

KEY TAKEAWAYS

High schools sending more students to four-year postsecondary institutions have distinctly different practices and counselor attitudes than high schools sending fewer students to four-year institutions.

Research supports high-impact, low-cost approaches such as college coaching and texting initiatives that can especially help low-income and first-generation college-goers.

Emerging state policies and initiatives are aligned with these approaches.

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COLLEGE COUNSELING IN HIGH SCHOOLS: ADVISING STATE POLICY

In recent years, many states have set ambitious postsecondary completion or attainment goals, driven in part by concerns that other OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) nations are outpacing the United States in the number of adults holding a postsecondary credential. That is, while the U.S. has made modest gains since 2000 in the number of adults who have completed postsecondary credentials or degrees, many other OECD nations, including Canada, Japan and Korea, have made markedly larger gains over the same period of time. Postsecondary redesign efforts aimed at achieving states' postsecondary completion or attainment goals are joined by a variety of state policies and initiatives intended to enhance secondary students' college and career readiness.

By and large, this drive to increase college readiness and postsecondary completion rates has not been backed by meaningful state policies to improve college counseling in secondary schools. In fact, many state approaches to college counseling appear to assume students will "figure it out" and need little, if any, individualized guidance.

The reality is that states are unlikely to meet postsecondary completion goals if current trajectories persist. However, recent research points to counseling approaches correlated with increased odds of college-going that, along with appropriate supports once students do enter college, may help states make progress on achieving postsecondary completion targets. This is especially true among low-income students.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* explores:

- ♦ Current state approaches to college advising that may not provide the hoped-for gains in college-going.
- ♦ Recent research on approaches correlated with increased postsecondary enrollment, including approaches with traditionally underrepresented students.
- ♦ Promising state approaches to triage counselors' efforts with other means to provide college counseling.



CURRENT STATE APPROACHES: ‘BUILD IT, AND THEY WILL COME’

Some states’ current approaches to college counseling appear to follow the “build it, and they will come” advice from the film *Field of Dreams*. The following section identifies a few of these approaches and their potential shortcomings.

Online Tools: Many states have developed web portals to allow students and their families to navigate postsecondary degree options, tuition and other college costs, and other information. However:

- ♦ It is unclear whether states have established effective public awareness campaigns to inform students and parents of the availability of these resources.
- ♦ Counselors and other school staff may not be aware of the existence of these tools or may use other resources. A 2010 study conducted for the Florida legislature on use of the Florida Academic Counseling and Tracking for Students (FACTS) online tools found that while 85 percent of counselors had used FACTS to help students in some way, of the counselors who were not using FACTS, 73 percent “used another system to advise students, 22 percent reported they were not aware of FACTS, and 5 percent reported they did not like it.”¹
- ♦ Online tools presuppose Internet access outside the school day. While smartphones and other Internet-connected devices may seem ubiquitous, research suggests that tools relying on these devices to convey college information may place this information beyond access of those who need it most.
 - A 2013 Pew survey found that while 56 percent of adults in the sample – and 70 percent of adults with a college degree – had a smartphone, those figures dropped to 46 percent of adults with only a high school diploma and 36 percent of adults who had not finished high school.²
 - While college-going in rural areas lags behind urban areas, just 40 percent of rural adults in the sample owned a smartphone.³
 - In another 2013 Pew study of Internet habits of 12- to 17-year-olds, rural teens were more likely than their peers in suburbs to say the computer they used the most was a shared computer (80 percent vs. 67 percent).⁴
 - The study also found that “youth ages 12-17 who are living in lower-income and lower-education households are still somewhat less likely to use the Internet in any capacity – mobile or wired.”
- ♦ Online tools presuppose that they provide the tailored information students and parents of first-generation college-goers most need. Low-income and first-generation college students in a 2007 federal study cited the need for resources to help them complete college applications and identify mentoring programs that may go beyond what some online tools are designed to provide.⁵

Individual learning plans: The majority of states require students, usually by grades 8 or 9 but in some states as early as grade 6, to develop and annually revisit individual learning plans identifying each student’s post-high school educational or career aspirations, and the courses and other activities students should engage in to achieve those goals. However, in many states, individual learning plans have a limited college counseling component, if any at all.

Completion of a college application: Some policymakers have suggested that including completion of a college application in high school graduation requirements would assist more traditionally underserved students in entering college. However:

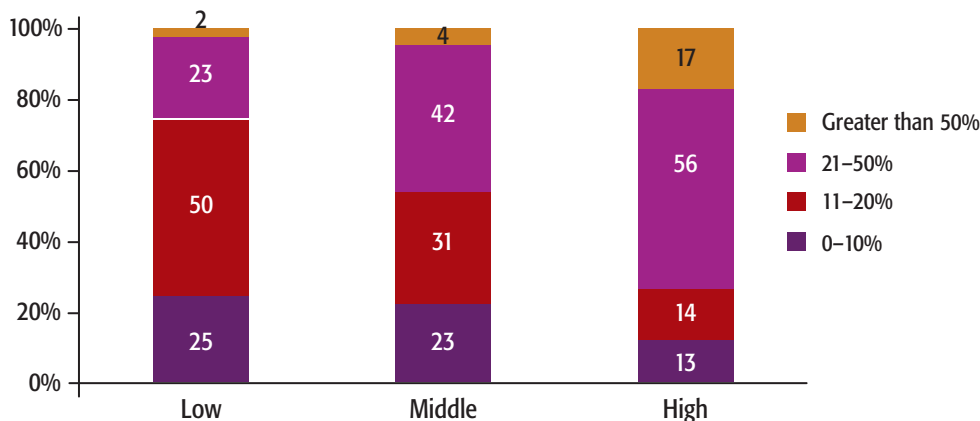
- ♦ Applications are not likely to be of high quality without high-quality guidance.
- ♦ Proposed policies do not address the concern of college mismatch and, by ignoring college match, these policies may exacerbate the existing problem of higher proportions of low-income youth who would be able to succeed at more competitive institutions but are enrolled at open-enrollment or broad-access institutions.
- ♦ Applications are but one challenge. Completing financial aid applications is the other. Without assistance with financial aid forms, even middle-income students under application-for-all policies may apply and be accepted to institutions they are unable to afford.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Research suggests that high schools sending higher percentages of students to college exhibit different practices and counselor attitudes than other high schools. Specifically, an analysis of federal data by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) found that:

- ♦ **Counselors' time matters:** In high schools with higher four-year college-going rates, counselors were substantially more likely to report spending the majority of their time on college counseling. Placing primary responsibility for college counseling with one or more counselors was *not* correlated with higher four-year college-going rates.

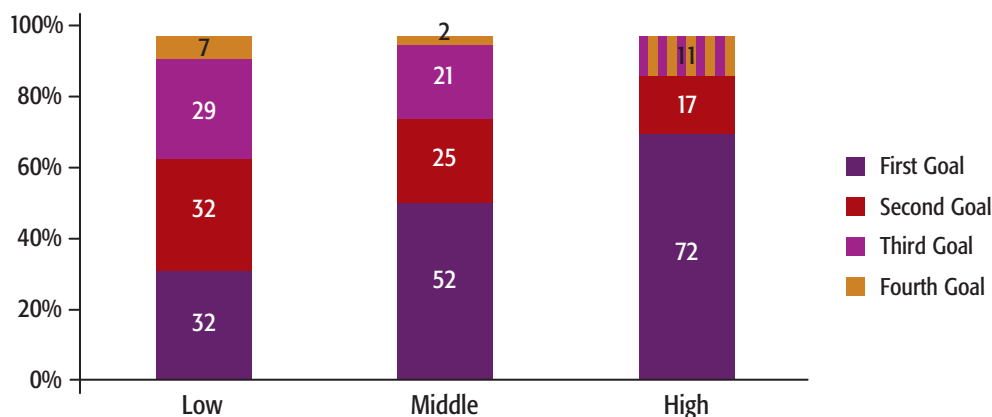
Percentage of time counseling staff spent assisting students with college readiness, selection and applications, by four-year college-going rate



NOTES: Estimates are weighted by W1SCHOOL. Low, middle and high categories represent four-year college-going rates of 0-33%, 34-67 and 68-100%, respectively. Details may not sum to totals due to rounding.

- ♦ **Counselors' priorities matter:** Counselors in schools with higher college-going rates also were far more likely to report that their number one goal was to assist students in preparing for postsecondary schooling. Seventy-two percent of counselors in schools with high college-going rates placed this as their highest priority, as compared to 52 percent and 32 percent of counselors in schools with middle and low college-going rates, respectively.

Emphasis counseling program places on preparing students for postsecondary schooling, by four-year college-going rate



NOTES: Estimates are weighted by W1SCHOOL. Low, middle and high categories represent four-year college-going rates of 0-33%, 34-67% and 68-100%, respectively. Due to small sample sizes, "third goal" and "fourth goal" categories were combined for high schools with high four-year college-going rates. Details may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Source for both graphs: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009, Base Year Survey Restricted Use File, http://www.nacacnet.org/research/research-data/nacac-research/Documents/Preparing%20Students%20for%20College_12-18-12.pdf

- ♦ **Counselors' attitudes matter:** Thirteen percent of all surveyed counselors felt that other counselors in their school “have given up on some students.” While responses to this question did not correlate with high school type, it was associated with four-year college-going rates: “schools with high college-going rates were 27 percentage points more likely than schools with low rates to strongly disagree with the idea that counselors had given up on students (60 percent vs. 33 percent).”
- ♦ **Counselors' caseloads matter:** Sixty-six percent of high schools with high college-going rates had counselor caseloads of 250 or fewer students. Private high schools were far more likely than public schools to offer this student/counselor ratio (89 percent vs. 39 percent).
- ♦ **Parent signatures on career/education plans matter:** While 80 percent of all high schools directed students to have a college and/or career plan, only 44 percent of these schools required a parent to sign off on the plan. Having a parent's signature on a college/career plan made a difference: schools with high college-going rates were 30 percentage points more likely than schools with low college-going rates to require parents to sign off on a plan (67 percent vs. 37 percent).⁶



LOW-COST, HIGH-IMPACT APPROACHES

Recent research also points to relatively low-cost, high-impact approaches states may consider taking to scale to supplement the work of college counselors in high schools, particularly in schools and districts serving large proportions of traditionally underrepresented students.

The power of a three-minute video: In a 2012 study, students in a handful of public high schools in disadvantaged areas in Toronto were invited to participate in online surveys. An initial survey queried students on their background, school performance, attainment expectations, knowledge of financial aid eligibility and on why they thought they would or wouldn't enroll in postsecondary education. After completing this survey, half of the participants were randomly selected to see a three-minute video on college costs, financial aid eligibility and earning differences of working 35-year-olds in Toronto with a high school diploma, two-year degree, or four-year degree or more. The video also offered a financial aid calculator allowing for printable results, as well as “the financial aid package for Toronto universities and colleges ... (and) brief instructions about how to apply.”

A second survey a few weeks later asked all students about the incomes one could expect to earn with varying educational attainment levels, about their estimated financial aid eligibility and their education attainment expectations.

The researchers found the three-minute video adjusted students' anticipated return on investment from postsecondary education from high to very high – this was particularly the case for students unsure of their educational plans after high school. The number of those students who viewed the three-minute video, who had previously been unsure of their post-high school plans and reported “tuition and other costs” as their primary reason for not enrolling in postsecondary education, dropped substantially on the second survey.⁷

The power of college coaching: A 2013 study of more than 44,000 graduating seniors from 58 public high schools in Chicago speaks to the potential power of the college-coaching approach. In 2004-05, Chicago Public Schools instituted a college coach program in certain high schools.

Like traditional counselors, coaches are based in schools and intended to serve all students. But coaches, the study notes, vary from traditional counselors in a variety of ways. They devote all their time to helping students prepare for college, are often hired due to their non-school experience with underserved youth, regularly meet with students in groups for formal and informal activities and employ relatively “innovative ... advising strategies,” including proactive outreach to students, establishing trusting relationships with students, and using student networks to provide information and enlist new students into program activities.

The researchers found that, in spite of the districtwide emphasis on college enrollment, especially in four-year colleges during the time of the study, “(a)ttending a coach school was associated with a 13 percent increase in the odds of attending college and a 24 percent increase in attending a less selective four-year college (vs. two-year college).” The likelihood of students completing three or more college applications and/or the FAFSA was 20 percent and 17 percent higher, respectively, at coach schools. Of particular importance, students with traditionally lower college enrollment – Latino students, students from low-income families, non-AP students, and students at low college-planning high schools – who attended a coach school were more likely to enroll in a less selective four-year versus a two-year college.⁸

The power of texting: A 2013 study looked at the potential of texts to low-income students as one approach to reduce “summer melt,” a term that describes when college-intending seniors fail to matriculate in a postsecondary institution the year after high school. Given that texting is overwhelmingly more common among teens than email or phone conversations, and the marginal cost of sending text messages, the researchers proposed a text messaging campaign as an inexpensive yet effective strategy to connect recent, low-income high school graduates with counselors in an effort to ultimately diminish summer melt. Ten text reminders were sent to students who had been accepted to a postsecondary institution (and to their parents, if possible). These texts nudged students to:

- ♦ Log on to their college’s web portal to access necessary paperwork.
- ♦ Sign up for orientation and placement exams.
- ♦ Fill out housing forms.
- ♦ File for or waive health insurance.

Students or parents replying to a text were connected with a counselor offering individualized, one-on-one support. Messages also offered assistance filling out the FAFSA, “and interpreting their financial aid award letter and tuition bill from their intended college. Most messages included web links that allowed students ... to complete tasks directly from their phone.”⁹

While outcomes varied across the participating districts, the researchers proposed that the impact of the text campaign may be most pronounced where students had less help planning for college. The greatest impact across sites was consistently among students with moderate GPAs. The authors noted, “These students are likely to be academically college-ready but may have been less likely to have received adequate college counseling during high school, as such supports, where present, may have been more likely to be directed towards the highest-performing students.”¹⁰

The authors also raised the cost-effectiveness of the text messaging strategy, noting the text costs alone for two sites totaled approximately \$2 per student; the addition of counselor salaries brought the cost to just \$7 per student. The researchers cite the texting initiative as a cost-effective approach “to increase college enrollment among low-income students, especially when compared with other policy options to increase college access for underrepresented students.”¹¹

PROMISING STATE EFFORTS

Some states have launched college counseling initiatives that integrate one or more elements proposed by the data and research previously mentioned.

Reduce student/counselor ratios and improve program quality: Colorado’s School Counselor Corps Grant Program (SCCGP), created by 2008 legislation, provides competitive grants to applicant districts to improve access to quality counseling, with the goal of increasing high school graduation rates and the percentage of students who prepare for, apply and continue into postsecondary education.¹¹ Each grant application must specify, among other elements:

- ♦ The number of secondary school counselors and the student/counselor ratio.
- ♦ A plan for using the grant money, including the extent to which the funds will be used to increase the number of school counselors and to provide professional development for school counselors and other faculty members to provide counseling and postsecondary preparation services.
- ♦ Whether the education provider (i.e., district, board of cooperative services or charter school) has entered into, or has committed to establishing, one or more partnerships with institutions of higher education or postsecondary service providers to increase the capacity and effectiveness of counseling and postsecondary preparation services.

- ♦ The extent to which the applicant has developed or will develop partnerships to serve the postsecondary needs of all secondary students it serves.¹³

In reviewing applications and recommending to the department and state board, the school counselor corps advisory board must take various criteria into account. These include the percentage of students enrolled who are eligible for free/reduced-price lunch or considered at-risk students, the percentage of students enrolled in postsecondary education within two years after graduating from high school and the number of first-generation college students who enrolled in postsecondary education within two years of graduating. The school counselor corps advisory board, department and state board must give priority to education providers that identify intended recipient secondary schools with a high percentage of first-generation college students.¹⁴

The most recent results of the SCCGP program show encouraging results. For 2012-13, trends in FAFSA completion rates at grantee schools mirrored those of the state as a whole, while comparison schools saw a slightly steeper drop in FAFSA completion rates. SCCGP saw modestly greater gains in postsecondary matriculation rates, while statewide postsecondary matriculation rates dropped slightly.¹⁵

Launch texting initiatives: Based in part on the texting research, the College Foundation of West Virginia (CFWV), in concert with the Kresge Foundation and Benjamin Castleman (who co-authored the research cited earlier on text messaging), has launched a text-messaging outreach effort targeting students in high schools served by the West Virginia GEAR UP program. Similarly to the research design described previously, CFWV and participating colleges will collect students' cell phone numbers from approved sources and allow students to opt into the program. Participating students will receive personalized texts with information about preparing for college and will be able to reply with questions or ask for one-on-one help.

In spring of students' 12th grade year, CFWV will ask students for the name of the postsecondary institution they will attend. If the institution is one of the project's four partner colleges, the student will begin to receive texts linking "them to on-campus resources and reminding them of institution-specific deadlines and services. Students attending one of the partner colleges are able to talk, via text, with staff members at their college regarding financial aid, housing, admissions, etc." Students electing to attend an institution other than a partner college will receive more general text support. Students enrolling in partner and non-partner colleges will continue to receive texts through their first year of college.¹⁶

Prompted by the same research, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education launched a similar effort in summer 2013.¹⁷ Likewise, Delaware announced the launch of a similar text message campaign in December 2014.¹⁸



Provide supports for college and career counselors in low-income middle and high schools: 2013 legislation in Arkansas created the College and Careers Counseling Program. The program is primarily geared toward middle and high school students in lower-income counties in the state, though districts outside these counties may apply jointly with a higher education institution, an education service cooperative or a nonprofit organization.¹⁹ Counselors must hold a bachelor's degree and receive training within a year of their hiring, and must be stationed at a postsecondary institution, education service cooperative or nonprofit organization.²⁰ The legislation identifies numerous duties for college and career counselors (see sidebar), who report to an on-site supervisor hired by the partner.²¹ The legislation calls for regular program evaluation based on various metrics, including increases in completion of the college-ready Smart Core curriculum, college attendance rates and applications for financial aid.²²

CONCLUSION

As eloquently noted in a 2013 study, postsecondary "completion goals can only be achieved if *all* students are part of the postsecondary pipeline. Ensuring that students who might not have gone to college in the past – low-income students, first generation college goers, students who are interested in career and technical education – enter and succeed in postsecondary education is essential to increasing the overall percentage of college completers."²³ While current efforts such as online tools and individual learning plans may produce some gains in college-going rates, emerging research points to specific counselor attitudes and priorities, as well as video, coaching and texting approaches demonstrated to have meaningful impacts, particularly among low-income students and others underrepresented in higher education.

Duties of Arkansas College and Career Counselors

- Assisting the career orientation instructor with the development of college and career plans for students, beginning in grade 7.
- Assisting the school counselor with college- and career-planning resources and revising college and career plans for each student annually, beginning in grade 9.
- Offering high school students college- and career-planning services and activities that combine counseling on career options and experiential learning with academic planning to assist students with their college and career plans.
- Encouraging parental participation by scheduling annual parent sessions, beginning with students in grade 7, to assist parents and students in understanding the college and career-planning process.
- Providing parents and high school students with information about career and technology education program opportunities available in Arkansas and the level of education and skill required to be successful in various career fields.
- Preparing high school students with information and preparation for financing a postsecondary education.
- Assisting schools in promoting quality career development for students in grades 7-12.
- Supporting students in middle school and high school in the exploration of career clusters and the selection of an area of academic focus with a cluster of study.
- Improving and promoting career development and college-planning opportunities within school districts and communities.
- Attending continuing education programs on the certified career development facilitator curriculum sponsored by the state.
- Coordinating with school counselors and school administrators on career day events, career classes, career programming, college planning and financial aid activities.
- Coordinating community resources and citizens representing diverse occupations to provide career-development activities for parents and students.
- Assisting with online-based career-guidance and college-planning systems.

Source: A.C.A. § 6-1-604(b)

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