

The Role of the School Counselor in
the College Admissions Process:
Barriers and Best Practices

Capstone Project by:

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Spring 2009

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Introduction

The focus of my capstone project is to identify barriers and best practices for school counselors in assisting all students to acquire access to post-secondary education. The relevant literature identifies a need to focus on this topic because many students are at a disadvantage in accessing the information needed for access to post-secondary educational options. Several major themes stand out in the literature as barriers including; culture, geography, language, disabilities, and socio/ economic class. Hoover (2008) noted that not all students have equal access to test preparation and that leaves some students at a disadvantage. Lee, Sang Min, Ph. D., Daniels, M. Harry, Ph. D., Puig, Ana, Ph.D., Newgent, Rebecca A., Ph. D., & Nam, Suk Kyung (2008) indicated that barriers exist for students from low socio-economic environments. Lopez, Hilda, & Mackeben, Tammi (2008) discussed the importance of the school counselor's role in being a primary source of information for economically disadvantaged students who receive little assistance from home, yet another barrier that can place students at a disadvantage. Oesterreich and Knight (2008) say, "It is the school counselor's role to make sure that cultural and linguistic barriers are breached" (p. 300). Savitz-Romer (2008) noted that there are limitations that exist for students in urban areas. The literature also states that in order for a student to make a well informed decision about post-secondary choices, they need to be provided with all of the information and tools. The school counselor is the one who provides that piece and can help the student make a choice that is best-suited for them, following graduation from high school. In many schools, counselors are the main resource for providing information to students and families, so they may obtain access to

post-secondary education. Bellesi (2008) suggests that it is the school counselor's job to help make the college search process personal and comfortable for students. Lee, et al noted that school counselors are in the ideal position to serve as advocates for all students, and as agents for removing systemic barriers to academic success. School counselors are a primary source of information for economically disadvantaged students who have little assistance from home (Lopez & Mackeben, 2008). It is noted that the school counselor is an important facilitator in working with students who have learning disabilities, and that they should be part of transition teams to be sure that all of the information is given appropriately and that it is understood by the student and families (Milsom & Hartley, 2005). Only when a student has been given all of the information, looked at themselves, and had conversations about what they want for their post-secondary experience, will they be able to make a choice that is the best fit for them and their future.

I am drawn to this topic for very specific and personal reasons. As a first generation student from a working class family, I was unable to receive financial assistance and also never received any scholarship money. I may have had more opportunity for help if I had been working with a more involved school counselor. I felt as though I navigated the college admissions process completely on my own. I never had workshops or individual meetings with my counselor to help me decide what would be best for me, or to even help me figure out who I was and what I would want or need. I have no recollection of any college preparation and I feel that it is my duty as a school counselor to be sure that I provide that assistance to my students. I feel that by making a connection with my students, having conversations with them, and finding out what their personal interests

and goals are, I can provide the assistance they will need to make well thought out and educated decisions about their post-secondary experience. I feel that it is my job to provide them with basic college admissions information and help guide them through what can be a very intense and stressful process. I think it is very important to identify the key, most important parts that a counselor plays in the college admissions process. Since I have never found all of this information compiled in one place, I would ultimately like to create a guidebook about the role of the school counselor in helping others in their quest to be an effective school counselor.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of my capstone project is to identify barriers, as well as strategies and best practices for school counselors in their efforts to assist all students in acquiring access to post-secondary education. The importance of doing this project is to provide school counselors with information which will enhance their ability to support students in their post-secondary educational planning and to provide counseling for the college admissions process. All students should have an equal advantage when it comes to college access, and with the help from school counselors who play a key role in that process it can be a very positive and effective experience.

The research indicates that the barriers include the fact that public high school counselors tend to be overburdened by significantly large caseloads (Cohen, 2006). Hawkins and Clinendinst (2008) support that argument in stating that there are very high expectations for public high school counselors because they have significantly large caseloads. Lee et al (2008) says that one of the barriers is the low socioeconomic status of children. Milsom and Hartley (2005) report that it can be very difficult for students with disabilities to access post-secondary education without the assistance of the school counselor. Savitz-Romer (2008) further supports the idea that students who are first generation, low income or from minority groups, have difficulty accessing and working through the college admissions process without the assistance of the school counselor. Cultural influences can create barriers for students to access post-secondary education because of cultural misunderstandings, disparity in resources, race and gender (Smith, 2008). The best practices that are identified in the research include the importance of the school counselor in staying informed and up to date on the college admissions process,

because it is an ever changing and evolving process (Bardwell). Bellesi (2008) reports that best practices include getting to know your students by finding out their interests through using questionnaires and having face to face interviews, to discover where the interests lie. Chimes and Gordon (2008) note that being aware of how colleges recruit students is very important because so much is done on line now, and that information is crucial for the school counselor to have. Hitchner, Kenneth W., Tiffi-Hitchner, Anne, & Apostol, E. Andre (1991) discuss the importance of knowing how to write effective college recommendations and how to help students with financial aid planning. Hoover (2008) noted that it is important for students to be aware of how heavily standardized test scores are weighted at different colleges. Some schools are choosing not to use them as a requirement for admissions and the school counselor can assist and finding out this information. A theme that appeared several times in the literature was in regards to the importance of parent/family involvement in a student's education and the college admissions process and the crucial role that counselors play in getting them involved (Smith, 2008). All of this information provided a very clear picture of what barriers and best practices exist, but I did not see a place where all of this information was located in one place. I feel that there is a real need for there to be one resource available to school counselors where they can access what they need in one single resource. It is important to do this research because if the barriers are identified and if we can determine the best practices for helping students, then school counselors will be more successful in helping students in the college admissions process.

Research Questions

The purpose of my capstone project is to identify barriers, as well as strategies and best practices for school counselors in their efforts to assist all students in acquiring access to post-secondary education. The importance of doing this project is to provide school counselors with information which will enhance their ability to support students in their post-secondary educational planning and to provide counseling for the college admissions process. All students should have an equal advantage when it comes to college access, and with the help from school counselors who play a key role in that process, as long as they are aware of what they need to do to help, it can be a very positive and effective experience.

- 1) What are the barriers to access higher education for students?
- 2) What are strategies for overcoming those barriers?
- 3) What do we know about best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process?

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of my capstone project is to identify barriers, as well as strategies and best practices for school counselors in their efforts to assist all students in acquiring access to post-secondary education. The importance of doing this project is to provide school counselors with information which will enhance their ability to support students in their post-secondary educational planning and to provide counseling for the college admissions process. My questions are:

- 1.) What are the barriers to access higher education for students?
- 2.) What are strategies for overcoming those barriers?
- 3.) What do we know about best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process?

The importance of doing this research is to develop the information base in order to, at a later date, provide school counselors with a comprehensive guidebook which will enhance their ability to support students in their post-secondary educational planning and to provide detailed counseling for the college admissions process. There is a strong need for this type of resource, because at this time, there is nothing available to school counselors that address these needs. The Capstone project will serve as a critical first step in this process by identifying barriers, strategies and best practices.

Project Participants and Setting

The individuals who will be interviewed are all from Brattleboro Union High School in Brattleboro, Vermont. The school is situated in the southeast corner of the state and is a rural-urban area. It is a six-year comprehensive middle-high school with a career center and the enrollment is roughly 1,350. There are approximately 220 course offerings in academic and career areas. Advanced Placement courses in English, Calculus, US History and Physics are also offered. Honors and advanced level courses are offered in all subject area; which provides for a challenging and rigorous curriculum. There is 140 licensed staff and more than half hold a master's degree.

Interviews will be conducted with four current school counselors, one representative from the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC), one office manager who handles a great deal of responsibilities in the college admissions process at the school, four classroom teachers who write multiple recommendations for college-bound students each year, and four students who vary in background and post-secondary choices. The interviews will yield a total of responses from fourteen different individuals. There will be a formal letter written to the building principal requesting permission to go ahead with the research. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, and any students under 18 will have parental consent and student assent. There will not be any formal incentives offered for participation

Each counselor is responsible for a caseload that is broken up by alphabet and grade. In any given year, there are two counselors who have half of the junior and freshman classes and two counselors who have half of the senior and sophomore classes. The department head has a handful of students from all of the grades. They begin

preparing the students for their post secondary experience in 9th grade by exposing them to career options, and continue throughout each of their years in high school. Each counselor has their own office, as well as access to a counseling resource room, specifically for career and college research. The VSAC coordinator is not a full-time employee at the school, but she does have an office located in the counseling suite, so it is easy to access her, and she provides workshops on different topics throughout the year to supplement the post secondary research process.

I will be asking four different teachers, who I know have experience with the college admissions process and who play different roles in the school to participate in the interviews. Individuals are under no obligation to participate. I will be asking school counselors of current seniors who have recently gone through the process to provide me with names of students who they would feel might be willing to participate in the interview research. Again, these students are under no obligation to participate, it is strictly voluntary.

The students I will interview will include a first-generation student, a student who is choosing a four-year competitive college, a student who is undecided about what to do after high school, and a student with a different racial background, non-white.

Data Collection Procedures

The tool that I will be using to collect my data is a semi-structured interview with a very specific series of questions tied directly to my research questions. In the course of the interview I will include follow-up questions as needed, to explore the questions in more depth or to clarify responses. I will use the same interview questions for each person. The purpose of the tool is to ask my research questions of people who have direct experience and/or interest in this topic. I will ask questions that will elicit responses about strategies for overcoming barriers and what they believe are best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process. I will be looking for consistencies and discrepancies among those I interview and will be comparing my findings to what I have found in the literature. Stringer (2004) identifies appropriate questioning techniques, used in a structured interview process. It describes the easiest and most precise way to interview with questions that get specific information and direct answers to all interview questions. Each person will be asked to respond to the same series of questions and the main themes will be drawn out for further comparison and synthesis. I will be conducting interviews with fourteen different individuals in private interview sessions. I will be asking a series of ten very specific questions to each of the interviewees. I will be interviewing four current school counselors, one Vermont Student Assistance Corporation Coordinator, one counseling office manager, four teachers and four students. The primary stakeholders in this research process are the school counselors and the students. They are the ones who are most directly affected by the issue of college admissions.

Informed Consent

Appendix A is the location of the letter for permission to conduct the research.

The letter for informed consent is in Appendix B. The letter for informed assent is Appendix C.

Materials

The data collection tool that will be used for this action research project is a set of interview questions on the topic of the college admissions process. The ten question interview addresses issues surrounding the college admissions process and best practices that exist for school counselors. The data collection tool is explicitly connected to my research questions. The first three questions are the same as my research questions. The remaining questions focus on respondents' personal and/or professional experience, the role they play in the admissions (including being a student who recently went through the process and the areas in which students most need help. The final questions focus on what could be changed or done differently in order to better support students in the process, advice for students going through the process and how the school counselor can be most helpful in the college admissions process. A copy of the interview questions is included as Appendix D.

The purpose of the interview questions is to hear firsthand from a range of people directly involved in different ways in the college admissions process and to find out what they have learned from their experience. Although this is only a very small study, credibility will be established through triangulation of data.

Triangulation is a process in which multiple forms of data are collected and analyzed. The purpose of triangulation is to look for recurrent behaviors or actions, those theme like features of a situation that inspire confidence that the events interpreted and appraised are not a aberrant or exceptional, but rather characteristic of the situation (Hendricks, 2009 page 80).

Data Analysis

Once all of the interviews are completed, I will read responses to each question from each interview noting themes that emerge from each question as well as discrepancies. I will keep careful notes organized by question and themes and discrepancies that emerge from each question. I will also look at the data by group, for example, comparing responses to each question among all the school counselors. I will then compare the data from all fourteen interviewees, once again noting themes and discrepancies. After I identify major themes and identify any discrepancies in the answers that are provided. I will then compare my results with what the literature I reviewed says about barriers, strategies and best practices in the college admissions process.

The data will be presented in the following way. Each question will be analyzed as described above and presented in the data analysis section in a question by question format focusing on emergent themes and discrepancies. Then the major emergent themes will be summarized in a narrative format.

Triangulation of data will be achieved in the following ways: I am interviewing school counselors, students, teachers and two people who are involved in the process in other roles (one is a counselor from Vermont Student Assistance Corporation, a community organization that supports the college admissions process and the office manager who is involved in the process at the high school). These multiple perspectives are further enriched by my own experience and observations over the course of the school year, as a school counselor involved in post secondary planning as well as my extensive review of the literature on this topic

Timeline

May 12th – Literature Review Completed and turned in

May 26th – First draft of methodology section written and turned in

June 5th – Interview questions and letters of consent completed

June 8th – Letters of consent distributed

June 12th – Letters of consent returned

June 15th-24th – Interviews will be scheduled at different times with participants

June 25th- 29th – Data will be analyzed and documented

June 30th – Closure section of methodology will be completed

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of my capstone project is to identify barriers, as well as strategies and best practices for school counselors in their efforts to assist all students in acquiring access to post-secondary education. The importance of doing this project is to provide school counselors with information which will enhance their ability to support students in their post-secondary educational planning and to provide counseling for the college admissions process.

My questions are:

- 1.) What are the barriers to access higher education for students?
- 2.) What are strategies for overcoming those barriers?
- 3.) What do we know about best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process?

What are the barriers to accessing higher education for students?

The barriers that exist for students to accessing higher education are many and all are very different. The school counselor's role in identifying those barriers and assisting students in overcoming them is crucial. The college admissions process is constantly evolving, and colleges will use more technological resources to recruit students because students who are applying to college at this time are much more technologically savvy. If a counselor is not up to date on the new trends and developments and does not use data collected on acceptance, denials and wait listed students, as well as SAT and ACT scores, they could be placing their students at a disadvantage (Bardwell, 2008). This point is

supported by Chimes and Gordon (2008) who say that colleges rely heavily on their web sites and technology to market their schools and if students are unable to access that information, they are missing a valuable piece of the college search.

Standardized testing can also be a huge barrier for some students, because their testing abilities may not be a strength for them, and that can be a difficult hurdle to overcome in the college admissions process. Many families pay large amounts of money to get their students tutored to improve their test scores (Bardwell, 2008). Hoover (2008) addressed the idea that not all students have equal access to test preparation due to lack of finances, and that leaves many at a disadvantage.

Accessing information on financial aid is another barrier that exists for many students. It can be very difficult for students and families to understand, especially those students from first generation college families (Bardwell, 2008).

A counselor not having the amount of time needed to get to know their students is another barrier that exists in the college admissions process. The literature says that it is crucial for counselors to get their students to open up about their interests by using questionnaires or face to face interviews, and to try to figure out what is going to be of interest to their students in the next four years and beyond. Statistics show that fifty percent of students attend more than one college before completing their undergraduate work, which points to the fact that they are not choosing the right school for them the first time around (Bellesi, 2008).

Another barrier that exists for students in the college admissions process is the application and how colleges have it set up to literally undermine adolescents' sense of self. Colleges say that they are looking for authentic students, but at the same time, they

are creating inauthentic goals by asking students to plan their futures by defining themselves before they truly understand who they are (Dix, 2008).

The expectations that are placed on public school counselors with significantly large caseloads are tremendous. College admissions counseling is just one of many tasks that most public high school counselors are expected to do. The increased level of stress that is added to the counselor because they want to help their students to the fullest extent is then passed onto the students and families (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2008).

Low socio-economic status is one of the most prevalent barriers that exist. Lee et al states that children from these circumstances frequently live in highly stressful and disadvantaged school environments, characterized by multiple risk factors for the development of psychosocial adjustment problems, including high rates of poverty, exposure to violence and drug use. Peer influence from these types of environments can also affect a students' perspective on being able to attain a post secondary education. Lopez and Mackeben (2008) support these ideas by saying that students from economically disadvantaged areas tend to get considerably less if any assistance in the college admissions process from home. Many of these students may be the first in their families to be attending college and they are left on their own to find their way without supports from family.

Mau, Wei-Cheng, Ph. D., Hitchcock, Ruth, Ph.D., & Calvert, Christy (1998) states that access to appropriate courses for college preparation is also a barrier, especially for a large portion of minority students. They tend to be enrolled in non-college prep courses and they also are less likely to have opportunities to interact with counselors.

Barriers exist for students with learning disabilities, who are not always encouraged to pursue or consider post secondary education options. Information is either not presented to these students or is not presented in a way that the student and families understand it (Milsom & Hartley, 2005). Oesterreich and Knight (2008) report that recent research suggests that disability in combination with other characteristics, such as race and class, has a much more powerful effect on educational attainment than any one of these characteristics alone. The race and class divide can lead to a differentiation in the academic college preparation that many affluent, Caucasian students with learning disabilities receive, as opposed to that provided to poor culturally and linguistically diverse students. These students often are labeled with more stigmatizing disabilities within special education. They also are underrepresented as a result of their disability in college preparation courses, including advanced placement courses. In addition, they cannot afford and do not have access to private tutoring and other out of school services such as SAT preparation (Oesterreich & Knight, 2008).

A barrier that was identified in the research, that I had not ever considered before, was the information found in Sanoff (1999). He indicated that a lack of knowledge on the school counselors part about credible online resources available to students in the college admissions process, coupled with the inability of counselors to really get to know their students well enough to write realistic recommendations can hinder a students' chances of accessing the best post-secondary placement.

Demographics can be a barrier for many students, especially those who are first-generation, low-income, minority students from urban areas (Savitz-Romer, 2008). Traditional resources do not address how to assist undocumented students in securing

financial aid, provide information appropriate for a parenting teen or suggest college counseling strategies for students living in foster care. Many urban students do not believe they have what it takes to be successful at college or they believe that it is unachievable (Savitz-Romer, 2008).

Race is a key component in accessing post-secondary education. According to Sciarra and Whitson (2007) Latino students are less likely to be able to pursue post-secondary education for reasons such as; social influences, lack of community involvement, negative stereotypes and lowered academic expectations. They also have fewer positive role models, which prevents them from obtaining necessary motivation and information on applying for college. Latino students are less likely to be enrolled in college prep courses, only 47% of Latino students as compared to 54% of white students. Many inaccurate assumptions are made about Latino students and their lack of interest in pursuing college educations, because they are unaware and uninformed about the process. Less rigorous curriculum and lower quality instruction due to under qualified teachers teaching in high poverty schools are major contributors (Sciarra & Whitson, 2007).

Uwah, Chinwe J., McMahon, H. George, Ph. D., & Furlow, Carolyn F., Ph. D. (2008) and Smith (2008) both discuss the barriers that exist for African American male students to access information on post secondary education. They suggest that there are "opportunity gaps," which can be a major contributor to the disparity in achievement. In 2004, statistics showed that the graduation rate for African American male students was only 45%, compared to white males at 70%. The authors state that there is a tendency for African American males to be in the lowest academic track, so they receive inadequate secondary education. Other reasons indicated for their lack of success include; cultural

misunderstandings, low expectations by school staff, disparity in resources, parenting styles in conflict with demands and expectations of traditional schools, and clearly race and gender.

Stanley (2008) suggests that barriers exist for many students who are not on track to attend a four year college, but have not been given all of the information in regards to other options. She states that students are not provided with information, or encouraged to look into community colleges. There tends to be a negative stigma associated with community college, and it is viewed sometimes as "13th or 14th grade." It is also viewed as just an educational option for older adults who want to return to school. Students also fear that there would be difficulties transitioning from community college to a four year school.

The research indicates that there are many barriers that exist for students in the college admissions process. There are many different groups, which in itself can be one of the largest barriers. Different types of students have significantly different challenges in accessing the information necessary to be eligible to continue on to post secondary education. The research did provide many strategies for overcoming those barriers.

What are the strategies for overcoming those barriers?

Bardwell (2008) states that it is very important for students and families to begin college planning early, even in elementary school. Lee et al. (2008) recommends providing curriculum about post secondary options for all students at younger ages. This is supported by Hawkins and Clinedinst (2008) who identify the importance of working with parents and families to provide them with information on post secondary options for

their child. This is further supported by Smith (2008) who states that getting parents involved is crucial. It is important for students and parents to become familiar with the idea of accessing a college education, and finding out what they need to know to get there. He addresses the importance of gaining valuable information about what is needed to prepare for and choose a college, how to make use of the college experience and to be able to identify the long term value of a college degree, along with how it will be financed.

Chimes and Gordon (2008) discussed the importance of utilizing technology for accessing information about colleges and also for applying. It can be difficult to get information home to families, so email is a very supportive tool in the college admissions process. Their research also addressed the importance of the high school collaborating with colleges to provide more readily available access to all students by arranging for college visits. Lopez and Mackeben (2008) support this thought and believe it is crucial for the high school to be involved in scheduling college campus tours for all grade levels, as well as providing career days.

Cohen (2006) identifies the importance of encouraging students to really get to know themselves and be able to self-advocate. They suggest that students should be able to identify their strengths, weaknesses, passions and goals. According to Mau et al (1998) it is also important for students to be aware of what their expectations are and what their aspirations are and to encourage them to not put limitations on their wishes for the future, by being overly influenced by perceived expectations of others.

In working specifically with students with disabilities there are many strategies available for helping them overcome the barriers to accessing post secondary education.

Creating strong transition plans, so that students are made aware of their rights, helping them develop a greater self-awareness about their disability, and helping them to identify more potential career options, after becoming familiar with their learning style are all things that will help these students move on to successful post secondary experiences. It is also important for them to determine which accommodations were effective for them in high school, so that they can communicate their needs to college professors and self-advocate (Milsom & Hartley, 2005). Oesterreich and Knight (2008) suggest that special education teachers ensure that their students graduate with a complete, up-to-date battery of tests that verify their disabilities so that those tests can be used by the students in their freshman year of college, and perhaps beyond, thus emphasizing the importance of becoming a self advocate. Milson and Hartley also discuss the significance of social and cultural capital. Social capital for students in relation to college includes the availability of information-sharing networks about college. Cultural capital is the value placed on obtaining a college education and the information available about acquiring one. It is important to nurture social and cultural capital in relation to college, by addressing social and economic stratification that exists in society in relation to race, class and disability; understanding the law; and facilitating the selection of a college with resources and demographics that match students' social, economic, and emotional needs.

Patterson (2007) offers the strategy of providing some form of assistance to students in the college essay writing process. It is clear that equal assistance can not be provided to everyone, but that some support should be available. It is recognized that some students and families are much more financially able to pay someone to help. This again is a socio-economic barrier for some. That is why it is recommended that schools

work with community organizations and other programs to provide support for all students. There is also an ethical dilemma involved with the amount of assistance that a student should receive, because the students' essay should be genuine and indicative of their true abilities.

Some strategies that were mentioned by Sanoff (1999) included having one or two counselors who are focused on college counseling, instead of having all counselors responsible for all students on their caseloads. Sanoff also mentions that it could be beneficial to provide counselors with twelve month contracts so that they could work through the summer and prepare for the academic year. They realize that this would be expensive, and may be difficult to restructure, but these would be effective strategies.

Savitz-Romer (2008) indicates that a strong academic curriculum for all students is a crucial part of preparing students for post secondary options. It is important to encourage staff members to promote it, give information on the importance of their grade point average and how it relates to future goals. Promoting equality in all programs, courses and services is of the utmost importance as well as providing appropriate academic supports. It is also a good practice to promote opportunity for all students to work with community stakeholders to establish partnerships for providing academic tutoring and skill development. She also speaks to the importance of implementing a developmental and comprehensive counseling curriculum that includes identity development, explores students' barriers to learning and achievement and fosters hope about the future.

There are certain strategies that are more specific to specific populations. No matter what group of students counselors are working with, encouraging parent and

family support and nurturing a student's locus of control or their inner drive to continue and achieve are crucial. Above and beyond that is finding a way to breach the language barrier that can exist between the family and the school. Using a translator, or meeting with parents individually can help address the disconnect that occurs from families not speaking the language (Sciarra & Whitson, 2007).

Encouraging students to explore all options that are available to them as post secondary choices, is a very important strategy. Community colleges are wonderful post secondary options for some students, because they do not have admissions barriers, such as the SAT or ACT scores. These schools can be the perfect transition for a first generation student who may not be prepared for a traditional four year college, directly after high school. Tuition tends to be lower and can be much more manageable. This is important information to provide to students and parents when beginning to discuss the college admissions process (Stanley, 2008).

All of these strategies can help to facilitate a positive and productive college admissions process or post secondary search for students and families. These are overall areas in which the process can be made easier and more accessible to everyone. The most important ingredients are early intervention, connecting with families and collaboration among students, families and school personnel.

What do we know about best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process?

Bardwell (2008) discussed the importance of the school counselor's role in the college admissions process. He indicated that staying up to date on technological

resources would be a very significant part for today's students. Counselors should provide training to their students on internet resources that can be a very valuable tool in the college admissions process (Cohen, 2008).

Counselors are taking steps to prepare students at a younger age for the college planning process, and they are also working more closely with families (Bardwell, 2008). They are providing curriculum about post secondary options for all students at a younger age (Lee et al, 2008). Meeting and working with parents is essential in providing them with the information they need for helping their children navigate the post secondary process, and to also ensure that they are aware of all options available to their child (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2008).

Counselors are using data to track acceptances, denials and wait listed students to help future students get an idea of what potential chances they may have of getting into perspective schools. Counselors are also using data from SAT and ACT scores to help determine and restructure areas of weakness in the school curriculum (Bardwell, 2008).

Bellesi (2008) stresses how important it is for counselors to get to know their students. She encourages counselors to meet with students individually to discuss their interests. Conducting face to face interviews and having the students fill out questionnaires is a good way to start to determine where their interests lie and what they may be looking for in the future. It is the school counselor's role to assist students in making the college search process personal and comfortable. The school counselor can help the student decide what is truly important to them, and also help them to look at their own beliefs about education, set goals and determine the most appropriate track to

achieve their goals (Mau et al, 1998). Getting to know their students can also assist the counselors in advocating for them in the college admissions process (Cohen, 2008).

It is the counselor's role to keep parents informed about the college admissions process, by sending emails, holding workshops and making phone calls if necessary. It is also the counselor's role to provide opportunities for students to learn about different pieces of the college admissions process. Providing information on financial aid, college essay writing workshops or what other options are available are just a few of the topics that should be explained to students by the school counselor, especially in the case of first generation students who have no prior knowledge to build about the college admissions process (Cohen, 2008). School counseling programs are helping students to review various educational and vocational options, and explaining the significance of all programs, such as military, vocational and going into the workforce (Mau et al, 1998).

Hoover (2008) reports that it is very important for counselors to talk to students about standardized test scores and how they are viewed by different colleges. It is good practice to let students know that there are colleges that do not require scores, and that community colleges can be an option for students who do not do well on standardized tests. It is also important to share with students that the admissions office looks at other things besides test scores.

The school counselor plays a critical role in being a primary source of information for economically disadvantaged students, especially if they have no assistance from home (Lopez & Mackeben, 2008). School counselors should be sensitive to differences in racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as gender (Mau et al, 1998). The school counselor

should be providing information on the value of a post secondary experience to each student so that every individual has equal access to higher education. In many cases, Families with a higher socio-economic status will place more value on a college education, and it is the counselor's job to level the playing field for all (Smith, 2008).

School counselors can play a critical role in assisting students with disabilities in transitioning to a post secondary education. It is their job to encourage collaboration in that transition with school professionals, the student and parents. The school counselor should work closely with everyone who is a stakeholder in the student's success to ensure that they have knowledge of their disability, that they know what post secondary support services are available, that they understand the laws surrounding disability legislation and to encourage them to become a self-advocate (Milsom & Hartley, 2005). The school counselor can also help to make access to college visits easier, they can help to make community connections for students, and in some ways they can even address economic limitations by making sure that students leave high school with an up to date testing battery, that they can use to get support services at the post secondary level (Oesterreich & Knight, 2008).

Sanoff (1999) discussed how important it is for counselors to spend time writing clear and truthful recommendations for students. He focuses on the idea that most public school counselors have very heavy caseloads, but that is no excuse for inadequacies in helping with the college process. Counselors should do everything in their power to make connections with students so that they can write recommendations that are a true reflection of their abilities and character.

Counselors should be making sure that all students have access to a rigorous curriculum, so that they are taking the classes necessary in high school to achieve their post secondary goals. Encourage students to take challenging and demanding courses to open up more opportunities for them (Savitz-Romer, 2008).

Summary

The research and literature is very clear about the importance of the role of the school counselor in the college admissions process. It is crucial that they be involved from an early stage and that they make every effort to get to know their students so that they can support them in making appropriate choices. It is up to the school counselor to provide access to all information regarding navigating the post secondary process, and it is of the utmost importance to provide that information to the students and their families. Giving them the resources that they need to search for a school that is appropriate, writing essays, filling out financial aid forms and keeping them informed about deadlines are major supports that that the school counselor should be sure are in place. Any additional assistance that can be offered will enhance the experience for everyone involved.

Results and Data Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of my capstone project is to identify barriers, as well as strategies and best practices for school counselors in their efforts to assist all students in acquiring access to post-secondary education. The importance of doing this project is to provide school counselors with information which will enhance their ability to support students in their post-secondary educational planning and to provide counseling for the college admissions process.

My research questions are:

- 1.) What are the barriers to access higher education for students?
- 2.) What are strategies for overcoming those barriers?
- 3.) What do we know about best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process?

The importance of doing this research is to provide me with the data I need to provide information, for school counselors which will enhance their ability to support students in their post-secondary educational planning and to provide detailed counseling for the college admissions process.

Project Participants and Tools

Interviews were conducted with three current school counselors, one representative from the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC), one office manager who handles a great many responsibilities in the college admissions process at the school, two classroom teachers who write multiple recommendations for college-bound students each year and four students who vary in background and post-secondary choices. The interviews yielded a total of responses from eleven different individuals. My original intention was to interview four school counselors, however only three were available due to the timing. It was the end of the school year and the fourth counselor was too busy to accommodate the interview. I was only able to interview two teachers, because two that had agreed to assist me, had other pressing responsibilities come up and we were never able to reschedule. I was able to conduct eleven interviews total, and received useful information.

The research tool that was used was a semi-structured interview conducted with the eleven individuals described above, on the topic of the college admissions process. The ten question interview addressed the research questions and focused on barriers to accessing higher education, strategies for overcoming the barriers and best practices for school counselors in relation to the college admissions process. A copy of the completed interview questions is included as Appendix E.

No adjustments to the procedure of the interview process, or the design of the tool were necessary. The original ten question interview was used with each individual in the interviewing process. The questions were all designed to elicit responses from either a personal or professional perspective. The tool did not need to be altered or adjusted in

any way. The questions on the interview form were effective in eliciting responses and I ended up primarily asking only clarifying questions rather than creating follow up questions to those structured into the interview form.

Results:

Organization and Data Analysis

After all of the interviews were completed, I compared the answers among all of the interviewees to determine if there were any major emergent themes. I also looked at the responses to determine if there were any major discrepancies. What follows are the data that I collected in the process of conducting the interviews, organized by interview questions.

Questions that I asked of each individual and their responses:

1.) What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?

The major themes that emerged from the professional participants:

The first emergent theme was the lack of students' knowledge about the step by step process of applying to college for financial aid/for scholarships. Reasons given for the lack of knowledge included: socio-economic status, being a first-generation college student and/or a lack of support from family.

A second major theme was the lack of knowledge about how to fill out appropriate paperwork in the college admissions process. The forms that were listed as difficult to fill out included financial aid, college applications and transcript requests.

A third theme that stood out was the students' perspective on SAT scores and how they can impact their decision of which colleges to apply to. Interviewees reported that students sometimes feel that if they do not meet the SAT expectations, they should not apply to certain colleges.

A fourth theme that stood out as a barrier was the fact that many resources such as college applications, websites for colleges and useful sites in the college search such as Naviance and College Board are available on-line and many students do not have access to the technology that they need to utilize these sites, putting them at a relative disadvantage as compared to those with full computer access.

The major themes that emerged from the student participants:

One major theme was their lack of clarity in career goals. One of the students interviewed did not experience herself as ready to choose a career. A second was hoping that his interests that guided his college choice would lead to a future career. The other two students had clear career goals that were consistent with their choice of college, for example one of them hoped to attend law school and was hoping to attend a school with a strong connection to this field.

A second emergent theme was being unsure of where they wanted to attend school in terms of geography, particularly in relation to family, which made it difficult to even begin the process of narrowing down colleges.

The third theme was that the information that was initially given to the students about the college search process was perceived as being too vague and general.

A fourth them was trying to figure out how many and which colleges to apply to. Students did not know how many schools to apply to or how to create a realistic list.

Time and money emerged as a fourth theme. Application fees and time to visit colleges are major barriers for the students I interviewed. Three out of the four

students reported that they began their college visits the summer before their senior year.

There was a definite discrepancy in the data collected from the four students whom I interviewed and what they thought to be significant barriers in the college admissions process and the professionals that I interviewed.

The main discrepancies that were identified between the professionals and the students were that the professionals felt the main barriers were based on socio-economic status, first-generation status or a lack of family support in the college admissions process. The four students that I interviewed did not focus on those issues at all. They considered the barriers to exist more in the actual college admissions process itself. Examples included not getting enough information soon enough, and the guidance in relation to the college admissions process being general and vague. They also identified a lack of understanding in how to go about applying for schools, how many to apply to and not being able to visit the colleges or pay the application fees as barriers. Another important barrier that was identified by one student was not knowing what her career goals are and not knowing what college would make the best fit. The barriers that were identified were not the same for each individual, but it is important to mention all of them, as they are important to the process for each interviewee.

All of this information is important for understanding the needs of the students as they are moving through the college admissions process. Clearly it needs to be understood that the students' perception of what the barriers are can be very different from those of the counselors and teachers. The one main theme that was supported by all individuals interviewed was the lack of knowledge about how to fill out all of the forms

in the process. It is crucial that counselors know what the students feel are barriers in order to be able to provide a thorough and productive experience for each college-bound student.

2.) What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?)

One of the major themes that stood out for all of the participants was the idea that students should be introduced to the college process early. Many said as early as 9th grade or even before. They felt that if the information was introduced earlier, some things would be a review and they would not be presented with an overload of information all at once, right before beginning the process. Another strategy that was identified was to connect with the families by providing informational nights for them, and making them feel a part of the process. It was also recommended that students, families and professionals working with them use all resources available in the process. The resources that were listed included: counselors, workshops, catalogs and on-line resources.

The only discrepancies that were identified among all of the participants were from the students' perspective. Students felt that they needed to become more aware of their own skills, interests and preferences so that they would have a clearer idea of what to look for in a college. They said they want to know more about what they want to do and where they want to be, before they start the process. They also said that they needed to adapt better time management skills to be utilized in the college admissions process. They needed to make time for college visits, to complete paperwork and fill out scholarships. They felt that better awareness of deadlines was a key piece to being successful in the college admissions process.

3.) *What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could school counselors do to provide the most help/assistance?)*

The major themes that emerged from the professional participants included:

Making sure the student was involved in the college admissions process from the start.

The importance of not assuming that students know what they need to do.

Counselors should be there to coach them through the process and provide assistance.

A third theme was that being in contact with the families was a very important part of the process for counselors.

Fourth, they indicated the counselors should make every effort to meet with students as much as possible, either in groups or individually to stay connected.

Fifth, they identified the importance of making sure that all students know what is available for post-secondary options, including community colleges, military and work force options.

The major themes that emerged from the students included:

First, that counselors should be there to support, encourage and guide them, but that it was really up to the student to participate and make it work.

They also said that counselors should write good, solid recommendations for their students.

Third, they also indicated how important it is for counselors to keep students aware of credits for graduation and what classes they should be taking to get them into the colleges that they are interested in.

The discrepancies in the responses for this question really came from the students.

Professionals assume that it is the counselor's job to be at the forefront of the college admissions process and to give the students colleges to look at, and places to apply. The students who were interviewed made it very clear that the counselors are there to offer assistance and give initial information, but the student really has to put in the time and energy and make the process work.

4.) Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process from a personal experience and/or in your professional role. What went well? What could have gone better?

This question seemed to elicit many different responses from all individuals. I have included the ones that stand out as being the most important to my research and the future creation of my guidebook. One of the school counselors made a very strong case for developing a strong rapport with admissions counselors at colleges. She identified the importance of attending college fairs to find out what the colleges are looking for in perspective students. She said it was very important to find out what students can do to help better their chances of admission. Another of the counselors identified the importance of encouraging all students to pursue a college path, and to not shut that avenue down because you may feel that the student is not college material. She also talked about the importance of the college recommendation from a teacher and how they could provide assistance to them by letting them know what to include about the student.

The teacher perspective on this question was a little different. One of the teachers indicated that it would be very helpful to find a way to get students onto college campuses that would not necessarily have that opportunity, by providing bus trips or something similar.

Another teacher indicated that what goes well is when you encourage student involvement at an early stage. Students do better if they feel that their opinion is being heard, and what their criteria are is identified. She indicated that what does not work is when students are pressured to decide their life goals today for the rest of their lives, and they are just not prepared to make those types of decisions. Encourage them to choose smaller, achievable goals.

The office manager that I interviewed had a different perspective on this question. She said that what works is when students use the on-line application process. It is more organized and in many cases can be done once for several schools. She said the college admissions process is much more successful when students take advantage of meeting with college representatives when they come to visit their school. Most importantly, she said the entire process works better when students take responsibility in the process and oversee it. They are much more successful when they keep track of deadlines on their own to be sure that everything is going well and that all pieces are completed.

The representative from VSAC said that having family connections (ongoing communication with families) is one way that the college admissions process can be more successful. She also said that figuring out the challenges and obstacles early can help make the process more successful.

The student responses to this question differed significantly as well. One student said that she really didn't know where to start and could have used more assistance in the entire process. Another said that it would have been nice to know what type of time commitment was required in the college admissions process. It was difficult to make time in her busy schedule to fill out all of the documents in a timely manner. She was successful at keeping track of all of the deadlines to be sure that things were completed on time.

One of the students that I interviewed was applying to many highly competitive colleges. She indicated that she was not happy with the college admissions process at all. She indicated that she did not feel that it was fair that SAT scores are so influential for college admissions. She feels as though a resume, transcript, community service and other extra curricular activities should count more towards acceptance. She said that she also had a difficult time with the scholarship process because so much of the information seemed inaccurate. She did not have anything positive to say about how the process went for her.

The last student said his admissions process went well because he chose to take an Introduction to College Studies course through the local community college. He also said that his experience with the local Boys & Girls Club helped as well. He indicated that it would have been nice to be able to meet with his school counselor more and that field trips to colleges through the school would have helped to better determine his personal goals.

This question clearly identified discrepancies in what professionals felt could go well or could go better, and what students focused on. Counselors felt that developing a

rapport with admissions counselors and visiting college fairs to meet with representatives was a crucial part of the college admissions process in their professional role. They also indicated that they should encourage all students to pursue a college path, regardless of whether they felt the student was appropriate for college or not.

Teachers indicated that providing opportunities for student to get on college campuses via field trips sponsored by their school or the college would be a very good way to improve the college admissions process.

The office manager identified the importance of applying to college on-line, because it is so much more time efficient and organized. She also said that it is very important for students to meet with college representatives who come to their school to visit. Making that first contact with the school is a good way for them to start to get to know the student and their level of interest.

The VSAC coordinator said that there needs to be better communication between the school and families, and it needs to be on-going throughout the entire process.

The students identified many things that they felt could go better or be done differently. They want more assistance throughout the entire process. They want to know ahead of time what type of a time commitment is expected for the process, so they are not feeling rushed to meet deadlines and visit schools. They wish that there was not such a large emphasis put on SAT scores, and that other identifiers in their profile were focused on more. They wish that they knew how difficult the scholarship process was and that they could have more assistance with that piece. They would definitely encourage students to take an introduction to college studies course if there was one being offered

and the last and most important piece, was that they wished they could have more time to meet with their school counselor.

None of these comments was any less important than another. I found them to all be very important for identifying important things to include in the guidebook.

5.) Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

There were some key themes that emerged from the data I received on this question with counselors. They all agreed that their role was to assist in helping the students search for colleges that would be a good fit. They also agreed that the counselor role should include writing good, solid recommendations for students. One of the main themes that they identified was the importance of the counselor to help assist with financial aid information and filling out paperwork. They also felt that it was very important for the counselor to be an advocate for the student and family.

The teachers felt that their role was to provide supplementary guidance and direction to students in the process. They felt that their main role was to write recommendations for students, and if at all possible, provide opportunities for students to visit colleges. One of the teachers that I interviewed was a Special Education Teacher so she had a slightly different perspective on the college admissions process and her role in it. She agrees with other teachers, but also said that she played a significant role in planning the transition for students into post-secondary options. She said she was also in charge of making sure that students on Individual Education Plans had appropriate accommodations from the College Board for SAT's.

The office manger's role was clearly different from other individuals because she does a great deal of paper processing. She is the person who processes final transcript

requests, is the point person for the counselors information that is required to be sent and she also tracks acceptance and denials from schools for future perspective students. Not all high schools have someone like this, and Brattleboro Union High School is lucky to have her, so that counselors can focus on other pieces of the college admissions process.

All four students agreed that their role included researching schools to create a realistic list of potential options. They felt that students should keep track of deadlines for applications, financial aid and scholarship information. They felt that a very important part of their role was to ask teachers and counselors for recommendations well in advance of when they would need them, and to be sure to visit as many as colleges as possible.

This is one area where the answers differed significantly among the adult interviewees and the students because each adult interviewee had specific roles that they felt they should be responsible for in relation to their position in the school. All of the themes that were mentioned are very important and should be addressed directly in the guidebook.

6.) What are the most important things to get help and support with in the college admissions process?

One of the main themes that stand out from all of the individuals who answered this question is receiving assistance with different parts of the application process. They recommended getting help on writing essays, figuring out the business end of the process on how to pay for college and how to fill out financial aid forms. They also indicated that it is incredibly important to get support about how to keep materials, dates and deadlines organized. All of the individuals agreed that getting support with choosing appropriate courses throughout their college career

was of major importance and that explaining the importance of SAT's was also very important.

The counselors added that it is very important for students and families to learn early what they will be able to afford financially. It is crucial that students and families choose schools that will fit academically, socially and financially.

These findings support what the literature says about the importance of getting support in these areas.

7.) What was the most helpful for you in the college search process?

The key themes that were identified as being the most helpful in the college process were resources that were available to help in the search. Specifically, an on-line program that is offered at Brattleboro called Naviance. It helps students, parents, teachers and counselors keep track of the college search process. The other resources that they said were helpful included their school counselor, workshops offered by the school, help from family and friends and being able to visit many colleges to broaden choices that may be available.

I thought it was interesting that the results from this question were very similar across the board. There were no significant discrepancies in what different individuals felt was most helpful in the college search process.

8.) What would you change or do differently if you could do it again?

There were some clear themes that stood out for all individuals in regards to making sure that they started out the process much earlier, and not waiting until the last minute to work on any part of the application process, including scholarships.

Counselors specifically focused on the importance of preparing students and families by providing them with as much information as possible, including access to resources, as well as teaching them how to use those resources. They also stated that it would be wonderful if they could meet with students more often, either individually or in small groups.

The office manager suggested that it is very important to try and have a relatively clear career goal, or at least to be able to identify where your strengths and skills lie. She also stated that spending more time in the college search and research portion of the process, could be very helpful and lead to a successful choice.

The teachers stated that visiting as many colleges as possible could be very crucial in the admissions process. They recommend asking a lot of questions, to help gain as much knowledge as possible about the process.

The students' perspectives included preparing earlier with applications, but also in choosing courses during your earlier years in high school. They stated that more contact and interaction with counselors can help ensure that you are taking the classes that you need for what you want to pursue in college. The overriding theme for them was the need for more interaction with their counselors over their four years in high school. They realized that there are some students who do not need as much assistance as others, but it is a critical piece to all students and their success in the college admissions process. This is true even of a student who chooses not to go directly into a post-secondary education. Those students still need to have an idea of what is available for them and how to access it.

The main theme that I gathered from all participants on this question was the importance of the school counselor being in close contact with their students and making sure to provide them with whatever assistance they may need, regardless of whether or not the student is moving on to a post-secondary education. This is a very important point and school counselors should be aware of all students and their goals, not just those that are college-bound.

9.) What piece of advice would you give someone going through this process?

Once again, an underlying theme was that of utilizing resources and preparing early. Attend college fairs and, start saving early was two recommendations. They highly recommend establishing a clear way of keeping track of deadlines, and respecting the time of teachers and counselors in the recommendation process. Provide them with ample time for getting them written. One counselor said that if she does not have at least a two week notice, she tells the students she will try to get to it, but will not promise. They also suggested that if students are responsible for completing a community service requirement, that it should be connected to a passion that they have, and they should try and make it support their college choices. Another counselor recommended that students should visit school while they are in session, so they may see what the campus is like with a student body present.

One of the key points that stood out for me was made by one of the teachers. She said that it is very important that students be realistic and do what is best for them, not others. She stated that putting it into perspective for students can really help facilitate the process, because five years from now, it will not matter if they went to community college.

Some of the most profound advice came from the students whom I interviewed. The advice that they offered was very clear and concise and all deserve to be mentioned. They stated how important it is to stay in contact with the schools that are being applied to; because that will help the schools understand how serious you are about attending. Once again, they stated the importance of applying early for acceptance and for scholarships.

They also listed some other pieces of advice that I found to be very important, but that focus a little more on attitude and personality. They stated how important it is to show dedication to the process and to remain positive and confident throughout the entire experience. They suggested that listening to others and accepting help is one of the best things you can do. Above all, they suggest the significance of remaining practical and develop strong ideas about what you want to do, so that you are not lost.

The answers that I received for this question were very clear and relatively simple. This one question generated a significant amount of solid advice that can be offered to students, and counselors can use it to support their work with the students.

10.) How could the school counselor be most helpful in the college admissions process?

Interestingly, this question generated many different responses. School counselors stated that they could help students meet deadlines. They stated that it is very important to help students follow their dreams, but to be sure they have a realistic safety net to fall back on. Another critical piece for the counselor to assist with is helping their students learn and see the sequence of the process, and what steps they need to follow to get through it.

One of the teachers recommended creating a checklist for students, parents and teachers so they would be clear about what needs to get done and how to do it. Another teacher recommended having a great deal of follow-up with students, because it is guaranteed that they will all be in different places in the process.

The students provided some very good insight into this question as well. One of them suggested the possibility of creating more specialized groupings to be able to work with specific needs of students. They also said that it would be ideal if there were more counselors. Another student stated that writing good recommendations is a key element for the counselor to focus on, as well as answering questions to the best of their ability, or at least pointing them in the right direction. Still another student suggested the importance of encouraging your students to set goals and work towards them. They said the only way that can happen is if counselors get to know their students as much as possible and find ways to connect with them. Discuss the changes that the students have experienced since beginning high school, because that discussion could help to guide the students in the appropriate direction.

All of these suggestions to the school counselor are relevant and appropriate. It was nice to see that there was overlap in the responses as well as some very different perspectives. This one question helped to generate some ideas for my guidebook.

Many of the responses that were given related closely to those identified in the literature. Providing early education on the college admissions process was one theme that stood out in the interviews and in all of the research. Another area that was discussed in both the interviews and the research was that of assisting with as many resources as possible for students and parents. They also stated that helping with the applications,

financial aid, recommendations and scholarships was one significant area that the school counselor could help in. There was a vast amount of overlap, but also many responses were specific to the individual answering the questions. All of the responses can be utilized and focused on in my guidebook.

The tool that I utilized in conducting my research was a ten question interview. The questions were all directly related to the college admissions process and what is most significant to those individuals who play a role in the process. I was able to interview three school counselors, one VSAC coordinator, one office manager, two teachers and four students who were preparing to graduate from high school and had recently completed the college admissions process.

A significant amount of information was gathered from these interviews. The data was analyzed by interviewing school counselors, students, teachers and two people who are involved in the process in other roles. These multiple perspectives are further enriched by my own experience and observations over the course of the school year, as a school counselor involved in post secondary planning as well as my extensive review of the literature on this topic. Several important themes emerged from the responses, which also coincided with the research I reviewed (see Literature Review).

Results: Narrative

In regards to barriers that exist in the college admissions process, students from poor and working class families and first-generation students were seen as having the most challenging experience because they had limited access to resources and assistance in the process. This was a very clear theme that was identified in the literature and throughout the interviews conducted with all individuals.

A second theme that emerged was the idea of early intervention. All of the research as well as all of the interviewees insisted that it was crucial for students and families to receive information on the college process as early as possible. Providing them with basic information in the beginning and then expanding on it as time goes on is the most helpful way for them to learn about the college admissions process.

A theme that is directly related to providing information to family and students early is the idea of working closely with families to be sure that they are receiving all information and that they understand what the process is and what their role is in the college admissions process. All of the literature and the interviews indicated a lack of knowledge on the part of the families to be able to assist their child in maneuvering their way through all of the pieces of the process.

A theme that was prevalent from the interviews that I conducted and was mentioned in the literature was the importance of college visits. The literature stated that it is very important for students to visit schools and to get an idea of what campus life is like. All of the interviewees stated that there should be more college visits scheduled like field trips, because many students do not have the money or transportation to get them

there. Everyone said that the college visit is a crucial part of the process because it can give you a much clearer picture of the school and what it has to offer.

There were two themes that stood out from my research as well as the literature which had to do with students and their role in the college admissions process. The first theme was the belief that students should take responsibility in the process. The literature and all of the interviews indicate that it is very important that the student play a lead role in the research and application process. It is believed that if they have a say and a stake in the process, it will be more meaningful and successful for them in the long run. The other theme that emerged in regards to students and their role in the process was in adapting time management and organization skills in order to keep deadlines in order and be able to meet them on time. All of the research and literature indicated that it was incredibly important for students to know what things were due and when, so that they could have a feeling of ownership in the college admissions process.

The remaining themes that emerged from the research and literature are all connected to the expectations of the school counselor and what their responsibilities in the college admissions process should be. The most prevalent theme that was identified repeatedly was the idea that counselors should do everything they can to get to know their students. They should take every opportunity to meet with them in small or large groups or on an individual basis. They should work closely with them and their families, and get to know them so they can provide the support that they need. They should work with students on making sure they take the right courses while they are in high school to set them up for success in college and their chosen career path. They should check graduation requirements and credits for students regularly to be sure that they are on track

and taking what they need to graduate, but also what they need to get into a college that they are interested in. They should provide assistance with researching and visiting colleges and offer whatever supports are available with that process. School counselors should also take a main role in writing clear, truthful and appropriate college recommendations for their students. All interviewees and the literature indicated the importance of writing genuine, authentic recommendations for students to assist them in the college admissions process. Everyone felt that this was an important role of the counselor. The last main theme that was identified for counselors in assisting in the college admissions process was the importance of helping with transition plans for student with disabilities. The school counselor can play a significant role in making sure that the students are aware of their rights and they are provided with appropriate transition plans for their move into post-secondary education.

There were many other important themes that emerged while conducting my research with my interviewees. Each individual had their own experience and perspective to answer the question. Each individual responded from their own experience and perspective when answering the questions and therefore there was variation in the responses. All of this information was very important and helpful, but the main themes that I have just identified are the ones that emerged both from the research and the literature and these are the ones that will make up the backbone of my guidebook.

Summary & Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of my capstone project is to identify barriers, as well as strategies and best practices for school counselors in their efforts to assist all students in acquiring access to post-secondary education. The importance of doing this project is to provide school counselors with information which will enhance their ability to support students in their post-secondary educational planning and to provide counseling for the college admissions process. All students should have an equal advantage when it comes to college access, and with the help from school counselors who play a key role in that process it can be a very positive and effective experience.

My research questions included the following:

- 1.) What are the barriers to access higher education for students?
- 2.) What are strategies for overcoming those barriers?
- 3.) What do we know about best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process?

The importance of doing this research is to provide the data needed for school counselors enhance their ability to support students in their post-secondary educational planning and to provide detailed counseling for the college admissions process.

Discussion of Results

Based on all of the literature that I have read (see Literature Review) and the research I have conducted; the following themes emerged.

1.) *What are the barriers to access higher education for students?*

The first emergent theme is a lack of knowledge of the step by step process for college admission for students of low socio-economic status and first generation students. These students count heavily on school counselors and teachers to help them through the process and do not always have the family support they need, or the access to resources that other students may have.

The second emergent theme is a lack of understanding about the importance of SAT scores, and how they can significantly affect college options. Students do not realize how important it is to prepare and even take them twice to improve on their scores.

A third theme that emerged is a lack of understanding about all of the paperwork that needs to be completed throughout the process including; applications, financial aid and scholarship forms. Students and parents do not know enough about the process to be able to ask the right questions, to access the help they need.

A fourth theme is that students do not set realistic goals for themselves about which colleges would be most appropriate for them. They need to spend more time researching and visiting colleges so they are better able to make a choice that is the best fit.

A fifth theme that emerged was the idea that the college admissions process should be introduced at an earlier time. Some schools begin teaching about it in elementary school, but realistically it would be beneficial to students, families and school personnel to start at the very least in 9th grade.

The sixth theme that emerged was the lack of knowledge about deadlines and how to find an organized way to meet them. This included making time for college visits, filling out all paperwork and requesting recommendations from teachers and school counselors.

A seventh important theme that emerged was the lack of assistance in making sure those students were taking the appropriate courses in high school, to get them into the college of their choosing. There was a strong feeling that school counselors should be the individuals to ensure that students are on the right track and meeting all criteria for college admissions.

These were the main themes that emerged from the research and all of the literature that I read, in regards to barriers. They are all very important themes for a school counselor to be aware of and to understand. I will use all of the data that I have gathered to make an informational booklet that will help support school counselors in the college admissions process.

1.) *What are the strategies for overcoming those barriers?*

One of the major themes that emerged was the idea that students should be introduced to the college process early. Many said as early as 9th grade or even before. They felt that if the information was introduced earlier, some things would be a review and they would not be presented with an overload of information all at once, right before

beginning the process. Another strategy that was identified was to connect with the families by providing informational nights for them, and helping them to feel a part of the process. It was also recommended that students, families and professionals working with them use all resources available in the process. The resources that were listed included: counselors, workshops, catalogs and on-line resources.

Other themes that were identified as strategies were the need to become more aware of their own skills, interests and preferences so that students would have a clearer idea of what to look for in a college. Knowing more about what they want to do and where they want to be, before they start the process was an important strategy that would help make the college admissions process easier. Adapting better time management skills to be utilized in the college admissions process was another strategy that was identified. Making time for college visits, to complete paperwork and fill out scholarships, and having a better awareness of deadlines was a key piece to being successful in the college admissions process.

The literature and the research presented some very specific strategies for overcoming barriers in the college admissions process. I will take the data that I have found and include it in my booklet for school counselors, to help support students in the college admissions process.

2.) *What do we know about best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process?*

The first best practice identified was to make sure the student was involved in the college admissions process from the start.

A second best practice is not to assume that students know what they need to do. Counselors should be there to coach them through the process and provide assistance.

A third best practice was that being in contact with the families was a very important part of the process for counselors.

Fourth, the counselors should make every effort to meet with students as much as possible, either in groups or individually to stay connected.

Fifth, was the importance of making sure that all students know what is available for post-secondary options, including community colleges, military and work force options.

A sixth best practice that emerged was that counselors should write good, solid recommendations for their students.

Seventh, school counselors should keep students aware of credits for graduation and what classes they should be taking to get them into the colleges that they are interested in.

The literature and the research presented some very specific best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process. I will take the data that I have found and include it in my booklet for school counselors, to help support students in the college admissions process.

Literature Support

As I summarized in my literature review, the research and literature is very clear about the importance of the role of the school counselor in the college admissions process. It is crucial that they be involved from an early stage and that they make every effort to get to know their students so that they can support them in making appropriate choices. It is up to the school counselor to provide access to all information regarding navigating the post secondary process, and it is of the utmost importance to provide that information to the students and their families. Giving them the resources that they need to search for a school that is appropriate, writing essays, filling out financial aid forms and keeping them informed about deadlines are the main pieces that the school counselor can be sure are in place. Any additional assistance that can be offered will just enhance the experience for everyone involved.

Bardwell (2008) supports the idea that students and families, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds and first generation students, as well as students with disabilities, have difficulty filling out forms in the college admissions process, and that it is very important for the school counselor to work with them to navigate this process.

Bellesi (2008) indicates that it is very important for school counselors to get to know their students on an individual basis, so they can provide them with the most support and assistance in the college admissions process. When counselors do not know their students well, it makes it difficult to help them choose the best college to attend.

Mau et al (1998) indicates the importance of appropriately preparing students for college by working with them to choose college prep courses that will support their goals for post-secondary education.

Bardwell (2008) reports that it is very important for students and families to begin college planning early, even in elementary school. This supports the information that I gathered from my interviewees about the importance of planning at a younger age and not waiting until junior year of high school.

Patterson (2007) supported the theme that school counselors should provide assistance to students in filling out forms in the college admissions process. They should help with applications, financial aid forms and scholarship applications.

Hoover (2008) supports the importance of school counselors talking to their students about standardized test scores, such as the SAT, and the crucial role that they play in a students' acceptance into a college of their choice.

The literature and my research findings are closely tied together. The information that I gathered from the reading paralleled what my interviewees indicated as being barriers to accessing higher education, strategies for overcoming those barriers and what best practices are for school counselors in the college admissions process.

Considerations for Strengthening the Study

This was a limited study with a small group of individuals. There are many things that could have made it more comprehensive and provided more extensive results. The following are barriers and limitations that I encountered while conducting my research, keeping in mind that this was only a pilot study.

I had intended to interview a total of fourteen people, but due to scheduling conflicts, was only able to interview eleven. This provided a good sample for some very rich information, but if I were to conduct the research again, I would use a much larger sample of individuals, with more diverse backgrounds. I would include school counselors, students and teachers from other schools and more diverse areas, including large city high schools. I would also try to set up focus groups so that I could get specific information from a group of people who have similarities.

If I were to conduct this research again I would also make sure that I began the process earlier. I would want to allow myself more time for working through the process, and would give myself more time to conduct the interviews. In the pilot study I began the process of getting permission and interviewing far too late in the school year. The school counselors were very busy and had difficulty fitting the interviews into their schedules. The teachers were all trying to finish end of the year items with their students and the students themselves were already through the college admissions process and were ready to move on.

I interviewed four seniors, who provided some very rich information, but I would interview students in 9th-11th grade as well, if I were to conduct this research again. I would also choose a more diverse sample of teachers.

If I were to conduct this study to its fullest extent, I would also request funding to be able to go to other schools, visit college admissions offices and collect a more diverse group of results.

I would also request for former students to return to the school and share their knowledge and experiences, to compare results with those who are in the midst of going through the process.

It is important to note that I was working as a new school counselor at the time that this research was conducted. I believe that because I had limited knowledge of the college admissions process, I may have focused on those themes that emerged as being most important to me, and what I felt would be most helpful for school counselors to know to support their students in the post-secondary education process.

The results that emerged from this study were extensive and informative. The information gathered will be very helpful to future school counselors, but there are some definite strategies that could help to improve the study if it were to be conducted again.

Recommendations for Future Research and Next Steps

It is important to mention the impact that technology has recently had on the college admissions process. School counselors need to be aware of all of the resources that are available to them and to students, as well as having the knowledge of how to use them. According to Chimes & Gordon (2008) many colleges are relying heavily on their web sites and technology to market their schools, and encourage on-line applications. It is very important that more focus be put on the critical role that technology is playing in the college admissions process.

Students with learning disabilities have not always been encouraged to pursue or even consider post-secondary education options. It would be most beneficial, according to Milsom & Hartley (2005) to investigate in what ways a school counselor could be of most assistance to these students. It would be helpful to know what role they play in helping them prepare in high school, as well as what they need to know to make the transition into post-secondary education.

Another recommendation for further research would be to thoroughly investigate post-secondary options, to be able to provide a more extensive information base for students beyond high school. If more school counselors were better equipped with information on military, or community college options, they could better assist their students in making the right choice for their future (Stanley, 2008).

The steps that I will follow include a complete and comprehensive review of my findings. I will then create a booklet that will include information that is vital to new school counselors in assisting students with the college admissions process. Once the booklet is complete, I will present and distribute copies to my co-workers and the

principal of my school. I will also present my findings and distribute copies to the Professional Seminar class at Keene State College in the fall of 2009.

Final Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of my capstone project was to identify barriers in the college admissions process, and to determine what strategies and best practices exist for overcoming those barriers. Many key points were identified throughout my investigation and the major findings included the importance of the role of the school counselor in supporting all students in the college admissions process. In order to be able to support their students, the school counselors must also first get to know them individually.

This investigation was conducted with the purpose of eventually creating a comprehensive guidebook for school counselors to help support them in working with students in the college admissions process.

What I learned was that school counselors can help themselves in this process by: learning about as many resources as possible that are available, working with students and families earlier, providing assistance with choosing courses in high school, offering opportunities for college visits, helping fill out applications, financial aid forms and scholarship applications and most importantly, by getting to know their students so they can assist in helping them make the best choice for them in their post-secondary options. This research has yielded an incredible amount of useful information, which I am already benefiting from in my work as a school counselor. I hope that my guidebook will provide the same support for other new school counselors in working with students in the college admissions process.

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Appendix

June 1, 2009

Dear Mr. Day,

As you may know, I am a Keene State College graduate student in the School Counseling Program. As part of my studies at Keene State College, I have designed an action research project. The purpose of this investigation is to identify barriers in the college admissions process, to determine what strategies and best practices exist for overcoming those barriers, and to bring the information together in one user-friendly place, by creating a guidebook for school counselors. The importance of doing this research is to provide school counselors with a comprehensive guidebook which will enhance their ability to support students in their post-secondary educational planning and to provide detailed counseling for the college admissions process.

I am seeking your consent to collect data from school counselors, teachers, students and other staff members at Brattleboro Union High School, to use in developing my project. I will be using the data from individual interviews and professional literature to analyze the specific needs of key players in the college admissions process. I will use the data that I collect to create a guidebook specifically designed to assist school counselors in addressing the needs of students in the college admissions process. I will be sharing this information with school counselors at Brattleboro Union High School, Keene State College Faculty Advisors, and in a professional exhibition at Keene State College with colleagues.

In analyzing and writing my report, I will seek to protect the identities of all individuals interviewed. The names of students and/or staff will not be included in the reporting of the results of this research study. Participation in this research is voluntary and participants may withdraw their consent at any time until my report is completed, to have the data excluded from printed material.

Enclosed, please find copies of informed consent letters, consent/assent letters for students under the age of seventeen, and interview questions for the interviews with all participants. A copy of my proposed research is also available upon request. I would be happy to answer any questions you have regarding this project.

Thank you,

Deborah J. Patria
Capstone Project
Keene State College

I have read the above statement and give my consent under the conditions stated above.

Signature of Principal

Date

College Admissions Process Informed Consent

The purpose of my capstone project is to identify barriers in the college admissions process, to determine what strategies and best practices exist for overcoming those barriers, and to bring the information together in one user-friendly place by creating a guidebook for school counselors. Your participation in my study would be beneficial in collecting the data necessary to create an effective and useful resource for school counselors in the college admissions process. You will be asked a series of interview questions, and your responses will be recorded by hand onto a separate anonymous sheet.

The data from this research will be compiled and used to create a useful tool for school counselors in assisting students in the college admissions process. I will also be sharing this information with administration and my colleagues at Kean State College. At no time will your identity be shared with anyone. All information will be documented anonymously. Participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent at any time until my project is completed, to have your data excluded from printed material. We will schedule a time and place for your interview that is most convenient for you. Thank you.

Your signature below indicates that you agree to participate in the interview process.

I, _____ have read the above information and have been informed of the nature of the study. I consent to being interviewed by Deborah J. Patria for this study.

Signature of Participant to Consent

Date

College Admissions Process Informed Assent

The purpose of my capstone project is to identify barriers in the college admissions process, to determine what strategies and best practices exist for overcoming those barriers, and to bring the information together in one user-friendly place by creating a guidebook for school counselors. Your participation in my study would be beneficial in collecting the data necessary to create an effective and useful resource for school counselors in the college admissions process. You will be asked a series of interview questions, and your responses will be recorded by hand onto a separate anonymous sheet.

The data from this research will be compiled and used to create a useful tool for school counselors in assisting students in the college admissions process. I will also be sharing this information with administration and my colleagues at Keene State College. At no time will your identity be shared with anyone. All information will be documented anonymously. Participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent at any time until my project is completed, to have your data excluded from printed material. We will schedule a time and place for your interview when it is most convenient for you. Thank you.

Your signature below indicates that you agree to participate in the interview process.

If you are participating in this study and are under the age of 17, you are required to get a parent's signature, consenting to participation.

I, _____ have read the above information and have been informed of the nature of the study. I consent to being interviewed by Deborah J. Patria for this study.

Signature of Participant to Assent

Date

Signature of Parent/Guardian to Consent

Date

Interview Questions

1. What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?

2. What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?)

3. What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could school counselors do to provide the most help/assistance?)

4. Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process from a personal experience and/or in your professional role. What went well? What could have gone better?

5. Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

Interview Questions

1. What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?

- having access to resources but not knowing what I wanted to do, I didn't know how to use them for me
- too general
- didn't know where I wanted to be

2. What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?)

- Need to figure out what I want to do, where I want to be (become more aware of preferences)
- more time, growth, experience to determine interests

3. What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could school counselors do to provide the most help/assistance?)

- BUHS counselors do quite a bit, did an ok job - students really need to participate to make it work

4. Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process from a personal experience and/or in your professional role. What went well? What could have gone better?

- Don't really know where to start
- Really could use assistance in entire process.

5. Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

- Being responsible for applying, getting fin. aid info, scholarships
- Finding a school, talking to people

6. What are the most important things to get help and support with in the college admissions process?

- financial aid, paying for college, business end of it (how does it work?)

7. What was the most helpful for you in the college search process?

- Naviance (BUHS-resource) was helpful & a great place to start

8. What would you change or do differently if you could do it again?

- more access to resources w/counseling assistance (Naviance)
- Wish I knew more about myself & what I want to do
 - I've changed since 10th grade, matured more to know I'm not ready to go to school for another year.

9. What piece of advice would you give someone going through this process?

- Take all the help you can get
- Be practical & develop strong ideas about what you want to do, so you're not lost
- Don't apply to schools cause you feel you have to, go for the right reasons

10. How could the school counselor be most helpful in the college admissions process?

- Try to see students more to offer more assistance
- If more time available w/counselors - discuss changes for students since beginning high school - discussion could help guide students more

* Don't be ashamed to take a year off. It's totally appropriate for some students. Feel like I need more life experience & to mature more ~~for~~ before attending school.

Interview Questions

1. What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?

- beginning - thoughts about grades inaccurate preconception
- didn't have terrific grades; learned that other things mattered too
- lack of self-esteem, not thinking highly enough of self for admission
- letters of non-acceptance
- not understanding all forms that need to get sent in • scholarship deadlines

2. What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?)

- making time to complete paperwork
- take a program to help motivate you to what you want to do
- take Intro. to College Studies Course (helped a lot) 1st semester Sr. year

3. What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could school counselors do to provide the most help/assistance?)

- encouragement - believe in your student (positive)
- push them to do whatever they want
- check-in more w/students (even if there is a connection w/other resources)
once a week
twice/month

4. Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process from a personal experience and/or in your professional role. What went well? What could have gone better?

- Intro. to College Studies
- Boys & Girls Club was helpful (encourage participation)
- more time w/counselor
- more field trips to visit colleges (helps determine goals, etc.)

5. Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

- identify who I am, be clear, personal, responsibility, high-quality work (portfolio)
- depending on the school will determine your role
- applications, researching schools in fall of 2009 (portfolio review)

6. What are the most important things to get help and support with in the college admissions process?

- financial aid forms
- getting advice about college from people who have been through it and how it all works
- accessing as many resources

7. What was the most helpful for you in the college search process?

- VSAC (working w/ Natalie)
- mom (UVM)
- being encouraged to do bigger/better things (to find a great/perfect)
- don't think that you won't/can't get into a college fit)
(have lots of confidence)

8. What would you change or do differently if you could do it again?

- Things worked
- more help from counselor; not connected to counselor - more check-ins, more communication
- * • Survey - Do you really want to go to college?
• make comparisons to now & before; need attention from counselor

9. What piece of advice would you give someone going through this process?

- It's easier if you listen to others or accept help
- pay attention to all pieces; show dedication to school; be positive, confident

10. How could the school counselor be most helpful in the college admissions process?

- encourage your students
- get to know your students as much as possible
(find ways to connect)

accepted to
all 3 { Keene State (wanted)
Univ. of N.E. (Maine) reach
Castleton (safe)

Interview Questions

1. What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?

- Choosing only so many to apply to
- Application fees
- Finding time to visit colleges

2. What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?)

- Location of colleges
- Asked parents to pay fees
- Found friends to visit with

3. What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could school counselors do to provide the most help/assistance?)

- Write a solid rec.
- Take time to check on app status w/ students
- Find scholarships for students
- sufficient help from counselor

4. Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process from a personal experience and/or in your professional role. What went well? What could have gone better?

- It took a lot of time to gather all the required documents and fit it in with my busy schedule.
- Kept track of all deadlines to be sure things were completed on time

5. Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

- Applicant
- completing apps., to apply
- teachers/counselors - recommendations, visiting colleges

6. What are the most important things to get help and support with in the college admissions process?

- The application essay.

7. What was the most helpful for you in the college search process?

- resources
BUTTS
- Word of mouth - people encouraging me to attend certain schools or programs
 - Naviance - graphs from previous students
 - Jenn O'Neill

• Junior workshops provided info. I already had

8. What would you change or do differently if you could do it again?

- Get my applications in earlier, even though I knew by Christmas about acceptance to all 3.

9. What piece of advice would you give someone going through this process?

- Fill out applications for scholarships early.
- Don't wait until the last min. to do any piece of the app. process.

10. How could the school counselor be most helpful in the college admissions process?

Write a good recommendation and answer questions well to the best of their knowledge or at least point in the right direction.

Interview Questions

* Georgetown

1. What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?

- time management (not preparing the summer ahead)
- tough time during fall of senior year
- unsure about certain courses that she should have taken for classes
- high stress levels w/process in general

2. What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?) (applied to 11 schools)

- suffered through it in fall ^{had to} miss school for college visits
- should have started earlier to get certain things done in advance
- used graphs/charts from Naviance to help in process

3. What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could school counselors do to provide the most help/assistance?)

- encourage students to really look at schedules to be sure classes are scheduled appropriately (writing courses, AP courses, etc.)
- write great recommendations
- credits, etc.

4. Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process from a personal experience and/or in your professional role. What went well? What could have gone better?

- not happy w/the process @ all
- waitlisted @ 6 schools out of 11
- Not fair that SAT scores are so influential for admissions (feel like resume & transcript, extra curriculars should count more)
- Scholarship info. seems inaccurate when it says "not need based" ^{more}
- still look @ financial info. (not merit)

5. Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

- Very important to do the research on the schools
- talk about interests, locations (area) where you want to go, major

6. What are the most important things to get help and support with in the college admissions process?

- organization (deadlines, writing essays, getting recommendations)
- need to continue to contact your college 3x/week to let them know you were interested (keep in touch)
- be aware of limitations of the process

7. What was the most helpful for you in the college search process?

- family experience

8. What would you change or do differently if you could do it again?

- begin preparing earlier
- apply early action to more schools; instead of waiting until Jan. 1st deadline
- course choices
- more contact w/schools you want to attend

9. What piece of advice would you give someone going through this process?

- Keep in contact w/schools your applying to, so they know how serious you are about going (political)

10. How could the school counselor be most helpful in the college admissions process?

- maybe create more specialized groupings to work w/specific needs of students
- provide more counselors (ideal)

(Spec. Ed. Teacher)

Interview Questions

• Don't know what to do or how to navigate the process
• not enough follow-up

1. What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?
 - SAT scores impact students; not wanting to apply if they don't meet score expectations
 - Very long process that many students don't understand the extent of; no supports @ home; too young when official process starts; timeline is looking too far in future
2. What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?)
 - parent info. workshops/nights
 - parent/student handbook
 - newsletters w/ separate piece for juniors
 - providing access to as many resources as possible
3. What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could school counselors do to provide the most help/assistance?)
 - disseminate as much info. as possible
 - regular class mtgs. Jan - June in junior year; Sept - Jan Sr. year
 - smaller grps. w/ specific topics to discuss
 - talk to jr. English classes about courses appropriate; classroom guidance
4. Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process from a personal experience and/or in your professional role. What went well? What could have gone better?
 - starting early
 - student feels their opinion is being heard; what are their criteria
 - get specific with questions & conversations
 - treat students as equals - don't tell them what they want
 - don't pass judgement - discuss all options
 - What doesn't work is students being pressured to decide life goals today for rest of their lives.
5. Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

• don't focus on past
• encourage student involvement

Very early conversation

- IEP/transition - employment & post-secondary options need to be discussed with/for students
- organizing skills & life from freshman → Sr. year
- support w/ college essays; written recommendation

6. What are the most important things to get help and support with in the college admissions process?

- how to write a good essay (choosing appropriate topic)
- SAT prep
- financial aid forms
- support their goals/dreams - supplement

7. What was the most helpful for you in the college search process?

- Knowing that there are resources available to help w/ students w/ disabilities; ask questions
- show them the diff. between accommodations in college vs. high school

8. What would you change or do differently if you could do it again?

- Be sure to ask a lot of questions; share previous experiences to make it real
- give constructive advice; parents need someone to talk to

9. What piece of advice would you give someone going through this process?

- start early & talk to a lot of ppl.
- be realistic & do what's best for you - not others
- * 5 yrs. from now it won't matter if you went to community college.

10. How could the school counselor be most helpful in the college admissions process?

- Having students work w/ programs like Vt. Guid. Central (early)
- Lots of follow-up w/ students; knowing that students are all in diff. places

 (teacher)

Interview Questions

1. What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?

- professionally*
- parents no idea (no support)
 - computer based - parents don't know how to navigate system
 - talk w/ students 10th/11th sometimes before counselors
 - filling out paperwork (fin. aid, etc.)
 - no concept of time (deadlines)

2. What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?)

- meet w/VSAC coordinator
- meet w/counselor
- be better equipped to talk to students about resources
- catalogs to see what's available
- access to diff. resources

3. What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could school counselors do to provide the most help/assistance?)

- provide training/workshops for students/parents
 - meet one-on-one
- provide best practices for teachers in working w/students

4. Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process from a personal experience and/or in your professional role. What went well? What could have gone better?

- helpful for students to do college visits
- meeting w/and talking to people at the college (staying/getting) connected
- bringing students to campuses who wouldn't normally have that opportunity

5. Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

- not a real role; provide direction or supplement
- write recommendations, take kids on college visits

6. What are the most important things to get help and support with in the college admissions process?

- meeting deadlines to continue w/more options
- SAT's, courses, being realistic

7. What was the most helpful for you in the college search process?

- people @ the college who helped w/transfer info.

8. What would you change or do differently if you could do it again?

- visit more colleges

9. What piece of advice would you give someone going through this process?

- visits
- bridges program (narrow choices down) - focused

10. How could the school counselor be most helpful in the college admissions process?

- checklist so kids are very clear about what needs, should be done & how to do it

[redacted] (Office Manager)

Interview Questions

1. What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?

- lack of understanding what the process is
- financial assistance / understanding
- lack of parent involvement

2. What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?)

- sm. groups
- Intro. to college app. workshop
- financial aid workshops for all students/parents

3. What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could school counselors do to provide the most help/assistance?)

- one-on-one talks about student goals & direction based on those goals
- follow-up after goals are set to help or answer questions or help to continue through process
- provide resources

4. Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process from a personal experience and/or in your professional role. What went well? What could have gone better?

- on-line apps. go well & recommend doing it; can be done once for several schools
 - much better when students are taking responsibility in the process & overseeing it; to meet deadlines and be sure all is going well & pieces are completed
- take advantage of mtg. w/ college visits

5. Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

- process final transcript requests
- point person for counselor info. needing to be sent
- track acceptance/denials from schools for future perspective students

6. What are the most important things to get help and support with in the college admissions process?

- college essay
- financial aid (~~know~~ know what there is & how to access)

7. What was the most helpful for you in the college search process?

- N/A

8. What would you change or do differently if you could do it again?

- Spend the time to search & research schools
- Clearer career goal

9. What piece of advice would you give someone going through this process?

- Take advantage of offerings through the school, VSAC, any resources for the process.

10. How could the school counselor be most helpful in the college admissions process?

- direct students to not overshoot their expectations based on academic profile & cost (reach school, etc.)

Interview Questions

1. What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?

- cost/inadequate financial aid
- inadequate info. (decisions made on little → no research)
 - don't access resources
 - unaware of resources
- family socio-econ. experience or lack thereof
- lack of access to technology

2. What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?)

- Ask questions (@ school, - try to share info. w/parents)
- early college planning 1-1 or grp. counseling, intro. to college process
- awareness of how grades impact college admissions & scholarships (before senior year)
- offer/promote financial literacy classes and/or workshops

3. What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could school counselors do to provide the most help/assistance?)

- early awareness activities (done @ BHHS very well) - life planning including thinking about college/careers
- access to resources (vsac, Naviance)

4. Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process from a personal experience and/or in your professional role. What went well? What could have gone better?

- Personal - family connection was what helped in sm. Catholic High school w/ no counseling
 - too much hype (name game) around certain colleges
- figuring out challenges/obstacles (early awareness)
- biggest obstacle - families don't have what they need
 - more \$ - lower cost

5. Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

- advocate for student/family
- assistance navigating app. processes (admissions, fin. aid, scholarships)
- teacher, counselor, fin. advisor, family therapist, mentor, listener
 - * for student & family

6. What are the most important things to get help and support with in the college admissions process? /fin. aid process

- who wants what when?
- dates, deadlines, materials need to be managed
- students/families need tools to do that

7. What was the most helpful for you in the college search process?

Personal

- family member (no other resources that I was aware of)

8. What would you change or do differently if you could do it again?

- access any/all resources available for college & fin. aid
- visit more schools (bigger list)
- better in high school (more access to scholarships)

9. What piece of advice would you give someone going through this process?

- encourage them to ask questions
- use free resources to gather college info.
- don't do it alone

10. How could the school counselor be most helpful in the college admissions process?

as early
as possible

- engage students in thinking/dreaming about their futures
- conversations about life goals
- then talk about college/careers
- involve parents

* A career is your life's work! Most jobs you do will be enhanced by education. * Encourage kids to follow their dreams & then help plan the steps!

(School Counselor)

- overwhelming process (essays, rigor, deadlines)
- attachment to community & family

- money (financial ability to pay for college)

- parental attitude (be aware of negativity)

Interview Questions

- Don't use the word "compare" - be careful of language we use

1. What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?

- socio-economic status, first generation (lack of knowledge about the step by step process)

Assumptions made that students have the info. because it is out there
college competitiveness is big

perception that big name colleges are the only way to go

2. What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?)

• Visit schools early (end of 10th → Sr. Year)

Being able to provide the step by step process w/out asking them, just do it (assume no knowledge of the process) Check in

- Start connecting w/colleges early (10th/11th grade)
- early prep/education about college - saving \$ too

- Know the family & the influence they have on where student will go
- Use resources to research early - 5 major areas (location, majors, activities, affordability, likelihood of admission)
- Don't apply to more than 10 - no more than 2 should housing, affordability, likelihood of admission

3. What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could school counselors do to provide the most help/assistance?)

- Being careful about language used (best, elite, compare are negative)
- * use words like: individual fit

- Don't assume knowledge or say "Do you know..." Start from square 1 w/ every kid
- Be sure to involve the student in the process (questionnaire)

- Encourage students even if they think they don't want to go, so they are prepared if they do want to go

- Go get students & offer them their opportunities
- Be careful not to just rely on one form of media for getting info. out to families & students
- parent survey to find out best way for contact

4. Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process from a personal experience and/or in your professional role. What went well? What could have gone better?

- Best thing is to develop one on one rapport w/admissions people, visit colleges, attend college fairs, find out what they're looking for in a kid, how can you help a kid better their chances of admissions

- Crucial to know wide variety of colleges w/wide variety of admissions standards
- Find outside geographic schools that offer better economic advantages to strong but not stellar kids (high-middle students)
- stay in relative contact w/colleges admissions

5. Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

- Informant, coach, motivator, getting students to challenge themselves to discover the right fit (at least 3 acceptance letters - goal)
- reality-checker w/students - keep esteem in tact but being realistic
- help create list that is realistic
- assist w/financial aid

• lack of knowledge about colleges outside their region (geographic diversity)

• emphasis on SAT scores (psychological) making kids believe that will keep them from getting in

• Use SAT scores as a way to look at your ability to handle college courses

• use all resources to help increase chances of getting in

• take SAT II (subject tests) as soon as class is over

• early conversations w/parents about when they can go

- Talk to parents early about what they can afford early
- Know admissions requirements @ schools to be able to know what to take

6. What are the most important things to get help and support with in the college admissions process? (Student)

- Ask for letters of rec. early to get support (end of Junior Yr. so they have time over the summer)
- provide a thank-you note or card for teacher
- search process
- financial aid in 10th grade or earlier
- get help in classes or tutors for support
- take as challenging a schedule as you can → Sr. Year (Junior's 1st semester Sr.)

7. What was the most helpful for you in the college search process? (Counselor)

- Important to get to know diff. admissions reps.
- to see/visit diff. colleges (colleges outside your area/region)
- familiarize yourself w/ diff. resources (internet/books)
- block time into schedule to interview students & write rec. letters
- candid & nurturing conversation about college choices (2 teachers) then realistic choices (academic & financial) (writing days)

8. What would you change or do differently if you could do it again? (Counselor)

- start earlier (junior year)
- write a generic letter for scholarships (to be prepared) * template & include the name of the scholarship *
- take more advantage of writing days
- * show how to do college search using internet have them come back w/ a list & ask them why they chose them (pros & affordability) * ending list of 6-10 *

What piece of advice would you give someone going through this process?

- Be very mindful of deadlines? give a minimum of 2 weeks to get it completed (postmark deadline or in your office deadline?) (internet) * standard business day * 2 weeks or won't do it
- est. a culture in which students respect time of counselors & teachers in both application & scholarships, as well as letter of rec.
- access to documents, questionnaires, transcript requests
- community service that follows their passion (supports college choices)

10. How could the school counselor be most helpful in the college admissions process?

- helping meet deadlines
- respect process & themselves, time, teachers, counselors
- helping follow dreams, but having a realistic safety net that they would want to go to
- helping them step out of the box

encourage strong academic schedule

know what schools have rolling admissions

(questionnaire) counselor & teacher's

(counselor)

* Majors you're interested in & why? Classes you have taken to support major choice? Tell me about your academic, thinking strengths that make you successful at it (whatever you are good at)

Interview Questions

getting accurate/helpful info
colleges should make applying easier

difficult to relay info.

1. What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?
 - not having clear info. from colleges about navigating the experience lots of technology w/out a lot of clear info.
 - more difficult for students who don't know exactly what to do
 - How can a student get into a nursing track from a comm. college
 - Students - what forms need to fill out, etc. - not knowing what?
2. What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?)
 - Create a counseling website to streamline access
 - more access to resources
 - Counseling needs more/better access to seniors (class mtgs./advising)
 - Keep stress levels to a minimum

3. What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could school counselors do to provide the most help/assistance?)

What we already do

→ mtg. w/ them as juniors, talk about workshops, Natalie's stuff, forms right, meet w/ each student individually who is going to college (as seniors)

What we should do

- mtg. more in senior grps. to talk about deadlines, SAT's, other info. they should know. More access to them
- Provide a parent night for the process

4. Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process from a personal experience and/or in your professional role. What went well? What could have gone better?

assist faculty w/ writing recommendations, etc.
counselor recommendation should be changed to only go to admissions office & not to students

- It depends on the student - our process works well for motivated college-bound students but not others who aren't ready
- More people should be aspiring to go to college - encouragement
- Talk to them about all options available after high school
- * providing more options

5. Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

middle-man

- help students search for colleges, determine good fits
- figure out what needs to be done, how to get info.
- some financial info. (resources)
- write letters of rec.
- help w/ following up status w/ colleges - communication w/ colleges

6. What are the most important things to get help and support with in the college admissions process?

- *
- For counselors to know from colleges what criteria they're looking for in applicants; help students w/ perceptions of colleges
 - students - financial aid (access to resources)

7. What was the most helpful for you in the college search process?

- Naviance (college search programs)

8. What would you change or do differently if you could do it again?

- creation of website to make info. more successful
- provide a parent night (w/info.)
- being able to meet w/students more
- meet w/ top 25-30 students right off to be sure of what their plans are

9. What piece of advice would you give someone going through this process?

- visit schools (when other students are there) before/after you apply

10. How could the school counselor be most helpful in the college admissions process?

- By helping students learn/see the sequence of process
 - ① research
 - ② research - learn more
 - ③ applications
 - ④ acceptance
 - ⑤ choosing a school
- * educating them about about the process or where to find it

Interview Questions

1. What do you believe are barriers (struggles) in the college admissions process?

Students are not always realistic about the colleges they apply to. Finding the right match with the right major, figuring out the financial burden, working out loans are all difficulties

2. What strategies do you feel could help overcome those barriers? (How did you work through those struggles?)

Helping students do a lot of research into choices. Having students do interest inventories to help them determine possible areas of study. Encouraging students to apply and then figure out actual costs.

3. What would you consider to be best practices for school counselors in the college admissions process? (What could they do to provide the most help/assistance?)

Same as #2. But mostly encourage ALL students to look at post-secondary study. Community colleges and trade schools, as well as 2 year colleges should be explored.

4. Tell me about your experience with the college admissions process. What went well?

What could have gone better? As a middle school counselor, I am not involved too much. I do write letters of recommendation for some students. I do help students research schools. I work with 8th graders on interest inventories and start them thinking about college. I

5. Can you explain to me what role you play in the college admissions process?

Send letters home each year about Destination College - an 8th grade program sponsored by NH Colleges + Universities. My role is to continually tell students that there is a program out there for every student.

6. What are the most important things to get help and support with in the college admissions process?

- ① Choice of school
- ② Choice of major
- ③ Financial Aid
- ④ Applications
- ⑤ Recommendations
- ⑥ Comparing Financial Aid Packages

- ⑦ Writing the college essay
- ⑧ Meeting deadlines

7. What was the most helpful for you in the college search process?

N/A

8. What would you change or do differently if you could do it again?

N/A

9. What piece of advice would you give someone going through this process?

*Start early. Have everything in mail by
Thanksgiving. Go to college fairs. Start
Saving early.*

10. How could the school counselor be most helpful in the college admissions process?

See #6