare for and apply to college."

The need for assistance is great, given the staggering workload of most high school counselors. The American School Counselor Association recommends a maximum student-counselor ratio of 250:1, but only three states meet that number. According to the most recent public data, the national average is 482:1; in Georgia, it’s 490:1.

An article in Washington Monthly notes that statewide ratio numbers alone underestimate the severity of the problem by concealing disparities between rich districts and poor districts. Additionally, counselors in schools that serve disadvantaged students have more issues to deal with, including violence, hunger and homelessness. So students who are most likely to need assistance with the college admission process are the ones least likely to get it.

That’s where GCAC—a state offshoot of the national College Advising Corps—comes in. GCAC advisers supplement existing counseling staff and focus strictly on postsecondary advising.

"In the past school year, our advisers continued to make tremendous contributions to the students and schools they serve," says Peeples, who started working with GCAC while still a graduate student at IHE and became director after earning...
her Ph.D. in 2012. “Our partner schools increased financial aid applications among their students by an average of 6 percent, with some schools seeing increases over 15 percent. We have seen college enrollment increase by an average of 2 percent, with some schools increasing as much as 13 percent.”

As the 2017-18 school year got under way, advisers quickly started working with students to make sure they registered for SAT or ACT tests and helped students identify target, safety and “reach” colleges so they can begin the application process.

“Our advisers offer one-on-one help to students who are less likely to have friends or family members who have navigated the complicated world of college admissions and financial aid,” says Peeples. “And because advisers are close in age and background to the high school students, they serve as positive role models.”

GCAC advisers offer moral as well as practical support—and form bonds of friendship with many of the students they work with.

“I love Ms. Simpson so much,” says Michaela Freeman, a 2017 graduate of Cedar Shoals High School, speaking of GCAC adviser Ashley Simpson. “She helped me with everything from financial aid to applying to school. I got accepted to Kennesaw State University, which was my first choice! I think the Georgia College Advising Corps is a great program.”

Cedar Shoals, located in Athens, was added to the list of GCAC partner high schools in 2016-17. Clarke Central, the other public high school in Clarke County where the University of Georgia is located, was one of the original four GCAC schools.

For 2017-18, Heritage High School in Conyers became the latest partner school. GCAC now serves all three of the public high schools in Rockdale County.

Advisers are recruited to serve for two years and go through an intensive summer training program that includes tours of a variety of colleges in Georgia, including public and private schools, technical schools and HBCUs.

“Our advisers have asked hundreds of questions and gained a wealth of knowledge that they will use to help students select, apply for and afford higher education,” says Peeples. “During their summer training and also in-service training during the year at IHE, they learn from guest speakers and each other.”

GCAC advisers also have the opportunity to attend an annual adviser summit in Washington, D.C., sponsored by the national College Advising Corps. A group that attended the summit last January got to hear a panel discussion that included GCAC alum Ryan Carty. Carty, who served in the first group of GCAC advisers, now works as a sales recruiter for TEGNA media company in D.C.

Current GCAC adviser Janai Raphael has been selected as one of 18 Data and Policy Fellows with the College Advising Corps. She will complete a year-long research project and participate in a series of professional >
development sessions designed to enhance her research skills while she serves as a GCAC adviser at Maynard H. Jackson High School in Atlanta.

“This is a wonderful honor for Janai and is indicative of the quality of the advisers that we are able to recruit to participate in GCAC,” says IHE Director Libby Morris, who worked to establish GCAC in 2008 as one of IHE’s public service and outreach programs.

Many advisers are inspired to pursue careers as teachers, counselors or admissions officers after completing their service with GCAC. The two-year stint gives them an opportunity to hone their skills as they figure out future graduate school or career plans.

“We are very fortunate to have GCAC based in IHE,” says Peeples. “Besides getting to tap into the expertise of our faculty at the institute, we have been fortunate to have wonderful graduate assistants work with our program. Our most recent were Tiffanie Spencer, who is now assistant director for diversity, retention and student services for the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont, and Austin Lyke, who finished his master’s and is now starting doctoral studies at UCLA.”

The new GCAC graduate assistant is Charles Sanchez. A doctoral student from New York, he earned an M.Ed. in higher education administration from the State University of New York, Buffalo, and worked in local public high schools, helping guide students through college applications and the financial aid process. His research interests are in college access, public policy, and retention of underrepresented students.

The GCAC advisers invest energy in the program as well—recently launching a newsletter, a recruitment committee to assist with identifying potential advisers, and a hospitality committee to facilitate internal celebrations, support and self-care.

“I am constantly impressed by all that our advisers are able to accomplish,” says Peeples, “and how their commitment to service extends beyond the walls of their schools.”

BERTIS DOWNS: WHY I GIVE

The Georgia College Advising Corps was initially made possible through a partnership with the Watson-Brown Foundation and the national College Advising Corps. Since then, financial support from other foundations (e.g. Robert W. Woodruff), organizations and individual donors has allowed the program to continue and grow.

BERTIS DOWNS is a dedicated supporter of GCAC. Downs, who has lived in Athens since attending law school at the University of Georgia in the early 80s, is well-known for his service as legal counselor and manager of the iconic band R.E.M. But he’s also a parent and community activist who spends a great deal of time advocating for quality public education.

Downs first learned about GCAC when he read in the local newspaper about GCAC adviser Lawrence Harris’ invitation and visit with then-President Obama at the White House. He subsequently wrote an opinion piece for the Washington Post about “good ideas” that are proving effective in Athens public schools—among them the placing of a GCAC adviser in Clarke Central High School.

Downs says he sees the idea behind GCAC—and the national College Advising Corps—of using near-peers advisers to assist high school students in getting to college as an attainable goal. “It just seems so do-able,” he says of the program.

He and wife Katherine were involved in raising money locally to support the recent addition of a GCAC adviser at Cedar Shoals High School. They had previously helped raise funds for an adviser at Clarke Central, the other Clarke County public high school.

“We love Clarke Central—our daughters went to school there—but it didn’t make sense to have GCAC in just one of our local high schools,” he says.

Downs appreciates the difficulties faced by students who are “smart enough to go to college but don’t have role models,” citing his own story.

“I was a kid who would have been listed as ‘at risk,’” he says, “because I was raised by a single mom. But I was involved with Big Brothers and had a mentor who very personally advised me about going to college.”

Downs graduated cum laude from Davidson College before going on to law school.

“Everybody’s story is different,” he says, “but getting a college degree changes lives. It makes you a different person, and it makes a difference for society.”