

Effective Counseling in Schools Increases College Access

Information in this first *Research to Practice Brief* is based primarily on “Counseling and College Counseling in America”—a white paper written for NACAC by Patricia McDonough, professor of education at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Research highlights:

- Counselors can positively affect students’ postsecondary aspirations and attainment.
- College counseling can have a significant impact on college access for all students.
- Increasing the number of counselors available to students and the time they devote to college counseling is one of the top three reforms needed to improve college access.

Implications for practice:

- Set high expectations for students and provide access to college counseling for all students to prepare for postsecondary education or work.
- Maintain or increase counseling staff level to improve the student-to-counselor ratio.
- Ensure that counselors spend more time providing direct services to students and less time on administrative duties and duties unrelated to counseling.
- Continually develop and assess counseling department priorities and outcomes.

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The National Association for College Admission Counseling offers this publication to assist counselors in three primary ways: (1) to provide research that can help counselors contribute to student success and school reform; (2) to offer counselors a ready-made tool to share with key decision-makers to support the counseling function in schools; and (3) to share information and resources about college counseling with all counselors and professionals involved in college counseling.



Effective Counseling in Schools Increases College Access

COUNSELORS HAVE A POSITIVE EFFECT ON COLLEGE ACCESS (PROVE IT!)

Examining high school counselors and the role they play in the college access process could not be a more timely or vital action to undertake. Within schools, no professional is more important to improving college enrollments than counselors.

Research consolidated by Dr. Patricia McDonough, professor of education at UCLA, indicates the following:

- Counselors, when consistently and frequently available and allowed to provide direct services to students and parents, can have a positive impact on students' aspirations, achievements, and financial aid knowledge (Adelman, 1999; McDonough, 1997 and 2004; Orfield and Paul, 1993; Plank and Jordan, 2001).
- Schools that have improved counseling and college counseling have increased college access for low-income, rural, and urban students as well as students of color (Gandara and Bial, 2001; King, 1996; McDonough, 2004; Plank and Jordan, 2001; Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei, 1996; Venezia et al., 2002).
- If counselors were available to begin actively supporting students and their families in middle school in preparing for college, as opposed to simply disseminating information, students' chances of enrolling in a four-year college would increase (Hutchinson and Reagan, 1989; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997, 1999; Plank and Jordan, 2001; Powell, 1996; Rowe, 1989).
- Increasing the numbers of counselors available and the amount of time they devote to college advising tasks is one of the top three reforms needed to improve college access (Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis, 2002; Gandara and Bial, 2001; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1997; Kirst and Venezia, 2004; McDonough, 2004).
- Counselors have an impact on the following components of the college preparation and advising task: 1) structuring information and organizing activities that foster and support students' college aspirations and an understanding of college and its importance; 2) assisting parents in understanding their role in fostering and supporting college aspirations, setting college expectations, and motivating students; 3) assisting students in academic preparation for college; 4) supporting and influencing students

in decision-making about college; and 5) organizationally focusing the school on its college mission (Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 2004).

However, counselors are structurally constrained from doing the job they know and do best, which is providing information to help nurture and sustain aspirations, guidance on course selection for maximal academic preparation, motivation to achieve, and advice on how to investigate and choose a college. Nearly 20 years ago, NACAC documented that the great disparities in college counseling resources and activities were directly related to the social class of the communities in which these high schools were located (1986). Specifically, school counselors in upper income neighborhoods were more plentiful and spent more time on college counseling.

ACTIONS THAT PROMOTE EFFECTIVE COLLEGE COUNSELING

The following actions can be implemented to support school counseling and its continued focus on counseling students for postsecondary education. The implementation of each action, however, should be considered in light of barriers that have historically prevented counseling success.

Action #1: Set high expectations and provide access to college counseling for all students to prepare for postsecondary education or work.

Counseling often is tied to the track placement of students; therefore, if you are not in the college track, you do not receive college information (Rosenbaum et al., 1996).

Four key components of the high school have a tremendous impact on college attendance: a college preparatory curriculum; a college culture which establishes high academic standards and includes formal and informal communication networks that promote and support college expectations; a school staff that collectively is committed to students' college goals; and resources devoted to counseling and advising college-bound students (Alexander and

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Eckland, 1977; Boyle, 1966; Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993; Cookson and Persell, 1985; Falsey and Heyns, 1984; Hotchkiss and Vetter, 1987; McDonough, 1994, 1997; Powell, 1996).

One common thread running through the research evidence on the school's role in structuring students' aspirations and actual college preparatory opportunities is that guidance and counseling staff can help to establish a school's college culture.

Action #2: Provide access to college counseling and counselors by maintaining or increasing counseling staff level and improving the student-to-counselor ratio.

Research verifies that counselors have a positive impact on students' aspirations, plans, enrollments, and financial aid knowledge. Meeting frequently with a counselor increases a student's chance of enrolling in a four-year college, and if students, parents, and counselors work together and communicate clearly, students' chances of enrolling in college significantly increases. Moreover, the effect of socioeconomic status on the college enrollment of low-income students is largely explained by the lack of adequate counseling (King, 1996; Plank and Jordan, 2001). Training and hiring counselors is a national imperative if our nation's education reforms are to be successful in providing greater access to and success in postsecondary education. Currently, a public school counselor in the United States must serve an average of 478 students each year (See Table 1).

NACAC estimates that under current ratios and current time on task allotments, students in public schools can expect less than an hour of postsecondary education counseling during the entire school year.

Action #3: Refine counselor roles and responsibilities to ensure that counselors spend more time providing direct services to students and less time on administrative duties and duties unrelated to counseling.

In public schools, counselors spend less than one-third of their time talking to students about education after high school (See Table 2). Whether and how college counseling should be a part of school counselors' work, and the traditional dominance of other roles, such as psychological development, testing, administrative

Table 1: Public School Student-to-Counselor Ratio by State

State	Students	Counselors	Students Per Counselor
U.S.	48,202,324	100,901	478
Alabama	739,678	1,696	436
Alaska	134,364	289	465
Arizona	937,755	1,264	742
Arkansas	450,985	1,436	314
California	6,356,348	6,684	951
Colorado	751,862	1,390	541
Connecticut	570,023	1,328	429
Delaware	116,342	238	489
D.C.	76,166	243	313
Florida	2,539,929	5,640	450
Georgia	1,496,012	3,319	451
Hawaii	183,829	649	283
Idaho	248,515	591	420
Illinois	2,084,187	2,942	708
Indiana	1,003,875	1,812	554
Iowa	482,210	1,197	403
Kansas	470,957	1,142	412
Kentucky	660,782	1,460	453
Louisiana	730,464	3,094	236
Maine	204,337	646	316
Maryland	866,743	2,228	389
Massachusetts	982,989	2,924	336
Michigan	1,785,160	2,660	671
Minnesota	846,891	1,063	797
Mississippi	492,645	966	510
Missouri	924,445	2,730	339
Montana	149,995	432	347
Nebraska	285,402	777	367
Nevada	369,498	715	517
New Hampshire	207,671	772	269
New Jersey	1,367,438	3,611	379
New Mexico	320,234	775	413
New York	2,888,233	7,241	399
North Carolina	1,335,954	3,422	390
North Dakota	104,225	279	374
Ohio	1,838,285	3,587	512
Oklahoma	624,548	1,570	398

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Table 1: Public School Student-to-Counselor Ratio by State

State	Students	Counselors	Students Per Counselor
Oregon	554,071	1,172	473
Pennsylvania	1,816,747	4,292	423
Rhode Island	159,205	351	454
South Carolina	694,584	1,717	405
South Dakota	128,039	320	400
Tennessee	928,000	1,878	494
Texas	4,259,823	9,924	429
Utah	489,072	684	715
Vermont	99,978	418	239
Virginia	1,177,229	2,362	498
Washington	1,014,798	1,972	515
West Virginia	282,455	660	428
Wisconsin	881,231	1,948	452
Wyoming	88,116	391	225

Source: Common Core of Data, 2003–03, U.S. Department of Education

support, and students’ personal therapeutic counseling needs, has led to an ongoing conflict about the appropriateness of college counseling as a function of school counseling (Boswell and Carr, 1998; Hugo, 2004). NACAC research suggests that both social/psychological counseling and college counseling are necessary components of a school’s guidance services.

Repeated studies have found that improving college counseling would have a significant impact on college access for low-income, rural, and urban students as well as students of color (Gandara and Bial 2001; King, 1996; Plank and Jordan, 2001; Rosenbaum, Miller and Krei, 1996; Venezia et al., 2003).

But counselors continue to be saddled with administrative duties like scheduling, yard duty, school discipline, and testing responsibilities. Thus, counselors are structurally constrained from doing the job they know and do best.

If counselors actively support students and their families through the college admissions process, as opposed to simply disseminating information, this will increase students’ chances of enrolling in a four-year college. Research from NACAC suggests that allowing for more college counseling, while reducing time spent on administrative and non-counseling duties, yields statistically significant increases in students’ postsecondary enrollment (Lautz, 2005).

Action #4: Continually develop and assess counseling department priorities and outcomes.

Inadequate research evidence of counselor impact on student learning and development has led to counselors’ vulnerability in times of budget cuts (Aubrey, 1982; Avis, 1982; Carroll, 1985; Cole, 1991; Kehas, 1975; Miller and Boller, 1975). Collecting research and assessing student outcomes related to college counseling is a central component to school reform efforts, and is part of successful college access programs in public schools (Martinez, 2003; Pathways to College Network, 2003).

Research suggests that making a commitment to professional development for counselors and to researching counseling outcomes is associated with a more successful schoolwide effort to enroll more students in education after high school.

Counselor effectiveness is increased by meeting counselors’ pre-service and in-service professional development needs. Historically, counseling education programs have not included preparation in the area of college counseling (Hossler, 1999; McDonough, 2004; National Association of College Admission Counselors, 1991). Counselor professional development in the area of financial aid is especially critical. While 86 percent of schools rely on school counselors to provide students information about financial aid, 76 percent of counselors reported needing more support and training to provide financial aid advice (NACAC Counseling Trends Survey, 2004). Since college affordability is one of the primary

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concerns for students wishing to attend postsecondary education, it is critical that more resources be devoted to providing financial aid information in school.

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Table 2: Average Percent of Counselors' Time Spent on Task by Type of School

Task:	Postsecondary Admission Counseling	Choice and Scheduling HS Courses	Personal Needs Counseling	Academic Testing	Occupational Counseling and Job Placement	Other Non-Guidance Activities
All respondents	38.78	21.02	16.42	11.57	6.16	6.04%
Control						
Public schools	28.04	26.06	19.24	12.87	7.89	5.90
Private schools	60.78	10.86	10.50	8.91	2.68	6.27
<i>Private Non-Parochial</i>	<i>66.20</i>	<i>9.95</i>	<i>8.09</i>	<i>9.11</i>	<i>2.21</i>	<i>7.93</i>
<i>Private Parochial</i>	<i>57.91</i>	<i>12.51</i>	<i>15.68</i>	<i>8.46</i>	<i>3.67</i>	<i>4.31</i>
Free and Reduced Price Lunch						
0 to 25%	31.23	25.45	20.08	11.75	7.35	4.82
26 to 50%	26.18	25.59	18.40	14.08	8.65	8.90
51 to 100%	26.32	24.49	18.60	13.49	9.73	8.09
Enrollment						
Less than 500 students	42.87	16.36	13.31	12.51	6.31	8.64
500-999	42.38	19.02	16.25	10.38	6.21	5.76
1,000-1,499	34.56	24.50	17.60	12.11	6.00	5.23
1,500-1,999	31.94	26.68	20.29	10.58	6.41	4.11
More than 2,000 students	33.07	26.87	17.34	11.70	7.33	3.69
Student to Counselor Ratio						
Fewer than 100:1	55.15	10.78	8.93	11.56	3.70	9.89
100:1 to 200:1	49.54	15.38	14.73	10.43	5.11	4.80

Source: NACAC Counseling Trends Survey, 2004

The “College Choice” Process

INDIVIDUAL STUDENT CHOICE

Students aspire and apply to, then enroll in college through a complex, longitudinal, interactive process involving individual aspiration and achievement, learning opportunities in high school and intervention programs, and institutional admissions (Hossler et al. 1989; McDonough, 1997; Oakes, 2004).

Student aspirations precede the development of college plans; college preparation precedes college choice, and all of the foregoing are the precursors to college enrollment. Along the pathway to college and over the course of elementary, middle and high school, students pass through predisposition, search and choice stages where they decide whether to attend college, search for information, consider specific colleges, and finally choose a college destination (Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith, 1989).

The world of college admission has changed dramatically over the last half century. Before the 1950s, 20 percent of high school graduates went on to college, and today 65 percent do.

Generally speaking, the predisposition stage is when a student begins to develop occupational and educational aspirations, which generally occurs from elementary school age through middle school. Research shows that most students have some post-high school educational or job plans by the ninth grade (Stage and Hossler, 1989). Students need to begin to develop college awareness aspirations in the middle school years in order to take algebra, and other gatekeeping courses in middle school, which then positions students for high school course work that aligns well with college enrollment requirements (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). Students and their families need counseling to develop this awareness and planning, and middle schools need to raise standards and expectations (Gullat and Jan, 2002). It is in this stage that

students need to be informed of college entrance requirements, be enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum, be engaged in extracurricular activities, and begin to learn in broad-brush ways about financing a college education (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; Hearn and Holdsworth, 2004).

During the tenth through twelfth grades, students are in the search phase, which involves gathering the information necessary to develop their short lists of potential colleges (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). High socioeconomic status (SES) students in this phase have more information sources, are more knowledgeable about college costs, and tend to have parents saving for college (Hossler, Schmidt and Vesper, 1999).

The choice phase of the decision to go to college begins in the eleventh grade, usually culminating in the twelfth grade. College costs and financial aid play a dramatic role in the college choices of low-SES students, African Americans and Latinos, all of whom are highly sensitive to tuition and financial aid (Heller, 1999). These students are negatively influenced by high tuition (McPherson and Shapiro, 1998) but positively influenced by financial aid (Berkner and Chavez, 1997).

Almost nine out of ten students now say they plan on going to college (U.S. Department of Education 2003a; Venezia, Kirst and Antonio, 2003).

AGGREGATE TRENDS

The world of college admission has changed dramatically over the last half century. Before the 1950s, 20 percent of high school graduates went on to college, and today 65 percent do (Kinzie et al., 2004). Because of the increased competition, high-socioeconomic (SES) students, who have been attending college for generations, are filing larger numbers of applications to hedge their uncertain admissions bets. Admissions policies and preferences for certain groups of students is the focus of a never-ending stream of media reports, litigation, advocacy and research. Race-conscious admissions policies, including percent plans, still exist in some states, even though new research has proven that they offer very little evidence for increasing African American and Latino students' presence on more selective college campuses (Carnevale and Rose, 2003; Tienda, Cortes and Niu, 2003). Researchers and college

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presidents are advocating for adding socioeconomic diversity to existing affirmative action plans to increase the low and stagnant numbers of poor students entering college (Basinger and Smallwood, 2004; Carnevale and Rose, 2003).

In 2006, we have 3.1 million students graduated from high school, and current projections are that the graduation numbers will peak at 3.2 million high school graduates in 2008–09. Eighty percent of these new students will be students of color and a disproportionate number will be from poor or modest income families (WICHE, 2004). Yet, only about half of African American and Latino ninth graders graduate from high school, compared to almost four-fifths of Asian Americans and three-quarters of Whites. For those who stay in high school to graduate, low-income and underrepresented minority students have more limited access to the rigorous coursework needed for college readiness (Green and Forster, 2003). Subsequently, although the number of African American, Latino and Native American students enrolled in college has risen, those enrollment figures are far below the representation of those students in K–12 schools and below what would be projected for average college attendance given those K-12 enrollment figures (Allen, 2003).

NACAC's Web Links for Counselors

NACAC has compiled hundreds of resources for college counselors at www.nacacnet.org. Highlights are listed below:

Web Resources for Students and Counselors

Links to hundreds of Web sites pertaining to college access for students, families, counselors, and other educators, including college information, application assistance, financial aid, testing, and all other aspects of the high school to college transition:

www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/ForStudents/OnlineResources/

NACAC “Opportunities for School Counselors” in the No Child Left Behind Act

Locate resources and information about counselors' roles and opportunities under the federal “No Child Left Behind” Act, or Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA):

www.nacac.com/pubs_counselors.html#esea

NACAC's *Fundamentals of College Admission Counseling*

A guidebook for counselors involved in college admission counseling: www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/Products/Publications/Fundamentals+of+College+Admission+Counseling.htm

NACAC Resources for Professional Development in College Counseling

Links to information and workshops on college admission counseling:

www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/ProfessionalResources/ProDev/
www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/Events/NatlConference/

NACAC: *State of College Admission Report*

An annual survey of counseling and admission trends from high schools and colleges across the United States: www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/ProfessionalResources/Rsearch/

“Counseling and College Counseling in America,” by Patricia McDonough: www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/ProfessionalResources/Research/

Pathways to College: College Readiness for All Toolbox

A research-based toolbox that involves counselors in school reform: www.pathwaystocollege.net/collegereadiness/

U.S. Department of Education: “College Opportunities Online”

Search more than 7,000 postsecondary institutions for information about college opportunities: <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cool/>

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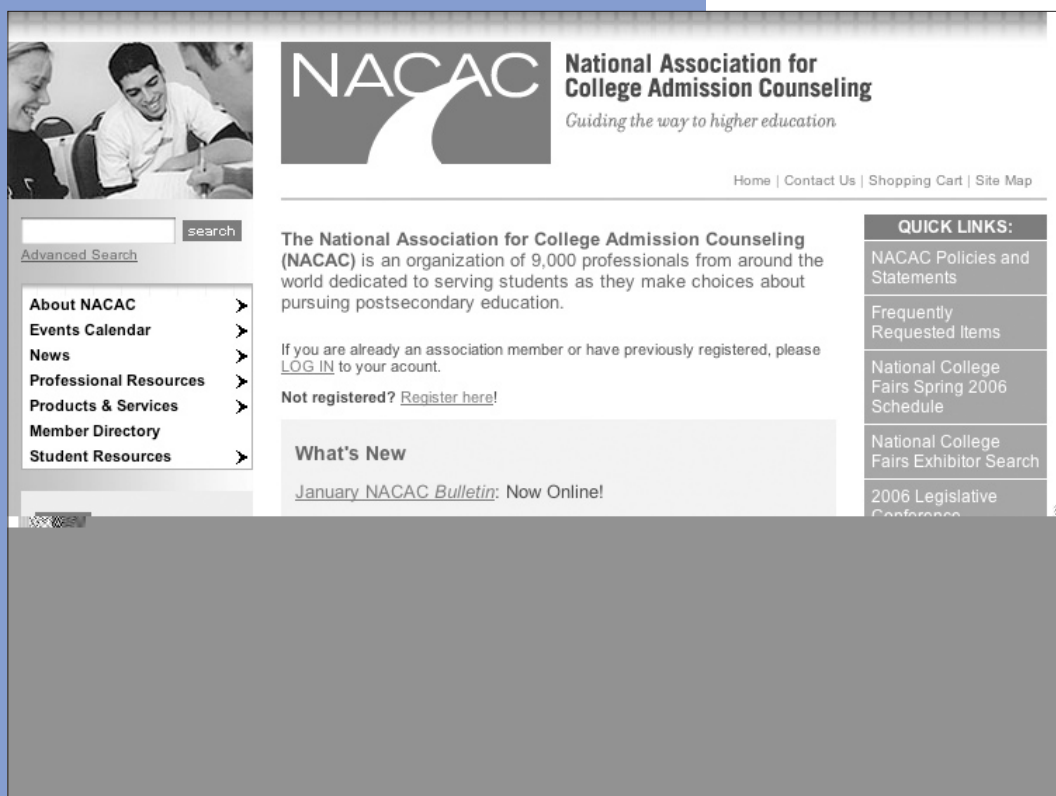
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The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) is an organization of more than 9,000 professionals from around the world dedicated to serving students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education.

Visit **www.nacacnet.org**
for more information.



The screenshot shows the homepage of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). The header features a photograph of three students on the left, the NACAC logo in the center, and the organization's name and tagline, "National Association for College Admission Counseling" and "Guiding the way to higher education," on the right. A navigation menu includes links for Home, Contact Us, Shopping Cart, and Site Map. Below the header, there is a search bar with a "search" button and a link to "Advanced Search". A vertical menu on the left lists various resources: About NACAC, Events Calendar, News, Professional Resources, Products & Services, Member Directory, and Student Resources, each with a right-pointing arrow. The main content area contains a paragraph describing NACAC as an organization of 9,000 professionals, followed by a login prompt for existing members and a registration link for new users. A "What's New" section highlights the "January NACAC Bulletin: Now Online!". On the right side, a "QUICK LINKS:" section provides shortcuts to NACAC Policies and Statements, Frequently Requested Items, National College Fairs Spring 2006 Schedule, National College Fairs Exhibitor Search, and the 2006 Legislative Conference.