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COMMENTARY

The Counseling Opportunity Structure

Examining Correlates of Four-Year College-Going Rates

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High school counselors play a critical role in college attainment but historically they have remained in the shadows. ThePathways to College Act, bipartisan legislation proposed initially in the 111th Congress, highlights the unique and important role that counselors play in both academic achievement and college access and is reflective of the changing times. Unfortunately, most schools do not have a systemic means of distributing college and financial aid information to students, and even fewer help students understand the relevance of academic preparation in the college process.

Responding to the increasing attention placed on high school counselors inthis study, we used a nationally representative data set (the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009) to examine the relationships between the norms (e.g., average caseload, hours spent on college counseling, primary goals) and resources (e.g., financial aid assistance, postsecondary relationships, college fairs) of counseling departments and the four-year college-going rates of high schools, taking into account important aspects of the larger high school organizational environment.

Using a multiple regression technique, we found that the organizational environment of a high school is an important determinant of the college-going culture, but that the counseling department also functions as an important intermediary in enhancing college opportunities. In particular, we found evidence that both the percentage of hours spent on college counseling as well as the average caseload of a high school were significantly related to the college-going culture of a school. Additionally, we found a number of counseling resources that significantly influenced four-year college-going rates, including resources relegated toward financial aid assistance, college fairs, and course-taking opportunities at four-year colleges.

We also used developed a three-level typology of schools (i.e., divergent, emergent, and convergent) based on the underlying counseling opportunity structure. Divergent schools were identified as schools with a limited focus on college preparation and few resources devoted to facilitating college opportunities. Emergent schools, however, were more equipped with available resources but still lacked a strong focus on college preparation. Convergent schools were associated with a strong focus on college preparation and an ample supply of resources to facilitate the college choice process.

There are a number of important policy implications based on the results of this study. First, in order to initiate effective outreach efforts to students, high school counselors must have the opportunity to develop the requisite skills necessary to build a meaningful college counseling program. It is imperative that counselor education programs address more than just the social and emotional challenges of working with students and also equip them with the tools necessary to help students and parents both understand and interpret information about college admissions and financial aid.

Second, as a microcosm of the overall school habitus, the counseling departments plays a critical role in both developing and sustaining the college-going culture. While many policy reports point to decreasing counselor caseloads, our research findings

suggest that caseloads must also be examined in relation to the overall goals of the counseling department and the amount of time allocated to college counseling activities.

Finally, myriad factors outside the purview of the counseling office, such as the school climate and student attitudes and behaviors toward school, also influence the college-going culture. While not directly responsible for working with students, building and district administrators must recognize their responsibility in ensuring that the school community promotes and supports college access for all of its students. By taking a closer examination of the underlying counseling opportunity structure of a school, administrators will be better positioned to allocate resources and advance normative values that enhance the college-going culture of their schools.

The full study is in Engberg, Mark E. and Aliza J. Gilbert, "The Counseling Opportunity Structure: Examining Correlates of Four-Year College-Going Rates," Research in Higher Education, Springer, August 2013.

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