



# College Counselors in the Public School:

## A Time for Specialization

Many of us in the college counseling profession are fortunate to have numerous occasions to positively impact students' lives, but too often, we are humbled by the many missed opportunities throughout the years that have undoubtedly occurred due to enormous caseloads, excessive demands on our time, performing non-counseling tasks, and in some cases, the lack of training and knowledge regarding resources that may be available to help students.



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After receiving a very gracious thank-you letter written by a student from a low-income family who learned that his entire tuition, room and board costs would be paid for by a combination of federal, state and private funds, I was reminded of the importance in our occupation of having adequate training to ensure that the needs of the students and parents with whom we work are met, and the need for counselors who are specialists in the field of college counseling. Without sufficient knowledge and subsequent specialization, counselors place many students and parents at-risk of making poorly informed decisions regarding school selection and financial aid. As a full-time college counselor in a public school setting, I was able to spend a significant amount of time working with this student and his mother to make certain the financial aid forms were complete and accurate. Despite complex family and job circumstances, we were able to work through the process together, spending numerous hours on the computer and the telephone. Our diligence and patience were rewarded, but I cannot help thinking about the number of cases of students facing a similar state of affairs I've had to give less time.

#### **Recognizing the Need for College Counselors**

Prior to becoming a college counselor at Hereford High School, a public school in Baltimore County (MD), three years ago, I was employed as a school counselor in a neighboring public school system for 12 years. Faced with a wide variety of tasks that included coordinating testing programs, group and individual counseling for at-risk students, scheduling, participating in IEP and 504 meetings, and cafeteria and bus duty, very little time was left to be proactive in college preparation activities. Counselors in the public schools are master generalists, handling everything from crisis intervention one minute to child abuse and neglect the next, and then grabbing a quick gulp of air (and maybe a bathroom break, if they're lucky) to handle a student/teacher conflict. Pity the poor student who crosses the threshold into the counselor's office to discuss the pros and cons of Early Decision, ask questions about a FAFSA form, or conduct a college search. Due to an inevitable overabundance of business, most counseling offices operate under the same guidelines as the emergency room—the most serious disasters first. Counselors are often forced

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to send students who are seeking “pearls of wisdom” out of the office with armloads of catalogues, forms and applications, but without spending the quality time we need to invest in the college-bound population.

As a result of the demands placed on the time of public school counselors, college-bound public-school students face a significant disadvantage in the college admission process. In contrast, counselors in independent schools often have a counselor-to-student ratio that is low enough for the counselor and the student to spend a considerable amount of time together in individual and classroom sessions, and get to know each other very well. The counseling relationships formed in independent schools enable counselors to secure the trust of the students and parents, and the opportunity to influence the students' attitudes towards academic and personal growth. Consequently, this relationship enables the counselor to accurately represent the personal and academic qualities of their students to college admission counselors who generally commit to basing their admission decisions on multi-dimensional perspectives of each student. Although the number of students enrolled in independent secondary schools averages around 10 percent each year, their presence in freshman classes at selective colleges tends to average around 30 percent, a number which considerably exceeds their percentage in the national pool of college-bound high school students. Many variables that explain this discrepancy (i.e., motivation, intelligence, socioeconomic status, etc.), but it stands to reason that a contributing factor to the success of the independent students' gaining admission to the selective schools is the developmental college counseling program to which most independent students are exposed.

#### **Increasing Demand for College Counselors**

The demand to have public school counselors specialize in college counseling appears to be mounting. Parents are increasingly becoming savvier about how strategic the college admission process has become. They are asking more complex questions about options for applying to schools, financial aid, testing options, and the importance of academic course selection. Correct answers and timely information are crucial to

the integrity and the credibility of the counseling department. Due to the changing nature of many of these aspects regarding college preparation, it is imperative to have at least one representative from the school counseling office meet with parents, students and admission counselors on a regular basis, and to attend the training seminars, college visits and conferences that are so vital to our professional development. Given the changes that will be taking place with the upcoming PSAT and SAT I, the next academic year is a prime example of how important it is to have a specialist handle the intricacies of the college planning process.

### **Developmental College Planning Program**

In addition to meeting the immediate college counseling needs facing public schools today, the addition of a full-time college counselor provides public schools with the opportunity to implement a developmental college-planning program at the secondary level. By helping students become aware of the process at an early age, we can reduce some of the tension and anxiety regarding this competitive process in addition to getting to know our clients better. The following is an example of a developmental college planning program we were able to create at Hereford High School:

#### **Grade 7**

- Participation in the College Board's CollegeEd program. The college counselor meets with all seventh graders to discuss levels of academic placement. The importance of course selection and how it relates to college admission is emphasized.

#### **Grade 8**

- Presentation of graduation and minimum college acceptance requirements to all eighth graders
- Development of four-year academic plans for all students
- Meeting with parents to discuss transition to high school levels of academic placement, GPA, class rank, and standardized testing schedule.

#### **Grade 9**

- Classroom presentations focusing on postsecondary options, coursework leading to college, college admission criteria, and financial aid
- Presentation on PSAT administration
- Interpretation of PSAT results
- Revision of four-year academic plans and registration for sophomore classes.

#### **Grade 10**

- Classroom presentations on career/college. Students take interest inventories and compare results to occupational information
- Presentation on PSAT administration
- Interpretation of PSAT results
- Revision of four-year academic program and registration for junior classes.

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#### **Grade 11**

- Classroom presentation on the college planning process
- Classroom presentation on "How to Make the Most of a College Visit"
- Classroom presentation on "Preparing for the College Interview"
- Schedule students for computer lab sessions conducting college and financial aid searches
- Schedule and conduct mock college interviews for students with area college admission representatives
- Meet individually with each college-bound student to discuss potential colleges, testing timetables and application options. Gather data from each student concerning college visits, planned test dates, community service participation, extracurricular involvement
- Conduct evening college planning session for parents
- Revision of four-year academic plan and register for senior classes.

#### **Grade 12**

- Classroom presentations on "How to Complete the College Application"
- Classroom presentations on "How to Write the College Essay"
- Conduct evening sessions for parents on "College Planning for Seniors"
- Conduct evening session for parents regarding the financial aid process.

Comments and reactions from students and parents regarding the developmental approach to college counseling have been overwhelmingly positive. Students appreciate the amount of time devoted to preparing for the application process, and parents are especially appreciative of the time spent investigating and analyzing college choices, admission options and financial aid.

To help facilitate these programs, we have created a separate college counseling office that includes computers for student use, a conference table, and bookshelves to store college viewbooks, CDs and videotapes. Parents and students frequently use the facility to conduct college and scholarship searches and to complete financial aid applications. In addi-

tion, the college counseling center is a wonderful location for scheduling visits from admission counselors. Students are able to meet in small groups to listen to presentations that are uninterrupted by the constant stream of phone calls and other distractions that frequently occur in the guidance office. The services provided in the college counseling center are advertised on the school's Web site, PTSA newsletters, morning announcements, during evening parent presentations, classroom presentations, and in fliers located throughout the building.

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Hopefully the trend of hiring college counselors in the public secondary schools will continue. As the college admission process steadily becomes more complex, it is certainly in the best interest of our clients to be able to have access to a professional school counselor who has extensive training and experience in all aspects of the college planning process.

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#### **Training for College Counselors**

Currently very few graduate programs in school counseling offer college-counseling courses. Graduates of school counseling programs are often placed into public secondary school counseling positions woefully unprepared for the complexity of the college planning process. Consequently, the inclusion of a course specifically designed for the college planning and counseling process is urgently needed. Having experienced the frustration of being ill-prepared to work with college-bound students the first several years of my career, and after supervising many counseling interns from graduate programs in Maryland the past 15 years, I became acutely aware of the deficiencies in the area of college counseling. As an adjunct professor in the counselor education department at McDaniel College, a small liberal arts college in Westminster (MD), I submitted a course proposal to address this need. Dr. Julia Orza, the chair of the Counselor Education Department, was very receptive to including the course as an elective for those students who are considering careers as secondary school counselors. As a result, the following course outline was developed:

#### **Meeting and Topic**

- Session #1** Developing a Comprehensive College Counseling Program
- Session #2** Choosing the Right College: Utilizing and Evaluating Resources for College Planning
- Session #3** Role of the Counselor, Student and Parent in the College Admission Process
- Session #4** College Admission Testing/Analyzing Transcripts/College Ratings Systems/AP Program
- Session #5** Helping Students with Applications, Essays, Interviews, Admission Options, and Recommendations
- Session #6** College Counseling for the High School Athlete
- Session #7** College Counseling for Students with Learning Disabilities and the Gifted and Talented Student
- Session #8** Navigating the Financial Aid Maze
- Session #9** Examining Student Recruitment Methods
- Session #10** Examining Difficult Ethical, Professional and Legal Dilemmas

The College Counseling and Planning Process course is designed to introduce students in the Counselor Education Program who plan to work with high school students to the complexity of college admission and beginning professional school counselors who would like to develop a comprehensive developmental guidance and counseling program that includes all aspects of the college admission process. Activities include utilizing technological resources for college planning, reading and reviewing current research in all areas of the college planning process, and analyzing challenging case studies. The course has been offered the past several years, and is steadily gaining in enrollment. Students who have completed the course have been most gracious in expressing their gratitude for having the opportunity to become aware of the many resources available to assist them in the profession, and to be able to get a sample of the challenging situations with which they will be faced in the coming years.

#### **Future Directions**

Hopefully the trend of hiring college counselors in the public secondary schools will continue. As the college admission process steadily becomes more complex, it is certainly in the best interest of our clients to be able to have access to a professional school counselor who has extensive training and experience in all aspects of the college planning process. Developmental college counseling programs can be beneficial to the secondary and postsecondary stakeholders. In addition, college administrators responsible for the development of effective counselor education programs at the graduate level need to emphasize the importance of including a college counseling class as a requirement for all potential secondary school counselors. Without this type of specialization, we will continue to neglect and fail to meet the needs of the parents and students with whom we work.

Editor's Note: To obtain a copy of the *Fundamentals of College Admission Counseling*, 2005 Edition, go to [www.nacac.com/profdevweb.html](http://www.nacac.com/profdevweb.html).