

A young Black male student with a backpack is smiling and looking towards the right. He is wearing a white and purple long-sleeved shirt. To his right, the hands and part of a light blue jacket of another person, likely a teacher, are visible. The background is a blurred brick building.

# Teachers Can Counsel, Too

We can't see our students every day, or every week, for that matter. To create a school-wide college-going culture, we need a lot of help from our fellow educators. How can we help them help us?

---



---

By Eric Neutuch

At Niles North High School outside of Chicago, music teacher Daniel Gregerman has an open door policy, and students often drop-by to talk with him about tough college choices. In April, Gregerman spoke with a student considering attending a historically black college and another student considering attending a music conservatory.

Gregerman said, "I listen with open ears." He explained that he is careful to refer students to his school's college counseling office for further advising. "If I don't have an answer to a question, I put students in touch with someone who can get them the answer."

At Gregerman's school, Jerry Pope, the dean of college counseling, said that many teachers, like Gregerman, "help students through the college admission process." Pope is grateful for their help and said that the work of college advising in the Niles Townships High School District is a team project involving all school personnel, especially teachers.

The NACAC Statement on Counselor Competencies defines college counselors' responsibilities as including "collaborat[ing] with teachers, administrators, and other educators." The experiences of longtime college counselors, like Pope, showcase many best practices for working with teachers to advance college counseling goals:

- 1) Educating and empowering teachers to talk about college-going and college admission.

newsletters and informal conversations. Serafine said, "Once faculty members understand how the college admission process plays out for students, they can be big advocates."

According to Patrick O'Connor, associate dean of college counseling at Cranbrook School in Michigan and a past NACAC president, teachers who are educated about the college admission process echo the information coming from the college counseling office. O'Connor explained, "It is reassuring for students when they get messages about how to apply to college from more than one voice."

O'Connor also noted that students spend only a small amount of in-school time with professional college counselors and most of their formal learning time in classrooms with teachers. It's from teachers that students get messages about most everything, including applying to college, so it's critical that teachers can answer basic questions, dispel myths, and direct students for more help.

In Niles Township, Pope asks the teaching staff to broadcast to students three main messages about college admission. "For any new teacher, I ask them to explain to their students that 1) college is possible; 2) that it can be made affordable; and 3) how GPA is calculated." He wants students to understand that just passing classes isn't good enough for selective college admission, and for him, teachers are powerful conduits for that message.

---

**Experienced college counselors, like Pope, say that it is critical that counselors educate teachers about the basics of college admission. They say teachers who understand the college admission and financial aid processes are likely to broadcast knowledge that they have gained in their classrooms.**

---

- 2) Working alongside teachers to embed college-related activities in the curriculum.
- 3) Sharing with teachers data on students' college readiness.
- 4) Training teachers to write powerful letters of recommendation.
- 5) Thanking teachers and respecting their time and knowledge.

### **EDUCATE AND EMPOWER TEACHERS**

Experienced college counselors, like Pope, say that it is critical that counselors educate teachers about the basics of college admission. They say teachers who understand the college admission and financial aid processes are likely to broadcast knowledge that they have gained in their classrooms.

At Fairport High School in upstate New York, John Serafine, the lead counselor, and his counseling colleagues communicate the nuts and bolts of the college admission process to teachers during in-service professional development days, at faculty meetings, and via email

### **EMBED COLLEGE ADMISSION PREP**

In many high schools, English teachers conduct units on college essay writing. O'Connor, Pope, and Serafine all mention the benefits of college essay-writing units and encourage college counselors to work even more closely with teachers to integrate college-related activities into the curriculum.

Pope cited one teacher who had students conduct research on colleges and then present that research to their classmates as if they were admission officers. He talks about other teachers who have paired field trips with college campus tours and still others who have integrated Naviance and the College Board's Big Future website into their classroom activities.

O'Connor commends counselors who play roles in launching and/or sustaining college-themed advisory or homeroom periods. At Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change (TMA) in New York City, senior students spend a 47-minute advisory period each day working on college and career-related activities. Tamelia James, TMA's guidance



counselor for grades 10–12, distributes to the senior advisory teachers a weekly curriculum guide. She reports that the advisory period structure has contributed to an increase in the college application completion rate.

Katherine Pastor, a school counselor in Arizona’s Flagstaff High School and a former National School Counselor of the Year, notes the embedding of college topics into the curriculum often requires serious work on the part of college counselors. She said that college counselors need to provide co-teaching support when teachers are incorporating college-related activities into their curriculum. At Flagstaff High School, she and her colleagues collaborate with teachers on lessons on college admission, financial aid, and career goals, including one lesson using the ONET occupational information software to guide students through potential career choices.

In Pastor’s case, new state accountability standards have played a role in faculty involvement in teaching about financial aid. In Arizona, FAFSA completion rates are a new part of the calculation of schools’ accountability letter grades. At Flagstaff High School, senior year economics and government teachers work closely with Pastor and her colleagues to teach about financial aid and the FAFSA. Then in the economics and government classes, students use class time to complete the FAFSA. The economics and government teachers, Pastor said, “were more inclined to help because they could be involved in boosting our school’s letter grade.”

Pastor also leverages the Michelle Obama-championed Reach Higher initiative to mobilize the entire Flagstaff High School community, including teachers, around college counseling goals. On Flagstaff High School’s Reach Higher Wednesdays, teachers wear college gear and address college-going topics during advisory periods, including talking about their own college-going journeys. She said that embracing big branded campaigns, like the Reach Higher initiative, can catalyze “college talk” and influence students to prepare themselves for college, complete college admission steps, and follow through on college enrollment steps.

O’Connor echoed Pastor, saying that investing time in executing campaigns like the Reach Higher initiative and its associated College Signing Day event

can “jumpstart the college readiness of students at a school.” Other branded programs that O’Connor advises counselors to implement include College Application Month/Week and FAFSA Completion Projects. Lesson plans for these events are often available from non-profit college access organizations and NACAC state and regional affiliates.

### **SHARE DATA WITH TEACHERS**

The NACAC Statement on Counselor Competencies specifically says that counselors must “be able to interpret test scores and test-related data to students, parents, educators, institutions, agencies, and the public.” Pastor said it’s critical for counselors to share data on students’ college readiness with teachers.

Pastor and her counselor colleagues present teachers with data on students’ college entrance exam scores, AP exam scores, survey results, and college enrollment and persistence rates. She recalled her school’s teaching staff listening intently to a review of student survey data that showed Flagstaff students reporting high aspirations to attend college. When Pastor and her colleagues juxtaposed that data with academic data showing weaknesses in college preparation, teachers talked about adopting more rigorous teaching practices to better prepare students for college-level work. For Pastor, this moment of realization crystallized the value of sharing the data with the teaching staff.

### **HELP TEACHERS WRITE**

Experienced college counselors also emphasize that educating teachers to write powerful recommendation letters is key. Serafine said, “Some letters of recommendation are very good, and some are very bad,” and in his experience, focused training on what to include in letters of recommendation limits the number of bad ones.

At TMA in New York City, the counseling staff provides teachers with sample letters of recommendation, letter-writing templates, and guiding questions. According to James, the training and resources promote high-quality recommendation letters.



Educating and involving teachers is hard and time-consuming work for college counselors. Yet when college counselors have empowered and trained teachers to talk responsibly about the benefits of college-going and answer basic questions about college admission, the culture of college readiness within a school is stronger as a result.

### THANK, RESPECT, AND INVOLVE TEACHERS

Pastor, O'Connor, Pope, James, and Serafine all encourage college counselors to be thankful and respectful when they are working with teachers. "If I were addressing a group of teachers, I would say, 'You are the most integral part of students' college readiness. You are giving students the skills to apply and succeed in college,'" said O'Connor.

In empowering teachers, Serafine cautioned that college counselors must not ask too much of teachers. "I wouldn't try to teach pre-calculus, and I don't expect our pre-calculus teachers to do college counseling. The college admission process is ever-changing. The SAT changes. The financial aid process changes. There are always new initiatives, like prior-prior and, in New York State, the Excelsior Scholarship." Most importantly, he said, college counselors should ask teachers to refer students to college counseling professionals.

To cultivate positive partnerships with faculty, O'Connor advocates that college counselors involve faculty in the formation of college counseling goals and in the planning of events, whether that be College Signing Day, financial aid nights, or other events. He advised that college counselors survey faculty about what to include in college counseling curricula and invite faculty to sit on college advising committees. According to him, the teacher buy-in that can be gained from maintaining and sustaining a college advising committee can be invaluable.

Educating and involving teachers is hard and time-consuming work for college counselors. Yet when college counselors have empowered and trained teachers to talk responsibly about the benefits of college-going and answer basic questions about college admission, the culture of college readiness within a school is stronger as a result. [↗](#)

Eric Neutuch is a freelance writer.

Advertisement

**Westminster College  
in Salt Lake City, Utah,  
is small by design.**

Our tight-knit community makes Westminster the ideal environment for students looking to get involved. One-on-one mentoring helps every student find their passion and success—and our mountain vistas and urban surroundings provide endless possibilities for exploration.

[westminstercollege.edu](http://westminstercollege.edu) | 801.832.2200