



Taking Action to Improve Post-secondary Readiness for All Learners

BY JANET E. WALL

Recent reports have highlighted the need for better and more extensive career and educational planning, but post-secondary students give school guidance counselors low marks on the delivery of services. What can you do to promote success?

The U.S. Council on Competitiveness (2007) claims that continuing prosperity will require greater worker investment in post-secondary education and training. It highlighted difficulties in education and training systems stemming from low completion rates, limited accountability, and poor coordination among different programs. Additional studies show that students do not feel they are getting the needed assistance in facing the challenges of choosing college and careers.

Falling Graduation Rates

Although the occupational demands of the future require skills obtained through post-secondary education and training, a very high percentage of post-secondary starters do not finish. Current statistics indicate that 80% of students who enter two-year institutions fail to graduate within 3 years. Similarly, 60% of students in four-year institutions do not finish their degrees within 6 years (Choitz, 2010). Globally, U.S. college graduation rates have fallen to 12th place among advanced industrial societies.

The issue is even more distressing when you consider the high school dropout rate. No state has a graduation rate above 88%, with gaps between various racial and ethnic groups, and low and higher income students, giving us great cause for worry about the future of so many young people. Given our global economy, it does not bode well for the future of the economy when the United States ranked 20 out of 28 on high school graduation rates among industrialized democracies.

The reasons for this poor showing of high school and college completers are many and complex but clearly, experiences students encounter in educational institutions are pivotal for individuals who are at risk of not finishing their educational goals.

Weaknesses in the System

In a recent survey of 600 young adults ages 22 – 30 conducted by Public Agenda (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009, 2010), participants were asked why they were not able to complete their post-secondary degrees. The top reason was that going to school and working at the same time was too stressful to sustain. In addition, high cost was a major factor in causing them to drop out. Not

surprisingly, non-degree completers stated that they selected their post-secondary education options more for cost and convenience than on career choice and quality of program.

In a subsequent report by the same organization, both degree completers and non-completers gave poor marks to high school counselors in helping them to think about and plan for careers, deciding what school to attend, providing advice on how to pay for college, and working through the college application process.

Another finding was that non-completers often came from families that had financial challenges, and/or the parents did not have a higher education degree and, thus, were not able to offer college and career planning advice to their sons or daughters. These students were more likely to grade their school counselors low. Research shows that the high school students who are in most need of counseling about getting into and doing well in college are the least likely to get that assistance because of conflicting priorities of counselors. Large numbers of disadvantaged students do not know their career and educational options and they are not academically prepared for college despite earning a high school diploma.

Seventy-two percent of those surveyed indicated that “the opportunity to talk with advisors who know all about the different college and job-training programs so you can make a good choice” would be very helpful. The proportion is much higher for African-American and Hispanic youth.

It is interesting to note that teachers, including coaches, were rated more highly than high school counselors in terms of providing encouragement and support to go on to college and to continue to learn. The same held true for advisors and counselors at the post-secondary level.

In summary, the report

concluded that the current high school counseling system is weak in helping to increase college attendance and college completion – a national economic imperative.

General Solutions?

More Counselors. Organizations such as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) believe that the student to counselor ratio for high schools should be around 250 to 1, while in reality it is around 460 to 1, nearly twice the recommended ratio. College and career counseling is only one of the many tasks and responsibilities that need to be carried out by these professionals.

More counselors in schools can help students get more individual attention. ASCA further suggests that the workload of school counselors should not include non-counseling duties. Though logical and undoubtedly helpful, that solution will be slow in coming in light of economic constraints faced by schools. At best, it is only a partial answer.

High Expectations for All

Students. It is important to devise and implement a national career development and planning core curriculum required of all students that has expected and measured outcomes. Content could be based on the National Career Development Guidelines and/or the ASCA National Standards, but it should have more in-depth instruction focusing on skills such as how to apply to college, obtain scholarships, determine job requirements, identify the best post-secondary education for the career choice, develop a post-secondary plan, etc. It should teach those skills required for life-long career self-management.

Shared Responsibility. School counseling staff should not bear the sole burden of advising students on careers and career planning. If post-secondary education is in

fact important to American global competitiveness, the job of school-level career guidance should be a joint responsibility of all school staff, parents, the community, public and private institutions, politicians, employers, and the students themselves. The surveys verified that teachers were influential in encouraging students to attain further education, yet many high school dropouts claim that they saw no connection between their school subjects and their futures. It takes all school personnel to help students make connections and become career and college ready.

Specific Tools for Action by Counselors

1. Update your school website every week to highlight an occupation and include the skills, abilities, and education necessary to successfully perform that occupation.
2. Collaborate with academic teachers to identify ways they can highlight careers requiring knowledge and skills in their subject areas. For example, English/Language Arts teachers can highlight those occupations that use writing skills.
3. Give students and parents a reality check by inviting college personnel to deliver workshops on the academic and financial expectations of colleges and universities.
4. Upon giving an interest inventory, provide lists of occupations that fit that interest area. Try <http://online.onetcenter.org> for initial information. Have students identify the educational requirements of the occupations that seem most interesting to them at this point.
5. Hold parent workshops on occupations at various education levels and their related wages to show that not all good jobs require a university degree, but many require post-secondary education and training.

6. Track your post-secondary applicants to a) see if they have been admitted, and b) if they finish their certificates or degrees. Interview non-completers to identify the obstacles.
7. Create online workshops and make them available to both students and parents that identify expectations for college applications, financial aid, time management, costs, and other issues.
8. Create YouTube videos on topics related to career development that are directed to students and parents.
9. Update your own knowledge base by participating in career development courses or certification programs like the Career Development Facilitator Program. <http://www.ncda.org>.

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