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News

Too Few Guidance Counselors, Too Little Information: Why Community College Might Be the Best Path for High School Graduates — But They'll Never Know It



Natalie Hamilton, left, Northwood High School counselor, gives college advice to senior students Bianca Schteiden, 18, at Northwood High School in Irvine, California. (Allen J. Schaben/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images)

Despite a stellar high school record with great grades, Advanced Placement classes and leadership positions on the debate team and in marching band, Jennifer Hernandez was completely unprepared during her senior year to choose a college or even comprehend the jargon that surrounds the application process.

“I did not know where to start,” she said. As a first-generation student living in the Chicago suburb of Rolling Meadows, Illinois, she didn’t have family who could decipher the terminology or take her to visit college campuses. Nor did she get that help from an adviser. Like many high schools around the country, hers did not have enough guidance counselors, she said. And the counselors the school did have were too busy to support students who needed extra help, like her.

With no one to guide her, Hernandez applied to a number of four-year colleges — some local, some chosen at random — not realizing until she received her acceptance letters that she could not afford them. She then scrambled, on her own, to apply to a community college later in the spring of her senior year. Her school counselors, she said, again didn’t help with her application, or provide much-needed information about how she could eventually transfer to a four-year school. With the stigma associated with community college, Hernandez said, she felt demoralized. “It was pretty rough,” she said.

Hernandez’s experiences are not unusual.

With an average of nearly 500 students per guidance counselor nationwide, experts say, college advisers bear too many responsibilities and have caseloads too large to give students the support they need. Another factor: National rankings of high schools are based in part on how many graduates go on to four-year colleges or universities, exerting pressure on guidance counselors that can create an anti-community college culture.

It’s the neediest students who suffer most from this lack of advisement. They may miss out on low-cost opportunities at their local community colleges, which educate nearly 6 million students nationwide. And even if they do enroll, many are ill-prepared to make decisions about majors or craft long-term educational and career goals, especially when it comes to the notoriously complicated matter of transferring credits to a four-year school.

Recognizing this problem, some community colleges have created new programs and positions to fill the information gap and give students like Hernandez, now 22 and newly graduated from University of Illinois at Chicago, what she said they need: more straight talk about higher education.

So much work, so little information

High school guidance counselors typically don't receive formal training around college and career counseling, said Melissa Clinedinst, associate director of research for the National Association of College Admission Counselors. What they do learn about post-high school options for students, they pick up on the job in between arranging kids' schedules, proctoring exams and supporting teenagers with social and emotional issues.

In a recent [survey](#) of 2,259 high school counselors conducted by the association, most reported feeling at least "moderately prepared" to advise students about the application process at community colleges. But most said they weren't ready to discuss important issues such as transfer policies, for-profit college comparisons and certificate programs or vocational licenses. "We did find that on certain topics, counselors weren't as prepared as we would like them to be," Clinedinst said. She was particularly surprised that respondents were unable to guide students about transfer policies even at their local institutions, and said counselors should be able to explain the difference between community colleges and for-profit schools that work on commission, can be much more expensive and have a reputation for being forced to close for breaking regulations.

High levels of stigma toward community colleges among students and families, she said, may discourage guidance counselors from learning more.

Pressure from school leaders to send students to four-year schools — and boost their national rankings — may also contribute to an anti-community college mentality in high schools.

Matthew Reed, an administrator at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey and a [columnist](#) for Inside Higher Ed, said these ranking systems motivate guidance counselors to push students to four-year institutions when a two-year school might actually be a better option. "For me," he said, "that's just criminal."

Missed Opportunities and Costly Errors

Without good guidance, high school students might miss out on educational opportunities in their own backyard, said Elisabeth Barnett, a researcher at Columbia University's Community College Research Center. Community colleges are often essential for students, like Hernandez, who come from lower-middle-income families and typically receive far less financial support from four-year colleges than students whose families qualify for Pell Grants. They are convenient to students' homes and have strong connections to local employment opportunities. In fact, Barnett said, an associate degree from a two-year school often provides a more direct route to a career than a bachelor's degree, particularly in certain health and technical fields. John Sygielski, president of HACC, Central Pennsylvania's Community College, said schools like his can also offer a higher-quality classroom experience. Unlike many four-year schools, where faculty must conduct research, "we have teachers who are committed to teaching only," he said. Sygielski's students range from career-minded teens and adults pursuing certification in a vocational field to high-achieving high schoolers who want to accrue college credits before transferring to an elite university.

But just because those students find their way to a community college, that doesn't mean they're prepared, Barnett said. Without a guidance counselor to lay the groundwork in high school, they struggle with having to make decisions about majors, degrees, remedial classes and course offerings on Day One.

"Many students come in rather lost," Barnett said, particularly first-generation students who attended lower-income high schools with few college advisers. That learning curve leads to poor choices, particularly for students who wish to earn a bachelor's degree down the line. According to the Columbia research center, 80 percent of community college students plan to transfer to a four-year school. But only one-third are able to make that jump, Barnett said, in part because the process is so complicated. Not all credits will transfer, and each school has its own rules. Many students make costly errors, like taking classes that another institution won't accept, because they lack knowledge. "We know that students face way too many barriers. Even just finding information can be difficult," said Judith Brauer, an associate director at the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students.

"Students don't realize that there's a lot involved with transferring," Clinedinst said. "They think that they'll be easily able to move from the community college to a four-year college."

Remedies for the information gap

With a lack of guidance counselors making essential information difficult for students to find, some community colleges are establishing new programs and administrative positions to support ill-prepared teens.

Reed said many two-year schools now offer “guided pathways” programs that place their students on very structured, well-organized routes toward graduation. His school, Brookdale Community College, provides students with a transfer counselor to help them create a game plan for moving to a target four-year institution.

Other colleges, like HACC, send recruiters directly into high schools to inform students about the application process and answer questions about majors and transfer policies. “We like to bring the community college to the high school to give the student a good understanding of college,” Sygielski said.

In Arizona, where there are 924 students for every high school guidance counselor, Mesa Community College places its own permanent, full-time staffers — with their own offices — inside six feeder high schools. There, they can answer students’ questions face to face, meet with parents, collect enrollment packets, discuss career options and register students for classes, explained Tara Blomvall, a student services manager for Mesa Community. They help coordinate a FAFSA Night, explaining to parents how to fill out government financial aid forms; host application workshops; and administer placement tests. “We can provide every step of the enrollment process for the students here at their high school,” Blomvall said.

Although Hernandez didn’t have anything near the sort of intensive advisement that Mesa Community provides, she completed her associate degree in two years at her local community college. Now, two years later, despite a commute that sometimes takes three hours, she will graduate in May with a bachelor’s degree in English. She’s paying it forward by advising students like herself on her [blog](#) and plans to work in politics or public policy, perhaps focusing on higher education.

In the end, she’s very proud of the path she’s taken, saying she waves her associate degree proudly. And she wants other students to understand that going to a four-year college

immediately after high school isn't the only route to higher education. "It's really important to recognize that there are alternatives," she said.