

Pangloss' Wisdom:

College Counseling as an Ethical Activity

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When people leave home, they find out most about it. And, when they are older, making their own homes, they often retrieve some of what they first lost or left behind:

so Candide finishes his life not merely with a collection of new companions, but also with Cunegode, his first love, now stooped and ugly, and Pangloss, his first teacher.

Pangloss' unshakeable faith in the precept that the world we live in is not merely good, but actually best seems silly and senile after the disaster and pain Candide had encountered on his journeys. Yet even in Pangloss' apparent foolishness there is wisdom. All things are connected in this best of all possible worlds, he assures Candide. If they were not, he asks, how would you be sitting here eating candied citrons and pistachios? And indeed, if they were not, Candide would not have gained the knowledge that he did.



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THE JOB IS MORE INTERESTING THAN YOU COULD EVER IMAGINE:

Clarity of communication and understanding of all four of the primary roles—document processor, advisor, counselor, and advocate—that comprise the college counselor's work a crucial for both college counselors themselves and the students and families they serve.

Teachers know how densely things are connected; they know every day the importance and consequences of what they do. As educators, they give students the cultural homes that they will grow in, travel away from, test, and then in some way return to. No matter what their subject or grade level, teachers provide students with the intellectual skills to judge their world.

I am quite sure that all college counselors regard themselves as teachers and educators, but they are something else as well. They are links between the location of childhood and the larger, more risky terrain of first adulthood.

Every aspect of what college counselors do raises explicitly the moral issue that classroom teachers address usually only implicitly; self-knowledge and its consequences, critical judgment of the world around one, and discovery of one's own values within the ethical confusions that characterize our culture are all included in the work of the college counselor.

College counselors prepare students for an actual, not merely figurative, journey, the prospect of which fill students and their parents with both excitement and fear. Every aspect of what college counselors do raises explicitly the moral issue that classroom teachers address usually only implicitly; self-knowledge and its consequences, critical judgment of the world around one, and discovery of one's own values within the ethical confusions that characterize our culture are all included in the work of the college counselor.

Clarification of these issues is important for college counselors themselves, as well as for their colleagues and for the students and families who they serve. The clarification is made possible by careful description and delineation of the different roles that college counselors play in their complicated work.

College counselors have four main roles. They are document processors, advisors, counselors, and advocates. Each of these roles carries different skill. In large schools, the tasks that pertain to each of these roles are in fast carried out by different people. Effective administrators understand appropriate distribution of these tasks among the school's staff, and it is the job of guidance

counselors to steer students through the bureaucracy of the process effectively. In small independent school, one person carries out all aspects of the college counseling process. In this case, explicit descriptions of each part of the college counselor's work are crucial; without a clear understanding of the college counselor's responsibilities and purposes, then the wide variety of issues that appears at every stage of the process cannot be adequately addressed by either the students or their college counselor.

Of the four roles that college counselors have, the first two, as document processors and advisors, are closely connected and require less expertise than the second two, as counselors and advocates. The first two roles depend on efficiency and accuracy. As document processors, college counselors are responsible for the timely filing of various documents which must convey facts quickly and clearly. The transcript must be accurate and up-to-date; the school profile must be informative.

The material that supports the secondary school report must be filed before the final deadline. Some college counselors keep track not merely of their own recommendations but those of teachers as well as the occasional outside reference. Transcripts must be updated as necessary with the latest standardized testing scores and recent semester, trimester, or quarter grades. Some college counselors submit additions to the original recommendation with new or recent grades. Occasionally individual students and their families must be able to rely on the college counselor to fulfill the role of document processor smoothly and effectively.

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Equally, students and their families must be able to trust the college counselor to dispense accurate and well-timed information; they must be able to count on the college counselor as advisor. The essentially uncontroversial advisor's job is to give out information. Advisors tell students when and how to register for standardized tests, inform them of significant deadlines, and explain procedures. Just as the college counselor as document-processor oversees the school's part of the college application process, so too the college counselor as advisor provides students with the information and means to carry out their part of the process.

The roles of document processor and advisor are interconnected: both require orderliness. In these roles, the use of imagination is limited to the anticipation of upcoming deadlines and the creation of increasingly refined filing and logging systems. The roles of the document processor and advisor constitute the easier part of college counseling because they require limited emotional investment and no risk taking. The other two roles, in contrast, those of counselor and advocate, involve a real engagement in students' lives and hopes. Both separately and together, they also pose significant challenges and provide deep rewards.

At its very best, the work of the college counselor as counselor enables students to understand what they are all about, recognizing their strengths and weaknesses, their gifts, and their dreams. The goal of the counselor is to guide students in making an appropriate match between themselves and several colleges and/or universities to which they will apply. In practice, the work of the counselor is a bumpy and lurchy business, always intense in quality and almost never easy.

The clearest way to describe the role of the counselor to students is to say that it is the role that takes place behind the closed door and within the four walls of one's office. Counseling is self-contained, private, and confidential. It is this counseling part of the college guidance process that produces tears and goofy laughter, distresses and confession, and requires boxes of tissues, glasses of water, and cups of tea.

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Frequently, the students with whom college counselors work expect the counselors will simply give them a list of colleges to which they should apply or a prescription for techniques that will secure admission to any institution they desire. But this is not what counselors in the truest sense do. If students are to be at their best in the application process and give themselves the greatest opportunity for happiness and academic success in their college careers, then the colleges to which they apply and the college that they finally attend must be of their own choosing; and the students' choosing must be guided by an accurate sense of what they themselves are all about. Helping to create students' self-knowledge and matching that usually new knowledge with particular colleges or universities are the work of the college counselor as the counselor.

Many factors affect this work; some intrude, others facilitate. The expectations, assumptions, accomplishments, and failures of students' family members figure both directly and indirectly in a student's sense of self and potential. Students' own perceptions of their achievements to date, particularly when students see them, quantified on a transcript or in a list of extracurricular activities, are often skewed and vulnerable: defensive optimism on one hand or irrational pessimism on the other may make students unable to interpret the transcript of activities list rationally or sensibly. The job of the counselor is to help students gain an accurate sense of themselves so they can envision an appropriate match between themselves and any of several colleges.

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If the role of counselor is the college counselor's most private role, the role of advocate is, in many senses, the most public role. As the students' advocate, the college counselor's capacity for this advocacy depends on the successful achievement of the main function and goal of the individual counseling. The final list of colleges to which a student will apply, which is the product of most of the counseling hours, must meet two criteria: first, the list should represent a realistic range of selectivity, and second, every college on the list should be one that the student is eager to attend for some reason. If a student's college list does meet both these criteria, then the college counselor in the role of advocate can be enthusiastic and supportive in every application. The written recommendation in particular and every conversation and communication between the college counselor and various admission officers will embody the college counselor's caring support of the applicant.

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Students and their parents often need a convincing description of the links between counseling and advocacy. Adolescents whose egos are already threatened by the kind of judgment and potential rejection that the college application process epitomizes need reassurance about their college counselor's advocacy. They must be made to feel confident that however difficult or seemingly negative some counseling session have been, their college counselor's support of their candidacy will be genuinely and consistently positive.

Students and parents who have the imagination to inquire about how apparently negative moments might become the source of positive advocacy can be told something about the college counselor's thinking during the counseling process. The competent counselor's investment of energy and insight yields the ability to describe each student caringly and clearly. Presenting a stu-

dent's strengths and weaknesses objectively, a college counselor unifies the goals of counselor and advocate and is able to describe a student's essential worth as it is and as it might come to be.

Students and their families can be helped to understand that admission officers will recognize that positiveness and legitimacy of the college counselor's recommendation from specific examples and detail description. Using the college counselor's recommendation, an admission officer can see that a candidate is different from the others. It is also appropriate and necessary for students and their parents to know about the professional gatherings that give secondary school counselors and college admission officers an opportunity to consider matters of common interest.

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Clarity of communication and understanding of all four of the primary roles—document processor, advisor, counselor, and advocate—that comprise the college counselor's work are crucial for both college counselors themselves and the students and families they serve. This is particularly true in an independent school, in which students bring much anxiety to the college

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application process and in which the college counselor tends to carry out all aspects of the college counseling function (sometimes in addition to other teaching and administrative duties).

The successful maintenance of a college counselor's relationship of effectiveness and trust with students and their parents depends on the explicit articulation of the different roles that the college counselor plays. In addition students must understand the frequent chronological simultaneity of the roles and must be able to trust the college counselor to distinguish between each of the role's different tone, purposes and procedures.

For instance, students should learn the difference between pieces of advice that are uncontroversial and informational and answers that are personal and interpretive. The statement, "Since you are considering an Early Decision application, I advise you to take three Achievement Tests this spring," is the statement of an advisor. In contrast, this statement, "As I listen to you, I wonder whether you shouldn't look at some smaller, less competitive liberal arts colleges, as well as the big, urban universities on your list," is the statement of a counselor.

The college counselor who indicates that he or she cannot, in the next 15 minutes, complete all four secondary school reports that a student just handed her is not reacting in anger to the difficult counseling session of the day before; rather, the college counselor as document-processor is calculating how to proceed to ensure that all the materials sent out are clear and accurate, and that college counselor as both counselor and advocate is trying to describe to the students that clear and accurate transcripts, recommendations, and support materials are important if caring advocacy is to be complete and effective.

Clear description of the distinct but interconnected roles that we as college counselors play help us to acknowledge and address the ethical questions that arise for all educators and therefore for college counselors as well. The presentation of intelligible lessons is only half our task. We must also teach by example. We do not merely explain the process to our students; we also actually participate in it, and we must be able to justify our action. The ethical task of the college counselor, therefore, is to help students understand that the application and admission process constitutes a balance between caring and toughness and a justifiable often decent, although fragile, compromise between two essentially opposed, even exclusive, world views.

In their college preparatory liberal art curriculum, our students have been schooled in two fundamentally conflicting perceptions of the world. On the one hand, classical and Renaissance culture alike strengthen our students in the courage of their own conviction. The Socratic exhortation to self-knowledge strikes a peculiarly responsive chord in these adolescents, and

they draw inspiration from Pico della Mirandola's assertion that philosophy taught him to rely on his own conscience other than on the opinion of others. Thoreau and Emerson reinforce these notions and make them American.

On the other hand, our students know from their required study of American history that the dark substructure of the meritocracy in which they live and whose pressure they feel depends precisely and completely on the opinions of others. Their idealistic American dream of self-reliant calm shatters easily in the face of their cynical sureness that effective manipulation of ap-

Helping students through this process, college counselors must be at every turn both credible as individuals who themselves have the same kinds of self-knowledge that we try to elicit in our students and competent as navigators through the system into which students are attempting to place themselves. Managing a balance of generous optimism and tough-minded, aggressive purposefulness, we must teach and support our students by our example and our results. We must convey a sense that the humanistic values we hope they will cherish are in fact applicable in the competitive, sometimes vicious world to which they are making eager application.

pearance is the quickest means to certain ambitions. Without having the age or historical perspective to assess or interpret their experience, our students intuit that the college application process expresses and epitomizes some of the fundamental moral confusion in our culture. They are eager to present themselves as they "really, really" are; simultaneously, they want to know what will "look best" on the transcript and application.

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The binding characteristics of our work in all four of our roles must be accurate as document processors and advisors and honesty, accuracy's abstract parallel, as counselors and advocates. At the most superficial level, the assessment of how we have fared each year lies in the published list of college acceptance in May. But the actual measure of our success at other levels that are more profound and finally more important lies elsewhere.

If we can show our students that their ability to think clearly and make judgments about the personal decisions required in the college application process comes directly from the skills of intellectual precision that they have learned in their high school courses, then we shall have made the college application process the integral and concluding part of the high school education that it should be. And if we give a clear account of ourselves, particularly in our roles as counselors and advocates, if we can demonstrate the essential integrity of the college counselor's work, then we shall have fulfilled successfully that necessity for ethical clarity and appropriateness that must be at the core of all educators' work.