SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE COLLEGE ADMISSION PROCESS

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

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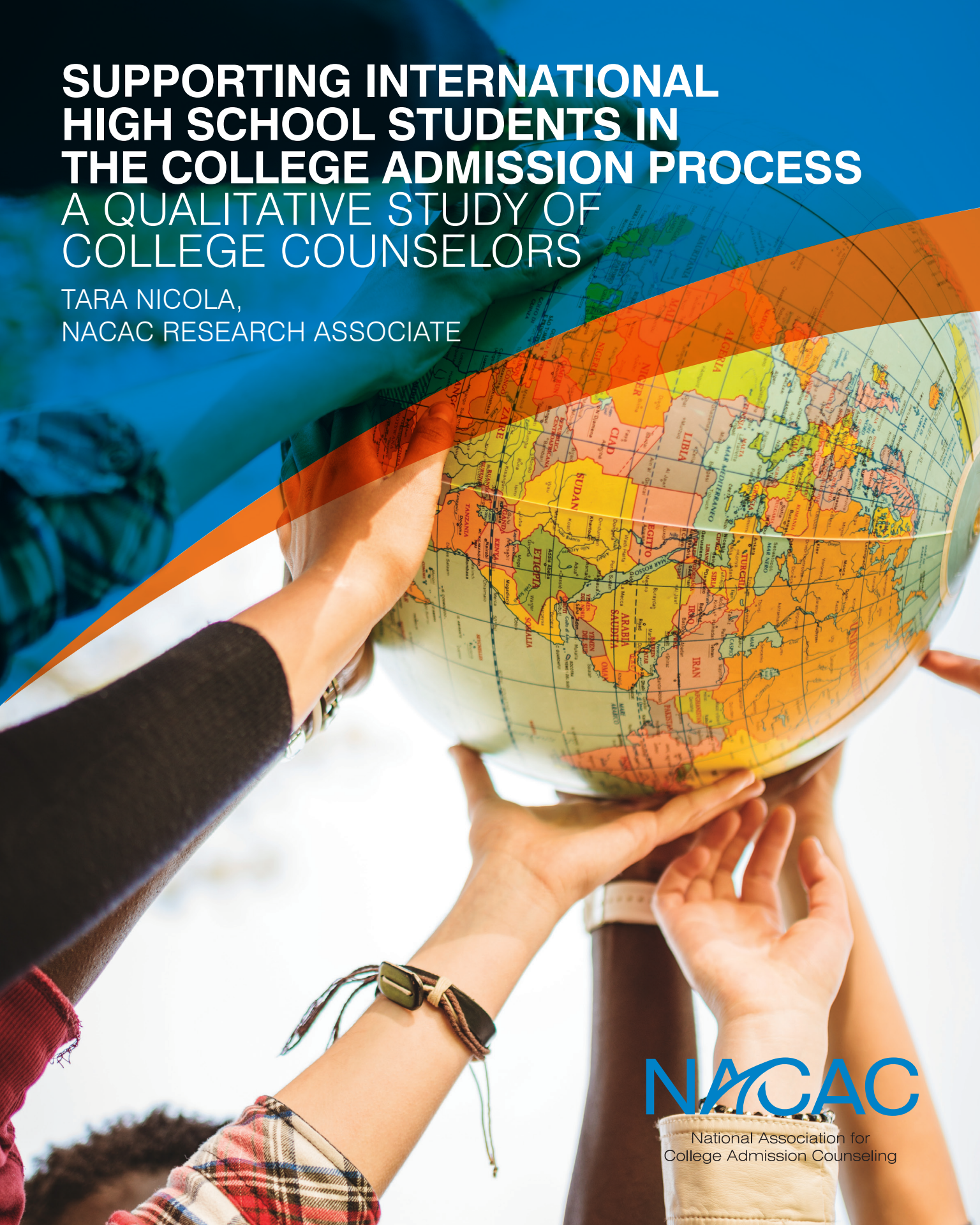

NACAC
National Association for College Admission Counseling

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

US secondary schools are experiencing the effects of globalization, particularly on account of their growing population of international students. The latest data from the United States Department of Homeland Security show that US high schools hosted 22,589 exchange students and 59,392 diploma-seeking students from over 200 countries in 2016 (Farrugia, 2017).

One of the most significant reasons that international students choose to pursue secondary education in the US is the perception that it will increase their chances of admission to top American colleges. With the growth of international students, the high school counselors who advise them on the college admission process are experiencing new professional challenges. Because many colleges have specific application, testing, and financial requirements for noncitizens, counselors can be a key source of guidance as students navigate the undergraduate admission process. Yet, there is limited research to date exploring whether counselors currently possess the resources and skills to adequately serve international students. This study addresses that gap.

Challenges Encountered by College Counselors

Drawing upon interviews with a diverse sample of 20 college counselors from across the United States, this study examines the unique challenges they face in advising international students about postsecondary education. It also highlights ways these professionals can be further supported.

Negotiating Language and Cultural Divides

- Almost all counselors cited negotiating language and cultural barriers as a significant obstacle. Because a minimum level of English proficiency was not required for admission at many of the schools in this study, some students arrived in the US with insufficient English skills. As a result, counselors experienced difficulty communicating with them about the intricacies of the admission process. Effectively engaging with their parents was also a challenge since the families of international students did not always speak English.
- Even students fluent in English often have difficulty understanding the vocabulary surrounding the college admission process. Counselors have to be cautious to not use specific terms, acronyms, or slang without providing thorough explanations or the necessary background context.

Assembling the College List

- Convincing international students to explore college options that are the right "fit" rather than those within a narrow list defined by prestige, cultural expectations, and parental and agent influence can be an insurmountable hurdle.
- University rankings often have an inordinate influence on international students' college choices, largely because top employers in their home countries prefer to hire students from highly-ranked institutions.

Navigating the Use of Third-Party Agents

- Seventy-five percent of all counselors interviewed, and 90 percent of private school counselors interviewed, reported their international students work with third-party agents.
- No schools in the study had a written policy outlining the relationship between the counseling office and agents, leaving counselors unsure of how to collaborate with the external consultants.
- All counselors agreed that navigating the admission process with consultants can be challenging. This was largely because agents can sometimes provide inaccurate information or unsound advice to students.

Dearth of Training and Professional Development Opportunities

- Of the 17 counselors who had completed an advanced degree in counseling or education, most reported their programs did not include content specifically about working with nonimmigrant international students.
- Only four schools—all private institutions—offered in-house trainings to faculty and staff, including college counselors, about advising the international student population. The vast majority of counselors neither received any formal training nor were aware of the variety of resources about the international student admission process produced by professional associations, universities, other non-profits, and the federal government.
- All counselors agreed they would benefit from more training opportunities, and the majority thought such training would be useful at their schools.
- This lack of training may contribute to why some respondents did not feel fully confident working with international students. On average, college counselors felt less comfortable advising international students about the college admission process than domestic students.

Recommendations for Supporting College Counselors

The following are recommendations for how college counselors who advise international students can be further supported:

1. Counselors need more training about advising international students, especially regarding the college admission process.

Curricula for graduate counseling programs should include coursework focused specifically on working with diverse student populations, including international students on nonimmigrant visas. Schools with foreign students should organize trainings or professional development opportunities for counselors that cover topics such as effectively communicating with students and families and navigating cultural differences.

2. More opportunities to share best practices at the state and national level should be created for counselors who work with international students.

Building a strong network of counselors nationally who advise international students at the secondary level is important in allowing the exchange of ideas and strategies for addressing common challenges. This is especially critical for counselors at public schools, who overall tended to feel more isolated in their work with these students.

3. Higher education stakeholders should create more resources relevant for international students and their counselors concerning the undergraduate admission process. Better dissemination of existing information is also needed.

Colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations, professional associations, and federal, state, and local governments should ensure their resources focused on postsecondary education are useful for all students, including those from abroad.

Better dissemination of content that is already available is also necessary, as many professionals are unaware of resources that may be relevant to their work.

Introduction

In recent years, the internationalization of the US education sector has caught the attention of the media, policymakers, and educators alike. Its effects are perhaps the most salient at the postsecondary level where higher education institutions grapple with how to best position themselves for success in a globalized knowledge economy. Seemingly every week there is a prominent headline about the efforts of colleges and universities to internationalize—whether that takes the form of adding multicultural perspectives to traditional Eurocentric curricula, forming research partnerships with foreign institutions, or establishing overseas branch campuses.

The recruitment of international students[1] has become an especially key facet of many institutions' larger globalization initiatives; such students diversify otherwise homogenous student bodies as well as bring much-needed tuition revenue to cash-strapped colleges. In fact, over the past decade the population of international college students has increased by nearly 70 percent (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2016).

Yet, internationalization is not just limited to the postsecondary sector. Albeit small, the population of foreign students on nonimmigrant visas enrolling in US high schools is growing as more individuals consider pursuing educational opportunities outside of their home countries. In many ways, these international high school students experience the same challenges as their college-age counterparts; social isolation, limited English language proficiency, and difficulty understanding American culture and its idiosyncrasies are just a few of the potential struggles such students face (Geary, 2016). The population of international secondary school students, however, is distinct. These pupils—some as young as 12 when they arrive in the US—must navigate their tumultuous teenage years far from the comforts of home.

Many international families choose to enroll their children in a US high school in order to increase their chances of acceptance to top American colleges in later years. College counselors employed by secondary schools play a vital role assisting these students with their transition into postsecondary education.[2] The college admission process can be quite complicated for international students as each university has different application, testing, and financial requirements for noncitizens. Counselors can thus be an important source of guidance for these students at every step of the application process (ASCA, 2016).

Given the recent surge in the number of international students attending US high schools, the extent to which college counselors actually feel prepared to meet the unique needs of these pupils is largely unknown. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature by not only pinpointing the professional challenges counselors face advising this diverse population about their postsecondary education options, but also highlighting what resources counselors need to support their international students most effectively.

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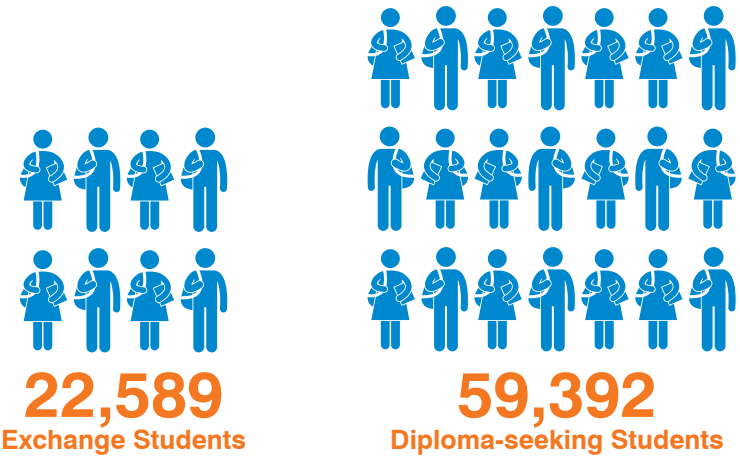
[1] Typically, students who are not US citizens or permanent residents and have entered the country on a nonimmigrant visa are considered international students. Some institutions also classify American citizens living abroad who return to study in the US as international (NACAC, 2016).

[2] College counselors represent a diverse group of professionals. Most public secondary schools employ school counselors who provide college advising in addition to socio-emotional and academic support. By contrast, private institutions are more likely to have college counselors, distinct from the school counselor population, who are responsible only for advising students about their postsecondary options. In this report, we use the term "college counselor" to encompass all professionals, including school counselors, who offer guidance to students about higher education.

Setting the Scene: J-1 and F-1 Visa Holders in US High Schools

International students on J-1 and F-1 visas are an overlooked demographic within US high schools.[3] Although the US hosts more foreign secondary school students than any other anglophone country, this population is still relatively small (Farrugia, 2014). Visa data from the US Department of Homeland Security's Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) indicated there were 22,589 exchange students and 59,392 diploma-seeking students attending US high schools during the fall of 2016 (Farrugia, 2017). This segment of the student population has experienced unprecedented growth, particularly with regard to the number of students pursuing full diploma studies on F-1 visas. Whereas participation in short-term exchange programs on J-1 visas[4] grew only 5 percent between 2004 and 2016 (Farrugia, 2014, 2017; CSIET, 2016), the enrollment of overseas pupils in diploma programs increased by almost 300 percent (Farrugia, 2014, 2017).

Until recently, little was known about the composition of this particular high school population. Christine Farrugia's 2014 study was one of the first to conduct a detailed analysis of international enrollment trends at the secondary level. Drawing upon 2013 SEVIS and National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, her report found that China, South Korea, Germany, Mexico, and Brazil are the top five countries of origin for international high school students, with Chinese and Korean students alone representing 42 percent of all foreign pupils. Whereas Asian students overwhelmingly enroll in diploma programs as a means of improving their chance of admission to US colleges and universities, European and Latin American students are more likely to participate in short-term exchanges that emphasize English language instruction and the development of cross-cultural relationships (Farrugia, 2014).



US high schools hosted 22,589 exchange students and 59,392 diploma-seeking students from over 200 countries in 2016.

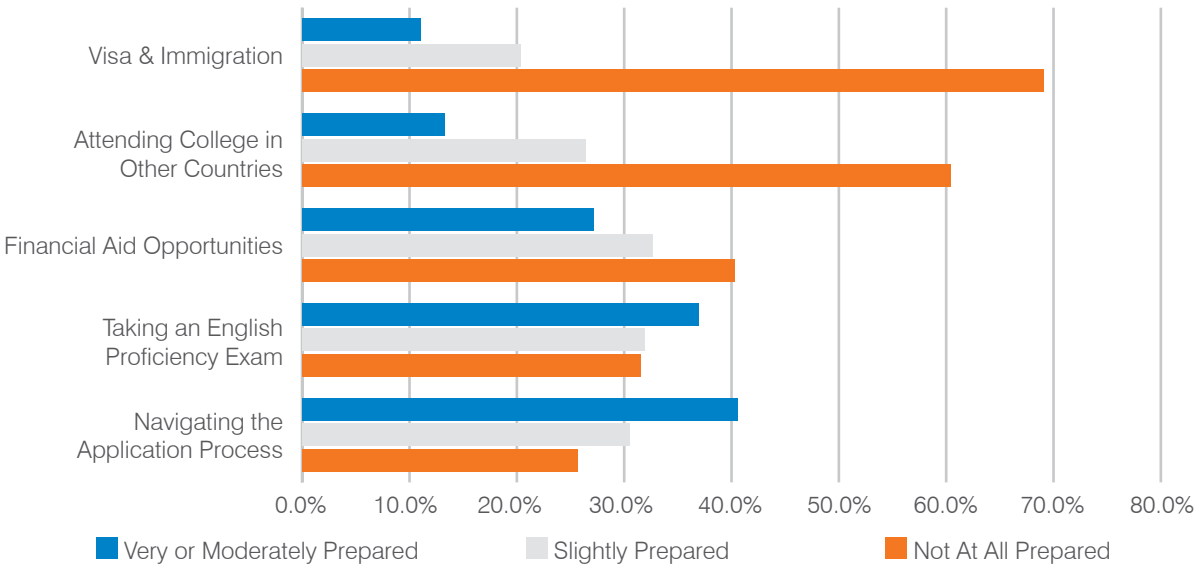
As Farrugia (2014) highlighted, international high school students are now found in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia, although J-1 and F-1 enrollment patterns vary across the country. For example, while the majority of F-1 students study in California and Northeast states such as New York and Massachusetts, exchange students typically attend school in Michigan, Wisconsin, or Texas.

While there is limited information on the specific schools where exchange students enroll, SEVIS data indicates that nearly all international students in diploma programs matriculate at private high schools: Of the over 59,000 F-1 visa holders in 2016, 94 percent attended a private institution (Farrugia, 2017). The majority of these pupils enroll in small, religiously affiliated schools (Farrugia, 2017), many of which actively recruit students from abroad. The large number of international students in private schools stems in part from

[3] International secondary students may hold visas other than a J-1 or F-1. For example, the M-1 visa allows students to enroll in vocational training while the H-4 permits dependents of H1-B visa holders to undertake academic study. However, data on students on these other visa types who are enrolled in US high schools is limited. Consequently, only students on J-1 and F-1 visas are considered in this study.

[4] The maximum duration of a J-1 secondary student visa is 12 months.

Figure 1. College Counselors' Level of Preparation Assisting International Students with Five Areas of the College Admission Process (N=749)



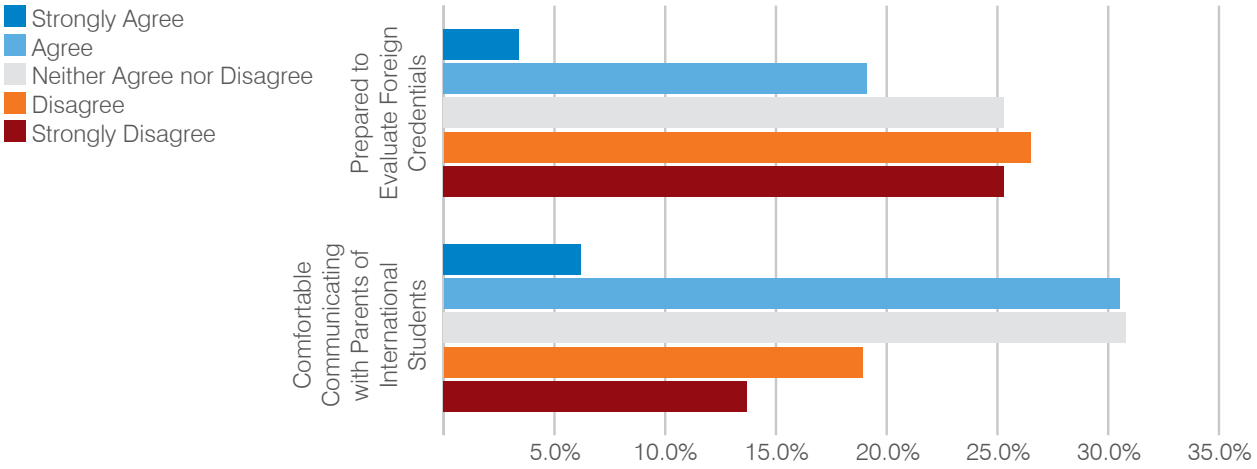
US immigration policy, which limits international students' attendance at a public secondary school to only one year. By contrast, such pupils are permitted to complete a four-year diploma program at private institutions certified to host international students. Consequently, only 251 public school districts in 30 states welcomed overseas high school students in fall 2016 (Farrugia, 2017).

Despite the presence of international pupils in high schools across the country, there is limited research focused on this population. There exists a vast body of literature addressing everything from the aspirations and expectations of international students (Gill & Routon, 2015; Cozart & Rojewski, 2015) to their academic success (Rienties et al., 2012; Tompson & Tompson, 1996) and cross-cultural interactions with their domestic counterparts (Glass & Westmont-Campbell, 2014), but these studies focus exclusively on the postsecondary education sector. In fact, a single study was not identified that explored the international secondary school student population.

College Counselors

Even more scarce is information related to the unique needs of college counselors who serve international students. Counselors' roles are multifaceted, their responsibilities encompassing domains as diverse as course scheduling, personal development, and academic testing (Radford & Ifill, 2012). Research has continually affirmed the importance of counselors in facilitating the success of high school students. For example, studies have found that counselors can help boost the academic outcomes of underachieving minorities (e.g. Davis, Davis, & Mobley, 2013; Bruce, Getch, & Ziomek-Daigle, 2009), as well as increase their likelihood of pursuing postsecondary education (Radford, Ifill, & Lew, 2014).

Figure 2. College Counselors' Level of Preparation Evaluating Foreign Credentials and Communicating with Parents of International Students (N=753)



In fact, data from the US Department of Education's High School Longitudinal Study 2009 (HSLS:09) underscored the influence of counselors on students' college-going behaviors. Specifically, analyses show that students who speak one-on-one with a college counselor are 3.2 times more likely to attend college and two times more likely to attend a bachelor's degree program (Dunlop, 2016). In addition, discussing with a college counselor options for life after high school is positively related to high school students' propensity for completing the Free Application for Federal and Student Aid (FAFSA) (Radford, Ifill, & Lew, 2014; Dunlop, 2016).

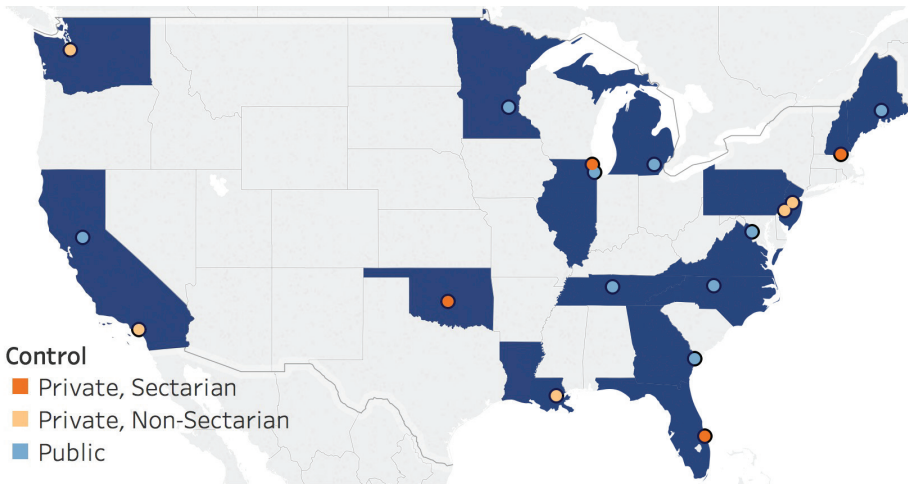
The influx of international students attending secondary school in the US is changing the role of the college counselor. Counselors must now be adept at understanding English language proficiency testing requirements, explaining immigration and visa policies, and communicating with students and families who may have misconceptions or unrealistic expectations about American higher education. The question naturally arises whether counselors currently possess the resources and skills to adequately serve these foreign pupils.

The National Association for College Admission Counseling's (NACAC) 2016 Counseling Trends Survey is the only research to date that directly explores this topic. The survey of about 750 public high school counselors and private college counselors who work with international students revealed that few of these professionals felt prepared to assist with any of the five major aspects of advising international students about postsecondary education: attending college in other countries; understanding visa and immigration requirements; locating suitable financial aid opportunities; navigating the application process; and taking an English proficiency exam (Clinedinst et al., *forthcoming*).

As indicated in **Figure 1**, 60.4 percent of counselors reported feeling not at all prepared to assist students with applying to and attending college in another country, such as other leading destinations for international students like the United Kingdom or Canada. Furthermore, 69.1 percent felt not at all prepared to advise on visa and immigration processes—information which students need to continue their education in the US on a nonimmigrant visa.

As shown in **Figure 2**, the vast majority of respondents also did not feel confident evaluating

Figure 3. Participating Secondary Institutions



Note: One institution is based primarily online and is not represented on the map.

foreign credentials, a skill needed in order to properly advise on course placement at the secondary level and to convey a student's complete history of academic coursework through the admission process. More troubling, only 6 percent felt very comfortable communicating with parents of international students about postsecondary admission procedures.

Research Questions

This study builds upon previous NACAC research, moving beyond the numbers to gain a deeper understanding about counselors' experiences advising international students on J-1 and F-1 visas about postsecondary education. The primary research questions were:

1. How does counseling international students about their postsecondary options differ from working with traditional domestic students?

2. To what extent are college counselors equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively support international students during the college selection and admission processes?

Methodology

This research took the form of an exploratory, qualitative case study. Case studies are valued for their emphasis on holistically understanding a phenomenon within its particular context (Punch, 2005). A case study design is appropriate given the focus of the research questions on the experiences and perceptions of a subset of the US college counselor population.

In order to obtain a diverse group of respondents, a purposive sampling strategy was employed. All US-based secondary school members of NACAC were invited by email to participate. Schools certified by the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) to enroll F-1 students, as noted on the Department of Homeland Security's *Study in the States* website, were also contacted. Only counselors who currently were advising international students on F-1 and/or J-1 visas about higher education options were chosen to enroll in the study. After receiving ethical approval from Solutions Institutional Review Board in June 2016 and the signed consent of participants, data collection commenced.

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 20 college counselors—10 from private schools and 10 from public institutions. Semi-structured interviews are ideal for capturing rich, in-depth information that traditional quantitative methods inherently cannot (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The interviews were conducted between June and November 2016 and lasted, on average, one hour.

The audio-recorded interviews were then transcribed and coded using NVivo 11 in order to reveal major themes within the data.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations, generalizability being one of the most significant. Specifically, the small sample size inherently restricts the study's external validity. While the research design allows the experiences of each study participant to be more fully understood, the 20 counselors interviewed are by no means representative of the entire high school counselor population in the US that works with international students on J-1 and F-1 visas. For instance, selection bias can result because counselors who agreed to participate may possess stronger opinions about advising international students and their families.

In addition, researcher bias is a potential threat to internal validity, as our personal experiences and perspectives may skew the results (Onwuegbuzie, 2003). However, to mitigate some of the effects of unconscious bias, a diverse group of individuals were involved in the planning, design, and execution of this study.

Table 1. Selected Demographic Characteristics, by Institutional Control

	Public	Private
Total Enrollment Grades 9-12	1,528	312
Four-Year College Enrollment Rate	63.2%	93.1%
Total Number of International Students *	6.7	42.4
J-1 Students	4.8	1.6
F-1 Students	1.9	39.8

*Includes only J-1 and F-1 students. Note: Figures represent averages. N=20

Overview of Participating Counselors and Institutions

The purposive sampling strategy allowed for the inclusion of a broad range of perspectives.

- Seventy-five percent of respondents identified as female and 75 percent as white. This is reflective of the larger school counseling and college counseling populations which research has shown to be predominantly female and white (i.e. Yep & Locke, 2001).
- The average amount of time in the counseling profession among respondents was 12.1 years.
- All but three participants possessed an advanced degree in school counseling or education.
- Approximately half of respondents had experience living or studying abroad.

As shown in **Figure 3**, respondents represented 20 institutions in 16 states.

- The majority of schools enrolled students in grades 9-12. Total enrollment ranged from 130 students to over 4,000. College attendance rates varied between 45 and 100 percent.
- Four schools were religiously affiliated—two were Catholic, one was Episcopal, and one Evangelical.
- Six of the private institutions accepted day and boarding students, while the remainder enrolled only day students.
- One school was single-sex.

A breakdown of additional demographic characteristics by institutional control can be found in **Table 1**. See **Appendix 1** (page 19) for a more comprehensive overview of the respondents.

Results

Over 20 hours of interviews with college counselors from across the country revealed that advising international students about their postsecondary options can be a very different experience than working with a traditional domestic applicant. This chapter sheds light on these differences by first examining the unique challenges counselors have encountered working with international students throughout the college admission process, including navigating language and cultural barriers; prioritizing fit over prestige during the college search; engaging with third-party agents; and accessing training and professional development opportunities. An analysis of the implications of these findings for future research, policy, and practice follows, as well as a discussion of how college counselors who work with this student population can be further supported.

Negotiating Language and Cultural Divides

Almost all counselors cited negotiating language barriers as a significant obstacle they face in their work with international students. These foreign pupils arrive in the US with varying levels of English proficiency, especially because schools may not require students to demonstrate proficiency prior to enrollment. Even those that mandate students take an English proficiency test or participate in an admission interview may find the students' mastery of the

English language insufficient once on campus. In speaking of her Chinese students, one counselor from California explained, "What they learned in China sometimes is not enough for them to be fluent… They seem to memorize questions for [the admission] Skype interviews, so it's not a good perspective on how they actually are" (Counselor 11).

On the most basic level, students' limited English skills make communication difficult for counselors. No counselors had a background in English as a Second Language (ESL) or spoke the primary language of their students. In fact, the majority of schools in the study did not have anyone on the faculty or staff who spoke the native languages of their international pupils. This often made explaining the intricacies of the postsecondary admission process quite tricky. One counselor noted that his school hired a translator to mitigate this issue and thus ensure students as well as their parents—who often do not speak English—could fully engage in the conversation. "The use of a translator has been immensely important, otherwise I'm talking, they're listening, and we have no clue whether we are communicating," Counselor 16 explained. "There is a lot of time where I have to say, 'could you explain that to them' because they nod and smile and are polite, but I have no clue whether they are getting it."

Even when working with students who have strong English skills, counselors reported having to be cautious about the language they use in conversations about the college search and application processes. Students might not be familiar with terms such as liberal arts, regular decision, demonstrated interest, and safety school. As a counselor at a private school in New Hampshire summarized:

> "When I talk about the college process and factors to look at in a college, often these are not typical words that [international] students will know. I have to keep myself in check and realize that saying things like "Greek life,' for example… they won't really know what that is."
> – Counselor 7

Finding the Right Fit

The idea of "fit" is also an especially American notion that can be difficult to convey. The term "fit" encapsulates the idea that students should attend a college that will best meet their academic, professional, and personal needs. Ensuring

international students find a college with the right "fit" can be difficult for a number of reasons.

First, there is the fact that international students are often unable to visit colleges and interact with students and faculty firsthand.[5] The majority of counselors in the study noted that their institutions do not organize formal college tours. Although some students may visit schools with their host families or with their own parents over the summer, many students do not have the chance to participate in campus visits before they matriculate. Though international students can often afford the travel costs associated with visiting colleges, they face difficulties arranging the trips. For example, if students are minors they may be unable to secure hotel accommodations.

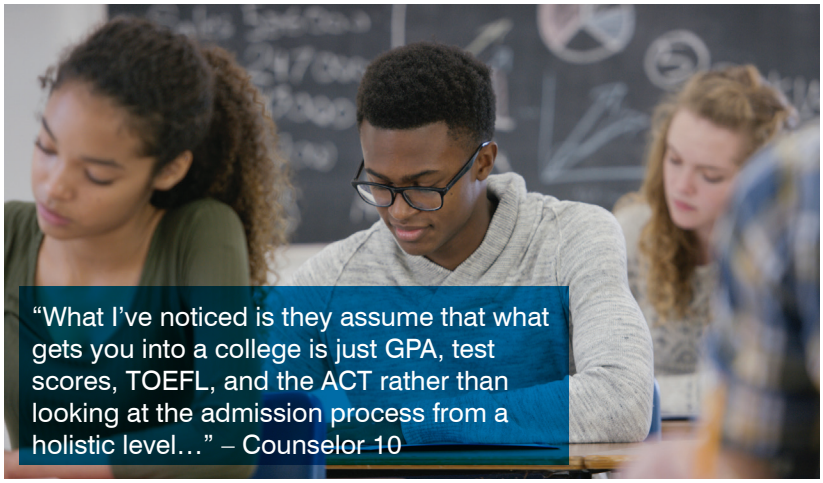
Counselors expressed concern about this, as students may not have all of the information they need to make a fully informed decision. As one counselor noted:

> "I really worry about them understanding the difference between going to an NYU and going to a Hamilton College or University of Miami versus University of Oklahoma. How would they know the difference? They look at them online, but we all know that everybody takes 12 pictures of the building with the pillars and the kid on the bike." – Counselor 15

Second, the idea of "fit" may also be difficult to understand for some students and families from cultures that place an inordinate weight on standardized testing performance in the college application process. While scores on the TOEFL, SAT, and ACT exams, among others, are highly important, these are not the only factors considered in the admission decision (Clinedinst et al., 2016). Under the holistic review system adopted by many US institutions, including highly selective colleges, there is an emphasis on admitting students who are more than just impressive test-takers and who will contribute to a college's academic and student life. International students and families are often not aware of this fact. As one counselor summarized:

> "What I've noticed is they assume that what gets you into a college is just GPA, test scores, TOEFL, and the ACT rather than looking at the admission process from a holistic level, and that is something I tried to communicate with them about… But I have to face the hurdle of explaining that to them in English—and to have them understand that extracurriculars are just as important as the grades and the rigorous course schedule." – Counselor 10

As a result, counselors may find themselves "dashing a lot of parents' hopes and dreams" because their child is not a strong "fit" at their preferred schools (Counselor 16). Even high-achieving students may not understand the sheer competitiveness of admission to Big 10 or Ivy League institutions at the top of their lists. As Counselor 10 tells his international advisees, the majority of whom are from China, their admission is dependent on submitting a compelling application demonstrating why they, instead of the "20,000 other Chinese students," are a good match for the institution.



[5] Note that first-generation and/or low-income US applicants also face hurdles visiting colleges due to the associated costs. As highlighted throughout this chapter, the experience of first-generation and low-income US students in many ways can parallel that of their international peers.

Assembling the College List

Convincing international students to explore college options that are the right "fit" rather than those within a narrow list defined by prestige, cultural expectations, and parental influence can be an insurmountable hurdle.[6] College rankings such as those produced by *U.S. News & World Report* and foreign media outlets significantly shape the college choice process for international students, especially those from Asian countries. As the director of college guidance at a day school in Louisiana noted, her international students "come with a list of well-known colleges and assume that they are going to be admitted" (Counselor 11).

These students overwhelmingly seek acceptance to highly ranked and thus highly selective institutions, although their conception of prestige can sometimes differ from that of their domestic counterparts. For example, as described by a college counselor at a private Catholic school in Illinois:

> "Typically, parents or some aunts and uncles will tell them which schools are ranked highly according to specific Chinese rankings so they have some opinions on schools that are very prestigious in their mind. I know one that surprised me early on was Penn State. Often Indiana University would also typically come up very high too . . . Not like they are bad schools in the US by far, but [it was different] the way they equated them with our typically more prestigious and academically rigorous schools." – Counselor 7

This emphasis on the prestige generated by rankings stems partly from the fact that attending a top American university is essential for boosting students' career prospects back home. "One student told me that when you are looking for a job in China, what they are going to look for is if your university from America is on the list of the *U.S. News* Top 100 or so," a counselor stated. "That is one of the reasons they are dead set on going to a higher-ranked school" (Counselor 10).

Because large research universities in major cities tend to be highly-ranked, students gravitate toward these types of institutions regardless of whether they can best serve their needs. As one counselor explained:

> "I think it goes back to, if nothing else, being able to point to a place on a map and say, "The University of Washington is in Washington." I think that larger is considered sort of better at first glance and that's probably also because of the way colleges and universities are portrayed in the media—that is the expectation of what the American higher education experience is about." – Counselor 7

From a logistical standpoint, international applicants may discount rural or suburban colleges because institutions located in metropolitan areas are more accessible and also are more likely to offer some of the comforts of home. For instance, one counselor stated that her Chinese students are particularly attracted to schools near major cities in southern California where there is a flourishing Chinese immigrant community; students only have to walk a few blocks from campus to purchase their favorite Chinese foods and meet others who share their same language and culture.

A number of counselors reported that students who are potentially more open to exploring other types of schools might be stymied by the wishes of their parents. As a counselor from a private school in Washington noted, "We have students who may come to the US and discover that they would be really well-suited to a small liberal arts college… [but] there may be a struggle to translate that experience to their parents."

Counselors thus sometimes struggled to rectify their definition of "fit" with that upheld by international students and parents.

"You want to make sure the student is finding the schools that fit for them but on the other hand… you don't want the prospective employers [back home] to look at the résumé and say, 'You went to school where? Never heard of that school,'" Counselor 6 explained.

"That's been hard for me to figure out how I can be a better counselor and help them to see there are other options out there, while at the same time recognizing families… have sent their daughters for a lot of money over to the US for high school and they have ideas of what they want," another stated (Counselor 7).

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[6] Counselors underscored that they experience this issue working with all students, including domestic applicants. However, the emphasis on prestige and rankings tended to be more pronounced among international students and their families.

Navigating the Use of Third-Party Agents

The presence of external agents can also complicate the admission process. Seventy-five percent of all counselors interviewed and 90 percent of private school counselors interviewed reported their international students work with third-party agents. These consultants, typically based overseas, are hired by the student and their family to assist with all facets of the college admission process—from helping complete the Common Application and editing essays to preparing students for the SAT and submitting visa applications. As confirmed by a number of counselors, many students utilize the assistance of agents when applying to secondary schools in the US and continue to pay for their services as they explore postsecondary options. These agents can be an immense resource for international students and families who are unfamiliar with the US education system. Because many international parents may not be fluent in English, the agents are also able to bridge that language barrier.

However, a majority of counselors whose students work with agents found that the consultants sometimes provide unsound advice because, as summarized by one respondent, they "don't know about the rich diversity of postsecondary options here in the United States" (Counselor 6). Specifically, one counselor spoke of how the agents tend to steer her students towards only "brand name" institutions, not taking into account students' academic and personal interests:

> "There are only certain schools [the agents] will let them look at. We are near Boston, so it is MIT, Northeastern, and Boston University. Then they go to New York and it's NYU, Fordham, and Columbia . . . They go to these cities but I'm trying to share [with my students] the wider field."
> – Counselor 15

90% of private school counselors who were interviewd reported their students work with third-party agents.

In addition, a handful of counselors shared stories about unscrupulous agents engaging in unethical practices including writing application essays on behalf of students and even forging grades on transcripts.

All counselors whose students employ third-party agents agreed that navigating the admission process with external consultants could be a challenge. As explained by a counselor from a private school in New Jersey with six years of experience, "it can get a little tricky trying to negotiate the process with that extra person in the middle," especially without clear instructions from the school and parents delineating the roles of the counselor and agent (Counselor 5). No schools in this study had a written policy outlining how the counseling office should collaborate with agents, often leaving counselors unsure of what information they could share with consultants.

Limited communication overall between the school counseling office and agents further exacerbated this issue. A number of counselors noted it was difficult to build a relationship with the consultants, one counselor even proclaiming, "They typically don't want anything to do with me. They don't want the parents to know that I exist" (Counselor 6).

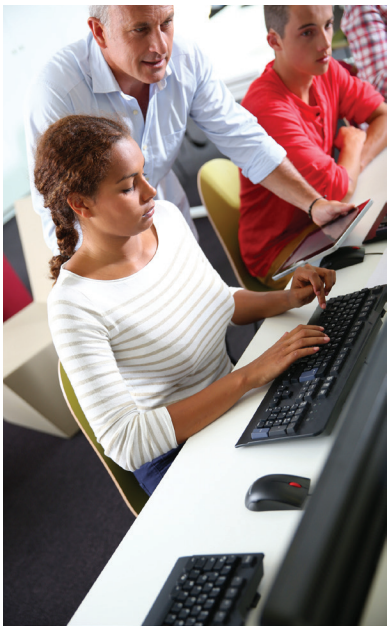
By far, the counselors who reported having positive experiences were those who established clear and open lines of communication between the counseling office, students, parents, and agents. Although students and families may be initially hesitant to reveal they are working with an external party, emphasizing the importance of transparency among all major stakeholders was seen as imperative in ensuring the best interests of students are upheld at all times.

Dearth of Training and Professional Development Opportunities

There is a lack of training and professional development opportunities available to help counselors navigate the issues they may encounter when advising international students. Of the 17 counselors who had completed a graduate degree in counseling or education, the majority reported their programs did not include content specifically about working with international students. While a handful of respondents noted that their coursework included multicultural competency training elements, the emphasis tended to be on supporting students from historically disadvantaged groups in the US.

However, students on J-1 and F-1 visas are distinct from their minority, first-generation, and undocumented peers. Whereas underrepresented minorities and students of color are disproportionately from low-income backgrounds, international students tend to be from well-educated families that can afford the high tuition rates charged by US high schools. And yet, these students share similar challenges, including overcoming language and cultural barriers as well as an information gap about the US postsecondary education system.

One counselor from a private school in California with a high percentage of affluent Chinese students grappled with the difficulties she has faced in applying the knowledge gained from her diversity training in graduate school with the realities of supporting her students:



> "In my graduate studies, there was a lot of emphasis on working with underserved students but not a lot of best practices in working with students who are given Maseratis for their sweet sixteen… There needs to be understanding on how to work with students from affluent families [who] are still English language learners and need to understand US culture and basic social skills." – Counselor 10

Counselors have limited access to formal training concerning this population, both in graduate school and once they enter the workforce. Only four schools—all private institutions—offered comprehensive training to faculty and staff about supporting international students. The trainings ranged from informal weekly workshops to structured programs organized by ESL staff or third-party agencies that schools hired to recruit international students.

For example, a counselor from a Vermont Catholic school that recently began enrolling students from abroad described how her institution offered four professional development sessions which covered everything from "what to expect, [and understanding] culture changes and culture differences" to "how do you grade these students so they don't feel discouraged, and what is the partnership between the school, the host family, the parents, and the agent?" (Counselor 15).

Beyond attending in-house trainings, a handful of counselors participated in conferences, webinars, or informational meetings hosted by NACAC, the Association of College Counselors in Independent Schools (ACCIS), the US Department of Education, NAFSA, and EducationUSA. However, the vast majority of counselors neither received any formal training for working with this population nor were aware of the variety of resources available to them.

Instead, these counselors tended to rely for advice on colleagues in the admission or international offices at their local universities. For some, colleagues from nearby high schools were their go-to source for infor-

mation. Counselor 1 from a public school in Minnesota noted how he serves as a primary resource for other counselors in his school district on account of his experience working with J-1 students. "They don't have someone like me [in their school] who has been working with exchange students for as long," he explained. "They will often call and ask, "What would you do in this situation?'"

All counselors agreed that they would benefit from more training opportunities, and the majority thought that such training would be beneficial at their schools. Specifically, counselors wanted to learn more about navigating cultural differences as well as more effectively communicating with international students and their families.

Lower Comfort Level Advising International Students

This lack of training may contribute to why some respondents did not feel fully confident working with international students. Respondents' level of comfort advising international students varied greatly. Whereas some were veterans in the field, others had started working with foreign applicants only a few months prior.

On average, however, the college counselors felt less comfortable advising international students about the college admission process than their domestic students. Counselors generally thought they understood the "basics" concerning the TOEFL exam and the Certification of Finances form, for example, but they did not always feel knowledgeable about the application, testing, and visa requirements for international students.

In particular, counselors from public schools voiced that they were not always confident working with their international advisees:

> "On a scale of 1-10, I would say I'm a 6. I'm definitely familiar with TOEFL and things like that, but I don't know the intricacies of the exact process." – Counselor 17

> "I feel like I know more than the average counselor, but I still don't feel I am by any means an expert." – Counselor 1

> "I can't tell you that I'm very comfortable. I always have a little bit of anxiety and trepidation about trying to advise [international] kids… I always have some degree of stress over that and concern that I'm doing everything that I could do and that I'm doing it properly. I'm not as comfortable with that obviously as with my [American] kids. I worry." – Counselor 9

Even experienced counselors who have worked in the private sector for over 20 years expressed hesitations about advising students on certain topics, such as financial aid. "I am always very cautious about the financial aid piece," one counselor explained, but "I can tell them where to go to get help" (Counselor 15).

Counselors underscored how immersion in the field was by far the best way to become a more prepared and knowledgeable advisor. "We have knowledge of what students may need for college, but the comfort level wasn't necessarily something our training provided us," Counselor 8 noted about her experience in the field. "As we've gone through our own job experiences, that's been something that we've learned and developed."

Discussion

Globalization—and the increased levels of student mobility it has engendered—is profoundly transforming the education sector in the US. Both the media and academic scholarship have drawn attention to the internationalization of higher education specifically, and with good reason: The United States is the leading destination country for students pursuing postsecondary education abroad (UNESCO, 2017). In fact, during the 2015–16 academic year, 1,043,839 international students from over 220 countries attended colleges and universities across the US (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2016).

While often overlooked, the US is also the top anglophone host of international secondary students (Farrugia, 2017). These ambitious students are an integral facet of their high school communities. They broaden the global outlook of their institutions, exposing their American classmates to different cultures and customs. As one counselor discussed, these students add especially invaluable perspectives to classroom discussions:

> "It's great to have as much perspective and background as possible and speak from a very different part of the world. It helps us understand that the Americans are not the center of the universe. We are a great country but we aren't the only one." – Counselor 16

It is imperative that schools have the resources to effectively support

all students, including those from abroad, throughout their high school careers. Since many international students enroll in US secondary institutions with the intention of ultimately gaining acceptance to an American college, it is of paramount importance that counselors are prepared to guide these students as they undertake the undergraduate admission process.

Interviews with 20 counselors at the heart of this study indicated that more work can and must be done: From navigating language and cultural barriers to effectively communicating with parents, these are challenges that are not necessarily insurmountable and can be overcome if the proper resources and networks are in place. The following are three initial recommendations for how college counselors who advise international students can be further supported:

Recommendations

1. Counselors need more training about advising international students, especially regarding the college admission process.

Curricula for graduate counseling programs should include coursework focused specifically on working with diverse student populations, including international students on nonimmigrant visas. Schools with foreign students should organize trainings for faculty and staff, including counselors, that cover navigating major cultural differences and assisting students during their initial transition into the US education system. Supporting college

counselors in attending professional development events that focus on the international high school student population is also beneficial.

2. More opportunities to share best practices at the state and national level should be created for counselors who work with international students.

Building a strong network of counselors nationally who work with international students at the secondary level is important in allowing the exchange of ideas and strategies for addressing common challenges counselors face.

3. Higher education stakeholders should create more resources relevant for international students and their counselors concerning the undergraduate admission process. Better dissemination of information already available is also needed.

Colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations, professional associations, and federal, state, and local governments should ensure their resources focused on postsecondary education are useful for all students, including those from abroad. For example, publications about locating financial aid opportunities should not assume that all students are US citizens.

Also, more emphasis must be placed on disseminating relevant information to counselors as many of these professionals are unaware of the resources available to them. It is critical that counselors have access to the most up-to-date information in order to most effectively counsel their students.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

One of NACAC's objectives in conducting this research is to jumpstart conversations about counseling an often-overlooked student population about college. The data gathered from the study confirmed that counselors want and need more information and training to help them in their work with these students. Schools, postsecondary institutions, and professional associations are uniquely positioned to provide these resources.

While the study was a first step in learning about the experiences of counselors who advise nonimmigrant international students, continued research in this area is necessary. Specifically, work is needed to determine best practices for college counselors who currently work with this population, as well as those who plan to counsel such students in the future. Broader research about the needs of other types of international students, including dual citizens as well as M-1 and H-4 visa holders, would also benefit the field as these students may differ significantly from their peers on J-1 and F-1 visas.

By collecting this vital data, the needs of the international high school student population and the counselors who serve them will be more fully understood.

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Appendix 1. Overview of Participating Respondents and Institutions

Counselor ID	State	Sex	Race / Ethnicity	Years of Experience	Control	Religious Affiliation	Total Enrollment Grades 9–12	Total International Students	J-1 Enrollment	F-1 Enrollment	Home Countries of International Advisees
1	MN	Male	White	18	Public		2,000	10	10	0	Belgium, China, Denmark, Germany, Norway, Poland, Spain
2	GA	Female	African American	17	Public		975	2	2	0	Germany, South Korea
3	WA	Female	White	3	Private, Nonsectarian		351	74	0	74	Brazil, Canada, China, Russia, Mexico
4	MD	Male	White	7	Private, Nonsectarian		120	49	0	49	China, Ghana, Nigeria, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Thailand, Turkey, Vietnam
5	NJ	Female	Asian	6	Private, Nonsectarian		524	72	0	72	Bahrain, Brazil, China, Japan, Kenya, Oman, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Spain, Thailand, Turkey, Venezuela, Vietnam
6	PA	Male	White	14	Private, Nonsectarian		207	40	3	37	China, France, Germany, Japan, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Korea, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan, Ukraine
7	IL	Female	White	10	Private, Sectarian, Single-Sex	Catholic	144	24	10	14	China, Mexico
8	Online	Female	White	5	Private, Nonsectarian		—	—	—	—	Brazil, Canada, China, Columbia, Japan, Mexico, Spain, United Arab Emirates
9	ME	Female	White	13	Public		164	6	0	6	China

continued on page 20

Appendix 1. Overview of Participating Respondents and Institutions (cont.)

Counselor ID	State	Sex	Race / Ethnicity	Years of Experience	Control	Religious Affiliation	Total Enrollment Grades 9–12	Total International Students	J-1 Enrollment	F-1 Enrollment	Home Countries of International Advisees
10	CA	Female	Asian	6	Private, Nonsectarian		130	120	0	120	China, South Korea, Pakistan
11	LA	Female	White	31	Private, Nonsectarian		243	6	0	6	China, South Korea
12	VA	Female	Hispanic	1	Public		2501	1	0	1	Italy
13	FL	Female	White	3	Private, Sectarian	Episcopal	250	30	5	25	China, Italy, Germany, Luxembourg
14	OK	Female	White	12	Private, Sectarian	Evangelical	358	15	0	15	China, South Korea, Vietnam
15	NH	Female	White	21	Private, Sectarian	Catholic	800	26	0	26	China, Italy, Germany, Russia, Italy, South Korea, Spain, Vietnam
16	MI	Male	White	28	Public		534	5	0	5	China, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain
17	CA	Female	White	17	Public		400	5	3	2	China, Brazil, Germany, Italy, Mexico
18	NC	Female	White	22	Public		1175	3	0	3	China, Germany
19	TN	Female	African American	5	Public		1872	3	3	0	Guatemala, Mexico
20	IL	Male	White	3	Public		4135	250	15	—	Canada, China, Denmark, India, Italy, Mexico, Norway, Philippines, South Africa, Sweden

Note: — Data unavailable.