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School Counselors' Support for First-Generation College Students

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Professional school counselors are expected to play critical roles in ensuring all students receive the academic, psychosocial, and career preparation needed to meet the demands of a global, knowledge-based economy; one in which most jobs require some postsecondary education. School counselors should make every effort to provide preparation, encouragement, and support for students who have historically been denied access to higher educational opportunities, including first-generation college attendees. School counselors should strive to understand and remove barriers facing students and their families who have been historically underrepresented in colleges and universities (Reid & Moore, 2008).

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs' (2009) standards supports these goals and recommends school counselors create and evaluate programs that address transition to postsecondary experiences. In addition, the American School Counseling Association's (2010) ethical standards charge school counselors with promoting equity and access to all programs in schools, closing the achievement gap, and preparing students for a full range of postsecondary options. Identifying gaps in student achievement and inequities in accessing higher education, designing and implementing appropriate interventions to bridge these gaps, and using data to measure progress towards more equitable student outcomes are important responsibilities of school counselors (The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2010b).

Because potential first-generation college students have parents who may be ill-equipped to assist their children in accessing higher education and frequently lack information about college, these students and their families require targeted assistance from school counselors. Although strategies that are effective for first-generation students

are likely to also be helpful for other students pursuing higher educational opportunities, Thayer (2000) suggests that the reverse is not likely to be true.

First-generation college students have been described in different ways. Definitions range from students whose parents never enrolled in college to those with neither parent completing a bachelor's degree. Nationally, almost 6 of every 10 public school students are first-generation, with neither parent earning a higher education degree (Herrold, & O'Donnell, 2008). Choy (2001) found that 59% of first-generation students enrolled in higher education, compared to 93% of those with a degreed parent. Because college enrollment and completion is strongly linked to parental educational levels, attention has focused on first-generation students.

Another concern is that first-generation students are more likely to leave college before earning their degree than other students, especially in the first year (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2003; Johnson, Rochkind, & Ott, 2010; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). Because first-generation college students are less successful at completing college, researchers have sought to identify their attributes and needs in efforts to improve college retention and graduation rates.

Although Matthay (1989) recommended that school counseling programs address first-generation students, little information about recommended strategies has been published for school counselors. The purpose of this article is to begin to bridge this gap. Research regarding first-generation college students with likely implications for school counselors will be presented, although most of the studies were conducted at the college level or are analyses of longitudinal data sets. Recommendations and strategies will be proposed to help professional school counselors more effectively assist first-generation college students in accessing postsecondary education opportunities.

Assisting First-Generation College Students in Accessing Higher Education

Students and their families are clearly aware of the need for postsecondary training, as over 85% of high school students expect to attend college (Chen, Wu, & Tasoff, 2010); however, too many students are ill-prepared for the college admission process and the demands of postsecondary education. Even more troubling is that school counselors are often perceived as not being helpful in assisting high school students in negotiating the college process (Johnson et al., 2010). Students who received inadequate counseling services in Chen, Wu, and Tasoff's study were less likely to enroll in college immediately after high school or to receive financial aid, and many did not complete their degrees (2010).

Another concern is the lack of information for professional school counselors seeking to assist first-generation college students. Fallon (1997) outlined primary prevention strategies for school counselors to use in proactive group sessions with first-generation middle and high school students. In a second publication, Gibbons and Shoffner (2004) proposed using social cognitive career theory as a way to assist individual first-generation students in overcoming barriers to higher education. Little additional information has been published for the school counseling profession regarding assisting first-generation college students.

There are a number of characteristics of first-generation students that set them apart from other college attending peers. For the purpose of this article, second-

generation students are those college students for whom at least one parent attended or graduated from college. According to the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES), first-generation college students are more likely to be older, have dependents, and have lower incomes compared to second-generation peers whose parents had more than a high school education (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Demographically, first-generation college students are more likely to be female, students of color, or married (Choy, 2001; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). As compared to second-generation students, first-generation students more frequently reside off-campus or live at home, work more hours, attend school part-time, and receive financial aid (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). First-generation students are more likely to select a college based on financial decisions including cost of attending, being able to hold a job, being able to finish in a shorter time, or being able to live at home. In addition to lower graduation rates, first-generation students are more likely to be enrolled in community colleges or private, for-profit institutions and to attend part-time, unlike their second-generation peers (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Challenges for First-Generation Students

First-generation students face a number of significant challenges that impact their ability to complete postsecondary programs. Inadequate academic preparation, misunderstanding financial aid and college admissions processes, and limited experiences with higher education are some of these barriers. In addition, first-generation students are less knowledgeable about college, show lower levels of commitment, and sometimes report less parental support for attending college (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). First-generation students also face significant challenges transitioning into college. In addition to the social and academic adjustments faced by all college students, first-generation students struggle more to balance family demands, financial concerns, and cultural considerations with their educational aspirations (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Academic Preparation

First-generation students are less likely to be academically prepared for college than their peers. Almost half of graduates in the high school class of 1992 whose parents had no college experience were marginally or less qualified to attend college compared to only 15% of second-generation graduates (Choy, 2001). First-generation college students have lower grade point averages and college admissions test scores (Riehl, 1994), are less likely to be enrolled in college preparatory curricula (Striplin, 1999), and are less likely to complete Algebra I in the eighth grade (Choy, 2001).

Taking advanced mathematics in high school is strongly associated with college enrollment. Over 75% of high school graduates in 1992 who had completed an advanced mathematics class enrolled in college, compared to 15% of those who had only completed Algebra I and Geometry (Choy, 2001). First-generation students are frequently at a disadvantage during course enrollment as their parents may not understand the importance of rigorous coursework, including the value of taking advanced mathematics (Warburton et al., 2001). Also, first-generation students often receive limited or inappropriate advising regarding high school curricular options (Striplin, 1999).

Counseling strategies. Professional school counselors can promote a school-wide climate that encourages all students to prepare for postsecondary education by advocating for college preparation, academic rigor, and challenging courses for students in all disciplines. School counselors can help middle school students and their parents understand the link between middle school academics, high school programming, postsecondary training, and future goals and aspirations, and should encourage parents and students to advocate for rigorous course offerings. For example, rather than only enrolling second-generation students in eighth grade Algebra I or in honors courses, these classes should be recommended for all students. Why not make Algebra I the default class for eighth grade students, and only remove students whose parents request they not enroll? For students who take longer to learn new math skills, advocate for a 2-year Algebra I sequence beginning in middle school so that students are able to complete advanced mathematics courses prior to college.

Although Advanced Placement (AP) courses are advantageous for students who use their scores on the AP exam to earn university credits, there are other benefits of AP classes. Students who successfully complete AP courses in high school are exposed to the rigor, college reading level, and critical thinking skills needed for university study, regardless of scores on the AP examination. Students who complete AP English rather than regular English classes are more likely to earn their bachelor's degree in 4 years (Hargrove, Godin, & Dodd, 2008). School counselors can work with teachers to include more students in AP classes, perhaps through using a pass/fail grading option, an extended day or year option to allow more hours in the course, or developing other ways to encourage students to select college level classes while in high school.

School counselors should promote a total school climate of promoting postsecondary training and pursuit of academic excellence, especially targeting first-generation students. Expectations from parents, peers, and school personnel that students will continue in postsecondary training, has been shown to positively influence college attendance (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Helping students develop resilience, confidence, and the expectation that they will continue to learn past high school is an important part of this process. Adelman (1999) found that a rigorous high school academic program was a better predictor of successful college completion than either grade point average or test scores. Students and their parents should be made aware of this information and school counselors should encourage students to enroll in challenging courses in preparation for the academic demands of higher education.

Accessing College Information

In addition to being less academically prepared for college, many first-generation students have limited first-hand access to information about higher education. Second-generation students are more likely to have family members who can provide college information (Thayer, 2000) and receive more support from their families regarding college decisions (Choy, 2001; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) also found that students who experienced more family support for attending college were more knowledgeable about college, as were students who had relatives who could provide them with college information.

Counseling strategies. Professional school counselors should provide information about accessing higher education during middle school and earlier, as it is

difficult for first-generation students and their families to plan adequately for college without having college information. Presenting comparisons of average lifetime earnings for students with high school diplomas, some college, and 4-year or professional degrees can be an effective way of getting students and their parents to recognize the financial advantages of postsecondary training. Although initially income may be lost for high school graduates who enroll in college rather than working immediately after graduating from high school, the long-term financial benefits of a college degree are evident (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). This information should be shared with first-generation students and their parents to encourage college completion.

Professional school counselors should also provide transparent and accurate information regarding how students can effectively prepare for college. One survey found that working class parents valued higher education more than middle and upper class parents, but were frustrated by difficulties in accessing information about postsecondary opportunities at school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Streeter, & Mason, 2007). First-generation students and their families should be oriented to various types of colleges and training programs, different degree options, and financial assistance, as well as the social and academic components of college life.

As a part of the college process, school counselors should have all students participate in career inventories and help students interpret their results. Career opportunities should be linked to students' interests and abilities and can also be examined based on varying levels of postsecondary training. School counselors can encourage all students to complete college admissions testing and widely disseminate information on fee waivers for those with financial need. Because many students access college information and complete applications on-line (Pathways to College Network, 2004), opportunities for first-generation students and their families to use computers should be provided through extended school hours. Collaborating with local libraries or other organizations can provide additional opportunities for Internet access.

The Application Process

A recent trend is that first-generation students are more frequently rating parental influence as an important factor in their choosing to attend college (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Many first-generation students apply for college with little parental assistance because their parents lack knowledge of the application process (Choy, 2001; Wimberly & Noeth, 2004). The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center (2010a) survey reported that first-generation college students relied on school counselors, teachers, and peers for information about the college application process; however, first-generation students were less likely to receive assistance in the application process from school staff (Choy, 2001; The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2010a).

Counseling strategies. The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center (2010a) reported that 70% of high schools offer classes or seminars to help students better understand the college process. Students viewed these presentations as helpful in clarifying the application process. Professional school counselors should encourage all students to attend such training sessions, focus on inviting all first-generation students, and offer these students additional opportunities for help and information. Establishing a series of presentations on selecting potential colleges, completing applications and college essays, soliciting recommendations, and applying for financial aid can provide

valuable information to first-generation college students. Other options include offering weekly drop-in sessions during application windows and establishing an ongoing support group for first-generation students. In addition to providing direct support to first-generation students, school counselors might train senior students as peer college counselors to assist underclassmen in negotiating the college application process. Students who are currently in the application process can provide peer support and encouragement while helping first-generation underclassmen access scholarship search engines, find college information, and download college applications.

Parents, too, found presentations regarding the college application process helpful (The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2010a). It may be important to support parents whose son or daughter will be the first in the family to attend college through targeted information sessions, additional meeting opportunities, and being available to address concerns and questions. Evening and weekend meeting options may allow working parents to attend, and providing a meal, childcare, or access to computers may encourage parental participation. Choy (2001) found that first-generation college students who completed all of the steps in preparing for college attendance had similar enrollment rates as their second-generation peers.

Selecting a College

Students differ in reasons for selecting a college, with more first-generation students preferring programs that allow them to live at home and work while completing school. First-generation students are also more likely than peers to make decisions based on financial aid and opportunities to complete classes more quickly (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Despite the desire to move more rapidly towards degree completion, first-generation students are less likely to persist or graduate than other students.

Counseling strategies. Because the majority of first-generation students feel they are solely responsible for deciding where to attend college, they need additional attention, information, and strategies regarding what factors to consider and how to make sense of the volume of college information available (The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2010a). Many first-generation students select schools closer to home than their second-generation peers, so these colleges should be carefully considered to determine which best fit the academic, career, and psychosocial needs of each student. School counselors should encourage first-generation students to consider applying to smaller, private colleges. First-generation students who attend private college are more likely to live on campus compared to second-generation peers who attend public universities, which provides greater opportunities for academic and social engagement (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Reasons first-generation students selected private colleges included financial assistance and smaller size.

Parents from lower income families indicated their children had sole responsibility for selecting a college (The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2010a). Many first-generation students come from lower income and working class families, so school counselors should also provide information and training for families regarding factors to consider when selecting a college. School counselors should be available to support and consult with families as they go through the decision-making process.

Financial Issues

First-generation students are more likely to work 20 or more hours a week during high school and more frequently list income potential as a reason for enrolling in college than their peers (Saenz et al., 2007). First-generation students more frequently consider finances when selecting a college and are twice as likely to be concerned about financing college (Saenz et al., 2007). Other decisions that may be influenced by financial considerations include attending college closer to home and living at home or off-campus, rather than in on-campus housing.

Counseling strategies. Professional school counselors should provide early, clear, and accurate information regarding the costs of attending college and other postsecondary institutions. Financial aid options for funding higher education should be presented to both students and their parents early in high school or during middle school, so that parents can plan for the cost of college attendance. Helping first-generation students and their parents with limited financial means understand the differences between grants, loans, and scholarships is important, as is assisting them in gaining a realistic estimate of the cost of different colleges. Some families may discourage students from signing college loans and may need help in understanding repayment plans and what loan amounts may be reasonable. In addition, working class parents frequently overestimate the cost of college and underestimate the amount of financial assistance that is available (Bridgeland et al., 2007).

Financial aid officers from local colleges can partner with school counselors to demystify the financial aid application and award process. In addition to providing information, sessions to complete financial aid or scholarship applications should be offered on evenings and weekends at convenient locations with computer access for parent and students. Students who have negotiated scholarship websites and searches can be trained to assist peers in locating scholarship and grant opportunities.

Making the Transition

First-generation students are often less prepared for the transition to college. Thayer (2000) found first-generation students were less likely to understand time management, finances, and operations of higher education compared to second-generation peers, and were less aware of academic expectations and campus environments. Some first-generation students doubt their ability to be successful in college and may need help in overcoming their fears (Striplin, 1999). Other first-generation students face conflicting obligations that interfere with college success. For example, first-generation students who live at home may be expected to devote time to work or to assisting with family responsibilities (Hsiao, 1992), which may limit time for study or college activities.

Counseling strategies. School counselors should help first-generation students plan for the transition to postsecondary education. School counselors can act as cultural brokers to help first-generation students and their families understand what to expect from college life and suggest ways to make successful social and academic adjustments (Reid & Moore, 2008). For example, first-generation college students may need help establishing places for study, and both students and their parents may benefit from knowing how much time outside of class students typically spend completing class assignments, reading material, and preparing for examinations.

School counselors can invite recent high school graduates to speak to students about the importance of contacting professors with questions, joining study groups, and attending tutorials, as well as discussing ways to balance social activities and academic demands of college. It may be helpful to review typical campus resources such as counseling and career centers, financial aid offices, and advising centers, and to remind first-generation students and their parents that college students are expected to take the initiative to contact available resources. First-generation students and their parents may not realize that many campus resources are included with their tuition and fees. Counselors should emphasize the importance of using available support services as well as taking individual responsibility for achievement (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). In addition, first-generation students and their parents may need help dealing with separation from home and family (Hsiao, 1992).

College Engagement

Pike and Kuh (2005) suggested the lower persistence and graduation rates of first-generation students may result from differences in pre-college experiences. First-generation students had lower levels of engagement in high school and reported spending less time socializing with peers and talking with teachers, trends which continued during college (Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation students enrolled in community colleges were less integrated into the academic environment and less frequently joined study groups, met with advisors, or attended campus career programs than peers (Nuñez & Ciccario-Alamin, 1998). First-generation students were also less likely to join school clubs or to socialize with other college students (Hsiao, 1992).

Although some research indicated first-generation students have lower educational aspirations compared to second-generation peers (Terenzini et al., 1996), other studies reported no difference in college completion plans (Billson & Terry, 1982). Pike and Kuh (2005) found that higher educational aspirations and living on campus were related to increased academic and social engagement, and that more engaged students reported greater gains in academic development. The authors suggest that first-generation students may not understand the importance of campus engagement and may lack knowledge of how to become involved in college activities (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Counseling strategies. Pike and Kuh (2005) suggested school counselors help first-generation students set high educational goals. All students should be encouraged to explore career options related to their interests, values, and aspirations, and should understand the relationship between school, postsecondary training, and work well before high school. School counselors should collaborate with teachers and members of the community to assist students in making clear connections between academic learning and future career fields.

School counselors can promote student involvement in extracurricular activities and enrichment opportunities, with a focus on encouraging first-generation students. Having the opportunity to develop leadership skills, talents, and interests will help students become more engaged in school (The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2010b). School counselors should also encourage participation in college access and enrichment programs. Designed to help first-generation students access higher education, these opportunities emphasize academic preparation and foster positive beliefs and attitudes about postsecondary training (Gullatt & Jan, 2003). Exposure to university

campuses and completing college classes allows first-generation students to view themselves as being capable of attending college. School counselors can assist first-generation students' integration of these experiences as they develop a vision of pursuing higher education.

School counselors can also help students understand how successful integration into the social and academic environment is an important part of transition to college. Counselors can discuss the value of living and working on campus with first-generation students. In addition, school counselors should talk to all students about the importance of joining extracurricular campus clubs and activities in order to connect with the college community.

Conclusion

Counselor educators should consider college admissions training in their programs, focusing on first-generation and other underserved students. Although the American Counseling Association lists 466 school counseling programs, the National Association for College Admissions Counseling reported only 42 programs offered an elective college admission course (O'Connor, 2010). Without training school counselors to negotiate the college admissions and transitions process, it will be difficult to close opportunity gaps for first-generation students.

Trained or not, school counselors are expected to support the academic, psychosocial, and career development needs of all students in school. School counselors are charged with promoting equity and access to all programs, closing the achievement gap, and preparing students for a full range of postsecondary opportunities. Limited information, however, has been provided to school counselors to help first-generation college students 'get ready,' 'get in,' and 'get through' college. Recommendations in this article may be a beginning step in the process of developing, evaluating, and promoting effective strategies to provide more equitable access for first-generation students.

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