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.

Read the feature article on page 2.
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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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

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

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

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

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

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.

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).

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

Research suggests that making a commitment to providing 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 (NA-CAC, 2004; Martinez, et. al., 2003).

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

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

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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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 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/

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 Mc-Donough: 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/
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bibliography


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Hull, B. J. (1979). The way we were and are: The changing roles of the high school counselor and the college admissions officer. National ACAC Journal. 23(2), 25-27.


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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.