



# A New Vision for the College Counseling Office

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## ***Core Values, Mission, and the College Admission Process in Independent Schools***

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Fifteen years ago, I received a letter from a father whose son I had been advising in his college search. "I have been through a divorce and the kidnapping of a child," he wrote, "and I can truthfully say that I prefer both to the college admissions process."

And that was 15 years ago.

Today, the process is even more complex and more anxiety-provoking for parents and students. The stakes feel higher (although much of this is probably hype) and independent schools sometimes seem to react to the pressures from colleges and parents as though they are under siege. The process has taken on a quasi-adversarial edge that is unproductive and often contrary to the best interests of students. Which brings us to the topic of our discussion today.

I think that I bring to this panel multiple perspectives, gleaned from my serial careers as a Princeton Dean of Admission, then as a private college admissions

counselor, and now as a consultant to more than 250 independent schools. As a result of all these experiences, I have developed empathy for all of the groups that are now often at loggerheads as a result of college admissions pressures.

I understand the anxiety of parents about the future of their children in an uncertain world even though I think much of it is overblown.

I understand why the most selective colleges have developed complex admissions rating systems to draw fine distinctions within a large pool of well-qualified applicants, many of whom come from your schools.

And I understand the resentment of independent school faculties and administrators about the extent to which college admissions considerations now drive programs and policies.

What I hope to do today is suggest a new approach that independent schools might take to respond to this complicated issue. Because I have only a few minutes, I hope you will forgive me if I am direct rather than politic in describing what I see as a common failing of independent schools in this area.

Virtually all independent secondary schools describe themselves as college-preparatory but most display an unwillingness to determine how well they actually prepare their students for college. Schools have somehow convinced parents – and themselves – that the college placement record is adequate evidence of their success in fulfilling their college-preparatory mission.

I would argue, in fact, that the obsessive focus among many parents and trustees on the annual matriculation list stems from a lack of any other concrete information.

What do parents really want?

While a vocal subset of independent school parents are obsessively focused on the admission of their child to a handful of prestigious colleges, most parents have more balanced goals:

- They want their child to have a happy, rewarding, and well-balanced secondary school experience.
- They want their child to be well prepared for the academic demands of college.
- They want help navigating the confusing and anxiety-provoking college admissions process.
- They want their child's hard work to be rewarded with appealing

choices at the end of the college search process.

- Ultimately, they want their sizable educational investment to pay off in their child's successful completion of college and launch into productive adulthood.

Independent schools need not compromise their missions in order to respond to college admissions pressures. You can be both mission-driven and outcome-focused in the operation of your college placement operation – as long as the outcome on which you focus is success in college rather than success in admissions.

Unfortunately, most independent schools can't really say what typically happens to their graduates when they move on to college. And Upper School teachers sometimes appear to be offended at the notion that they should concern themselves with what colleges want their students to know and be able to do.

This misplaced ambivalence about the college-preparatory component of the mission is reflected in the limited roles typically assigned to the college counseling office. If you describe yourself as a college-preparatory institution, someone in the school should be an advocate for that component of your mission. That person should be the Director of College Counseling.

College counselors have been placed under a great deal of scrutiny and pressure in recent years, but few have been accorded a corresponding amount of influence in the administrative structure. I believe that the Director of College Counseling should report directly to the Head of School and should be a member of the senior administrative cabinet, accorded a role equivalent to that of the Director of Admissions or the Director of Development.

Like the Director of Admissions, he or she should bridge the gap between internal and external – serving as both an advocate for the school to its external constituencies and as a messenger from the outside world back to the school community. To perform this role effectively, the Director of College Counseling needs to be an expert on three distinct phases of the process:

- college preparation,
- college selection and placement, and
- the college experience of your graduates over time.

Stated another way, the role of the College Counseling Director should be expanded well beyond the typical responsibilities related to managing the application process. I'd like to focus on three key roles

that are not commonly included in this administrator's portfolio, but which would help establish a stronger sense of common purpose among all of the interested parties in the college admissions conversation.

***Role 1. Systematically collect, analyze, and share data about the experiences of your graduates throughout their college careers.***

Most college counseling offices are awash in statistical data about the admissions process but lacking in the most important information of all: How do our graduates perform at specific colleges and how well do those colleges serve our graduates?

Every independent school should track the college experiences of its alumni, ideally in a comprehensive annual survey administered every year for five years from the date of graduation. If carefully designed and analyzed, this instrument would provide the college counseling office with a wealth of valuable data. Because most independent schools send the majority of their graduates to a core group of colleges, this information accumulated over time could help college counselors to tailor their recommendations on the basis of solid historical data about the experience of their graduates at particular colleges.

The information gathered would serve two vitally important functions:

First, it would allow the college counseling office to be a consumer advocate for your students, pointing out the strengths and shortcomings of various colleges on the basis of your graduates' actual experiences rather than viewbook claims. From which colleges are your students most likely to transfer out or fail to graduate within 5 years? In which colleges is the academic advising perceived as a weakness? At which colleges do your students seem to thrive?

Second, it would enable the college counseling office to identify strengths and shortcomings within your own educational program that, if corrected, might help your students to be more successful in college.

For example:

- What if you discovered that a very small percentage of your students end up pursuing careers in science and math?
- What if you learned that a high proportion of your most outstanding students were experiencing academic or emotional burnout early in their college careers?
- Do you know how well your students adapt to anonymous, large lecture-format classes after years spent in your intimate

seminar-style classes? Are they well prepared for the high-stakes midterms and final exams?

- Can you advise parents and students about the likely impact of the AP track on the college careers of your students? Is there a tangible benefit (or perhaps a detrimental effect) for students who take 6 or 7 APs as opposed to 2 or 3?

Solid data in all of these areas would enable the school to make appropriate adjustments to program and policies. As the person who analyzes this information, the Director of College Counseling also would be well positioned to fulfill the second expanded role I envision for this office:

***Role 2. Be an advocate for excellence in the college-preparatory aspects of the school's mission.***

As a member of the Head's leadership team, the Director of College Counseling should have a voice in decisions about the educational programs and policies that influence students' preparedness for college. At most schools, decisions about course requirements, advanced offerings, and the design of the academic calendar and schedule all rest almost entirely with the faculty. Often, the decision-making process has no external component at all.

This is akin to a company developing a new product and a new marketing strategy without taking into account the needs or preferences of their consumers. Like it or not, colleges and universities should be viewed as your customers. The college counselor can be a bridge between your program and your audience.

Whenever I visit independent secondary schools, I hear about issues currently being debated by the faculty. Among the questions they are grappling with:

- Do our grading practices serve our students well?
- What constitutes a meaningful educational experience for second-semester seniors?
- How large an AP program should we offer and what restrictions should we place on student access to these courses?
- To what extent, if any, should we evaluate teachers on the basis of their students' performance on SAT II and AP exams?
- Should we offer test prep courses to our students?

All of these decisions relate directly to your college prep mission and all should involve input from a college counselor who is knowledgeable about admissions practices

and the experiences of your graduates in these important areas.

The issues surrounding standardized testing are a prime example of the need for leadership in defining excellence in college preparation. As the school administrator charged with building bridges between the school and colleges, the Director of College Counseling is ideally situated to lead the school community in articulating its philosophy and goals with regard to standardized test preparation. This issue should not be left to the personal bias of each faculty member.

Within the past week, there have been two news items of interest to independent schools caught up in the standardized test wars.

The College Board has just announced that it is eliminating the SAT II score choice option, meaning that your students will no longer be able to take the exam in a given subject on a no-risk basis. If students elect to report any SAT II scores to colleges, ALL of their SAT II scores will be reported.

In abandoning the score choice practice, the College Board said that it favored wealthy students and those with access to savvy counselors – in short, your students. With the safety valve option of burying unimpressive test results eliminated, your faculty members who proudly insist that

they do not teach to the test should now be prepared for heightened scrutiny of their students' SAT II results.

Harvard University will no longer award college credit to freshmen who score lower than a 5 on an AP exam. They say they are taking this step after finding that students with AP scores of 4 who were placed in second-year economics or chemistry classes performed far worse than those with scores of 5, and worse than students who did not receive advanced standing.

Many colleges, in fact, are rethinking the adequacy or the desirability of the AP curriculum, particularly now that so many students are arriving on their doorsteps with 6 or 7 APs under their belts. These developments raise all sorts of questions for independent schools, particularly those that have developed extensive AP programs.

If your mission is excellent preparation for college, what if it turns out that helping some students to achieve advanced standing actually affects their college performance adversely? Can you predict which of your students are likely to benefit and which are likely to be harmed?

It may actually turn out that the cohort who would benefit most are those who will attend less selective colleges where

introductory courses are more likely to be equivalent to the AP courses.

There is room in the independent school universe for schools that say flatly, we do not teach to the test, and there is room for schools that say we believe this is an important part of our college prep mission. The important thing, in my view, is that each school has the courage of its convictions in this area.

If you are going to permit your faculty wide latitude in establishing their own curriculum – with no teacher accountability for student performance on SAT IIs and the AP exams – then you need to be willing to tell your parents why you do not consider standardized test preparation a part of your college-preparatory mission. In making these determinations, the college counselor should play a vital role.

The third expanded role I envision for the Director of College Counseling relates to the development of each student's initial college list.

***Role 3. The College Counselor should be a knowledgeable resource for students in making college choices that maximize their chance of a successful undergraduate experience.***

Families choose independent schools because they seek an educational environment in which their child will be well known by the faculty and will receive instruction tailored to their talents and needs. Most parents also expect that the school will do a good job of presenting their students to colleges – and most independent schools do, providing counselor reports and faculty recommendations which demonstrate that they know their students well.

But many independent schools are missing a key opportunity to fulfill their mission of positioning their students for success in college. Too often, parents, students, and college counselors are overly focused on the mechanics of the admissions process rather than the critically important decision of which colleges to consider.

One way to see if this disconnect applies to your students is to review their application essay responses to the ubiquitous question, “Why do you want to attend this college?” In my experience, this fairly straightforward question stumps an incredibly high proportion of students. In other words, most students cannot demonstrate a sound rationale for their college list.

Why is this the case? All too frequently, college counselors rely on two questionable strategies in developing the list. Often, they begin by recording the colleges mentioned by the students and

their parents early in the process, and then fine-tune the list by adding a school or two. The problem with this strategy is that both students and parents often approach this task from a position of ignorance.

The second strategy employed by many college counseling offices is the development of a list that matches student credentials with the selectivity measures of various colleges in order to come up with a list of possibilities, which are then narrowed through reliance on geographic and size preferences.

In my experience, it is relatively rare for a college counselor to help each student focus on such critical questions as:

- What kind of educational environment best matches my learning style?
- Do I learn best in the classroom or should I seek out opportunities for real-world internships during my college career?
- How much academic and personal support do I need?
- How well do I handle academic pressure? Would I do better in a competitive or a cooperative educational environment?
- In what areas do I need to strengthen my skills? Writing? Public speaking?

- Do my long-term goals include graduate school?

Helping students to develop a college list that takes into account the answers to these critical questions is not a simple matter. It would require a college counseling staff that is exceptionally knowledgeable about a core group of colleges and closely attuned to the learning styles of each student. But there is perhaps no greater service a college counselor can perform than to open a students' eyes to possibilities they would not otherwise have considered.

### **Conclusion**

Having laid out my idealistic vision for a greatly enhanced, mission-driven college guidance office, I need to acknowledge the

reality that such an office would require resources not typically provided to this function in today's independent schools. Among the added requirements would be more staffing to allow for individualized counseling, more travel to colleges, and more expertise in data collection and analysis.

Perhaps this is an unrealistic vision. On the other hand, all of us realize that – for reasons largely beyond your control – independent schools can no longer rely on an impressive college admissions list as a point of competitive distinction. Perhaps the time has come to identify a new competitive advantage: a verifiable record of success among your graduates in the next stage of their educational careers.