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Building relationships beyond the counseling office can pay dividends— for your institution and for students.

By Jim Paterson

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There are a growing number of creative new ways that college admission professionals are reaching students and their families, but often, experts say, the biggest payoff can come from the simplest technique: building relationships.

And those relationships may extend beyond the short-lived connections to the student who is inquiring or enrolling, and can include counselors and the broader high school community, including personnel who work with students directly and know them well.

“One of the most important aspects of my job is the relationship that is developed with college admissions professionals,” said Jennifer Nuechterlein, a college and career counselor at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, New Jersey. She noted that often those connections last for years, starting with the counseling department but eventually involving various parts of the school community. “It makes my job easier, but the really important thing is that it benefits the students,” Nuechterlein said.

Ultimately, relationship management—at all levels—is one

of the most important aspects of the job, said Ryan DePuy, senior director of undergraduate admissions at Iona College in New Rochelle, New York. “It can be the counselors, the band director, or the principal. It really works best when you can make connections to the point that you are part of the school community,” he said.

He notes that relationships can be developed with school administrators, teachers, coaches, parent/teacher organizations, and even advisers to student organizations or people who work with students



EXPAND YOUR REACH

There are some fundamental ways that college admission representatives can build stronger relationships with a high school community. Here are five ideas.

1. **Be visible.** Show up at the school for events where you are expected (a panel about higher ed for sophomores and their families, for instance) and some where you're not (a parent night, perhaps). The goal is to become an approachable college resource within the high school community.
2. **Reach out to other segments.** While the relationship with counselors and college counselors, specifically, is important, think about anyone else at the school who might work closely with students who would be interested in your school or a specific program there. One admission person visits an early meeting of the National Honor Society and another shows up for a polytech showcase.
3. **Include administrators in your networking.** They are very busy and may not have time for meetings or regular communications, but it is good for them to know about you and consider you as a resource. They know their students and have continual, ongoing conversations with more parents than anyone else in the school.
4. **Be neutral.** Relationships are more likely to develop if the high school staff, parents, and students think of you as a resource with good, objective information—and not someone just pitching your school. Enduring relationships will pay off more in the long run than any inappropriate hype.
5. **Don't overlook the small things.** The goal is to be considered part of the high school community and familiar to a variety of community members. Building that connection may involve a very visible presence at times, but also small things, such as: donating funds or even college giveaway items to a high school event or fundraiser; offering to talk to a confused parent directly for a staff member; or connecting a family to a helpful colleague in the student's projected major. Objective help understanding college costs and financial aid is also always appreciated. ▢

with specific interests and skills. They might know about talented students or those with leadership skills, including some who might not excel in the classroom or at test-taking.

The goal for admission officials is to establish a relationship with a high school by becoming trusted, accessible, and familiar—building connections to individuals and the school generally that grow and build with time.

Beata Williams has worked in college admission offices and as a college admission coach for high school students. She is now an admission consultant with the college planning firm Intelligent, and said that admission professionals should look for pathways that might start with just a bit of assistance.

“There are many ways a college admissions representative can connect with a high school,” she said. “Every connection that is made can turn into a cooperative relationship and ultimately help the students.”

THE COUNSELOR CONNECTION

Williams said that while admission staffs often work with high school counselors, building a relationship may require effort beyond supporting the application of one student or establishing a single contact about an open house. The relationship can be developed through collaboration for college fairs, informational sessions, or group visits, as well as in small ways, such as providing bits of useful information.

“In the best relationships, college officials get a better understanding of a high school’s curriculum and the students there, which allows them to better interpret and evaluate the candidate,”



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Williams said. “Also, with a stronger relationship with college representatives, high school counselors can help students apply to schools that are more aligned with their interests.”

Nuechterlein agreed, ticking off the various ways such relationships pay off, particularly when it comes to each side sharing information. Admission offices, for instance, may be able to gather data about the attitudes that students have about certain

careers or college features, while high school counselors can benefit from having a direct connection to a college if they have general questions about admission or attendance. Both benefit when a counselor can personally pass along information about a prospect.

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Nuechterlein noted that some colleges formalize the connections by establishing an admission advisory board, with several high school counselors participating, while others regularly survey their colleagues working in high schools. College visits for counselors and participation in events at the high school level by admission staffers can also help formally establish connections.

“Unfortunately, there are times when we are incredibly busy and it’s challenging to cultivate external relationships,” said Troy Hammond, director of university counseling at Bayview Glen, an independent day school in Toronto. “So, outreach from the postsecondary side is appreciated, whether it’s through counselor-targeted newsletters or emails, information sessions, or a scheduled chat now and then. Hopefully, that can lead to professional relationships that last for several years and can allow for more nuanced interactions.”

He added: “The reality is, the high school counselor is often the eyes and ears for the students, and the students generally will seek advice from their counselor before they would contact an admission representative, so having that connection is immensely important.”

OTHER RELATIONSHIPS

Candice Mackey, college counselor at the Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies, said that to create that connection to the school community, admission representatives should also consider ways to build relationships with others.

“Admission reps are stretched thin, so adding high school coaches, many of whom don't work on the campus, to their list of contacts could be tough. Also, some sports really mostly recruit out of the clubs. But for others that recruit heavily out of high school, like football and basketball, it could be important to make connections.”

“While counselors have direct roles serving students, other stakeholders who serve in roles that are direct, transactional, and influential, could be part of valuable partnerships between admissions offices and the school community,” said Mackey, who, along with Nuechterlein, chairs NACAC’s Special Interest Group for public school counselors. “Deans, coaches, advisers to student groups, and administrators can be a source for information related to students and the overall school community for colleges.”

For instance, some college representatives become acquainted with advisers to groups like the National Honor Society or student government to gather information about and make connections to prospects. DePuy, of Iona College, said he knows of circumstances where college representatives have

worked closely with high school personnel responsible for arts or tech programs, particularly when those colleges specialize in a field or have a strong career-related department that they want to build.

He also said he has developed deeper connections with schools by making presentations and being willing to present objective information to the staff, parents, and students—becoming a resource rather than simply a recruiter for his institution.

“They appreciate it if you are transparent about the process and provide them good, honest information,” DePuy said. “You don’t want to make presentations and have people always saying ‘OK, here comes the sales pitch.’ You want everyone—from the superintendent to the students—to think of you as a valuable resource.”

Amy Goldin, founder of College Options in the Performing Arts,



helps art students connect with college programs and says that high school teachers in those fields often are too busy to advocate for a student. She started her business just to fill that gap and thinks college admission representatives could do more to provide information and seek out talented students who may need guidance, especially if their institution is seeking more students interested in the arts.

“I have seen that there is a lack of information and guidance when it comes to their college questions and pursuits,” Goldin said, noting that arts students often aren’t given as much support as those with traditional academic or athletic skills.

SPORT SUPPORT

Jennifer “J.T.” Thomas, who has coached high school athletes about their performance in sports

and about the college admission process, and chair of NACAC's former Student Athlete Advisory Committee, said the process for connecting athletes to college programs is “nuanced” because the skill levels of the students and the types and levels of college athletics vary so widely.

Like Goldin, she warned that high school personnel charged with overseeing athletics are often busy and perhaps reluctant to spend much time on building relationships with equally busy admission staff members. But such links could pay off.

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Thomas said it might be helpful to find out if there is an athletic director or recruiting coordinator with whom to become acquainted, offering help without being intrusive.

“It's challenging for coaches on the high school and club side because the recruiting process, rules, and timelines are so different for each sport, gender, division, and individual institution,” said Thomas, who is the US College Pathway Consultant for the TOVO Institute. “So it's always better to have more communication and stronger relationships to help everyone navigate the process.”

Bigger high schools that prioritize athletics and place many student-athletes in college programs often have a point person who helps navigate the process, Thomas says, but most high schools don't. “These are the schools that I usually do presentations for and then it's usually up to the college counselor to help along with the coaches.”

There are “no guarantees in admissions,” Thomas noted. “...even if coaches and athletes do everything right, it may not work out, so they always need strong backup plans.”

“Either way, this point person can help navigate the often-chaotic recruiting process and may know who to talk to about a prospective student-athlete when challenges arise,” Thomas said. “We all know from experience that the process is easier when we form relationships on both sides of the desk.”

Jim Paterson is a former school counselor living in Lewes, Delaware.