COLLEGE FOR ALL

With a practical approach, school counselors can make great strides on the journey to creating college-going cultures in their schools.

BY KRIS HARVEY

We've all seen them – the kids who would experience great success in college but have never even considered applying. Perhaps their parents aren't college-educated and are convinced a college degree isn't necessary. Perhaps there are financial issues involved, and they don't think there's any way they could afford it so they don't even consider it. Or perhaps their self-esteem is low, and they think they'd fail at college.

Helping these students realize that, yes, they can attend college should be a schoolwide effort, one the school counselor is uniquely positioned to lead. One of the best ways to accomplish this is by creating a college-going culture in your school.

The term "college-going culture" is ubiquitous in today's school environment literature. What isn't as common is a definition of exactly what this term means, why it's important and how schools can achieve it. Without this information, schools struggling to get students to perform at grade level are unlikely to discover how raising expectations can actually help, not hurt, their students' performance.

With some basic information and a practical, step-by-step approach, school counselors can help transform their schools' cultures in ways that will significantly improve students' lives.

WHAT IS A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE?
There are many different definitions, but one of the most common is the one used by the College Board in "CollegeEd®: Creating a College-Going Culture." There, a college-going culture is defined as an environment "that builds the expectation of postsecondary education for all students – not just the best students. It inspires the best in every student." A school with a college-going culture is one where the goal for students is not simply to graduate from high

school but to obtain a college degree. It means creating an atmosphere where all students are engaged in a rigorous curriculum that adequately prepares them for the academic demands of postsecondary education.

WHY DON'T SCHOOLS HAVE A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE? Many schools don't have college-going cultures because faculty and administrators there believe college advocacy and planning should be done at home. The problem with this approach is that, unfortunately, many students who have the potential to succeed at college don't receive this type of encouragement and support at home. Research has repeatedly shown that a family's income and experience with college are better predictors of a student's enrollment in college than the student's academic performance. In these situations, creating a college-going culture can go a long way toward reducing the achievement gap between rich and poor students.

Some schools don't have college-going cultures because many of their students aren't performing well in less-challenging courses, and they fear increasing the rigor will only result in more failing students. Just the opposite occurs. According to the Education Trust, schools that raise academic standards find student performance improves.

Other schools don't develop a college-going culture because they are too focused on other priorities they believe are more important, such as testing or addressing drop-out rates. What these schools fail to realize is that these things are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, having a college-going culture can actually help schools achieve many of their other objectives.

HOW DOES A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE HELP SCHOOLS MEET THEIR GOALS? Simple. By emphasizing the many lifelong benefits of a college degree, schools can shift students' focus from the short term to the long term. In doing so, schools help students see the value of their performance in middle and high school and why it's in their best interest to do well and work hard.

Students who believe a college degree will increase their standard of living in life and see the connection between doing well in school and getting into college are much more likely to care about their performance on state and national tests. They're also more likely to improve their attendance and grade-point averages. A college-bound student sees the value of staying in school, instead of dropping out, and is interested in a more rigorous curriculum.

Assess Your Culture

To get an accurate picture of its existing culture, a school should evaluate itself both quantitatively and qualitatively.

A quantitative measurement of a secondary school's college-going culture

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should include an analysis of its performance in the following key areas:

- College application rate
- College acceptance rate
- Percentage of students who take the SAT or ACT
- Average SAT or ACT score
- Number of students who take the PSAT/NMSQT or PLAN
- Number of college-level or AP classes offered
- Number of students who take AP classes
- Number of school-improvement goals related to college

A qualitative assessment of a school's college-going culture should involve surveying key stakeholders about their attitudes toward college. Topics covered should include the following:

- Students: plans to attend college, type of college they plan to attend, ways they are preparing for college academically, plans for financing college
- Parents: whether or not they attended and/or graduated from college, their interest in encouraging their children to obtain a college degree, their belief in their ability to pay for their children's college education, their knowledge of the preparation and application requirements
- Faculty: their beliefs that all students have the potential to earn a postsecondary degree, their agreement with the need for a college-going culture at school, their knowledge level about college admission requirements, their willingness to incorporate college advocacy messages into their classroom lessons

Take a Stand

Once you've determined your school's existing college culture, you can help improve the culture using a five-step process.

First, a school should establish specif- ic, measurable and time-sensitive goals. In other words, it's not enough to say, "Increase the number of students who apply for postsecondary education." A more specific goal would be, "By the end of the 2007–2008 school year, increase the number of students who apply for postsecondary education by 25 percent." The latter is a much more specific objective because it includes a deadline and is quantifiable.

Second, schools must establish procedures for tracking and measuring their progress toward goals. This step includes deciding who will be responsible for maintaining and updating these data. Many schools don't realize until they attempt to measure their existing college culture that they have poor systems in place for measuring many key metrics. For example, it's not uncommon for schools to have no way of knowing how many of their students apply to or get accepted at college and to not know who at the school is responsible for collecting this information.

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One way to obtain this type of information from students is to simply ask them for it. Schools should continually request this information not only from the students themselves but also from parents. Include requests in newsletters, on the school's Web site and at parent conferences. Often, students and parents have never provided this information because they didn't think schools were interested in it. A school that sets goals to improve its college-going culture and assigns someone, often a school counselor, to own this information sends a message to the school community that it cares about these types of things.

The third step is to establish strategies and tactics for meeting the school's goals. One great way to tackle this project is to separate the big strategies from the small ones.

Small strategies are defined as things the school can accomplish with little effort or money and include activities such as:

- Hanging college posters and pennants in the hallways.
- Having faculty wear college sweatshirts every Friday.
- Starting a college newsletter.
- Announcing college entrance exam dates.
- Setting the default screen on school computers to college Web sites.
- Offering computer time to families to complete financial aid and college applications.
- Inviting recent college graduates to speak at assemblies or in classrooms.
- Inviting admissions officers to speak at assemblies or in classrooms.
- Hosting a college fair and/or a financial aid information session.
- Instituting a "college of the week" profile.
- Organizing or sponsoring campus visits.
- Creating a college corner in the school.
- Starting an alumni directory.

- Celebrating students' acceptances publicly.

Big strategies involve a much larger commitment of time and resources. Usually, they take longer and are more expensive to implement than smaller strategies. Some examples of big strategies to consider are:

- Offering an advanced, rigorous curriculum available to all students.
- Establishing the curriculum required for admission to local four-year colleges as the curriculum required for high school graduation.
- Offering free SAT and/or ACT preparation classes.
- Providing the PSAT or PLAN free to all 10th-grade students.
- Providing professional development in college counseling.
- Integrating college topics into the curriculum. For example, students in pre-algebra could be given the following ratio/proportion problem: "If two-thirds of the students at U of I are in the School of

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Engineering and U of I has 35,000 students, how many students are engineering majors?" English language arts students could be asked to write a college admission essay.

- Implementing a college-awareness and planning curriculum such as the College Board's CollegeEd program, which is a classroom-based curriculum for students in grades 7-12.
- Partnering with national, federally funded programs promoting college readiness for low-income and first-generation college students. Two such programs are TRIO and Gain Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEARUP). Both programs serve students in grades 7-12.
- Implementing a college-preparation program such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID). An elective for underperforming students, AVID promotes rigorous

coursework and provides tutoring for students in grades 4-12.

The fourth step in creating a college-going culture is measuring the school's progress and continually revising and improving its strategies. Using the methods outlined in earlier steps, schools should, on a regular basis (annually, at least) monitor their progress toward their goals. A thorough review of a school's progress should include answering the following questions:

- Which goals has the school met?
- Which goals has it not met?
- Which strategies and/or tactics were most effective in helping the school meet its goals? Why?
- Which strategies and/or tactics were least effective? Why?

After the school has answered these critical questions, it can begin to set new goals and establish more effective strategies for the following school year.

The fifth, and final, step is to communicate the school's results.

Unfortunately, many schools forget this critical step. If a school previously communicated to faculty, students and parents its college-going goals, those key stakeholders will be expecting to hear from the school on the status of these goals. Schools shouldn't disappoint them by failing to keep them updated or, worse, send the message that the school no longer considers having a college-going culture a high priority. Instead, the school should take every opportunity to report on its progress, even if it didn't meet all goals. An honest and open report is more likely to result in a more successful year next year.

Creating a college-going culture in a school is not easy, but its rewards are worth the effort. Schools having difficulty meeting goals such as improving standardized test scores and decreasing drop-out rates have found that creating a college-going culture can help. Many schools are also deciding that creating a college-

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going culture can help reduce the achievement gap between rich and poor students. School counselors can, and should, play a key role in establishing such a culture. As an advocate for students, they are often in the best position to serve as a change agent in school. SC

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Advancement Via Individual Determination
A college-preparation program for underperforming students in grades 4-12
www.avidonline.org

TRIO and GEARUP
National, federally funded programs promoting college readiness for low-income and first-generation college students, grades 7-12.
www.ed.gov

The College Board's CollegeEd Program
A classroom-based college-awareness and planning curriculum for students in grades 7-12
www.collegeboard.com/collegeed

ACT
Provides a wealth of information and databases online for college searches, financial aid calculators and more.
www.act.org/path/secondary/college.html

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