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OUR LESSONS FROM GROUPS

BY NANCY PENK

Did you ever have that special group? The group where students met for a real purpose and the cohesiveness bonded them into lifelong friends, regardless of where they fell on the social ladder? I have been fortunate enough to have facilitated several groups that chose to build those types of bonds. They are the students we feel the most fortunate to have worked with during their journey through high school.

In our line of work, we have all facilitated small groups ranging from stress and depression to anger and grief. They are all challenging in nature and eventually take on their own dynamics based upon those bonds that develop with our assistance. Our hope for our students is that, as they go through the group process, they have the opportunity to learn from each other by comparing issues and thinking through their problems while identifying with others who have similar issues.

For me, the most difficult groups I have worked with are the grief groups. During my 23-year career, we have tragically lost many students and former students through automobile accidents, cancer, and suicide. I have found that each tragedy is different in nature, forcing us to look for the most suitable methods and procedures to address the needs of the grieving students. What is most often overlooked in these situations is that, as a counselor, I am grieving, too. I am not only grieving the loss of a young life, but also I grieve for the survivors who are struggling with the loss of a friend or classmate. What most of my students didn't realize is, as I helped them through this difficult time in their lives, they were helping me cope with loss as well, and we were eventually healing together.

As I listen and reflect on what is shared with me, I am always amazed at the lessons our children can teach us.

I tell my students, "What you say to me and others in group is important—we learn from each other." As I listen and reflect on what is shared with me, I am always amazed at the lessons our children can teach us. Maybe the most important is the art of loving life, of approaching it with an open heart and trust of others. That is a lesson most adults could certainly afford to learn over and over again.

Contact Nancy Penk, ISCA president, at npenk@rivertonschools.org.

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ISCA UPDATES

Presence at National Convene, Illinois Model, and RAMP Preparation

ISCA is very excited to have had four of our members, in partnership with the White House's College Opportunity Agenda and the First Lady's Reach Higher Initiative, attend the convene at San Diego State University. This convening was an invitation-only gathering of committed leaders and commitment makers focused on improving school counseling preparation, programs, and practices with the goal of increasing college access for all students. This took place on November 17-18, 2014, in San Diego, CA, on the SDSU campus. We look forward to our members reporting back to us regarding the process and goals of the convening.

One of our goals this year is to educate counselors throughout the state about the Illinois Model of School Counseling. We want them to receive as much information as possible as well as training on how to implement the Illinois Model.

Our other goal is to inform school counselors about RAMP and help guide them through the process. To help in this effort, ISCA sponsored a successful program, "Ready to RAMP," on September 9, 2014. Several Illinois school counseling programs already have the designation and are helping others to understand the process and work with those that want to develop a RAMP program.

We look forward to our annual state conferences on April 10, 2015, in Springfield and April 24, 2015, in Skokie. This year's theme is "Counseling Through the School Mandates." We have experienced an increase in memberships with a special conference-plus-membership discount on our 2015 conference registration form. We hope to increase our membership even more in 2015. Have a great year!

2015 CONFERENCE KEYNOTER

ISCA is pleased to announce that both the Skokie and Springfield Conference Keynotes will be delivered by Vince Walsh-Rock. The theme of the 2015 Annual Conferences is "Counseling Through the School Mandates."

Vince Walsh-Rock

Vince is the assistant principal and director of Counseling and Student Support Services at Downers Grove South High School, Community High School District 99. He received the ISCA 2014 School Administrator of the Year Award.

Learn more about the 2015 Annual Conferences

LEARNING EVIDENCE-BASED SCHOOL COUNSELING

Dr. Brett Zyromski

ISCA held a very successful program, "Evidence-Based School Counseling," on December 4, 2014, at Universal Technical Institute (UTI) in Lisle, IL. The event was sponsored by ISCA and UTI, and sold out with 150 attendees. Dr. Brett Zyromski presented a step-by-step guide to evolving data-driven, comprehensive school counseling.

Workshop participants learned how to prioritize interventions and build RAMP programs using data-driven decision making within school counseling programs. They explored how to match evidence-based school counseling interventions with identified needs of their schools and are prepared to apply their knowledge of evidence-based interventions and data-driven decision making to evolve their own programs to target equity gaps.

In the workshop, participants applied their knowledge of data-driven decision making to create two-to-three school counseling program goals. They also learned about RAMP requirements and how to apply that knowledge to align their evidence-based interventions and data tracking to create a three-year plan for achieving RAMP status.

THREE KEYS FOR SMALL GROUP SUCCESS

Regardless of the focus of a particular small group, knowing some universal truths and lessons-learned can help your group succeed.

BY KATHRYN WATKINS VAN ASSELT, PH.D., LPC, NCC

When I worked as a middle school counselor in an agricultural community, I had plenty of opportunities to work with at-risk students. Not only were many of our students from low socio-economic groups, but a large contingency were from migrant working families. Each week, our school administrators would publish a list of students who were failing two or more courses. When I reviewed the list, I noticed that many of the students were from Hispanic homes. I began to wonder what was happening because my experiences in the hallways and teacher's lounge reflected a positive atmosphere. It seemed that the teachers truly cared about educating their students and were equitable in the classroom regardless of a student's race.

I spoke with the seventh-grade mathematics teacher and discovered that several of his Hispanic female students had asked to drop the advanced math class. He said what concerned him was not that they wanted to drop due to inability but that several of the girls wanted to drop because it had become "the cool thing to do." He said they were capable but didn't want to put forth the effort of being in an advanced math course. I became concerned; I recognized their potential to succeed and feared the potential domino effect of taking less-challenging academic courses.

Without much effort, I found a need and decided to fill it by running a small group. This article presents ways to ensure, as a group facilitator, that your students can receive the full benefits of an effective group. Using the targeted girls group as an example, let's focus

It was important to select members who would be potentially motivated to improve their grades because the purpose of this group was to retain students in advanced mathematics.

on some keys to successful small group counseling.

1 **PRE-GROUP SELECTION**
After some strategizing with the math teacher, we selected a group of five Hispanic girls who were capable of accomplishing the math work but were on the verge of dropping the course or failing due to a lack of desire to overcome the challenges. They did not appear to have any personality struggles with the math teacher, and no factors were apparent such as bullying in the classroom that would influence the girls' decision to want to drop the course.

During this stage, it was important to select members who would be potentially motivated to improve their grades because the purpose of this group was to retain students in advanced mathematics. I did not want the impact of the group to be thwarted by members who were genuinely disinterested in school. When setting up your small groups, really ask yourself about the composition of the members. Are they going to help the group achieve the intended goal?

As school counselors, we can be tempted to try to encourage those who are at the greatest risk, but by doing so, you may miss out on the opportunity to work with those

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who are motivated to change but need more direction or support. To have a positive group experience, spend some serious time developing the kind of group that you want. You cannot include everyone. If you are uncertain about particular students, take a moment to touch base with them individually. Ask open-ended questions about their thoughts on the topic and use your intuition and professional skill to help screen for the best possible chemistry when putting together your group. This extra effort will pay off for you as the leader and for each member.

Once I had selected the members for my group, I had some Hispanic girls in the same math class ask to be included. I had to turn them away, saying the group was closed and that perhaps we could do something together in the future. Again, I did not try to include everyone but figured I was adding value to my "bank" for future group interest.

Once you have established who is going to be a member in the group, you need to create a parental consent form. Take into consideration how you want to convey the purpose of the group to parents. Let parents know when the group will meet and for how many sessions. Carefully consider what you label your group. For example, I did not call the group "Drop Out Prevention Group" but instead called it "The Girls Group." This seems obvious, but when thinking about groups that focus on anger, grief, depression or anxiety, you'll probably want to be less descriptive. Don't try to explain the group's purpose in its title. That's what the parental consent form is for. If group members want to create their own name they are welcome to do that, but for housekeeping purposes it can be easier on you if you keep things simple.

An honest discussion among the girls revealed a feeling that doing well in school meant "being white" and "being white" was turning away from their own race.

When putting together the group, establish the need for members to commit to coming to every session and arriving on time. As group facilitator, you can take the lead here and set up some boundaries for the students. Middle school students need some direction, and if you're clear about expectations in the beginning, you won't waste group time developing members' time management skills. When setting up your group, remember to convey warmth and positive regard while explaining your guidelines.

2 SUCCESSFUL GROUP STAGES

Throughout each group meeting, I hoped to model expectations for respect, empathy and an acceptance for each group member. Not only would this establish a safe setting but it would also demonstrate to the students how to convey compassion and support.

The Girls Group met for six one-hour sessions to discuss academic goals and personal and career goals. The girls were eager to be in a group of just Hispanics, and trust among the members was established fairly quickly. After we met two times and had established a working group, I introduced some research about the results of entrance exam testing for colleges. I wrote on the board SAT

math scores ranked from highest to lowest by race. The list read: Asian, white, Native American, black and Hispanic.

The girls were aghast. They could not believe what they were seeing, and many shared their surprise that whites were not ranked first. This led to a discussion about whether or not the students believed Native American students weren't as smart as white students, Hispanics not as smart as Asians, etc. For me, part of what was interesting was that the girls did not believe they were treated differently in the classroom from their predominately white classmates. In fact, they believed the educational opportunities and support among students were equal.

The question then became what was going on to create this difference in final scores. This was where the girls really started to open up and share their own experiences. An honest discussion among the girls revealed a feeling that doing well in school meant "being white" and "being white" was turning away from their own race. Some girls also reported parental or familial pressures not to do better in school than their own family members. This stage provided a place for the girls to share their concerns and frustrations. The conversations eventually led to members supporting each other in establishing goals for academic and personal choices.

The girls decided to establish concrete academic goals for each of their courses. The greatest strength from the group members came from their need to feel acknowledgement for their struggle. Simply because the girls made the decision to do well in school they were still Hispanic and not turning against their own race. There was a strong sense of

support as the girls recognized the pressures they were putting on themselves to be unsuccessful in school. The group came to an end, and the girls expressed a readiness and willingness to move forward academically.

For adolescents, a sense of belonging and understanding can be tremendously powerful, and by taking a few extra steps as the facilitator, you can extend the success of the group experience. When leading groups, you may find it helpful to establish individual goals as well as ways the members can continue to lend support after the group has concluded.

The girls in this group decided they wanted me to have a copy of their academic goals. They wrote them down and asked me to be a continued check-in. We established a timeline for the grade check-in, a place where we could meet and asked members to help each other remember the check-in schedule. In the hallways and when I caught up with the girls I would offer encouraging comments and support. The girls also agreed to continue to inspire each other when they had the chance. In the end, it seemed to be a positive, successful group experience.

3 LETTING GO

I would be ecstatic if I could report that each girl was able to identify the pressures she felt and move toward academic success. Unfortunately that was not what happened. The math teacher reported they were showing more effort but weren't excelling the way we had both hoped.

In the end I had to remember that the choices that needed to be made were still up to the individuals. I had worked to provide a space for the girls to become aware of their own internal dialogue, and for many, that may have been where the impact ended. In the moment, the group seemed effective, and I believe it was. Improving their grades was going to take a tremendous shift in behavior, and that can be more challenging than gaining awareness.
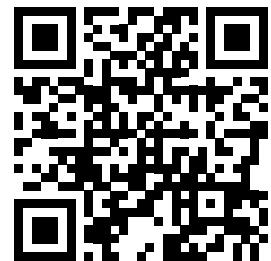
As a group facilitator, I had to believe that the insight the girls gained was still powerful and that many of them will take this new awareness with them as they begin to make more difficult academic and personal choices in high school.

A key to being a successful group leader is to trust the process itself. Perhaps review your own goals for leading groups and reflect on your philosophies about personal change. As a group facilitator, you do not have to be impeccable or perfect; you only have to be the best you can at that time, given your own skill level. Again, remember to trust the process.

Running groups can be exhilarating as well as providing a tremendous return on your school counseling investment. Many topics are appropriate for middle school, so pick something that gets you fired up. Whether you are tackling academic, social, personal, or career goals, you are meeting the demands of your ultimate stakeholder, the student.

Sometimes you even get rewarded by seeing the results of your labor. From my Girls Group I had one student who truly worked to turn around her grades. She took extra time and learned how to study for exams. She came bounding into my office elated to share with me that she had aced her math exam. She ended up achieving her personal goal and earned an A in advanced mathematics. Perhaps the other girls did not have the skills or personal strength to achieve in the same way, but one student was able to find a way to make choices that were authentic for her. I will put my trust in the process and picture her being a role model for others. ▬

Kathryn Watkins van Asselt, Ph.D., LPC, NCC, is a core faculty member in counselor education at Capella University. She can be reached at kathryn.vanasselt@capella.edu.

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# INFUSING TECHNOLOGY INTO SMALL GROUPS AND COUNSELING PRACTICE

BY ANGELA CLEVELAND, M.S.ED., M.ED., MA

I considered myself fairly adept at handling the typical student issues that arise in fifth and sixth grade. That is, until an 11-year-old girl came to me distraught by the harassment she received from an anonymous hate group that formed on a social networking app. I barely understood what she was talking about, let alone knew the proper channels to report this type of cyberbullying. I couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that this girl was having a problem with a cell phone app when she didn't even own a phone! I worried that if I didn't familiarize myself with the technology most commonly used by my students, I would become disconnected from the latest in the tech world and disconnected from my students.

Another realization hit me: the only technology I used in my guidance lessons were a VCR and VHS tapes. The thought of a student looking at a VHS tape and innocently asking, "What's that?" filled me with dread. I knew something had to change. I had to change.

My students grew up with technology at their fingertips. I feared venturing into a territory in which they were the experts and I was the novice. I worried that my lessons or activities would fail. However, I was excited to try something new to connect with my students and address their needs. Letting my passion for helping children guide me, I took a leap of faith into the technology pool and found amazing resources.

One of the first groups I organized was a New Students group. I had several new boys from a variety of geographic and academic backgrounds. Coming from private schools, an urban setting, across the country, and outside the U.S., the common thread was that these sixth-graders were trying to find
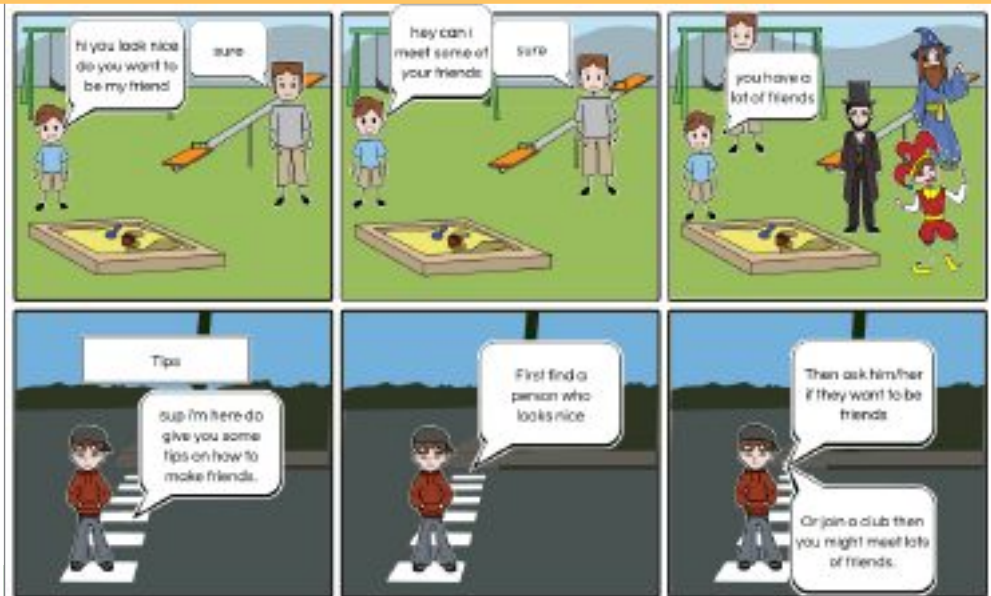
Figure 1: StoryboardThat comic illustrates tips for making fiends at new school.

I worried that if I didn't familiarize myself with technology, I would become disconnected from my students.

their way through a large school (600 students per grade level), a new town, and even a new culture.

In our group, we broke down the topics into five main themes: locker tips for first-timers, navigating the cafeteria, making friends, being organized, and miscellaneous tips (like you don't have to change for PE class, but sneakers are required). We developed a list of helpful hints for new students by addressing these five areas. Each student then picked one topic to create a comic using *StoryboardThat*, a free, online storyboard/comic strip maker (see figure 1). It was incredibly easy to navigate, and the students enjoyed making the comics. I then put the

comics together so we could share these helpful tips with other new students.

Next, I reflected on my guidance classroom lesson plans and updated them by using *Prezi* and infusing a few short *YouTube* videos into the lessons. Figure 2 provides the the title page of my first lesson plan update using Prezi. It took some work to set it up, but I received a great deal of positive feedback from students. I will benefit from using the lesson plan again and again! Here is another helpful tool we developed together: in the past, I used to come to class with a stack of "scenario" cards, which over the years had become worn and dirty. Now, I allow students to select a random scenario by picking one of the brightly colored figures on the screen. I update the scenarios to stay current with technology trends and also address common concerns that have arisen. Updating on Prezi is a lot easier than printing out and laminating new cards. *View my Prezi.*

One of my goals is to make sure classroom lessons are memorable to students. I try to incorporate a fun review of salient points. I used *Quizlet* to create online Conflict Resolution Flash Cards. After the lesson, we have a fun online review, "flipping" the cards (which look like index cards) on the screen. At the end of the review, students compete using the Conflict Resolution Quizlet. When I began this, I had no idea what the students were referring to by "competing," but they showed me how they could challenge each other in a race to see who could answer the review questions the fastest. The students are engaged in a healthy competition while reviewing the most critical points in the lesson!

After using Quizlet, I decided to try another digital tool with my study skills group. *Mindmeister* gives students the opportunity to create digital mind maps. I had always used paper and pen (or marker, crayon, etc.) to create mind maps. However, I found that students might make another connection to the material or between concepts, but would run out of space on their paper. This free online tool affords students the flexibility of moving concepts and connections to create mind maps that truly reflect their learning experience.

One of the challenges I faced this year was organizing a Girls' Empowerment Group. I found several great hands-on activities, discussion questions, and videos to spark reflective thought and lively discussion. However, I struggled to find a meaningful way to weave these resources together...until I discovered *Blendspace*, a great tool for infusing a variety of web-based tools and resources into lessons. I created a *Girls' Empowerment Blendspace* by adding our activities, discussion questions, and videos for us to access addressing specific topics. One problem was that some of the best videos I found, like those from *Dove*, the *Guess*

Who? Video Learning Series, *See Jane*, or *GoldieBlox* sometimes showed advertisements for videos that were not school appropriate. I used *SafeShare*, a free resource that "removes distracting and offensive elements around YouTube videos" and allows you to crop videos before sharing them. I used Blendspace as a resource to keep powerful YouTube videos (via SafeShare) that I didn't necessarily want to use right away, but I wanted to have at my fingertips in case a related topic arose or for use in another group in the future.

My Girls' Empowerment Group was more directed by me, but I wanted to take a different approach with a social skills group. I had the students take the lead by accessing the resources I collected, facilitating group discussion, and working on a quiz together that I created for the last Blendspace slide using Google Forms. *Interrupting* was a big problem in our group, and I found a couple of great social story videos addressing this, sprinkled with questions to facilitate on-topic discussion, and I allowed the children to lead the group discussion. I found that using Blendspace with my group allowed the students some flexibility within set parameters, and I saw the children taking more ownership over the activities. You can search for Blendspace lessons on any topic, or you can create your own!

As counselors and educators, we face professional responsibilities that typically involve a significant amount of paperwork. All staff members are required to administer a survey as part of our evaluation model. I decided to administer my survey to one of my teams (50 students), but the thought of tallying responses and analyzing results felt daunting and time consuming. I used *Google Forms* to create my survey and *Flubaroo* to analyze the data, two great free resources that have saved me so much time and

Figure 2: Prezi guidance lesson on groups.
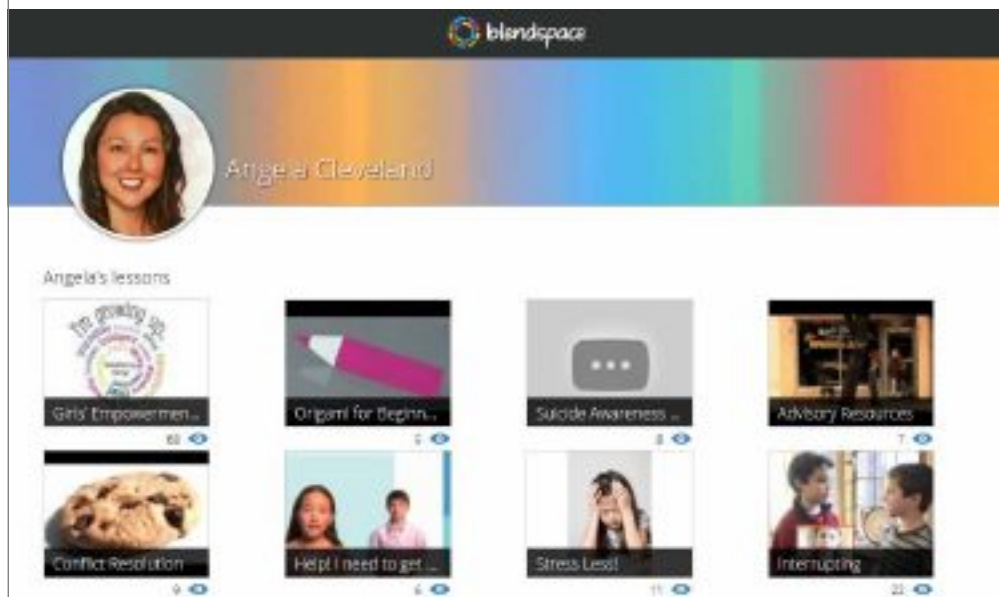
Figure 4: Blendspace lessons that you create are listed for easy access.

have given me immediate access to survey results. I also used both of these free resources to create a School Climate and Safety Survey for our student body to determine the effectiveness of our programming and where we should focus our attention to reduce bullying

and create a positive and safe environment for our students.

My journey has definitely had some ups and downs, moments of frustration, and some exciting successes. I am truly fortunate to work in a school district where so many staff members embrace and

share their favorite technology tools. When I decided to take this leap toward integrating technology into my counseling setting, I found many supportive colleagues and administrators. They encouraged me to try new things and helped me to find the humor in situations when something I tried just didn't work the way I envisioned. I am fortunate to have access to technology that utilizes many great resources. The intangible resource is a counselor's deep, driving desire to help students. The technology is a tangible resource that can help us achieve our goals. I have found a renewed spark of excitement in my journey, and I am looking forward to continuing my adventure in the field of counseling and in the area of technology. ▬

ANGELA CLEVELAND'S TECH TOOLS

StoryboardThat – create a comic strip
Prezi – interactive presentation/lesson plan
YouTube – videos
Quizlet – create flashcards and study games
Mindmeister – electronic mind mapping
Blendspace – collect and present Web resources
SafeShare - removes elements around YouTube videos; allows cropping
Google Forms – electronic survey tool
Flubaroo – data analysis

Angela Cleveland is a school counselor at Auten Road Intermediate School in Hillsborough, NJ. Hillsborough Township Public Schools is entering the final phase of the 1:1 initiative during the 2014-2015 school year. Every student in grades 5 through 12 will receive a Chromebook provided by the school district with the goals of enhancing the students' educational experience, improving organizational skills, and expanding the learning and sharing beyond the walls of the traditional classroom. For more information, contact Angela Cleveland at ACleveland@htps.us or visit the district website to learn more about the vision and goals of this initiative.

PERSONAL AND POWERFUL HIGH SCHOOL GROUPS

Many high school counselors say they don't have the support of administration to do groups at their level. One Virginia high school shares its successful formula for a small-group counseling program.

BY BETH COHEN AND JENNIFER GLASER

For some students, high school can be an intimidating place. Students eat lunch in busy cafeterias, approach the buses in masses, participate in extracurricular activities, and are expected to achieve academically. In some instances, students have little opportunity for small-group or individual interaction with teachers and faculty members. Groups can be the catalyst to bridge relationships, enhance communication and foster self-regulated behavior.

With a student population of approximately 2,300, West Springfield High School (WSHS) in Fairfax County, Va., may seem like an incredibly large school to many, but its strong group program personalizes learning experiences and increases access to the school counseling program for students. Through groups, students across four grade levels work with school counselors to develop skills, discuss important and relevant issues and improve achievement and attitudes. School counselors meet with students in smaller numbers to address specific issues and needs surrounding the academic, personal/social, and career domains.

Establishing a groups program, generating buy-in from stakeholders, identifying students, and collecting data may seem like overwhelming tasks, but WSHS school counselors believe the benefits far outweigh the challenges. Small-group counseling makes a large school seem smaller for students while it connects students with school counselors and peers in unique ways.

PROGRAM EVOLUTION

Although WSHS has had group counseling for approximately 20

Through groups, students across four grade levels work with school counselors to develop skills, discuss important and relevant issues and improve achievement and attitudes.

years, it has evolved to meet the school population's needs. We've incorporated groups into the school's culture, and they are an integral part of the school counseling program. Groups represent meaningful and successful components of the comprehensive school counseling program.

All WSHS school counselors have the broad range of knowledge and skills necessary to facilitate groups for academic, personal/social, and career topics; however, our school counselors generally lead groups in their areas of expertise. We use data to determine the types of groups to facilitate.

Groups vary in size and scope based on the sensitivity of issues and students' needs. School counselors facilitate group meetings during the school day to avoid con-

flicts with transportation and after-school activities. Sessions last approximately 45 minutes and groups typically have four to six sessions. While some groups, such as study skills, have structured lessons, others, such as relationships and dating, are more discussion-based. All school counselors approach the groups with open minds, knowing that students' needs drive the group.

We actively promote group participation. Students access groups through a self-referral process and/or referrals made by staff and parents. In addition to the group signup and referral system, we use student-achievement and achievement-related data from the student information system and Naviance/Counselor's Office to identify students for groups such as the new student group and the selective college admissions group. Most students who are invited or referred to an applicable group will participate, but what's even more impressive is that those students then encourage their peers to join as well.

COLLABORATION AND BUY-IN

At WSHS, the entire school counseling staff buys into the group program. Our school counselors have diverse backgrounds, skill sets, and interests that they contribute to the program. With more than one school counselor assigned to each group and with proper planning, the need to cancel a session due to an unannounced drop in or an unexpected crisis is rare. In addition, the collaborative instruction of the groups results in departmental sharing and leads to

expanded skills and knowledge for all school counselors.

This collaboration extends to other members of the school staff. We work closely with the school's psychologists, social worker, career center specialist, county support personnel, and teachers. For example, the school psychologist and social worker conducted bereavement groups established through staff and community referrals. County support personnel created a leadership resiliency program and a stop smoking group for students. The career center specialist col-laborates with school counselors to create and conduct college and career groups.

Recently, due to an unanticipated student response on the needs assessment, we worked with the school's business department to develop small groups addressing personal finances and financial aid issues. With increased participation from faculty members and interdepartmental collaboration, the small-groups program has expanded its scope and has increased buy-in.

Following the ASCA National Model, WSHS school counsel-ors always ask the question, "Are students different as a result of what we do?" Not only do the groups increase student access to the counseling staff but they also provide students with unique learning opportunities. The groups unite students with common needs and interests, showing them that they have peers who share the same concerns. Within a small, structured environment, students learn communication skills, share ideas, and provide peer support. Working together with a shared

purpose, the groups provide a safe environment for students to learn about themselves, share feelings with peers, and attempt new skills. As group sessions progress, school counselors notice increased peer sharing and interaction, along with students developing an increased confidence level.

A main group goal is for students to transfer the skills they have learned to larger social and academic settings. Successful groups have a positive impact on student achievement and personal development by increasing students' confidence and skills through peer sharing. Although the counselors facilitate the group, the students own the work and are the agents of change.

CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT

Although we've had a groups program for many years, we continue to seek ways to improve the program and its impact on students. Through data collection and analysis, along with systemic change, the group program at WSHS continues to evolve.

For many years, we offered the same groups: personal image, anger, relationships, study skills, etc. Over time, we saw that students' interests and needs were changing. Groups previously offered were not as popular or possibly not as relevant. For us to continually run a group simply because we'd always offered it did not make sense. To rectify this situation, we designed a needs assessment survey to solicit student feedback before conducting the group sign-up.

We conducted a whole school needs assessment during the introductory grade-level units in September and October. The survey included open-ended, closed, and Likert scale questions in 21 different categories relating to academic, personal/social, and career needs.

In total, 72 percent of students completed the anonymous survey through Survey Monkey, and the survey provided solid, and sometimes unexpected, information about students' needs. For example, of the students completing the survey, 72.4 percent indicated a need for help with study skills and work habits. This remarkably high percentage led us to reconsider the type and number of study skills groups offered. The aggregated data from the needs assessment determined the types of groups available during the next groups sign-ups.

We made another improvement to the groups program based on a school-wide change. WSHS faculty voted to include an embedded period of intervention, remediation, and rewards for students during the school day. This embedded period clearly provided another opportunity for group work. Before the implementation of the new schedule, the school counseling department approached the administration with data regarding the impact of the small-group program and advocated for the use of the embedded period to continue these groups. Given the results of the data, the administrators showed support for the school counseling programs by allowing the use of embedded time for group sessions. We now attempt to schedule the majority of the group meetings during this embedded period to decrease the amount of class time students miss.

Results collected confirm that small groups make a positive difference for WSHS students. Groups are one of the easier programs to collect and track data for due to the small number of students involved. We administer pre- and post-surveys to collect perception data. These surveys consistently indicate that students value groups and experience growth during ses-

sions. In addition, the frequency of students' visits to talk with school counselors after participating in a group tends to increase significantly. This demonstrates that they have formed a connection to staff.

We also collect process data to track changes from year to year and to examine the rates of student participation. Results data varies for each group, but in most cases, the data point to an increase in attendance and overall improvement in grades among students who participate in groups, and the results data provide strong feedback for the department. Record keeping and accountability contribute to program improvement and continued buy-in from stakeholders.

Although ASCA recommends a student-to-school-counselor ratio of 250:1, the reality is that many school districts require school counselors to carry much higher caseloads. Yet, school counselors are still challenged to find ways to reach and support all of their students. A groups program can benefit the school counselors by maximizing time with students in both advisement and responsive services. Through detailed planning and a management agreement, school counselors can establish a groups' program to run throughout the school year. The related data collection helps school counselors advocate for the support of programs. In the end, effective groups personalize the program to meet the specific needs of the school's population and connect students to the counseling program. ▬

Beth Cohen is retired director of student services and Jennifer Glaser is coordinator, School Counseling and College Success Program, both with Fairfax County Public Schools, VA.

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- *Group Counseling with Elementary School Students*
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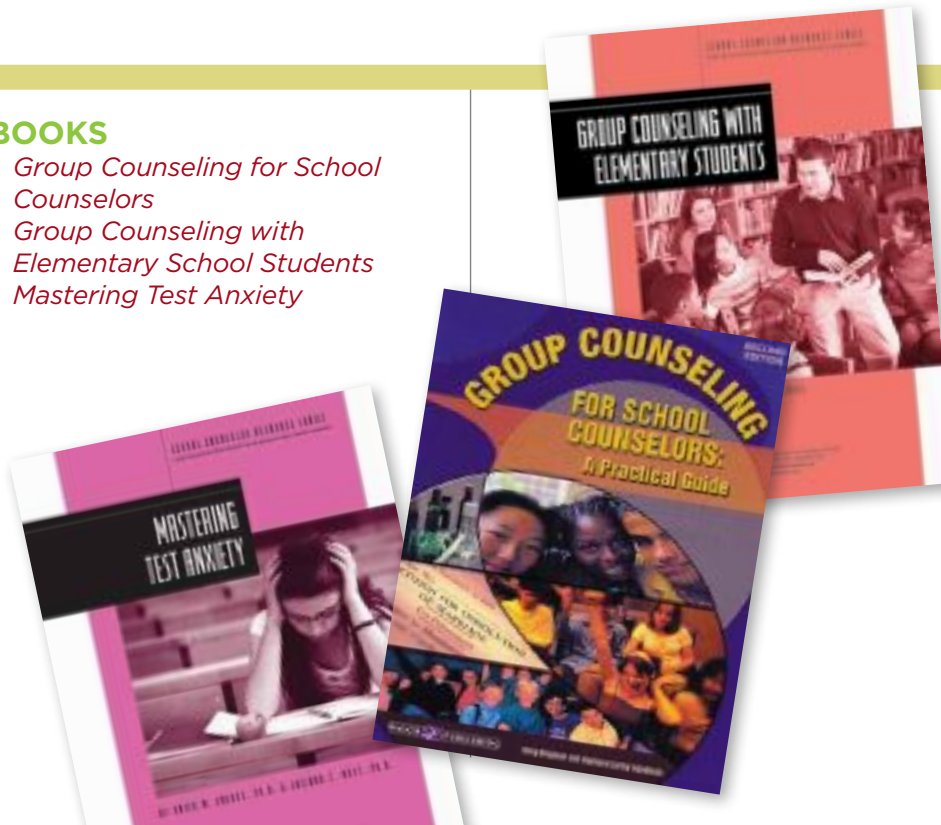
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CONNECTING STUDENTS TO CAREERS

Easily provide your high school students with the tools and resources they need to explore careers of interest (with tips for middle school and elementary counselors, too).

BY JULIA TAYLOR

When you ask a group of elementary-aged students what they want to be when they grow up, you'll likely hear everything from a firefighter to the president. There are always a few eager students who uniquely combine as many careers they can think of with heart-melting determination. As elementary school students transition to middle school, their career choices become more grounded and realistic. However, middle school students typically don't know what most careers entail. They see a crime scene show and think it's cool. Or they want to make a lot of money and be "the boss." By the time students reach high school, most cannot answer the proverbial "what do you want to be" with the same level of enthusiasm they once had. Furthermore, high school students often feel pressured to pick a path, are bombarded with challenging questions about post-graduation plans, and are often unsure of the road that lies ahead.

From elementary to high school, career development activities are an important component of ensuring college and career readiness for all students. It's important for students at all levels to explore career options. Countless career-oriented websites, inventories, and programs are designed to help students explore careers, but do they really help students understand the day-to-day reality of a particular job? Say, for example, you have a high school junior who tells you she wants to be a veterinarian. This student also happens to pass out when she sees blood and has no interest in attending a four-year university. Wanting to be a veterinarian means she likes animals, and there are countless careers with animals that don't involve surgical

procedures or a four-year degree. Sometimes inventories and assessments offer the sound advice of shadowing someone in the career students find interesting, but the inventories and assessments obviously don't provide the resources students need to follow through.

Offering a program that connects students to local employers and employees can be extremely beneficial in filling in these gaps.

At my previous job at Apex High School, in Apex, NC, the student services department created a program called "Career Connections." Career Connections provided purposeful exposure to the realities of the work within fields students were considering. Each month, we brought in three local employees/employers to talk to students interested in their particular field. In a panel format, each of the three career specialists discussed their position and offered advice to students. Students were able to ask pointed questions about the day-to-day work, salary, educational training needed to enter the career, and other details you can't get from the company website or in a career inventory. The panelists were honest about the best and worst parts of their jobs, which was helpful to students. Many students

had the opportunity to job shadow panelists or have a one-on-one informational interview. All schools can benefit from running a program similar to Career Connections; you just have to know where to begin.

GETTING STARTED

To begin a program like Career Connections, make a list of careers you'd like to showcase. Select the careers based on data from a previous career day, enrollment data in elective courses (such as auto technology, journalism, or culinary arts), or survey the students to see what careers interest them. Once you have six to 10 possible careers, sit down with your department and talk about where to find speakers. Think about whom you know and which parents can help you out. We found that community members were eager to talk to students, so we didn't have problem finding panelists. We chose three panelists from each field and tried to diversify their educational levels to show students the variety of options they have for postsecondary education. This helped make the program appealing to students who weren't interested in a four-year degree. For example, for the dentistry panel we had a hygienist (associate

or technical school degree) and an orthodontist (advanced degree).

Create a list of questions for the panelists. For example:

- Introduce yourself and your career
- Did you always know what you wanted to do?
- Tell us about your postsecondary training/education
- What do you love about your job?
- What don't you love about your job?
- What advice would you give someone prior to entering your field?
- How can students contact you?

You can put your own spin on the questions, but keep in mind that time goes by quickly and try to stick with eight questions or fewer.

When: When choosing program dates and times, be mindful of both the panelists' and students' schedules. First thing in the morning typically works best for 9-5 employees. This way they don't miss too much work or get caught up in a situation in which they cannot get away and have to cancel at the last minute. We held Career Connections on the last Friday of the month for an hour in between first and second period. This timing ensured students didn't miss an entire class and worked well for the panelists.

Where: Choose a location that can be set up for a meaningful conversation. This could be a

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classroom with movable desks/chairs, the cafeteria, or the library. We held Career Connections in the library and arranged the appropriate number of chairs in a U shape. This setup naturally led to a more organic discussion and allowed the panelists to sit down and still be able to see all of the students. Also, using this seating arrangement, students were less likely to text, talk to a neighbor, or work on something else.

Marketing: After you've squared away your time, dates, places, and speakers, it's time to start advertising. Take advantage of social media outlets, newsletters, principal announcements, morning/afternoon announcements, or make fliers and visit classes. For example, if your topic is the automobile industry and you have an auto mechanics or technology course, start there. Figure out how many students you can accommodate based on the location and seating arrangement, and don't forget to cap it at that number. We told students about it in classes and brought a sign-up sheet and also told students to come to the student services department to sign up when we used the other advertising outlets. To sign up, students had to leave their name, first period class information, and e-mail address. The day before the program, we e-mailed a reminder and had a pass delivered to them during first period.

Prior to Career Connections: Take these steps in the days immediately before the panel discussion.

- E-mail the panelists a reminder and also a list of the questions you will ask them.
- Send teachers a reminder about Career Connections.
- Make student passes and deliver them to the teachers. We found delivering the passes to the classrooms worked a lot better than just leaving them in teachers' mailboxes.

- If you are doing a pre/post survey, have it copied and ready to go.
- Set up the room, and make sure you have bottles of water for panelists.
- Print out a copy of your panelist questions.

The Day of Career Connections: If you plan well, the day itself should be relatively simple. Your room is set up, your students are reminded, and you have all of your materials ready to go. You may want to swing by the room to make sure nobody put the chairs back, but other than that, enjoy the program. Make sure you send a thank you e-mail to the panelists.

DATA COLLECTION

A program such as Career Connections can easily tie into your school's comprehensive school counseling program and provide meaningful data that will help determine how students are different as a result of this program.

Collecting data can help your school counseling team determine what careers students are most interested in and what they learned. You can also share the data with administration, teachers, and other educational stakeholders. We used a simple pre/post test that combined two- and five-point scales and measured the outcomes. Attendance data provided us with a general idea of how many people were interested in that field, and the post-test showed us what the students got out of the program. For example, we had to close registration when we had video gaming panelists but had a relatively low attendance for the dentistry panel. However, the students who came to the dentistry session were really interested in the career, and most planned on that path after graduation. So, although the numbers were low, it was highly useful to those who attended.

ADAPT TO OTHER LEVELS

Although this was a high school program, it can easily be modified and replicated to meet the career needs elementary and middle school students. It is important for elementary and middle school students to learn about various options under different career paths. Let's revisit the veterinarian example. Other careers with animals could include: zoologist, dog-walker, animal behaviorist, breeder, farmer, animal health inspector, animal adoption specialist, pet sitter, marine biologist, wildlife specialist, beekeeper, dog groomer, or a pet treat baker. Elementary and middle school counselors can pick popular career choices (sports, veterinarian, medical, firefighter/paramedic/police officer, educators) and have teachers sign up to bring their classes. You may want to have this program in the library with students sitting on the floor, or in the cafeteria or auditorium.

Doing a large-group program like this also incorporates teachers, letting you accommodate a larger audience. It is unlikely that you will be able to have all students in front of all speakers, so with the panelist's permission, you can video tape the program and put it on YouTube, SchoolTube, or make a career video poster using a program such as Glogster to introduce it in classroom lessons.

Career Connections is a fun, simple way to build partnerships with the community while meeting the career development needs of all students. Exposing students to a variety of careers empowers them with options and hope and sets them up for postsecondary success. ▬

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TAKING THE CHALLENGE TO CHANGE

BY ASHLEY SAUNDERS, NATIONAL GUARD YOUTH FOUNDATION

Every year, nearly one million teenagers drop out of school. In many cases, these are the youth you've been worried about all year and have tried reaching out to. As a school counselor, you are well aware of the kind of future that awaits them: high school dropouts are more likely to suffer health problems as adults and live shorter lives than graduates. They are more likely to be involved in the justice system and to be incarcerated. And their future job prospects are bleak.

But the vast majority of students who drop out of school regret their decision. "The Silent Epidemic," a 2006 report by Civic Enterprises on the perspectives of high school dropouts, found that three quarters say they would have stayed in school and earned their diplomas if given a second chance. So what do you say to the student in front of you, who has given up and is ready to quit?

Lena Illig was a junior in high school with only seven credits who was experimenting with drugs, drinking, and skipping school, when a school counselor was frank with her about her future and provided options that might help her out.

"My high school counselor was realistic with me about what my future was going to look like given the path I was on, but was encouraging. I was not going to graduate on time, so he gave me a few options to get back on the right track," she said.

"That conversation opened my eyes to options that could not only

Lena Illig shares her story at an annual National Guard Youth Foundation celebration dinner.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY NATIONAL GUARD YOUTH FOUNDATION

help me academically, but also help me change my perspective about myself," recalls Lena.

Today, Lena is a graduate of the Alaska Military Youth Academy, one of 35 evidence-based ChalleNGe programs across the country. ChalleNGe is known for its tough structure but compassionate approach to addressing the underlying issues that lead youth to drop out of school, and Lena credits the program for turning her life around.

Attending ChalleNGe "really changed my outlook on life," says Lena, who has discovered a passion for law enforcement. "I knew I wanted to do something big with my life, but I didn't know how to build it. [ChalleNGe] handed me the tools, and I excelled in every-

thing I did while I was there...I got addicted to the feeling of accomplishment and that kept me motivated."

Lena is now pursuing a degree in criminal justice at the University of Alaska Anchorage, supported by $52,000 in scholarships. She has immersed herself in the law enforcement field, and is no longer at risk of being another statistic, but holds her destiny confidently in her own hands.

Dropping out is a process that involves multiple decisions. More often than not, teenagers who are failing high school courses come from families that are facing social, economic, or emotional challenges. But those challenges can be overcome with the help of a reliable

role model, someone who is willing to spend the time to understand what is going on behind the failing grades and discuss their options. No program works for everyone, but there is a way forward for every teenager.

Trying to reach every young person is overwhelming, and yes, sometimes there is nothing anyone can do. But every once in a while, the right words at the right time just might have an impact that can change a lifetime. When students succeed, their families, communities and future generations benefit in the process.

For more information on the ChalleNGe program, go to *www.ngyf.org*. ▬

SELECTIVE SERVICE—WHY REGISTER?

Registering with the Selective Service system opens opportunities.

BY PATRICK SCHUBACK, GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS, SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM

When a young man in the United States turns 18, he has a lot on his mind, such as graduating high school, applying to colleges, or finding a job. One other important thing is registering with the Selective Service. If he forgets to register, he will get a reminder in the mail. But what happens if he doesn't register?

"If a young man doesn't register when he turns 18, he stops being eligible for student loans, federal jobs, and job training programs," said Dick Flavahan, spokesperson for the Selective Service System. "We don't want that to happen."

Federal law says virtually all men living in the U.S. from the age of 18 through 25 must register within 30 days of turning 18 or of becoming a resident of the country. There is no penalty for late registration, but once a man turns 26, he cannot register and can become permanently barred from the opportunities associated with registration.

The top reason most men fail to register with Selective Service is a simple lack of awareness. This is particularly true for non-college bound young men, or men in underserved communities. "All young men living in America should be able to take advantage of all the opportunities our country has to offer," said Flavahan. "We're always working to make it easier for young men to register."

If young men have access to their Social Security number, they can register online in less than two minutes at *www.sss.gov.* They can also register at the local post office or by filling out the form they receive from the Selective Service as a reminder mailing. Community leaders can access free educational materials about Selective Service registration at *www.SSSresources.us*.

Selective Service also plays an important role in the security of the U.S. It helps make sure that the U.S. can be ready for any dire national emergency when activated. Only the President and U.S. Congress can reinstate a military draft.

"We want young men to have all the information they need, so they can make a decision that helps them—and helps their country," Flavahan said. For additional information, please visit *www.sss.gov*. ▬

IF THE COLLEGE FITS, RECOMMEND IT

BY MARK BOGGIE

During the first few months of the school year, high school counseling offices buzz with activity. Current seniors and some juniors are looking for help with the college admission process. As these students, and sometimes their parents, flock to your office for help, they bring lists of schools where they plan to apply—and questions about the application process and the schools they're considering.

Clearly, school counselors need to have the necessary reference materials to help students answer their questions and make the best decision possible about where to apply. This information should encompass a variety of school options, from the elite four-year university to the local community college. Just like their students, school counselors need to ask themselves "Which college would best fit?"

In some cases, students have already done their research and maybe even visited their front-runners. Other students arrive without a clue where to begin the process. Most students will probably fall somewhere between these two extremes. Regardless of a student's college research or class ranking, this is the time for a discussion on what is best for the student.

As part of that discussion, you should also discuss the possibility of attending community college. The common arguments for advising students to consider attending a community college are familiar: affordability, smaller class sizes, ability for students to explore before making a decision about a major and easier admission. But what type of students fit best at community colleges?

If we look at the current trend in community college enrollment, higher numbers of students are finding community colleges do fit. According to the College Board, four out of 10 graduating high

If we look at the current trend in community college enrollment, higher numbers of students are finding community colleges do fit.

school students start their college careers at community colleges. Did community college fit these students or did other circumstances influence the choice of school?

Students, their parents, and even some school counselors often need to overcome some misconceptions when considering community colleges. These may stem from prior experience in a community college or notions about the way it used to be. Today's community college experience is not only less costly than a four-year institution, but some of the old barriers for continued education at a community college are disappearing. This is opening up the community college experi-

ence to a wider variety of student by spreading the fit for community college to students who may have not considered that option.

MISCONCEPTION 1: TRANSFERRING FROM A COMMUNITY COLLEGE TO A FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY IS DIFFICULT.

According to the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, nearly two thirds of all students entering a community college plan to transfer to a four-year institution. In fact, 51 percent have transfer as a primary goal, and a full 73 percent have transfer as at least a secondary goal. One of the concerns students express is whether credits will transfer to another university. In the push to increase the number of degrees awarded to our nation's students, universities are taking advantage of the transfer pipeline from community colleges. Many transfer agreements are in place between community colleges

and universities, spelling out exactly what it takes for students to make the transfer from community college to the university system.

Are these transfer students successful? Research has shown that community college transfer students who complete the curriculum for an associate degree do as well, if not better, than students who start at a four-year school. Many four-year universities automatically accept students who've completed a two-year degree.

MISCONCEPTION 2: COMMUNITY COLLEGE DEGREES AREN'T AS USEFUL AS UNIVERSITY DEGREES.

Many viable, well-paying occupations in today's job market require

Community college transfer students who complete the curriculum for an associate degree do as well, if not better, than students who start at a four-year school.

less than a four-year degree. A high percentage of workers in these fields obtain their training at community colleges. Also, a community college degree can lead to an opportunity to complete a four-year bachelor's degree by transferring to a program that matches the associate's degree.

MISCONCEPTION 3: COMMUNITY COLLEGE IS FOR OLDER STUDENTS AND STUDENTS WHO WORK FULL TIME.

According to the Pew Research Center, one of the larger groups attending community colleges are traditional-aged college students (18 to 24 years of age). Community colleges are attractive to older and working students because students can work and attend school. Classes are offered during the day and at night. Some community colleges add to the flexible schedule by offering online classes students can complete on their own schedule.

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MISCONCEPTION 4:
I SHOULD ONLY ATTEND COMMUNITY COLLEGE IF I WANT A VOCATIONAL CAREER.

Sure, vocational education is part of the mission of community colleges, but it is only part of the mission. Community colleges also are providing a high-quality transfer articulated to university bachelor degree options. So, students should attend a community college whether they are looking for training in a vocation or are pursuing a professional degree.

WHO FITS?

A visit to a community college campus will show a wide-ranging student body. Students attending community colleges are diverse not only in ethnicity and socio-economic status but also in age and the reasons they attend a two-year institution. What kinds of students fit at and attend community colleges?

- current high school students taking a class or two for high school graduation
- current high school students participating in a planned program designed to attain an associate's degree as early as possible
- recent high school graduates looking for academic tracks to transfer to a university at some point
- recent high school graduates looking at a vocational program for training so they can get into the workforce when that training is completed
- students who attended (or attend) a university and need a class offered at the community college that they cannot get in a reasonable timeline at the university
- non-traditional students who are back in school for retraining after job loss (or a job change)
- students seeking courses for personal interest

If a community college can provide the fit these students looked for, what other factors should students and their parents consider when making college decisions? Here are some factors school counselors should explore with students when considering if a community college provides the right fit in the choice of post-secondary institution:

FINANCES: Let's face it. In today's high-cost post-secondary world this is the number-one factor in choosing where to attend school. Unless the student has a full scholarship or the student's family can afford whatever the student wants, the cost of education is the biggest factor in selection of a college. Community colleges offer the first 60 units, and sometimes more, of a 120-unit bachelor's degree at a fraction of the cost of a four-year institution. This can save students and their families thousands of dollars over a two-year period.

LOCATION: As desperately as some students want to get away from home, some students prefer not to or can't afford to leave their current location. Whether the student is place-bound for family obligations, financial reasons, job responsibilities, or transportation reasons, the local community college may be a solid option.

PROGRAMS: Community colleges offer a wide range of programs attracting a wide range of students. These can include programs that transfer to universities, technical education programs, programs to upgrade job skills for students seeking to expand their employment opportunities, programs that meet a particular local demand, and programs that serve individual interest.

ENVIRONMENT: This may be a more important factor than the others because, in the long run, if students don't like their environment, they won't be as successful. Some factors in environment are subjective, and students will have to decide if a college fits just by being on campus. Other factors can be compared between colleges. Class size is important; the smaller the class size, the more attention students get. Community colleges sometimes have a lower student-to-instructor ratio, making contact with the instructor more likely. This may or may not be the case at a university, especially at a research institution where students may encounter more graduate assistants or teaching assistants than professors. Community colleges also offer the possibility of remediation. If the student struggles in a subject and needs more time to be successful, community college can offer that possibility. A four-year institution will likely tell students who need remediation to go to the community college until they are ready for the college-level coursework.

To successfully guide your students into making the right post-secondary choices, you should be familiar with your local community colleges, the programs available, the student success rate, and the variety of reasons students choose to attend community college. You can be the key in providing the information students and their parents need to make an informed decision about where to attend college. The improvements in community colleges over the past decades make them a good option for a wider variety of students than ever before.

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