

# It's Time to Say No More

by Robert Bardwell

School counselors today are overwhelmed. The demands on and expectations of us continue to grow, including mandated testing, paperwork and other accountability measures, yet nothing seems to be taken off our plates. In the majority of schools, this means spending less time providing direct services to students, which is our core mission. In reaction, school counselors across the nation are stepping forward to try to make changes. The American School Counselor Association's National Model (ASCA 2003), which provides the framework for school counseling program development and evaluation, is an instrumental part of the reform movement.

As we continue the discussion, to truly focus on reform in school counseling today, we must address how we prepare school counselors to assist their students as they plan for and transition out of high school. The bottom line is that college admission coursework is not being adequately taught in our school counselor graduate programs. This needs to change.

In 2009, there were an estimated 3.32 million students who graduated from high school and an estimated 15.1 million of them will pursue an undergraduate degree (*Chronicle of Higher Education*). This is the highest number of high school graduates this country has ever seen. Behind this record number of students, many of whom are first-generation college students and minority students, are thousands of school counselors. They assist students trying to reach their dreams, but what credentials do they possess—were they properly trained for this important process?

Research demonstrates that within the school setting, school counselors are the most important professionals when it

comes to improving college-going rates. when it comes to improving college-going rates (McDonough 2006). Furthermore, it shows us that many schools lack effective college counseling and that high student-to-counselor ratios negatively impact the availability of college advising (Perna, et al. 2008). For low-income and first-generation students, the school counselor is often the only adult to provide such information (Cabrera and LaNasa 2000).

Most school counselors report a limited amount of time available for college counseling activities. High school counselors spend on average only 29 percent of their time on college counseling (23 percent for public schools vs. 58 percent for private schools). Additionally, at higher income schools, counselors generally have more time to spend on college counseling related activities (NACAC 2008). A study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 43 percent of counselors report spending more than 20 percent of their time on college advising (US Department of Education, 2003).

Sadly, counselors do not receive adequate training and preparation in the area of college admission counseling. NACAC's annual *State of College Admission Report* (2004) shows that 96 percent of school counselors felt that assisting students in the college search, application and selection process was very relevant; yet only 66 percent of respondents had received some sort of training during the past year and only 24 percent said they received graduate coursework in college admission, higher education and/or enrollment management.

This data demonstrates just how important knowledgeable school counselors are to college entrance success. While school counselors face issues of time availability,

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role definition and adequate training, students and families still need access to college information and assistance. How can it be that some school counselors spend at least one-fifth of their time performing a skill, yet receive little, if any, training in graduate school?

NACAC research ([www.nacacnet.org/CareerDevelopment/Resources/Pages/Graduate.aspx](http://www.nacacnet.org/CareerDevelopment/Resources/Pages/Graduate.aspx)) has found approximately 40 colleges in the country that offer students graduate credit for a specific course in college admission counseling which can be applied towards a school counseling degree. There are also eight others that offer graduate credit for courses, but do not count them toward a school counseling degree at that institution. Most of us who work on the secondary level are forced to pick up these skills via practicum experiences, on-the-job-training or through professional development opportunities, but this on-the-fly approach should not be the way our future school counselors learn.

When newly-hired or inexperienced school counselors are not assigned to counsel a caseload of seniors because they don't know how, we should be offended. When directors of guidance say they will only hire counselors with college counseling experience, we should be worried about how aspiring school counselors gain it. When school administrators outsource college counseling services because their staff is unable to provide them, we should be incensed.

Until school counselors and college admission personnel take a stand and let counselor educators know that college admission counseling is expected of all aspiring school counselor graduates, very little will change. As practitioners, we know what skills have to be mastered; college admission counseling is an essential one. It's time to object to this trend, to stand up to the system and say something has to change. It is no longer acceptable for school counseling programs to inadequately prepare our future school counselors.

Some argue that college admission counseling is not a "real" curriculum compared to counseling theory or research, and therefore has no place in graduate school. However, those of us in the field rebut that a curriculum can specifically teach graduate students to provide services to students and families, including college choice theory. In addition, NACAC has published the *Fundamentals of College Admission Counseling* to help teach this material. A 2011 edition with three new chapters is in process.

Some argue that elementary and middle school counselors do not need to know about college counseling. This argument is invalid as well. Firstly, one never knows where he or she will end up working—just ask a counselor who one day was an elementary counselor and, because of budget cuts, is a secondary counselor the next. Secondly, having an understanding of the college counseling process helps all our students. Knowing the barriers to higher education and the appropriate coursework to take in middle school is an advantage. School counselors at all levels must be on the same page when educating, advocating and guiding students down the path to success.

Counselor educators are concerned also about what to remove if they add a course dealing with college admission counseling. Graduate programs are already overwhelmed with curricula and some schools have even increased requirements to 51 or 60 credits. However, when we consider that 43 percent of school counselors spend more than 20 percent of their time engaged in postsecondary counseling, the need for adequate training is clear.

Forty institutions' directors had the foresight to offer a school counseling program to their students—they should be applauded. As an adjunct professor who teaches college admission counseling graduate classes at three institutions, I know what a difference this class makes. In my first year teaching the class, 12 students took the course: in the second year, 23. This increase speaks volumes. One student said about the course, "While I draw constantly from the knowledge I gained in all my graduate coursework, nothing stands out for me more, or is utilized more, than the college counseling class... I was able to hit the ground running during my practicum and because of my strong knowledge base. I am more marketable because of the class... this class is an absolute necessity in any graduate school counselor curriculum." I hear similar statements each time I teach the class.

As a society, we are seeing a significant push for more high school graduates to go to college—the subject is even of great interest to President Obama. If we want more students to go to college, logically that would require proper training for school counselors. What would policymakers and legislators say if they knew that the majority of school counselors do not take college admission counseling coursework? They create all sorts of programs and grants

to increase college-going rates, yet this simple, cost-effective option is not even on their radar. If it was, I expect that they would quickly lean on school counseling program directors to add this component to the graduate school curriculum.

Perhaps we can spark a conversation about preparation for future school counselors. When this problem is resolved school counselors will come out of graduate school stronger, more valuable and ready to improve options for students. The next time you talk with your local counselor educator or supervisor of interns, ask why there is no course in college admission counseling in their training programs (unless of course, they are from one of the 40 schools). If necessary, we may want to consider further steps, such as declining to supervise future interns without college counseling coursework and/or experience, or revealing to them that one of their graduates was not hired due to a lack of this skill. While we counselors are nice, caring people, we should no longer be expected to feel our way around something that can be taught in a course. It's time to say, "No more." Our students deserve better.



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