

# Community Assistantship Program

*...a program of the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA)*

## Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota

Prepared in partnership with  
Central Lakes College

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**Focus Group Study:  
College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

**Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

Introduction

Purpose

Participants

Focus Group Questions

Results

Recommendations

References

## **Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Betsy Picciano, College in the Schools Program Director, Central Lakes College

Students, Staff, and Administration at the following High Schools:

Aitkin High School

Brainerd High School

Crosby-Ironton High School

Little Falls High School

Long Prairie High School

Pierz High School

Pine River High School

Central Lakes College

University of Minnesota

Center for Urban and Regional Affairs



## **Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Central Lakes College partners with several high schools in central Minnesota to offer college courses to high school students while they are in high school and on the high school campus. In recent years, the number of students taking College in the Schools (CIS) courses has increased. However, a trend exists that demonstrates a decreasing number of students who take CIS courses attend Central Lakes College after completing high school. This focus group study is designed to develop a deeper understanding of CIS student experience so that CIS program developers can become informed with regard to positive and negative student experiences as well as student career and academic plans post graduation.

# **Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

## **INTRODUCTION**

“College in the Schools Program (CIS) at Central Lakes College is a partnership with local high schools that gives high schools an opportunity to strengthen their academic course offerings while providing high school juniors or seniors a jump start on earning college credit. Students experience the academic rigor of college curriculum and strengthen their study skills in a high school environment. Upon high school graduation, students who have participated in the CIS program make a smooth transition to a college setting.” (<http://www.clcmn.edu/cis/>)

## **PURPOSE**

Students enrolled in the CIS program offered by Central Lakes College were invited to participate in a focus group research study to learn about their experience while taking CIS courses. Focus group questions were designed to hear student perspectives on the following topics:

- Student value regarding taking CIS classes
- Student interest in taking CIS classes
- Student positive CIS experiences
- Student negative CIS experiences
- Student suggestions for CIS improvements
- Student academic and career goals

## **PARTICIPANTS**

High schools participating in the CIS Focus Group Study were identified based on the CIS enrollments in the current and previous year. Principals from participating high schools were asked to invite a variety of CIS students to participate in a focus group study. Students enrolled in CIS classes were invited to participate in a 45-minute focus group held at each high school.

## **Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

Each group was composed of 6-9 students. Focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Following is a list of high schools that participated:

1. Pine River
2. Aitkin
3. Crosby-Ironton
4. Brainerd
5. Long Prairie
6. Little Falls
7. Pierz

### **FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

The questions for the focus groups were designed to elicit student feedback on their experience while taking courses in the CIS program. In addition, student perspectives were sought regarding their career and academic plans, and specifically if they plan to go to college and where they plan to go to college.

Following is a list of the focus group questions:

- ▶ What is your main motivation for taking a CIS course? (Please specify your course)
- ▶ What has been your most positive and negative experience while taking a CIS course?
- ▶ What differences did you note about taking a CIS course vs. a high school course?
- ▶ If you could identify two new skills that you gained while taking or after having completed a CIS course, what would those be?
- ▶ Think back over the past year of the things you experienced in the CIS class. What went particularly well?
- ▶ What needs improvement?
- ▶ Suppose that you were in charge and could make one change that would make the program better. What would you do?
- ▶ What are your academic and career plans after graduating high school?

## **Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

- ▶ For those wanting to complete their college degree, will you be attending Central Lakes College, why or why not? Where will they plan to complete their degree?

### **RESULTS**

The results of the focus groups are organized as a set of themed student responses to each question.

Themes were identified in response to each question and under each theme is a collective and representative set of quotations from students. Although the results include perspectives from students at each of the seven focus groups, the data is qualitative and is not generalizable. The results are intended to provide a range of student experiences and are not intended to broadly represent the views of all CIS students. Themed student responses can be used to inform the program developers for CIS programs about topics that can be investigated further. Following are themed student responses to focus group questions.

#### **Student motivations for taking a CIS course**

##### ***Get into college and graduate in 4 years or less***

- ▶ “Taking CIS classes looks good on my resume and college applications.”
- ▶ “Get prepared for college.”
- ▶ “To get college credit and get general courses out of the way.”
- ▶ “To get out of college sooner. “

##### ***Save Money***

- ▶ “To save money.”
- ▶ “Books are free for the CIS classes.”
- ▶ “The AA degree program saves a lot of money.”

#### **Positive experiences while taking a CIS course**

##### ***Environment of CIS class vs. regular class is better***

- ▶ “CIS teachers treat us with more respect.”
- ▶ “When I am in an environment where other people care, I care more.”

## **Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

- ▶ “Feels more independent and more responsibility.”
- ▶ “More personable relationship with teacher.”
- ▶ “In CIS classes the teacher doesn’t have to spend so much time disciplining kids that are screwing around...it takes away from your experiences. I learn more in CIS classes.”

### ***CIS cohorts of students regularly take classes together in small high schools***

- ▶ “The college in the schools kids are like a big group of friends. It’s nice.”
- ▶ “You hear the other people around you and their thoughts and ideas and it helps you form your own.”

## **CIS experience boosts confidence, interest and commitment to going to college**

### ***CIS classes are more challenging***

- ▶ “The CIS teachers challenge you to think deeper into the topic rather than a usual teacher asking you to ‘please pass this test’.”
- ▶ “It’s challenging. You don’t just accept something for what it is; you think about it and relate it to your life.”
- ▶ “The work is not busy work of looking things up. It is applying yourself and thinking about things.”
- ▶ “It’s not lecture. It’s discussion and the teacher is a facilitator not a lecturer.”
- ▶ “When you take the ITV class, you are with real college people and they are motivated to do well.”

## **Negative experiences while taking a CIS course**

### ***CIS classes are more stressful***

- ▶ “Regular college classes don’t meet every day but in CIS we do and our homework is due every day. When you are maxing out your college schedule with 7 classes per day, it’s stressful because the teachers don’t give you a break.”
- ▶ “The college teachers don’t communicate with the high school teachers on their schedules so you might have 3 projects due on the same day or 5 tests on the same day. That happens a lot.”
- ▶ “You have a week to create a large project. And I have a week to do an equally large project in another class. And I have extra-curriculars so I am up until midnight to get work done on time. It can lead to a lot of crying!”
- ▶ “Lots of reading on our own.”

## **Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

- ▶ “We don’t have time to order and pick up interlibrary loan books in time to do research paper. Not everyone has time to pick up the books.”

### ***CIS students don’t take classes in a cohort at large high schools***

- ▶ “All the classes are mixed CIS and non-CIS so it doesn’t feel any different than a regular high school class.”
- ▶ “You are independent and go your own way. You don’t know who the other CIS students are.”
- ▶ “When the CIS class is mixed with non-CIS students there is a lot of time wasting.”

### ***Students perceive negative consequences of earning AA degree in high school***

- ▶ “The AA program means I will start college as a junior and I don’t want to take the LSAT when I feel like a freshman.”
- ▶ “It’s stressful to know you will start college in one of the advance years since I will technically be a junior.”  
“The AA program dumps you into the harder classes when you get to college.”

## **Differences between CIS and regular classes**

### ***CIS classes require work at an accelerated pace***

- ▶ “You have to do bigger projects and have more thinking in-depth and thinking about how to apply your knowledge to the world.”
- ▶ “Subject matter is deeper and we go through more material than in the regular high school class.”
- ▶ “The CIS class makes you think and know the whole process and to understand how you got an answer not just to memorize the right answer.”

### ***CIS teachers expect you to do work independently***

## **New skills learned in CIS class**

- ▶ “Growing organization skills and taking time to plan and organize.”
- ▶ “Time management.”
- ▶ “Discussion skills.”
- ▶ “Writing skills that use analysis skills and not just your opinion.”
- ▶ “Motivation to do better work. I couldn’t just crank out work the morning before class.”
- ▶ “Note taking. Thoroughly and the right kind of notes.”

## **Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

### **What worked well in CIS class**

#### ***Active learning teaching methods: Discussion, feedback, peer reviews***

- ▶ “It’s more in-depth and you can remember it because you have discussed things.”
- ▶ “Cycles of discussion and doing work and immediate feedback on what we are working on.”
- ▶ “Comp is where I learned a lot more. We wrote papers and talked about intros, paragraphs, conclusions and different types of papers like opinion, analysis, and research.”
- ▶ “We worked in teams and proofed each other’s papers to see other people’s style and get ideas.”

#### ***Teacher approach as facilitator rather than director***

- ▶ “I like that they expected us to get the work done and high quality instead of treating us like babies and watching over us.”
- ▶ “CIS teachers are more open to making changes that help students. It’s more about helping us learn and not just giving us curriculum.”

### **What could be changed in the CIS class**

#### ***Offer a schedule that allows work to be done during the school day***

- ▶ “I’d like to see it run more like a college class and have a college schedule like Tues/Thurs or M/W/F with study halls in between so we could get some work done in the school day.”
- ▶ “You could do work like interviewing or video editing during the class day because we can’t do that at home.”
- ▶ “Especially for kids that have jobs. Sometimes I get home at 10pm and do homework until 1 in the morning. I do have to sleep a little bit!”
- ▶ “We sign ourselves up for this stuff but, come on! Sometimes I go to bed at 1am and get up at 5 am to get it all done.”

#### ***Scheduling and course design***

- ▶ “Well colleges go on semesters and the high school goes on trimesters so the classes are smushed together and we get less time to do all the college work.”
- ▶ “Have the CIS teachers talk to the regular teachers so we don’t have a lot of due dates happen on the same day. I have had 6 tests and 3 essays due on the same day.”

## **Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

- ▶ “Don’t mix CIS and non-CIS students.”
- ▶ “In the ITV class I feel like an observer not a participant so that is not so good.”
- ▶ “ITV teachers should communicate with our teachers instead of just teaching a class.”

### ***Technology and resources***

- ▶ “We can’t do research very well or access the internet like college students can because our internet access in the school is blocked. No youtube.com access and sites that have word like meth or nazi are blocked so we can’t find information on these topics and a lot of us don’t have internet at home.”

### ***Connection to CLC***

- ▶ “I have the CLC ID card but the discounts only work in Brainerd but we don’t want to drive 30 miles there. It would be good if the discounts worked in our town.”
- ▶ “I would like a professor to visit and teach a day or a chapter.”
- ▶ “I would like to be able to email or talk online to the professor of the class sometimes.”
- ▶ “We aren’t very connected. It’s awkward when they come to observe twice a year. They should be more involved.”
- ▶ “Not connected [to CLC] and that is good because I want to be a high school student.”

### ***Student perceptions on how to use CIS college credits***

- ▶ “I would like to know more about what schools have reciprocity and where my credits will transfer.”
- ▶ “I am a junior so I don’t know what I am going to do.”
- ▶ “I can go to CLC and ask them.”
- ▶ “Credits transfer to UMN, Bemidji, Duluth, Mankato.”
- ▶ “I’m nervous because I don’t know what will transfer.”
- ▶ “I would like to talk to a college adviser to figure this out.”
- ▶ “I would like to talk to a career counselor or have a presentation about careers so I can get a job.”
- ▶ “I might wait a year to go to college because I am worried about starting as junior since I will have the AA degree.”

## **Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

- ▶ “Since we have an AA degree are we transfers or freshman for financial aid applications?”

### **Student career and academic plans**

#### ***Central Lakes College***

- ▶ “CLC for 2 yrs for AA in graphic design.”
- ▶ “CLC or Jamestown ND for maybe teaching.”
- ▶ “CLC for robotics because jobs are available. My dad found the career for me and this is not an assembly line job. You make things and could be a computer programmer or electrician.”
- ▶ “I am going to CLC to do the transfer curriculum because I’m not sure what I want to do.”

#### ***4 Year universities***

- ▶ “Bemidji or UMN for vet school.”
- ▶ “BSU for 4 yr degree or elementary education.”
- ▶ “I want to go to a 4 yr college for electrical engineering.”
- ▶ “I am going to go to Mankato. It’s the only law enforcement school in MN.”
- ▶ “I’m going to UMN Crookston for pre-vet and then to Kansas State to be to study sheep or exotic animal production because it makes a good living.”
- ▶ “I have not made a decision yet.”
- ▶ “I’m going to St. Ben’s to study environmental science and to the UMN for an environmental engineer degree after that. A speech I gave in the CIS class was about recycling and it sparked an interest for me.”
- ▶ “I am going to New York to study music for 4 years and I feel there is a lot of intelligence in music too.”

#### ***Technical programs***

- ▶ “Architectural drafting at Dunwoody and a BA in design or painting.”
- ▶ “I am going to Duluth to do a 2 yr welding program.”
- ▶ “I am going to Ely or Steven’s Point to go into natural resources and if not then welding.”

## **Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

### ***Undecided or waiting***

- ▶ “I am going to wait a year because I don’t know what I want to do and I will be a junior.”
- ▶ “I am going to wait a year so I know about financial aid.”
- ▶ “I am going to wait a year because I will be a junior and don’t know what my major will be.”
- ▶ “I want the experience of going to a 4 yr school. I want to get to know people and I am going to play volley ball there.”

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The results of the focus group study were presented at a Central Lakes College Leadership meeting where stakeholders gave feedback on the results and offered some initial ideas for recommendations which are the following:

- ▶ Offer career and college advising to CIS students before they graduate to support them in academic and career planning, and specifically to inform students regarding how to evaluate where the CIS credits transfer and how to apply for financial aid.
- ▶ Adjust scheduling to offer students study time and access to technology during the school day rather than relying on student access to technology while not on the high school campus. All students do not have reliable access to computers and internet.
- ▶ Consider developing a CIS cohort program at Brainerd to facilitate student team building and interpersonal development among high performing peers.
- ▶ Facilitate communication between CIS and other high school teachers in an effort to reduce overloading students with deadlines that converge on the same dates.
- ▶ Deepen partnerships with MNSCU 4-yr programs that facilitate transfer from CLC and communicate the opportunity and value to students.
- ▶ Offer minority students an opportunity to share their perspectives in a private forum such as a survey monkey.
- ▶ Offer students an opportunity to have visiting faculty from CLC teach a class and give students access to faculty to ask course-related questions.
- ▶ Offer students an opportunity to fill out their high school schedules with online courses, especially when there aren’t enough students to justify adding a certain in-person CIS course.

## **Focus Group Study: College in the Schools Student Experience in Central Minnesota**

### **REFERENCES**

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# Focus Group Study of Central Minnesota Student Perceptions of College in the Schools Experience

Conducted by Melissa Peterson Malen  
for Central Lakes College and  
the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA)

# Purpose

## Learn about CIS student experience

- What students value about taking CIS classes
  - Why students take CIS classes
  - Positive CIS experiences
  - Negative CIS experiences
  - Student suggestions for CIS improvements
  - Student academic and career goals
- 

# Participants

Students currently enrolled in CIS classes were invited to participate in a 45-minute focus group held at the high school. Each group was composed of 6–9 students.

## Schools

1. Pine River
  2. Aitkin
  3. Crosby–Ironton
  4. Brainerd
  5. Long Prairie
  6. Little Falls
  7. Pierz
- 

# Focus Group Questions

- ▶ What is your main motivation for taking a CIS course? (Please specify your course)
  - ▶ What has been your most positive and negative experience while taking a CIS course?
  - ▶ What differences did you note about taking a CIS course vs. a high school course?
  - ▶ If you could identify two new skills that you gained while taking or after having completed a CIS course, what would those be?
  - ▶ Think back over the past year of the things you experienced in the CIS class. What went particularly well?
  - ▶ What needs improvement?
  - ▶
  - ▶ Suppose that you were in charge and could make one change that would make the program better. What would you do?
  - ▶ What are your academic and career plans after graduating high school?
  - ▶ For those wanting to complete their college degree, will you be attending Central Lakes College, why or why not? Where will they plan to complete their degree?
- 

# Student motivations for taking a CIS course

## *Get into college and graduate in 4 years or less*

- ▶ “Taking CIS classes looks good on my resume and college applications.”
- ▶ “Get prepared for college.”
- ▶ “To get college credit and get general courses out of the way.”
- ▶ “To get out of college sooner. “

## *Save Money*

- ▶ “To save money.”
  - ▶ “Books are free for the CIS classes.”
  - ▶ “The AA degree program saves a lot of money.”
- 

# Positive experiences while taking a CIS class

## *Environment of CIS class vs. regular class is better*

- ▶ “CIS teachers treat us with more respect.”
- ▶ “When I am in an environment where other people care, I care more.”
- ▶ “Feels more independent and more responsibility.”
- ▶ “More personable relationship with teacher.”
- ▶ “In CIS classes the teacher doesn’t have to spend so much time disciplining kids that are screwing around...it takes away from your experiences. I learn more in CIS classes.”

## *CIS cohorts of students regularly take classes together in small high schools*

- “The college in the schools kids are like a big group of friends. It’s nice.”
- “You hear the other people around you and their thoughts and ideas and it helps you form your own.”

## *CIS experience boosts confidence , interest and commitment to going to college*

# Positive experiences while taking a CIS class

## *CIS classes are more challenging*

- ▶ “The CIS teachers challenge you to think deeper into the topic rather than a usual teacher asking you to ‘please pass this test’.”
  - ▶ “It’s challenging. You don’t just accept something for what it is, you think about it and relate it to your life.”
  - ▶ “The work is not busy work of looking things up. It is applying yourself and thinking about things.”
  - ▶ “It’s not lecture. It’s discussion and the teacher is a facilitator not a lecturer.”
  - ▶ “When you take the ITV class, you are with real college people and they are motivated to do well.”
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# Negative experiences while taking a CIS class

## ▶ *CIS classes are more stressful*

- “Regular college classes don’t meet every day but in CIS we do and our homework is due every day. When you are maxing out your college schedule with 7 classes per day, it’s stressful because the teachers don’t give you a break.”
- “The college teachers don’t communicate with the high school teachers on their schedules so you might have 3 projects due on the same day or 5 tests on the same day. That happens a lot.”
- “You have a week to create a large project. And I have a week to do an equally large project in another class. And I have extra-curriculars so I am up until midnight to get work done on time. It can lead to a lot of crying!”
- “Lots of reading on our own.”
- “We don’t have time to order and pick up interlibrary loan books in time to do research paper. Not everyone has time to pick up the books.”

# Negative experiences while taking a CIS class

## *CIS students don't take classes in a cohort at large high schools*

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  - “You are independent and go your own way. You don't know who the other CIS students are.”
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# Negative experiences while taking a CIS class

## *Students perceive negative consequences of earning AA degree in high school*

- ▶ “The AA program means I will start college as a junior and I don’t want to take the LSAT when I feel like a freshman.”
  - ▶ “It’s stressful to know you will start college in one of the advance years since I will technically be a junior.”
  - ▶ “The AA program dumps you into the harder classes when you get to college.”
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# Differences between CIS and regular classes

## *CIS classes require work at an accelerated pace*

- ▶ “You have to do bigger projects and have more thinking in–depth and thinking about how to apply your knowledge to the world.”
- ▶ “Subject matter is deeper and we go through more material than in the regular high school class.”
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# New skills learned in CIS class

- ▶ “Growing organization skills and taking time to plan and organize.”
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  - ▶ “Writing skills that use analysis skills and not just your opinion.”
  - ▶ “Motivation to do better work. I couldn’t just crank out work the morning before class.”
  - ▶ “Note taking. Thoroughly and the right kind of notes.”
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# What worked well in the CIS class

## *Active learning teaching methods: Discussion, feedback, peer reviews*

- ▶ “It’s more in-depth and you can remember it because you have discussed things.”
- ▶ “Cycles of discussion and doing work and immediate feedback on what we are working on.”
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- ▶ “We worked in teams and proofed each other’s papers to see other people’s style and get ideas.”

## *Teacher approach as facilitator rather than director*

- ▶ “I like that they expected us to get the work done and high quality instead of treating us like babies and watching over us.”
  - ▶ “CIS teachers are more open to making changes that help students. It’s more about helping us learn and not just giving us curriculum.”
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# What could be changed in the CIS class

## *Offer a schedule that allows work to be done during the school day*

- “I’d like to see it run more like a college class and have a college schedule like Tues/Thurs or M/W/F with study halls in between so we could get some work done in the school day.”
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# What could be changed in the CIS class

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- ▶ “Have the CIS teachers talk to the regular teachers so we don’t have a lot of due dates happen on the same day. I have had 6 tests and 3 essays due on the same day.”
- ▶ “Don’t mix CIS and non-CIS students.”
- ▶ “In the ITV class I feel like an observer not a participant so that is not so good.”
- ▶ “ITV teachers should communicate with our teachers instead of just teaching a class.”

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# What could be changed in the CIS class

## *Connection to CLC*

- ▶ “I have the CLC ID card but the discounts only work in Brainerd but we don’t want to drive 30 miles there. It would be good if the discounts worked in our town.”
  - ▶ “I would like a professor to visit and teach a day or a chapter.”
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  - ▶ “We aren’t very connected. It’s awkward when they come to observe twice a year. They should be more involved.”
  - ▶ “Not connected [to CLC] and that is good because I want to be a high school student.”
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# Student perceptions on how to use CIS college credits

- ▶ “I would like to know more about what schools have reciprocity and where my credits will transfer.”
  - ▶ “I am a junior so I don’t know what I am going to do.”
  - ▶ “I can go to CLC and ask them.”
  - ▶ “Credits transfer to UMN, Bemidji, Duluth, Mankato.”
  - ▶ “I’m nervous because I don’t know what will transfer.”
  - ▶ “I would like to talk to a college adviser to figure this out.”
  - ▶ “I would like to talk to a career counselor or have a presentation about careers so I can get a job.”
  - ▶ “I might wait a year to go to college because I am worried about starting as junior since I will have the AA degree.”
  - ▶ “Since we have an AA degree are we transfers or freshman for financial aid applications?”
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# Student career and academic plans

## *Central Lakes College*

- ▶ “CLC for 2 yrs for AA in graphic design.”
  - ▶ “CLC or Jamestown ND for maybe teaching.”
  - ▶ “CLC for robotics because jobs are available. My dad found the career for me and this is not an assembly line job. You make things and could be a computer programmer or electrician.”
  - ▶ “I am going to CLC to do the transfer curriculum because I’m not sure what I want to do.”
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# Student career and academic plans

## *4 Year universities*

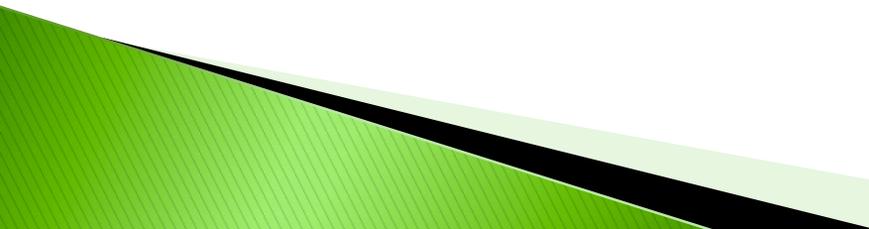
- ▶ “Bemidji or UMN for vet school.”
- ▶ “BSU for 4 yr degree or elementary education.”
- ▶ “I want to go to a 4 yr college for electrical engineering.”
- ▶ “I am going to go to Mankato. It’s the only law enforcement school in MN.”
- ▶ “I’m going to UMN Crookston for pre-vet and then to Kansas State to be to study sheep or exotic animal production because it makes a good living.”
- ▶ “I have not made a decision yet.”
- ▶ “I’m going to St. Ben’s to study environmental science and to the UMN for an environmental engineer degree after that. A speech I gave in the CIS class was about recycling and it sparked an interest for me.”
- ▶ “I am going to New York to study music for 4 years and I feel there is a lot of intelligence in music too.”

# Student career and academic plans

## *Technical programs*

- ▶ “Architectural drafting at Dunwoody and a BA in design or painting.”
- ▶ “I am going to Duluth to do a 2 yr welding program.”
- ▶ “I am going to Ely or Steven’s Point to go into natural resources and if not then welding.”

## *Undecided or waiting*

- ▶ “I am going to wait a year because I don’t know what I want to do and I will be a junior.”
  - ▶ “I am going to wait a year so I know about financial aid.”
  - ▶ “I am going to wait a year because I will be a junior and don’t know what my major will be.”
  - ▶ “I want the experience of going to a 4 yr school. I want to get to know people and I am going to play volley ball there.”
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# Recommendations

- ▶ Offer career and college advising
  - ▶ Adjust scheduling to offer students study time and access to technology during the school day
  - ▶ Consider developing a CIS cohort program at Brainerd
  - ▶ Facilitate communication between CIS and other high school teachers
  - ▶ Deepen partnerships with MNSCU 4-yr programs that facilitate transfer from CLC and communicate to students
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