



Counseling and College Counseling In America's High Schools

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January 2005

This report was commissioned by the National Association for College Admission Counseling as part of an ongoing effort to inform the association and the public about the state of college counseling in America's high schools.

The views and opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the author and not necessarily those of NACAC.



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Introduction

Examining high school counselors and the role they play in the college access process could not be a more timely or vital action to undertake. Within schools, no professional is more important to improving college enrollments than counselors. Research clearly shows that counselors, when consistently and frequently available and allowed to provide direct services to students and parents, can be a highly effective group of professionals who positively impact students' aspirations, achievements, and financial aid knowledge (Adelman, 1999; McDonough, 1997 and 2004; Orfield and Paul; 1993; Plank and Jordan, 2001). However, as this paper will show, counselors are structurally constrained from doing the job they know and do best, which is providing: information to help nurture and sustain aspirations, guidance on course selection for maximal academic preparation, motivation to achieve, and advice on how to investigate and choose a college.

Currently the general state of counseling is not an important point on any major policy agenda. However, college access is an important educational and economic policy issue, a lynchpin in P-16 reforms, an imperative for advocates for improving affordability, and essential to policymakers wishing to reduce barriers to college admission. This vital issue is marked by both progress and unmet goals and what follows is a summary of these major college access issues

Generations of working-class, immigrant and underrepresented minority students have improved their individual economic circumstances through a college education,



while policymakers and employers have stimulated economic growth and created an informed citizenry through more college-educated adults. Although we have 16.5 million undergraduates today (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), economic and manpower projections are that the U.S. will face a shortage of 14 million college-educated workers by 2020 if current demographic and economic trends continue as expected (Carnevale, 2002). Specifically, six out of every ten jobs in our economy depend on highly trained workers with the requisite advanced skills that are available only to those possessing either a two-year or four-college degree (Carnevale and Desrochers, 2003; U.S. Department of Labor, 2004b). The increasing competitiveness of the global market and the shift to an information, service, and technology-based economy in the U.S. propels a growing need for college-educated professionals.

Improving academic preparation for college and ensuring affordability, especially for low-income students and students of color, are those rare policy goals that enjoy widespread, active support across a wide spectrum of educational researchers, policymakers, and advocates (Advisory Commission on Student Financial Assistance, 2002; Heller, 2003; Pathways to College, 2003). And although college enrollments are 72% larger today than they were in 1970 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), bridging the access gap is complicated. We know that despite decades of concerted policy efforts and extensive financial aid resources, today's gap between low-income and high-income students today is roughly the same as that participation gap in the 1960s (Gladieux and Swail, 1999).

That gap is partially a result of the fact that both the perception and the reality of college affordability is plummeting. In this decade alone 440,000 potential students will



be turned away from four-year colleges due to financial reasons (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2002). Through decades of policy creep our student aid system has become less oriented toward expanding opportunity for needy students and more toward making it possible to recruit the best middle and upper income students as financial aid is increasingly awarded in the form of merit-based aid (Heller, 2002).

Enrollment management practices have led to institutional practices like tuition discounting and large proportions of unmet financial need, while federal, state and institutional grant availability has led to an increased reliance on loans with skyrocketing student loan debt (McPherson and Shapiro, 2002). Overall this lessening of need-based aid has eroded low-income students' participation in higher education, particularly at more selective institutions (Carnevale and Rose, 2003).

The world of college admissions has changed dramatically over the last half century. Before the 1950s, 20% of high school graduates went on to college and today 65% do (Kinzie et al., 2004). Because of the increased competition, high-socioeconomic (SES) students, who have been attending college for generations, are filing larger numbers of applications to hedge their uncertain admissions bets, while colleges hedge their U.S. News and World Report rankings' bets by boosting their yield rates through early admission programs (Avery et al., 2003). Admissions policies and preferences for certain groups of students is the focus of a never-ending stream of media reports, litigation, advocacy and research. Race-conscious admissions policies still exist in some states, including percent plans even though new research has proven that they offer very little hope for increasing African-American and Latino students' presence on more selective college campuses (Carnevale and Rose, 2003; Tienda, Cortes, and Niu, 2003). Researchers and college presidents are advocating for adding socioeconomic diversity



to existing affirmative action plans (Basinger and Smallwood, 2004; Carnevale and Rose, 2003) to increase the low and stagnant numbers of poor students entering college.

Today, we have 2.6 million high school graduates and current projections are that we will peak at 3.2 million high school graduates in 2008-09. Eighty percent of those new students will be students of color and a disproportionate number will be from poor or modest income families (WICHE, 2004). Yet, only about half of African American and Latino ninth graders graduate from high school, compared to almost four-fifths of Asian Americans and three-quarters of Whites. For those who stay in high school to graduate, low-income and underrepresented minority students have more limited access to the rigorous coursework needed for college readiness (Green and Forster, 2003). Subsequently, although the number of African American, Latino, and Native American students enrolled in college has risen, those enrollment figures are far below the representation of those students in K-12 schools and below what would be projected for average college attendance given those K-12 enrollment figures (Allen, 2003).

In large part that is because individual college opportunity is predicated on K-12 institutional opportunity. Opportunities to learn are in good measure reflective of the following K-12 school conditions: the quality of the school as measured by the level of rigor of curriculum, learning environments and resources; the quality of teachers as indicated by teacher test scores and teacher preparation; the expectations and encouragement that teachers hold for students; the persistent and pernicious racial and ethnic segregation in American schools; the availability, quantity and quality of high



school counseling; dropout rates; and financial constraints (Gandara and Bial, 2001). Reports on the condition of K-12 education in low-performing schools that serve primarily urban students of color find that these schools “shock the conscience” because they lack minimal learning essentials: books, qualified teachers, and safe places to learn (Oakes, 2004).

Thus, K-12 student achievement rates between underrepresented minority and majority students are still profoundly unequal (Oakes, 2004; Pathways to College, 2003) and poor students and students of color still experience major barriers to college access (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). Is it any wonder that today’s gaps in high school graduation and college enrollment are tied to race and income or that one-third of white U.S. adults in their late twenties have a college degree but only 18% of Black and 10% of Hispanic adults have those same degrees (Pathways to College, 2003)? Yet, despite the inequities in outcomes, sixty percent of adults believe that, regardless of costs, education is so indispensable that they will do whatever it takes to ensure their child’s college attendance (Ikenberry and Hartle, 1998; Miller, 1997).

Many current K-12 accountability systems focus on minimally acceptable performance not the college readiness required of 21st century workers. A wealth of policy reports acknowledge that K-12 schools must be significantly transformed and there is near unanimity from policymakers, foundations, and a growing body of research evidence that P-16 systems will ensure greater alignment between high school exit skills and the skills required for college entry and success.



More to the point of this paper, repeated studies have found that improving counseling would have a significant impact on college access for low-income, rural, and urban students as well as students of color (Gandara and Bial 2001; King, 1996; McDonough, 2004; Plank and Jordan, 2001; Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei, 1996; Venezia et al., 2002). Specifically, if counselors begin actively supporting students and their families in middle school in preparing for college, as opposed to simply disseminating information, this will increase students' chances of enrolling in a four-year college (Hutchinson and Reagan, 1989; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997, 1999; Plank and Jordan, 2001; Powell, 1996; Rowe, 1989).

Multiple, recent research studies and policy reports call for increasing the numbers of counselors available and the amount of time they devote to college advising tasks one of the top three reforms needed to improve college access (Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, 2002; Gandara and Bial, 2001; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1997; Kirst and Venezia, 2004; McDonough, 2004). Yet, how do these calls for more counselors devoted to college preparation in all its forms map onto the current state of counseling in America?

This paper reviews the research evidence on what students need to do when preparing for college, the history of school counseling, counselors' work and availability, research evidence on good college counseling, the professional associations, and recommendations. The time has never been better for college counselors to collaborate with all other school counselors and school leaders, and for the major, national



counseling associations to collaborate with college access advocacy organizations to improve the state of college counseling.

Preparation for Improved College Access

The pathway to college access is marked by vast disparities in college preparation, college knowledge, and college culture within schools, (McDonough, 2004). In 1992, 82% of students whose parents were college-educated enrolled in college directly out of high school, but only 54% of students whose parents had completed high school, and only 36% of students whose parents had less than a high school diploma immediately enrolled in college after high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). In 1992, 64% of whites, but only 55% of blacks and 52% of Hispanics immediately enrolled in college after high school. In 1992, only 44% of low-income families, while 80% of high-income families immediately enrolled in college after high school.

How do students get to college? A major new report from Educational Testing Service acknowledges that college preparation begins in preschool (Carnevale and Desrochers, 2003). Students aspire and apply to, then enroll in college through a complex, longitudinal, interactive process involving individual aspiration and achievement, learning opportunities in high school and intervention programs, and institutional admissions (Hossler et al. 1989; McDonough, 1997; Oakes, 2004).

Student aspirations precede the development of college plans, college preparation precedes college choice, and all of the foregoing are the precursors to college enrollment. Along the pathway to college and over the course of elementary,



middle and high school, students pass through predisposition, search, and choice stages where they decide whether to attend college, search for information, consider specific colleges, and finally choose a college destination (Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith, 1989).

Generally speaking, the predisposition stage is where a student begins to develop occupational and educational aspirations, and this generally occurs from elementary school age on through middle school. Research shows that most students have some post-high school educational or job plans by the ninth grade (Stage and Hossler, 1989). Students need to begin to develop college awareness aspirations in the middle school years in order to take algebra, and other gatekeeping courses in middle school, which then positions students for high school course work that aligns well with college enrollment requirements (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). Students and their families need counseling to develop this awareness and planning, and middle schools need to raise standards and expectations (Gullat and Jan, 2002). It is in this stage that students need to be informed of college entrance requirements, be enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum, be engaged in extracurricular activities, and begin to learn in broad-brush ways about financing a college education (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; Hearn and Holdsworth, 2004).

During the tenth through twelfth grades, students are in the search phase, which involves gathering the information necessary for students to develop their short list of potential colleges (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). High socioeconomic status (SES) students in this phase have more information sources, are more knowledgeable about



college costs, and tend to have parents engaged in saving for college (Hossler, Schmidt and Vesper, 1999).

The choice phase of the decision to go to college begins in the eleventh grade, usually culminating in the twelfth grade. College costs and financial aid play a dramatic role in the college choices of low-SES students, African Americans and Latinos, all of whom are highly sensitive to tuition and financial aid (Heller, 1999). These students are negatively influenced by high tuition (McPherson and Shapiro, 1998) but positively influenced by financial aid (Berkner and Chavez, 1997).

Many students cannot easily complete these steps in the school-to-college transition given most K-12 schools systems' capacity for college preparation. One policy report's assessment is that the current structure of middle and high schools is inadequate to prepare minority, low-income, and first-generation students to attend college and to change that condition will require significantly transforming high schools, and possibly reinventing education as a P-16 system (Martinez and Klopott, 2003).

A Focused History of School Counseling

Within modern school counseling, the value placed on the college counseling task has been shaped by multiple forces. Throughout the last century, one major influence has been the dominance of other roles, specifically, psychological development, testing, administrative support, and students' personal therapeutic counseling needs (Boswell and Carr, 1998; Hugo, 2004).



A second influence has been a longstanding, sometimes acrimonious debate about whether and how college counseling should be a part of school counselors' work. An early argument against college counseling was that it was not actual guidance, but the unseemly work of subtle persuasion or salesmanship (Tibby, 1965). Until the 1990s, college advising was seen as simply information dispensing in the counseling literature (Cole, 1991) and, a significant segment of the college advising support industry (books, CDs, self-help college materials) is premised on this fundamental assumption (McDonough, Ventresca and Outcalt, 2000). Other counselors view college advising as esoteric (Cole, 1991; Murro, 1963) and in conflict with counselors' identities as mental health agents (Carroll, 1985). Some counselors bristle at the elitism inherent in providing disproportionate institutional resources for college advising to small numbers of college-bound students (Avis, 1982; NACAC, 1986), even though almost nine out of ten students now say they plan on going to college (U.S. Department of Education 2003a; Venezia, Kirst and Antonio, 2003).

A third force influencing the development of college counseling has been the impact of scholarly research that identified and criticized counselors' gatekeeping functions and subsequently influenced public discourse and policy debates (Rosenbaum et al., 1996). Cicourel and Kitsuse first (1963) described and critiqued counselors' exercise of professional responsibility for determining which students were college material based on their personal assessments of students' character, maturity and appearance. Rosenbaum later (1976) critiqued counselors' practices in thwarting working-class students' access to college preparatory curricular tracks and other means of discouraging students' college aspirations.



Another factor that has increasingly shaped counselors' jobs and made them more vulnerable to administrative demands has been counselors' inability to demonstrate their effectiveness. Inadequate research evidence of counselor impact on student learning and development has led to counselors' vulnerability in times of budget cuts (Aubrey, 1982; Avis, 1982; Carroll, 1985; Cole, 1991; Kehas, 1975; Miller & Boller, 1975). Moreover, counselor effectiveness is only possible by meeting counselors' pre-service and in-service professional development needs. Historically, counseling education programs (Hossler, 1999; McDonough, 2004; National Association of College Admission Counselors, 1991) have not included preparation in the area of college counseling. Counselors have major professional development needs related to securing accurate, up-to-date college admissions and financial aid information (Chapman and DeMasi, 1984). Yet, Moles (1991) found that counselors attend three in-service programs annually across all counseling domains. Hawkins (2003) found that nine out of ten counselors received time off for professional development, however, only 42% received full financial support (registration fees, travel expenses, etc.), and only 21% of public school counselors received full financial support for those professional development activities. Additional training is necessary. To give one example, because counselors are not trained in, nor knowledgeable about, the student aid system and college costs, they are unable to adequately help students and parents understand what they need to know about college costs and the financial aid system (McDonough, 2004).

Role conflicts have emerged from differing expectations of counselors and principals (Hugo, 2004; Partin, 1990). Counselors who view resolving students' social-emotional problems as an important goal are often in conflict with principals who seldom perceive this task as a central role for counselors (Chapman and DeMasi, 1984).



Moreover, as principals' jobs have expanded, they have redirected counselors' work to include additional administrative duties like scheduling and yard duty (Cole, 1991; Day & Sparacio, 1980; Hugo, 2004; Monson and Brown, 1985). Other researchers have noted that some of counselors' competing roles, like enforcing school discipline rules, undermine counselors' roles as advocates and confidants (Tennyson et al., 1989). Finally, accountability reforms have led to increased testing responsibilities for counselors, which has resulted in further confusion over the proper role of counseling in general, and reduced capacity for carrying out the college counseling function in particular.

Complicating matters further is the fact that over the last several decades, many counseling programs have migrated from education departments into psychology departments resulting in increased family and clinical practice training; a considerably more desirable and higher status role (Aubrey, 1982; Carroll, 1985), and a subsequent shift in professional identity to mental health agents whose primary goal is helping adolescents through the challenges and pitfalls of adolescence (Aubrey, 1982; Carroll, 1985; Huey, 1987). On a positive note, this identity and training shift has provided counselors with alternative job options when school counseling positions have been eliminated (Carroll, 1985; Hull, 1979).

Counselor Availability and Jobs

The federal government's Occupational Outlook Handbook (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004a/b) states that high school counselors "advise students regarding college majors, admission requirements, entrance exams, financial



aid, trade or technical schools, and apprenticeship programs.” Research and textbooks on school counseling say that counselors’ work in schools includes 1) coordination of administrative tasks (scheduling, etc.), 2) counseling across academic, career and personal domains, and 3) consultation with all school personnel on guidance tasks (Hannaford, 1987). The realities of counselor-to-student ratios mean that counselors often have to rely on large group guidance in order to reach, at least minimally, all students (American School Counselor Association, 2001; Gysbers and Henderson, 1997).

In U.S. public schools, there are not many counselors, and in urban and rural schools, and schools serving low-SES students and students of color, counselors are fewer and often unavailable for the college advising job.

How many counselors are there in American schools, how available are they to students, and how available are they for the college counseling task? We can answer these questions by looking at total numbers of school professional holding counseling titles, by looking at student-to-counselor ratios, and by looking at estimates of how much time counselors spend on their various assignments.

In-depth counselor data are not systematically and routinely collected at federal and state levels. NCES has mostly been content to collect headcount data on counselors, supplemented by infrequent surveys of program goals and activities. Many NCES reports do not even bother to distinguish between full- or part-time counselors. Acknowledging that the federal government had not collected any data on guidance programs and activities since 1984, in 2002



NCES (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), through its Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), conducted a survey of public high school guidance counseling entitled, *High School Guidance Counseling* (HSGC). Also, NACAC's annual surveys give a good picture of NACAC member counselors, in other words a good picture of the group of good college counselors available in U.S. high schools, but despite all efforts, the comparative sample of non-NACAC members has had a low response rate. The College Board occasionally surveys high schools and their counselors but provides limited public reports on the counseling data.

Using the most recent NCES data, public high schools average 2.6 counselors per school, yet this figure counts full- and part-time counselors the same. If you disaggregate the data, high-poverty schools have an average of 1.3 full- and part-time counselors per school (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). A College Board (Maucieri et al., 2002) survey reports that the average number of counselors per public high school was 2.7 counselors-to-students and that nearly all counselors reported providing college counseling as a part of their job. It would seem as though we can look across this data and conclude that the average public school has less than 3 counselors, some of which are full-time and some of which are part-time.

Knowing how many counselors there are in a given school does not give us enough context to understand if the number of counselors is enough for the number of students in those schools. So we need to look at student-to-counselor ratios, while keeping in mind that the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends an ideal counselor-to-student ratio of 100:1.



In public schools across America student-to-counselor ratios are outrageously high. According to *The Condition of Education 2004* the ratio is 284:1, although in large schools and schools with more than 20% minority students the ratios are >300:1 (US Department of Education, 2004). The *HSGC* report, using separate NCES data, determined that public high schools averaged 315 students per counselor. According to NACAC the national average is 490:1 (Hawkins, 2003) and other reports on the largest urban metropolitan areas find a 740:1 average (Fitzsimmons, 1991). Statewide averages show even more disturbing trends, with California as the notorious leader in highest student-to-counselor ratios at 994:1, followed by Minnesota at 800:1, and Arizona with 736:1. In one study of California counseling, Paul (2002) found an even higher ratio of 1,056 students assigned to an individual counselor. Finally, some individual high schools in large, urban school districts effectively have no counselors. For example, Fremont High School in Los Angeles Unified School District has a student to counselor ratio of 5000:1 (Perez, 2004) Regardless of which counseling numbers you refer to, at a minimum, there are three times (and up to 50 times) as many students assigned to each of those full- and part-time counselors as what the profession believes is appropriate.

Now that we have a sense of how many students are in counselors caseloads, what do these full- and part-time counselors do with their time? ASCA has set a benchmark that 70% of counselors' time should be spent in direct services to students. Interestingly, NCES does not collect data on how much of counselors' time is spent in direct service to students so we do not have accurate national data on this issue. Also, NCES reports how counselors spend their time in a disaggregated fashion, such that we know the percentage of schools whose counselors spend increments (up to 20% or



more) of their time on a limited number of tasks. A 1998 NACAC study that over-sampled college counselors found that public school counselors spend 50% of their time in direct service to students carrying an average caseload of approximately 330 students (Miller, 1998).

Since we don't know how much time counselors spend in direct service, how much time do they spend on college advising? Across multiple surveys the vast majority of counselors report they engage in college advising and that they value it equally to their other counseling tasks. Yet, a 1991 NCES study (Moles) found that counselors reported they spent only 13% of their time in college guidance, compared to 25% in personal development. According to the NCES *HSGC* study (US Department of Education, 2003), only 43% of all public high schools reported that more than 20% of their counselors' time is spent on college advising which meant that 57% of schools' counselors spend between 0-19% of their time on college advising. Using NCES's ratio of 315 students per counselor in public high schools, and the Moles estimate of hours the average school counselor spends on college counseling, counselors are spending 38 minutes per year on each student for college advising.

Other research paints a different picture of how counselors spend their time. We have ample evidence that in day-to-day practice, the overwhelming amount of effort of counselors revolves around the tasks of scheduling, testing, and discipline (Delany, 1991; Lombana, 1985; McDonough, 1997, 2004; McDonough, Ventresca and Outcalt, 2000; Monson and Brown, 1985; Wilson and Rossman, 1993), with additional needs for counseling related to dropout, drug, pregnancy, and suicide prevention, as well as sexuality and personal crisis counseling (Miller 1998), yard duty, substitute teaching, etc.



(US Department of Education, 2003). One important thing to note in the discrepancy between these studies and NCES is that large-scale surveys are only as good as their questions and if those instruments are not adequately asking about counselors' roles and time spent it will be impossible to get good data.

A final way of looking at counseling in high schools is through the goals of guidance programs writ large. In large-scale surveys, counselors are usually asked what are the main goals of the counseling program. NCES collects data on four such goals: helping students prepare for work after high school, helping students with personal growth and development, helping students prepare for college, and helping students with academic achievement in high school. Forty eight percent of all schools, report emphasizing academic achievement, 26% emphasize college preparation, 17% emphasize personal development and 8% report emphasizing work preparation. The smallest schools (<400 students) were more likely to report a primary emphasis on preparing students for college.

After looking at numbers of counselors, student to counselor ratios, goals of programs and how counselors spend their time on various tasks, what can be said about college counseling in America? In a recent NACAC survey, Hawkins (2003) summarized the state of the college advising task as follows:

“On average, the precollege counseling infrastructure is lacking in secondary schools across the country, as the national student-to-counselor ratio remains high at 490 to one. Public schools and rural schools suffer from the worst counseling shortages. Schools with supportive environments for postsecondary education, including a well-



staffed counseling department, reported significantly higher rates of college attendance.”

Counseling Disparities & Contributions

A plethora of research has grown up documenting the great disparities in counseling resources, especially as they pertain to college counseling. Nearly 20 years ago, NACAC documented that the great disparities in college counseling resources and activities were a direct result of the social class of the communities in which these high schools were located (1986). Specifically, school counselors in upper income neighborhoods were more plentiful and spent more time on college counseling. Orfield and Paul (1993) found high school counseling programs at fault for students’ and parents’ lack of necessary college access information including an understanding of the influence of high school track, college admissions requirements, and the system of college costs and financial aid. Other research found that African American and Latino students were significantly more likely to have their college plans influenced by their high school counselors (Lee and Ekstrom, 1987; Plank and Jordan, 2001) and yet these were the students who were least likely to have counselors, the most likely to have underprepared counselors, and the most likely to have counselors pulled away from college counseling to work on other counseling tasks (Paul, 2002). Moreover, students of color expressed grave reluctance to use counselors because they were perceived to be uninformed and hostile (Gandara and Bial, 2001), have well documented reputations for placing students in non-college-recommending classes (Atkinson, Jennings, and Livingston, 1990), and historically have thwarted students’ and their parents’ educational aspirations (Lareau and Horvat, 1999; Perez, 1999). It is important to note, that those



populations who are especially hard hit in terms of unmet or inadequate counseling are primarily low-income communities, schools, and students of color (McDonough, 1999; Paul, 2002).

Counseling often is tied to the track placement of students, therefore, if you are not in the college track you do not receive college information. African American and Latino students as well as first-generation college bound students are significantly more likely than their white counterparts to have their college plans influenced by their high school counselors, both potentially positively and negatively (Lee and Ekstrom, 1987; Plank and Jordan, 2001).

Counselors have never been able to capture the attention of school administrators or policymakers and thus are frequent targets for budget cuts and are perennially ignored in accountability systems and data collection for educational indicator systems (McDonough, 1997; Whiston, 1996). Both Corwin and colleagues (2004) and Hugo (2004) articulate the problems that arise for counselors who know too well the devastation that comes from neglect of counseling in public schools. Yet, Whiston (1996) documents that counselors also know that they lack the hard evidence that could persuade state and local policymakers and school administrators of the need and potential benefits of hiring more school counselors. Moreover, Grubb and Watson (2002) concede that the general consensus is that counseling and guidance are among the weakest services in most high schools, and that there is very little research evidence on what counselors do.

Two disparities in counselors' work stem from work with parents and counselors'



roles within schools in creating or sustaining college cultures. One counselor role that is nearly completely missing in schools that serve low-income students and students of color is working with parents. Although much has been known for a long time about the fact that parents tend to be the most powerful influence on their students' educational aspirations in general and college plans in particular, it was only beginning in the mid-1980s that parents were identified as a service population for counselors as a means of serving students in the college-going process (Boyer, 1987; Chapman and DeMasi, 1984; National Association of College Admissions Counselors, 1986). Boyer identified parents' need for basic college information, while Chapman and DeMasi pinpointed major parental needs regarding financial aid, and the NACAC study showed that, even though most high schools had college fairs and college information sessions, nonetheless, over 400 high schools across the U.S. did not even have these simplest of parental college informational and engagement activities. Other more recent studies have focused heavily on parents and their roles in their students' college aspirations and enrollments, and these studies definitively show that parents, particularly Latino and African-American parents, need to be on counselors' agendas (Perez, 2000; Tierney and Auerbach, 2004; Tomas Rivera Institute, 2004; Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio, 2002).

Second, it is important to look beyond the individual counselor working with a student in her/his office. The high school environment has a powerful influence on students' college aspirations and preparation. Four key components of the high school have a tremendous impact on college attendance: a college preparatory curriculum; a college culture which establishes high academic standards and includes formal and informal communication networks that promote and support college expectations; a school staff that collectively is committed to students' college goals; and resources devoted to counseling and advising college-bound students (Alexander and Eckland,



1977; Boyle, 1966; Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993; Cookson and Persell, 1985; Falsey and Heyns, 1984; Hotchkiss & Vetter, 1987; McDonough, 1994, 1997; Powell, 1996).

One common thread running through the research evidence on the school's role in structuring students' aspirations and actual college preparatory opportunities is that guidance and counseling staff can help to establish a school's college culture. But that culture needs to be held and acted upon by knowledgeable staff who affect students in daily interactions apart from specific college preparatory programs (Hotchkiss & Vetter, 1987; McDonough, 1994 and 1997; McDonough and McClafferty 2000).

High schools have different structural arrangements for counseling in general, and college advising in particular (McDonough 1997). Guidance counselors have a direct impact on students, and more importantly, they create and implement the school's normative expectations for students' college destination and how to prepare for them. They create a worldview for students and their parents that delimits the full universe of 3000 possible college choices into a smaller range (1-8) of cognitively manageable considerations. Schools and counselors construct this worldview in response to their perceptions of the parents' and community's expectations for appropriate college destinations, combined with the counselor's own knowledge and experience base.

Thus from research, we know that counselors impact students' aspirations, plans, enrollments, financial aid knowledge and that meeting frequently with a counselor increases a student's chance of enrolling in a four-year college, and if students, parents, and counselors work together and communicate clearly students' chances of enrolling in college significantly increases. Moreover, the effect of socioeconomic status on the



college enrollment of low-income students is largely explained by the lack of adequate counseling (King, 1996; Plank and Jordan, 2001).

Counselors have an impact on the following components of the college preparation and advising task: 1) structuring information and organizing activities that foster and support students' college aspirations and an understanding of college and its importance, 2) assisting parents in understanding their role in fostering and supporting college aspirations, setting of college expectations, and motivating students; 3) assisting students in academic preparation for college; 4) supporting and influencing students in decision-making about college, and 5) organizationally focusing the school on its college mission (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 2004).

Repeated studies have found that improving counseling would have a significant impact on college access for low-income, rural, and urban students as well as students of color (Gandara and Bial 2001; King, 1996; Plank and Jordan, 2001; Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei, 1996; Venezia et al., 2003). Specifically, if counselors actively support students and their family through the college admissions process, as opposed to simply disseminating information, this will increase students' chances of enrolling in a four-year college.

But, counselors have too many jobs assigned to them to be effective, they are not allowed to fulfill the jobs for which they have been trained, and parents and students feel counselors are not focusing on the most important jobs. Moreover, they can not satisfy the competing demands of parents, students, school personnel (Freeman and Coll, 1997).



Thus counselors are structurally constrained from doing the job they know and do best. Specifically in the junior and senior year, counselors can significantly help students and parents by

- reducing anxiety;
- providing application profile enhancement in the form of test coaching, essay assistance, proofing and effective means of self-presentation;
- helping students realize the wide range of college options and find the best personal match;
- presenting students in the most effective ways in letters of recommendation; and
- maintaining professional networks with college admissions officers.

Alternative Forms of Counseling

There is much to be learned in comparative analyses. Three ways to compare public school counseling are with college preparatory or “prep” schools, outreach programs, and private counselors. Counseling was first developed in prep schools in the 1950s when college admissions offices faced a surge of applications and prep school heads could no longer call admissions offices and “place” their students into a small number of elite colleges. In stark contrast to public schools, prep school counselors are exclusively devoted to college counseling. The psychological counseling components so prevalent in public schools is outsourced to private therapists who have minimal connection to the school (Powell, 1996). A competing public school counseling function,



scheduling, is not a significant function in prep schools because of their relatively small size and their singular mission, therefore all courses are college preparatory.

A second comparison comes from college intervention programs. Low-income students and students of color are often deprived of college-enabling conditions in their K-12 schools. Too often, these students are enrolled in high schools that fail to meet the entrance requirements of more competitive colleges because of shortages of qualified teachers and college counselors, and inadequate honors and advanced placement classes, etc. (Oakes et al., 2002).

Pre-collegiate outreach or intervention programs are designed to supplement schools and communities with resources that are helpful for students preparing for college. Most intervention programs target improving opportunities for individual students, rather than changing the structure or functioning of schools, and thus are student-centered, rather than, school-centered programs. But inadequate preparation for college is an institutional problem not an individual problem. By design, outreach programs are inequitable because they target only a small percentage of students and they do not and can not serve all students consistently.

College preparation intervention programs can double the college-going rates for at-risk youth (Horn, 1997), can expand students' educational aspirations, can increase students' educational and cultural capital assets can boost college enrollment and graduation rates (Gandara and Bial, 2001; Perna and Swail, 2002; Tierney et al., 2004). Moreover, the benefits are often greatest for low-income students with low initial expectations and achievement (Myers and Schrim, 1999). Counselors are one of the



key reasons for these programs' effectiveness (Gandara and Bial, 2001; McDonough, 2004; Tierney et al., 2004).

A final comparison comes from private college counselors. Increasingly competitive college admissions have made college entry a complex, high risk, and stressful task. In the absence of cohesive college advising programs within schools (and sometimes even in the presence of such programs), some high SES students and their parents have looked to private counselors to: provide access to specialized knowledge, coach on tests and essays, "hand-hold" students through the admissions process, keep the admissions process organized and the student on schedule, and help with peer pressure and learning disabilities or other special circumstances. Private counselors spend more time with college-bound students than any type of school-based counselor, public or private, and most are available both by phone and in-person during evenings or weekends (McDonough, 1994; McDonough et al. 1997). The privatized and costly nature of this support precludes access by lower SES college aspirants who arguably need it most.

Professional Associations of Counselors

There are three major national counseling associations: The American Counseling Association, the American School Counselor Association, and the National Association for College Admission Counseling. The American Counseling Association is "the world's largest association exclusively representing professional counselors in various practice settings" (American Counseling Association, 2004). Of its 18 divisions of professional specialization, there is the American College Counseling Association



which began in 1991. However, unlike what one could surmise from its name, ACCA's mission is to foster student development within postsecondary institutions, not to help students get to college.

Of all ACA's current public policy initiatives mentioned on their website, the only one relevant to the role of school counselors in college advising is a lobbying effort to fight President Bush's third attempt to eliminate the \$33.8 million for the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program. This program is the *only* source of federal funding for counseling. While it is currently only funded at the elementary school level, it plays a crucial role in providing access to counseling services through a grants process designed to reward innovative counseling projects. Laudable as this initiative is, it demonstrates a lack of federal commitment to counseling and fails to directly address middle and secondary school college advising needs (ACA, 2004).

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is an independent organization, yet it is affiliated with the American Counseling Association as a division. ASCA mission is to assist "school counselors' efforts to help students focus on academic, personal/social and career development" (American School Counselor Association, 2004a). In its position statements, ASCA emphasizes an academic developmental focus on skills acquisition, attitudes and knowledge while its career development focuses on a "successful transition from school to careers" (American School Counselor Association, 2004b). ASCA has a long list of position statements that include character education, high stakes testing, special needs students, etc. The only official mention of college advising needs in its position or mission statements is on college entrance exams, which reads: "Professional school counselors help students



and their families become aware of college entrance test preparation programs” (American School Counselor Association, 2004b).

The National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) is “dedicated to serving students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education... with particular emphasis on the transition from secondary schools to higher education and with attention to access and equity for all students” (National Association of College Admission Counseling, 2004a). This professional group provides direct support to any high school counselor involved in college advising, although most high school counselors are not NACAC members.

A professional association that could be of great help to high school counselors in advising students and their families is the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) which seeks to advance “the professional preparation, effectiveness, and mutual support of persons involved in student financial aid administration” (National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 2004). Interestingly enough, their mission statement explicitly focuses only on postsecondary personnel and institutions.

What seems problematic from the outside is that these professional associations, and more importantly the counselors who belong to each of these organizations, are not working together on common policy agendas, or with the many other educational associations and advocacy groups now calling for significant investment in college access, and specifically calling for more counselors dedicated to improving college access. Why are college counselors expected to take care of college preparation and



advising and other counselors not expected to engage in this work? Why aren't all counselors attending annual meetings of NACAC, regional ACACs, College Board, and the many other college advising training and professional development workshops? Why is there so little overlap between college counselors and all other school counselors? Why is NACAC, ASCA, and advocacy groups like Pathways to College, etc. not joining forces and meeting with NASFAA to encourage college financial aid officers to train high school counselors, to routinely (not just at the request of the dedicated, savvy college counselor) run financial aid workshops at high schools for students, parents, and teachers, and to have joint annual meetings or offer reduced registration fees at each other's annual meetings? Why is NACAC, ASCA, and advocacy groups like Pathways to College, etc. not joining forces and meeting with the National Association of Secondary School Principals to develop professional development workshops and publications for new and continuing principals about what good counseling for college looks like and why counselors should not be pulled off that task for yard duty?

Conclusions

In America, high school counseling, and in particular college counseling, has multiple personalities. The counseling profession is both valued and unvalued, highly effective and of little impact. Different constituencies would describe the primary job description as administrative, while others would say academic, and yet others would say therapeutic. So, what is the nature of counseling? What is the state of the art of counseling? And how can discrepant views such as these be reconciled?



Research clearly shows that counselors, when consistently and frequently available and authorized to provide direct services to students and parents, can be a highly effective group of professionals who impact students' aspirations, achievements, college enrollments, and financial aid knowledge. On the other hand, although nine out of ten students feel their counselor is knowledgeable about colleges (but not about financial aid) they report not getting the assistance they need from counselors. Is college counseling a task of information dispensing or a task of advising?

In fiscally austere times in public schools, counseling positions are among the "nonessentials" cut. When not eliminated, counselors' main jobs---as defined by principals and demanded by accountability systems---are scheduling, testing, and discipline. After that, in public schools located in middle and upper class neighborhoods the priority is college counseling. But in schools in poor neighborhoods with large numbers of students of color, the next counseling priorities are dropout, drug, pregnancy, and suicide prevention, along with sexuality, personal and crisis counseling. Then as time permits or teaching loads are increased to make more counselors available, there is attention to college counseling. Within high schools, the work of college counselors is frequently separate and apart from the rest of the counseling operations.

A third of American counselors are in high-poverty public high schools, the schools that enroll the vast majority of low-income students and students of color, the schools that enroll a significant proportion of the 12.8 million high school students today (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Some of these



schools have student-to-counselor ratios of 500:1, some 5000:1, and some multi-track, year-round schools in urban areas have no counselors available for certain tracks of students.

Contrast this with private schools, for which parents pay tens of thousands of dollars, where counseling programs are focused only on college counseling. In fact, the parents with the most money and the highest levels of postsecondary education spend thousands of dollars for private counselors when school counselors are not available or adequate to the college task, even in private schools.

Counseling is also, in many ways, a nearly invisible profession. Counselors, high school counseling, and college-related counseling are not the foci of adequate, nationally representative quantitative or qualitative data collection. The College Board, NACAC, and The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) all collect data on counselors but these efforts are incomplete. Moreover, counseling is off the radar in virtually all accountability schemas. Helping students prepare for college or assisting students in enrolling in college is not written into any existing accountability system, any leadership performance evaluation, or any K-12 job description. Yet, most of the American public, journalists, and policymakers assume that adequate numbers and adequately trained high school counselors are doing this job.

Major counseling textbooks used to train new counselors rarely, if ever, mention or index the words “college” or “college counseling.” Consequently, coursework in graduate education rarely, if ever, includes training in college counseling.



The major national counseling associations appear to be fragmented. High school counselors sometimes belong to the American Counseling Association, often to the American School Counselor Association, and rarely (except for college counselors) to the National Association for College Admission Counseling. ACA and ASCA do not mention college advising in their websites or mission statements, with the exception of mentioning college entrance exams. From these professional associations there is no uniform voice or obvious history of collaboration to improve the state of counseling or college counseling. From the outside, it would appear as though in an era of calls for P-16 collaboration and reform, counseling associations are fractured and isolated.

Yet, we have definitive evidence that improving high school counseling and equalizing students' access to counseling would likely have a significant impact on improving college access for underserved populations. In fact, counseling is generally agreed upon as one of the three main needs for improving college access for poor students and students of color (along with a more rigorous high school curriculum and a better financial aid system).



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