
College Counseling Services in High Schools in Puerto Rico: College Student Perspective

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“What a man can be, he should be.” Abraham Maslow, 1954

This quote is the essence that guided my work as a high school college counselor for fifteen years of my life. Throughout these years, I also helped many students from other high schools who asked for my help for a multitude of reasons. This was the reason that prompted me to choose the

topic for my doctoral dissertation, a research on the college counseling services available in public and private high schools in Puerto Rico.

High school college counseling is a multi-dimensional form of counseling which encompasses personal, academic and occupational counseling. One of the most important tasks for a high school student is to establish realistic goals after high school graduation. Moser (1963) indicates that each person should receive help in selecting an occupation as well as prepare him/herself adequately. The selection should be satisfying and also an opportunity to optimize their inborn talents. High school college counseling should be provided in an organized and encompassing manner. An essential aspect of these services is assisting students in knowing their personal strengths and weaknesses, providing information on their post secondary options, aiding the student in the analysis of this information and helping the student in the college admission counseling process.

Cáceres (1976) defines educational and occupational planning as one of the counselors responsibilities. This entails counseling the students and their parents on the relationship that exists between the students' occupational interests and aptitudes with available and realistic educational and occupational options. Once the students make an occupational decision, the research process begins taking into account their academic qualifications such as their grade point average, high school course selection, standardized test scores, financial need, location and size of the post secondary institutions as well as other personal preferences of the student and family.

Placing a student in an adequate educational institution is the key for

academic and social adaptation and success. This statement agrees with Donald Super (1990) and his Theory of Occupational Development which emphasizes the importance of achieving congruence between occupational expectations and self concept. Self concept encompasses self knowledge of our abilities and skills, likes and dislikes, as well as our weaknesses and conflicts. Once the individual finds its place in society he can effectively contribute to his community. Occupationally, the right fit will result in better performance which will bring material and emotional satisfaction.

What to do after high school graduation? If the decision is to continue college studies, will the student work? What and where will I continue my studies? The student faces one of the most important decisions in life, a decision that although not set in stone, will require careful analysis while dealing with peer and family pressures. Feeling that a stage in his life is being completed after 12 years of compulsory education, the student has to deal with the onset of a crucial stage in his life that will determine his future. Facing a new independence in a totally new environment with a completely different structure, the student must apply knowledge and skills learned throughout the previous 12 years of study as well as learn to manage time effectively. This is the beginning of an occupational life plan when the student must learn to balance time efficiently between work, classes, studies, family and friends.

The Department of Education requires that high school counselors, amongst multiple tasks, provide students with the information needed for post –secondary planning as well as with occupational exploration and a variety of options after graduating from high school. Nowhere in the list of

tasks is college counseling mentioned. The absence of appropriate high school college counseling might eventually end up in poor placement of a student in an academic program, in an educational institution, lack of time management skills, poor adaptation skills to college life, a lack of occupational exploration and selection or a lack of financial aid to attend college.

Hilton (1979) mentions that the ultimate component in a high school counseling system should be the follow up of graduates in college in order to be able to evaluate the consistency of plans before and after high school graduation. The analysis of this data will serve as valuable information for the counselor to evaluate the occupational and college counseling services offered at the high school.

Research on college admission counseling has been scarce and limited to the United States dating decades ago. The findings of these investigations have little pertinence to needs of Puerto Rican students. This is one of the reasons that prompted me to conduct this investigation a year ago. This research is of a descriptive nature, designed to collect and analyze valid and reliable information provided by Puerto Rican university students on the college counseling services available in the high schools from where they graduated. This investigation identified the college admission counseling services available in public and private high schools in Puerto Rico.

Significant differences were identified between the college counseling services offered in private and public high schools as well as between the descriptions of the students of the University of Puerto Rico (public) and

those of the University of the Sacred Heart (private).

Finally, it analyzed if the college admission counseling services available fulfill the standards established by the National for Association College Admission Counseling and by the American School Counselor Association. NACAC, with its main office in Alexandria, Virginia, establishes direct lines of communication between high school counselors and college admission personnel while protecting student rights. This association created the *Statement of Principles of Good Practice*, where its standards are clearly stated and continuously revised. There are five components in this document:

1. admission promotion and recruitment
2. admission procedures
3. standardized college admission testing
4. financial aid
5. advanced standing students and the awarding of credit

This document states that high school counselors should provide different post-secondary options, provide information of different colleges and universities, welcome college admission representatives, comply with the Buckley Amendment for privacy of records, and offer information on financial aid to students and families. They should also provide colleges and universities with official and accurate student records, school profiles, and any other information required for admission.

Most high school counselors and college admission personnel in Puerto Rico are members of the Puerto Rico Association for Professional Counseling and many of these belong to the American Counseling Association as well. A smaller number are members of NACAC and of the Caribbean Counselors Association, often schools that are college preparatory and where students often decide to attend post secondary institutions in the United States. High school counselors in Puerto Rico observe the regulations established by the Department of Education and some model their systems using NACAC or ASCA guidelines.

The scarcity of information on high school college counseling services available in Puerto Rico established the need to conduct this research. To gather the data the Questionnaire for College Admission Counseling Services (2003) was used. This instrument was developed and validated by the investigator. The sample consisted of 238 students of which 131 (55%) attended a private college and 107 (45%) a public university, both in San Juan. The average age was 18 years old. The sample represented students who had graduated from private (53%) and public (47%) high schools in Puerto Rico. The quantitative data was analyzed by frequency, averages and a chi-square test to determine the existence of significant differences between sectors of the sample. Qualitative data, 69% of the participants answered the optional question at the end of the questionnaire, was analyzed creating categories according to frequency. These categories were occupational counseling, college admission counseling, quality of counseling services, transition from high school to college and financial aid information.

This research pursued the answer to five questions. The first one was related to the level of satisfaction of the participants with their high school counselor, available college admission reference materials, and the college admission process. Although 53% were satisfied with their high school counselor, 35% were not and 12% never used counseling services. The answers provided in the open ended questions indicate that one of the reasons for the lack of satisfaction with the high school counselor is the lack of accurate and actualized information. Ferguson (1989) presented a college counseling model in which he stressed the importance of the counselor being informed on available post secondary options for each student including college size, geographical location, admission requirements and academic programs available. Many students mentioned the fact that due to the lack of information they were not placed in the appropriate institution or academic program as well as not have been able to benefit from available financial aid for post secondary studies. A recurrent comment stated in the open ended question was the need for a greater number of counselors in high schools due to the fact that the ones available cannot adequately manage the large case loads assigned to them. In 2004, NACAC reported that in public high schools the student counselor ratio was 315:1 whereas their recommended ratio is 100:1. Some of the participants of this study indicate ratios as high as 750:1 in public high schools in Puerto Rico.

Reference materials related to college admission were evaluated as satisfactory by 63% of the participants whereas 29% evaluated them unsatisfactory and 8% never used them. Many students commented that these materials were outdated and obsolete as well as not accessible for all

students in their high school. Post secondary institutions in Puerto Rico should make their informational materials available to all students including their academic offerings, admission requirements, student services, financial aids as well as athletic programs. High school counselors should have them available at their offices.

The college admission process was evaluated satisfactory by 51%, unsatisfactory by 40% and done independently by 9%. These results are concurrent with the results of the study conducted by the College Board Office for Latin America and Puerto Rico that the high school counseling process is not balanced and not useful for the transition to post secondary education. Reasons for this lack of satisfaction were varied; amongst them the need to begin the process before 12th grade, the need for more occupational counseling and experiences, the need for the administration of interest inventories, to increase individual counseling, to improve counseling services, to provide more professional development for counselors, to actualize college as well as financial aid information, to establish better communication with their parents, to improve available resources and to increase the number of counselors in schools.

The prevailing needs of college admission counseling services expressed by the participants can be summarized in:

- lack of information
- need for more counselors in high schools that would result in
 - more individual counseling
 - greater number of interventions with students

- occupational counseling and opportunities for internships
- earlier college counseling interventions
- improved personal and professional behavior in high school counselors
- desire for a greater involvement of parents in the college admission process

Hernández Rivera conducted research in 1988 on student perception of high school counselors in School District III in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico. He established that student perception on counseling services will determine how much they will use them. He emphasizes that these services are for student thus enhancing the importance of their perceptions when evaluating these programs. High school college counseling services should be evaluated periodically to assure their quality and effectiveness. Evaluation is an important part of any professional service as it provides the means to study the perception of the clients served.

There is a great need in high school counseling programs for a higher awareness of the importance of college counseling services. The college admission counseling process is detailed, specialized and individualized and it integrates occupational, personal and academic components. This research project on high school college counseling services has been the

first conducted in Puerto Rico and it should serve as the beginning of a regular and ongoing evaluation of these services. The analysis of these results was used to develop a description of high school college counseling services and establish the strengths and weaknesses of these programs. A high school college admission counseling model should be developed for Puerto Rican counselors and students to follow as a guide modifying and adapting it to their various environments and populations.

Adolescents find themselves in an exploration stage, according to Super's Segmented Model for Occupational Development (1990). In this period of transition from adolescence to adulthood, decisions will be made for the implementation of a tentative occupational selection. Some will choose an occupation and look for a full time job for the first time in their lives, others will choose a post secondary educational institution and continue studying, others will join the military and others will choose to take a year off to make a decision. Each decision is important and valid for the student, but it is of utter importance that this decision is made thoughtfully and carefully. Pressures will abound from parents, peers and educators. The professional counselor is the key person for the student to look for help and support during this important decision making process. The

professional counselor will facilitate the information, help explore options and consider alternatives in this careful creation of a life plan for the student.

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