

Bad Advice, No Advice

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The counseling that students receive in high school isn't effective in helping them enroll in college, according to a national survey released today.

The survey and an accompanying report, which are by Public Agenda (a research group) and financed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, **suggest that high school counselors may be a weak link in the chain needed to get more students into college. The report -- "Can I Get a Little Advice Here?"** -- notes that tight budgets have resulted in student-to-counselor ratios well beyond those recommended by experts. But the overall tone of the study is critical of the counselors.

The findings are based on a national survey of 614 individuals aged 22 through 30 who had attended college (although not necessarily for long or long enough to earn a degree). Among the responses:

- 48 percent said that they felt like "just another face in the crowd" in dealing with their guidance counselors.
- 67 percent said that they would rank their counselors as fair or poor in helping them find an appropriate college.
- **62 percent said that they would rank their counselors as fair or poor in helping them find ways to pay for college.**
- 60 percent gave their counselors fair or poor rankings on thinking about different career paths.

The report says that these findings don't just point to hurt feelings of those who didn't connect with their counselors. Rather, the report says, there appears to be a correlation between the degree to which students have a good counseling relationship, and whether they make decisions that land them at the right institutions, and with a plan to pay for college.

For example, 51 percent of students who felt their counselors made an effort to know them had a scholarship or other assistance in paying for college. Only 41 percent of those who felt they were "a face in the crowd" obtained such aid. And while only 35 percent of those who felt their counselors understood them said that they would have enrolled in another college had money not been a factor, 46 percent of the "face in the crowd" individuals felt that way.

Those who were surveyed gave their advisers in college better evaluations. Sixty percent said that their college advisers were good or excellent in helping them decide which courses to take. **But the ratings went down a bit when focused on finances, with only half giving good or excellent ratings when it comes to helping them understand how to get loans or scholarships.**

As the report notes, student-to-counselor ratios have grown in recent years, making it more difficult for counselors to spend enough time with students. The national average ratio is about 265 to 1, but in some states the ratio is much higher, and the California figure is close to 1,000 to 1.

Joyce Smith, chief executive officer of the National Association for College Admission Counseling, said in an interview that it was important to place the survey in context. **She noted that the duties of counselors vary widely, and that some are able to focus on the college selection process, while for others that may be only a small area of responsibility.** When school districts accept high student-to-counselor ratios, she said, or don't give counselors the time and support to keep up on admissions and financial aid, it's not surprising that some students wish they had more time or received better advice.

But Smith said that she also hears lots of frustrations about the process from counselors themselves. In the digital era, she said, more families "are doing their own searches and coming up with lists and students don't always listen to what the counselors say," Smith said.

While Smith said it's great that families use Web searches to learn about the process, she said that she worries when she hears counselors tell her about families that bring in a list of colleges based on magazine rankings that may or may not be appropriate for the student -- and then expect the counselor to just push the materials through the application process. Counselors can "provide a reality check" for families, Smith said, but only if they listen.

— **Scott Jaschik**