

Counseling

- ▶ Counseling high school students for postsecondary and workplace success

Projections from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggest that many of the fastest-growing jobs in the U.S. will require some form of postsecondary education — be it technical certification, an associate’s degree, a bachelor’s degree or beyond. And although the vast majority of students (and their parents) express the belief that they will go to college, research indicates that the actual number of young people — particularly low-income and minority youth — entering postsecondary education falls far below these stated expectations.

While there are various reasons why students who state the intention to go to college ultimately do not do so, a primary reason is a lack of “college knowledge” — information about the options, academic preparation, necessary processes and financial resources students and their families need to be aware of, as early as the middle grades. Research by the Bridge Project at Stanford University (and others) reveals that many students and their parents lack basic information about curricular requirements, the relative importance of admissions criteria such as class rankings and SAT scores, college costs and financial aid. Although they report consulting various sources of information about preparing for college — including parents, friends, older siblings, teachers, etc. — research suggests counselors are an especially important source of information and help for African American, Latino, low-income and first-generation college aspirants, even while these students are significantly more likely to be in schools with higher student to counselor ratios and the most underprepared counselors.

Relatively little policy activity has focused on the key role of counselors in providing the guidance students need to make informed decisions about their post-high school options. This issue of *Progress of Education Reform* takes a closer look at research related to:

- ▶ The variation in access of college counseling across schools and the impact of schools, districts, postsecondary institutions and states on the availability and type of college counseling
- ▶ The types of information traditionally underserved students need to prepare for postsecondary education
- ▶ The varying types of guidance students receive based on their academic pathway or ethnic background.

What’s Inside

- ▶ The interplay of local and state policies in the availability of college counseling
- ▶ Information underserved students use to make decisions about attending college
- ▶ Vocational teachers vs. counselors: What information do they provide?



2008 JUNE
Vol. 9, No. 3

THE PROGRESS OF
Education Reform



Education Commission
of the States

The Role of College Counseling in Shaping College Opportunity: Variations across High Schools

Laura W. Perna, Heather T. Rowan-Kenyon, Scott L. Thomas, Angela Bell, Robert Anderson and Chunyan Li, *The Review of Higher Education*, Winter 2008, Volume 31, No. 2, pp. 131-159.

This study examined three questions:

- ▶ What is the availability of college counseling at selected high schools?
- ▶ In what activities do counselors at different schools engage with the goal of promoting college opportunity?
- ▶ How do external entities, including school districts, higher education institutions, and states, shape the availability of college counseling at different schools?

The researchers conducted case studies in five states. In each state, they studied three high schools — one each with above-average, average, and below-average student achievement and socioeconomic status.

Findings

Availability of College Counseling

- ▶ The student-counselor ratio exceeded the recommended 100:1 ratio, though average ratios varied by state.
- ▶ Because counselors' availability was inadequate, most activities at some schools were geared toward the average and/or most needy, likely resulting in fewer supports for other students, especially college-eligible students in low-resource schools.
- ▶ At low-resource schools, other priorities appeared to take precedence over college counseling.
- ▶ Counselors at all high schools were too overloaded to achieve their advising goals and meet student/parent expectations.

Counselors' College-Related Activities

- ▶ Counselors shaped financial aid information provided based on student body characteristics (e.g., bilingual materials for Spanish-speaking families). In the Georgia and Florida schools, the simplicity of the financial aid award criteria helped counselors feel confident advising students on the availability of state aid.
- ▶ Intensity of assistance varied by state. In California and Florida, for example, counselors actively scouted out potentially eligible students to fill out state financial aid applications.
- ▶ Teachers in most schools played a narrow role in providing college counseling.

External Entities that Shape College Counseling

- ▶ **Districts:** A district commitment to college opportunity mattered. The district goal in all three Maryland schools was, "Every kid goes to college." Each Maryland school offered relatively low student-counselor ratios and a designated career and college counselor.
- ▶ **States:** A state mandate for counseling did not appear to affect the availability of college counseling. However, states influenced how college information was provided through variables such as:
 - Availability of state agencies to support college counseling
 - The Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program
 - A statewide financial policy.
- ▶ **Colleges and Universities:** Most counselors depend on local colleges and universities' financial aid staff to run the annual financial aid night for parents.

“[b]ecause this study demonstrates that the school, district, and state context shapes the availability of counseling, a one-size-fits-all approach to improving counseling is likely to be ineffective.”

Policy Implications/Recommendations

- ▶ Efforts to simplify college eligibility criteria, application processes and federal and state financial aid policies would help counselors provide essential financial aid information.
- ▶ A district-level commitment to college-going is important, particularly when this philosophical commitment is joined by resources and other support.
- ▶ Schools and postsecondary institutions should identify collaboration opportunities such as higher education staff conducting high schools' annual financial aid night.

A one-size-fits-all model for improving college counseling is unlikely to be effective. However, schools, districts and states could enhance access to college counseling by “explicitly and intentionally” taking advantage of all potential resources, such as teachers, district offices, state agencies and local postsecondary institutions, and by recognizing the intentional and unintentional outcomes of the interplay among local, state and postsecondary policies and structures.

Career and College Advice to the Forgotten Half: What Do Counselors and Vocational Teachers Advise?

Melinda Scott Krei, Educational Research and Consulting; James E. Rosenbaum, Northwestern University; Teachers College Record, Volume 103, Number 5, October 2001, pp. 823-842.

This study analyzed the postsecondary and career advice high school counselors and vocational teachers give to the “forgotten half” — students unlikely to pursue a four-year degree. Both counselors and vocational teachers were likely to advise students with any interest in college to pursue postsecondary education, although the two groups had vastly different approaches in doing so.

Guidance Counselors

Guidance counselors generally inform students of their postsecondary options, shepherd them through the application process, help students meet with visiting recruiters or visit colleges, and, from time to time, strongly advise postsecondary institutions to accept individual applicants. No parallel cluster of activities exists to guide students who do not intend to enroll in a postsecondary institution. Neither schools nor society at large has set out what assistance counselors should provide students planning to go directly into the workforce.

As a consequence of their heavy workloads, counselors in this study often use large group settings to give career information, and all too often, individual appointments are short and rushed. Only 22.5% of counselors in the federal High School and Beyond survey indicate preparation for work roles as a high priority for their guidance programs. Counselors most often frame options as a choice between going to college or entering the workforce. Few say they encourage students to look into other forms of training, such as technical schools or apprenticeships.

Vocational Teachers

Vocational teachers “offer a far more nuanced view of college, often providing students a much broader range of postsecondary choices.” They seem to consider themselves more qualified than counselors in their schools to provide students with information about job options and training after high school.

However, the attitudes of vocational teachers in the study vary from a nearly universal “college-for-all” approach to the opinion that their students are already adequately prepared to join the workforce and get well-paid entry level jobs with potential for advancement. Although the authors were unable to identify any “clear pattern of characteristics shared among teachers within any group,” they found vocational teachers could be classified into four general categories given their attitudes toward college and the advice they dispensed: (1) “College-for-all,” (2) “Diplomats” (who give students subtle cues that their plans might not be realistic), (3) “Straightforward” and (4) “Hands-off”.

Policy Implications

- ▶ The authors found that the college-for-all attitude of most counselors and some vocational teachers in the study does not acknowledge the fact that many students with college aspirations do not earn a degree. This presents a difficult dilemma for policymakers and counselor/teacher preparation providers: How can they best ensure that support systems for college opportunity are strong, yet balanced with realistic assessments of student chances for success? This is where implementing core high school curriculum expectations might wield the greatest impact. By reducing two or even three tiers (or tracks) of expectations to a single common core, all students who graduate with a diploma should have the skills necessary to succeed in college.
- ▶ Vocational teachers and counselors need professional training to “learn about job requirements, salary levels and advancement opportunities, information on apprenticeships, jobs that offer training and advancement, short-cycle occupational schools and certification programs, job-training opportunities,” etc.
- ▶ School systems need to acknowledge non-college-bound youth and assist them in developing skills and finding careers.



High School Guidance Counselors: Facilitators or Preemptors of Social Stratification in Education?

Frank Linnehan, Christy Weer, Paul Stonely, Drexel University, 2006,
<http://www.collegeaccess.org/NCAN/Uploads/2006095102MANUSCRIPT-counselor.doc>

This study examined whether counselors' recommendations that students attend a two- or four-year institution are influenced by a student's race, social class or academic achievement, or by the interplay among these factors. Given that fewer than 10% of all community college students will complete a bachelor's degree within five years, as opposed to 57% of those attending a four-year institution, the impact of counselors' recommendations to attend a community college rather than four-year program are considerable. In addition, their impact is important because of the strong relationship between level of education achieved and one's future income.

Socioeconomic status appears to influence counselor recommendations. Counselors in this study were more likely to advise lower-income students toward community colleges and higher-income students toward four-year institutions.

Race does not appear to influence counselor recommendations. Counselor recommendations to attend a community college were not stronger for black than for white students, nor were their recommendations that students attend four-year institutions stronger for white than for black students.

Academic performance influenced recommendations. Counselors were more likely to steer students with lower academic achievement to community colleges and students with higher academic achievement to four-year institutions. The three-way interaction between student race, socioeconomic class and academic performance does appear to impact counselor aspirations for students. Counselors were more likely to advise middle-class black students with lower academic achievement to attend community colleges than they were middle-income white students with low academic performance. Counselors were more likely to recommend community college to upper-income white students with low academic performance than they were upper-income black students with low academic achievement. However, when making recommendations that students attend four-year institutions, counselors did not appear to be influenced by a significant interaction of race, socioeconomic class and academic performance.

Given this study's findings, counselor preparation and professional development programs should work to address the perceptions that reinforce social class stratification.

Also, policymakers should consider providing incentives and/or frameworks for schools and districts to more deeply collect, study and make transparent data on the impact of counseling programs.

Helping Equip Teachers to Answer Students' Questions on College Knowledge:

This 2007 ECS policy brief examines the findings of the Bridge Project's research on students' questions to teachers on "college knowledge," teachers' responses to these questions, and state policies that would better equip teachers to provide students with accurate information on college policies. Available on www.ecs.org

High School Graduation Requirements: Additional Coursework Options and Requirements.

This ECS database provides 50-state information on state policies aimed at helping students consider postsecondary and career options by requiring all students to develop an individual graduation plan or complete courses in a career major/career pathway. Available on www.ecs.org

Involving Families in High School and College Expectations

This 2006 ECS policy brief examines the troubling gap between educational aspirations and postsecondary attainment, what students (and parents) need to do to achieve those expectations, and what states are doing to better communicate to students and parents the importance of being academically prepared for college and the steps to take to achieve that level of preparation. Available on www.ecs.org

The South Carolina Education and Economic Development Act

Enacted in 2005, this act establishes numerous provisions on the topics of career clusters, guidance counseling and personnel issues, and Individual Graduation Plans (IGPs). The state's Education and Economic Development Coordinating Council, serving as the P-16 coordinating body in the Palmetto State, has begun developing and implementing a number of efforts to expand access to quality postsecondary and career-selection information in the state. More information available on the coordinating council's Web site: <http://www.teachspathways.org/Council.html>

Coming Soon! "Effective Strategies to Aid Low-Income and Minority Students in the College and Financial Aid Application Process," 2008.

This ECS policy brief examines the federal, state and local policies that serve as obstacles to aspiring first-generation college students — who are more likely to be low-income and/or minority — and state policy approaches designed to reduce or eliminate these obstacles.

Deciding on Postsecondary Education: Final Report

Keith MacAllum, Denise M. Glover, Barbara Queen, and Angela Riggs, National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, December 2007

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008850.pdf>

This study was conducted to improve knowledge about the information that students, and particularly underserved students, use to make decisions on postsecondary education. Researchers conducted a literature review and held 11 focus groups with underserved (i.e., low-income and/or first-generation college) students and parents, as well as guidance counselors, in eight states. They also reviewed national and state college search and information Web sites that were cited as resources by students, guidance counselors and others.

Findings

For traditional-aged, middle-income students, the decision to attend college and choice of college are not single events, but a multi-year process of gathering information. These students look for information on programs of study, college quality, cost of attending, geographical location and size.

For low-income, first-generation students, though:

- ▶ The decision on which postsecondary institution to attend is made at the same time they decide to pursue postsecondary education, which is later than their middle-income counterparts.
- ▶ Much of the information underserved students are looking for is less accessible (e.g., lack of Internet access at home) or less understandable — particularly information about cost, financial aid, and scholarships — than for their middle-income counterparts.
- ▶ Students whose parents have less formal education and who are lower-income rely more on advice from guidance counselors (when available), unsolicited college marketing materials, and information specifically requested from postsecondary institutions or provided at college fairs.

For both groups of students:

- ▶ Information about cost is very important, but especially for lower-income students (and parents).
- ▶ Students and their parents often do not have accurate information about college costs.

Interestingly, family financial constraints do not negatively influence college enrollment as much as the indirect influence of low socioeconomic status (SES), such as students' development, social networks, educational experience, aspirations and academic preparation.

Findings and Policy Implications:

- ▶ Low-income families and first-generation college-goers need more targeted assistance in differentiating between information of greater and lesser importance, and interpreting and using it.
- ▶ Low-income parents know they need assistance in helping in their children's college searches, but they do not know what information they need or where to locate the most reliable information.
- ▶ Students and their families would benefit from additional information and resources and from assistance in interpreting and using college search information.
- ▶ Institutional and state initiatives directed at low-income students and their parents should consider using surveys, focus groups and/or usability studies to make sure the targeted audience can access and understand essential resources and information.

Information and resources needed

Low-income and first-generation students	Low-income parents and students	Guidance counselors
Resources, for example, to assist them complete college applications, identify mentoring programs	Reliable information and resources: people and organizations and checklists of questions	Tools to network with college admissions counselors
Information on graduation, retention, transfer rates by race/ethnicity	Institutional fit	Sample templates to help them produce college preparation newsletters
Information on importance of postsecondary education and age-appropriate guidance on steps to follow, beginning with the 7th grade	Early career planning	Tools to assess students' learning styles and career interests
Information to address fears/concerns about college	Financial aid, including what information is required to complete forms	Self-guided, computer-based search tools
Early career planning	Campus crime/safety	

Student Future Outlook and Counseling Quality in a Rural Minority High School

Scott A. Dellana and David Snyder, *The High School Journal* - Volume 88, Number 1, October-November 2004, pp. 27-41

Little research has considered the impact of school counseling on students' future outlooks. One would anticipate that the guidance that high school teachers and counselors provide is an important source of assistance to students as they make decisions about their future. In predominantly minority towns in the rural South, students' postsecondary and career aspirations seem to suffer, making the influence of counseling on students' future outlooks especially important. This study concentrated on rural minority high schools.

Quality of counseling. The most cited problem was that students believed their counselors were not well informed. Students who reported receiving quality counseling indicated a more positive outlook on their future prospects than students who were less satisfied with the quality of counseling they received.

Gender differences. Females more often than males reported feelings of uneasiness when speaking with guidance counselors. Males reported more often than females that guidance counselors were not well informed.

Grade level differences. Seniors indicated the highest satisfaction with the amount of guidance counseling they were receiving, while freshmen reported the least satisfaction.

Racial/Ethnic differences. There were no differences along racial/ethnic lines on students' future outlook or perceptions of counseling quality.

The influence of academic performance, particularly in communications.

Students who had not performed well in communications classes felt as though they needed more counseling time. The same areas that led to poor performance in communications classes may be making it more difficult for these students to communicate effectively with counselors, who are often hurried, overwhelmed and pressed for time. Students who reported higher communications and science grades and who were more satisfied with quality of guidance counseling and teacher support counseling had better future outlooks.

Policy Implications

More research on the problems associated with lower quality counseling is needed. Also, counselor preparation programs should work to ensure that counselors are better prepared to handle potential "landmines" such as lack of trust, communication issues and psychological barriers.

Endnotes

¹Patricia M. McDonough, "Counseling Matters: Knowledge, Assistance, and Organizational Commitment in College Preparation," in *Preparing for College: Nine Elements of Effective Outreach*, ed. William G. Tierney, Zoë B. Corwin and Julia E. Colyar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 69-87.

²Laura W. Perna, Heather T. Rowan-Kenyon, Scott L. Thomas, Angela Bell, Robert Anderson and Chunyan Li, "The Role of College Counseling in Shaping College Opportunity: Variations across High Schools," *The Review of Higher Education*, Winter 2008, Volume 31, No. 2, pp. 131-159.

This issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* was made possible by a grant from the GE Foundation. It was written by Jennifer Dounay, senior policy analyst, ECS High School Policy Center. If you have any questions regarding this or other issues, please contact Jennifer at jdounay@ecs.org or 303.299.3689.



GE Foundation

Subscribe to six issues of *The Progress of Education Reform* for \$30, plus postage and handling.

Please order from the ECS Distribution Center,
700 Broadway, Suite 810,
Denver, CO 80203-3442; 303.299.3692;
fax: 303.296.8332; or ecs@ecs.org. ECS accepts prepaid orders, Visa, MasterCard and American Express. All sales are final. Pricing subject to change.

© 2008 by the Education Commission of the States (ECS).
All rights reserved.

ECS encourages its readers to share our information with others. To reprint or excerpt some of our material, please contact the ECS Communications Department at 303.299.3698 or e-mail ecs@ecs.org.

The Education Commission of the States is a nationwide nonprofit organization formed in 1965 to help governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education. ECS is the only nationwide interstate compact devoted to education.

Postage and handling charges apply if your order totals:

Up to \$10.00 — \$3.50
\$10.01-25.00 — \$5.00
\$25.01-50.00 — \$6.50
\$50.01-75.00 — \$9.25
\$75.01-100.00 — \$10.75
Over \$100.01 — \$12.00

Single copies of this issue of *The Progress of Education Reform* are available from the Education Commission of the States for \$7 plus postage and handling. Ask for publication No. SI-08-02.

Discounts are available for bulk orders of this publication. They are:
10-49 copies — 10% discount
50-99 copies — 20% discount
100+ copies — 30% discount.

**Equipping Education
Leaders,
Advancing Ideas**