

# 04

## COLLEGE COUNSELING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

### Introduction

Using results from the 2014 NACAC Counseling Trends Survey, this chapter explores the different facets of the school counseling profession as they relate to precollege advising, including student-to-counselor ratios, counseling department priorities, college counseling activities, and counselor professional development.

NACAC's *Statement on Precollege Guidance and Counseling and the Role of the School Counselor* defines precollege counseling as generally including activities that help students: 1) pursue the

most challenging curriculum that results in enhanced postsecondary educational options; 2) identify and satisfy attendant requirements for college access; and 3) navigate the maze of financial aid, college choice, and other processes related to college application and admission.<sup>1</sup>

School counselors play a key role in assisting students through the transition to postsecondary education. By collaborating with school administrators, teachers, community representatives, government officials, and parents, school counselors can be significant assets throughout the college application and admission processes.

### Student-to-Counselor Ratios

According to the US Department of Education, in 2013–14 each public school counselor (including pre-kindergarten, elementary, and secondary counselors<sup>2</sup>) was responsible for overseeing 476 students, on average.<sup>3</sup> Counselors at public secondary schools had smaller caseloads than their primary school counterparts, serving an average of 436 students. As highlighted in Figure 3, these ratios have changed very little over the past 10 years.

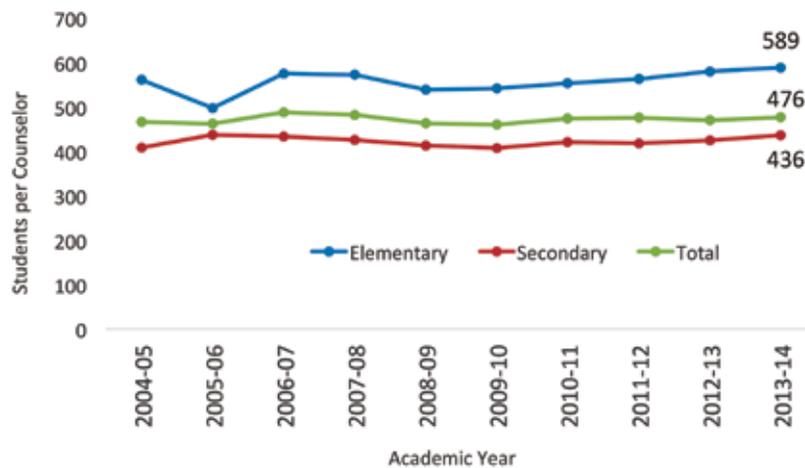
Results of NACAC's 2014 Counseling Trends Survey indicated the average student-to-counselor

<sup>1</sup> National Association for College Admission Counseling. (1990). *Statement on Precollege Guidance and the Role of the School Counselor*. Available at: [www.nacacnet.org/about/Governance/Policies/Documents/RoleofSchlCounsNEW.pdf](http://www.nacacnet.org/about/Governance/Policies/Documents/RoleofSchlCounsNEW.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of these calculations, elementary school is defined as grades K–5 and secondary as grades 6–12. The number of counselors is provided by school level only.

<sup>3</sup> US Department of Education. (2015). *Common Core of Data State Nonfiscal Survey Public Elementary/Secondary Education: School Year, 2013–14 Version 1a*. Washington, DC: NCES.

FIGURE 3: PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT-TO-COUNSELOR RATIOS BY SCHOOL LEVEL: 2004–05 TO 2013–14



NOTE: For the purpose of these calculations, elementary school is defined as grades K-5 and secondary school as grades 6-12. The total number of counselors is provided only by school level, not grade level.

SOURCE: US Department of Education. *Common Core of Data State Nonfiscal Survey Public Elementary/Secondary Education: School Years 2004-05 through 2013-14*. Washington, DC: NCES.

ratio for both public and private high schools combined, taking into account part-time staff, was 285-to-1. This number exceeds the 250-to-1 maximum ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association.<sup>4</sup> Data regarding the extent to which college advising is part of counselors' job responsibilities showed the average student-to-college counselor ratio was 350-to-1.<sup>5</sup>

Public institutions assigned substantially more students to each counselor. There also were

significant differences in the student-to-counselor and student-to-college counselor ratios by enrollment size. Overall, the largest schools had significantly higher ratios than institutions with fewer than 1,500 students (see Table 12).

Notably, while 73 percent of private schools reported that they employed at least one counselor (full- or part-time) whose sole responsibility was to provide college counseling for students, only 30 percent of public institutions had a dedicated college advisor. Schools

with high student-to-counselor ratios were also less likely to have a dedicated college counselor.

US Department of Education data show that student-to-counselor ratios vary widely. In 2013–14, only three states—New Hampshire, Vermont, and Wyoming—had ratios below ASCA's 250-to-1 recommended threshold. The states with the highest number of students per counselor included Arizona (941), California (812), Minnesota (743), Michigan (732), and Illinois (700). (A list of average public school student-to-counselor ratios for all 50 states plus the District of Columbia can be found in Appendix Table B.8.)

### Counseling Department Priorities

Counseling departments must juggle a number of responsibilities in catering to a diverse population of students. In order to understand the priorities of school counseling departments, survey respondents were asked to rank the importance of four goals:

- Boosting students' academic achievement
- Educating students about postsecondary options and preparing them for the college admission process
- Fostering students' personal growth and development
- Assisting students with preparing for work roles after high school.

<sup>4</sup> American School Counselor Association. (2016). *The Role of the School Counselor*. Alexandria, VA: ASCA.

<sup>5</sup> The student-to-college counselor ratio is based on both the total number of counselors who exclusively provide college counseling for students and the total number who provide college counseling among other services for students. As such, it overestimates the focus on college counseling. Both full-time and part-time counselors were included in this calculation.

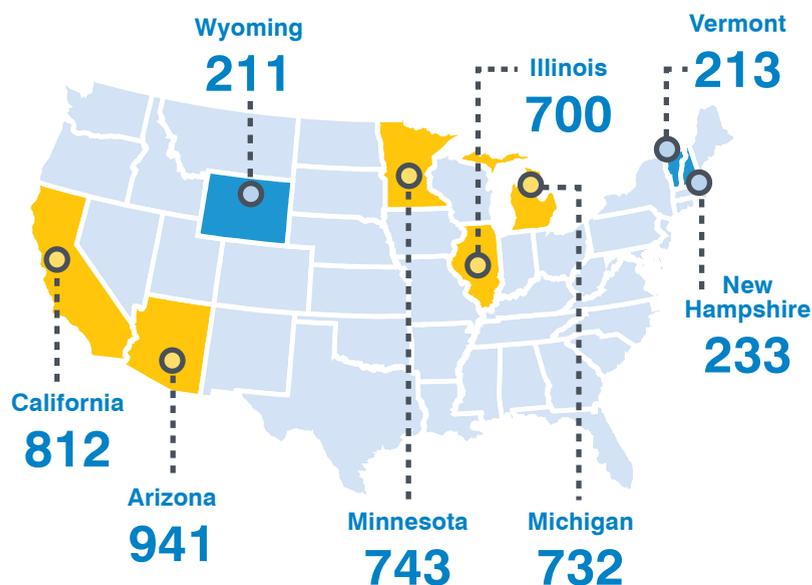
TABLE 12: AVERAGE STUDENT-TO-COUNSELOR AND STUDENT-TO-COLLEGE COUNSELOR RATIOS, BY SCHOOL TYPE AND ENROLLMENT

	Students per Counselor	Students per College Counselor
<b>All Survey Respondents</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>350</b>
<i>Type</i>		
Public	303	358
Private	222	323
<i>Enrollment</i>		
Fewer than 500 students	214	246
500 to 999	288	361
1,000 to 1,499	306	378
1,500 to 1,999	377	492
2,000 or more students	403	510

NOTE: Independent *t*-tests and one-way ANOVAs showed there was a statistical difference between the number of students per counselor and: control:  $t(1306)=5.6, p < .001$ ; enrollment:  $F(4,1309)=30.6, p < .001$ . There also was a statistical difference between students per college counselor and enrollment,  $F(4,1308) = 37.4, p < .001$ .

SOURCE: NACAC Counseling Trends Survey, 2014.

## STATES WITH HIGHEST AND LOWEST RATIOS



Overall, survey results indicated that helping students succeed academically and prepare for postsecondary education were the top priorities of most counseling offices. While public school counselors indicated providing academic guidance was their key priority, private school counselors were more focused on postsecondary advising. Public school counselors—especially from low-income schools<sup>6</sup>—also ranked helping students prepare for the workforce more highly than their private school counterparts. By contrast, private school counselors and individuals from institutions with lower student-to-counselor ratios placed a higher emphasis on fostering students' personal development.

<sup>6</sup> The percentage of the student body eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch was used as a proxy for whether the school served a low-income population.

## COUNSELING DEPARTMENT PRIORITIES



### Public Schools

**First priority academic achievement; second priority college planning**



### Private Schools

**First priority college planning; second priority academic achievement**

## Staff Time for College Counseling

Postsecondary admission counseling is one of many functions of school counselors. On average, the time that counselors in secondary schools spend on various tasks breaks down in the following way:

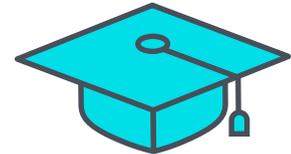
- Postsecondary admission counseling (30 percent)
- Choice and scheduling of high school courses (21 percent)
- Personal needs counseling (19 percent)
- Academic testing (13 percent)
- Occupational counseling and job placement (6 percent)
- Teaching (5 percent)
- Other non-guidance activities (5 percent)

However, the division of time among these tasks differs significantly based on school characteristics. For example, private school counselors spent more than double the amount of time as their public school counterparts on college counseling. As private schools tend to be small, enrolling fewer low-income

## PERCENTAGE OF TIME SPENT ON COLLEGE COUNSELING



**Public Schools  
22%**



**Private Schools  
55%**

students than public institutions, it makes sense that counselors from more affluent schools with small enrollments have more time to devote to college advising.

(A more detailed breakdown of the time counselors spent on these tasks by various school characteristics can be found in Appendix Table B.9.)

## Counselor Activities Related to College Counseling

Counselors engage in a variety of activities to assist students with the process of applying to college. As shown in Figure 4, the most frequent activities included individual meetings with students to discuss postsecondary admission options and hosting college representatives. Almost half of counselors (48 percent) also reported frequently engaging in electronic communication with students or parents about postsecondary admission. About 40 percent noted that they frequently engage in the following activities: representing students to college admission officers, reviewing students' college applications, hosting group counseling sessions about postsecondary education, and meeting with parents.

There are variations in the extent to which students at different types of schools benefit from these services. For example, counselors at private schools reported that they engage more frequently than those at public schools in most of these activities, with the exception of financial aid counseling. Counselors at larger schools spent more time meeting with parents and electronically communicating about admission, and less time reviewing applications and organizing college campus tours.

## Professional Development

In 2014, 37 percent of high schools reported that counselors responsible for postsecondary counseling were required to participate in related professional development. Private high schools were much more likely than public institutions to require professional development for counselors (54 percent and

32 percent, respectively), and they were more likely to cover all associated costs (70 percent and 33 percent, respectively). Schools with lower student-to-counselor ratios also were more likely to require professional development in postsecondary counseling and to cover all costs. (See Table B.10. for a more detailed breakdown of professional development requirements and costs by various school characteristics.)

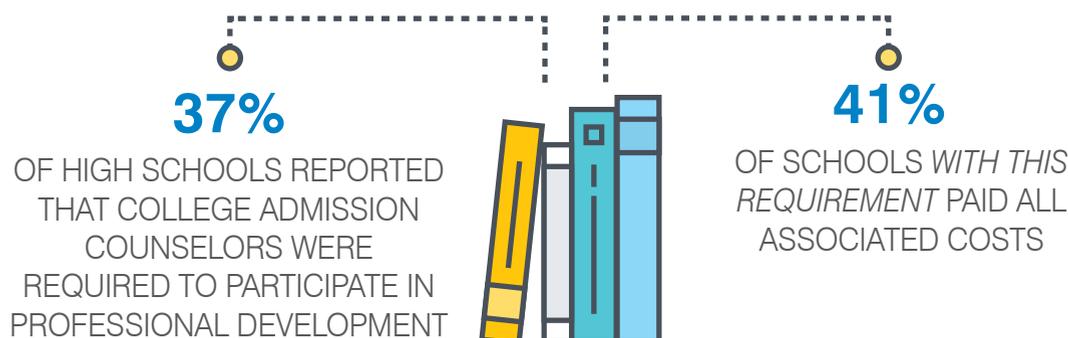
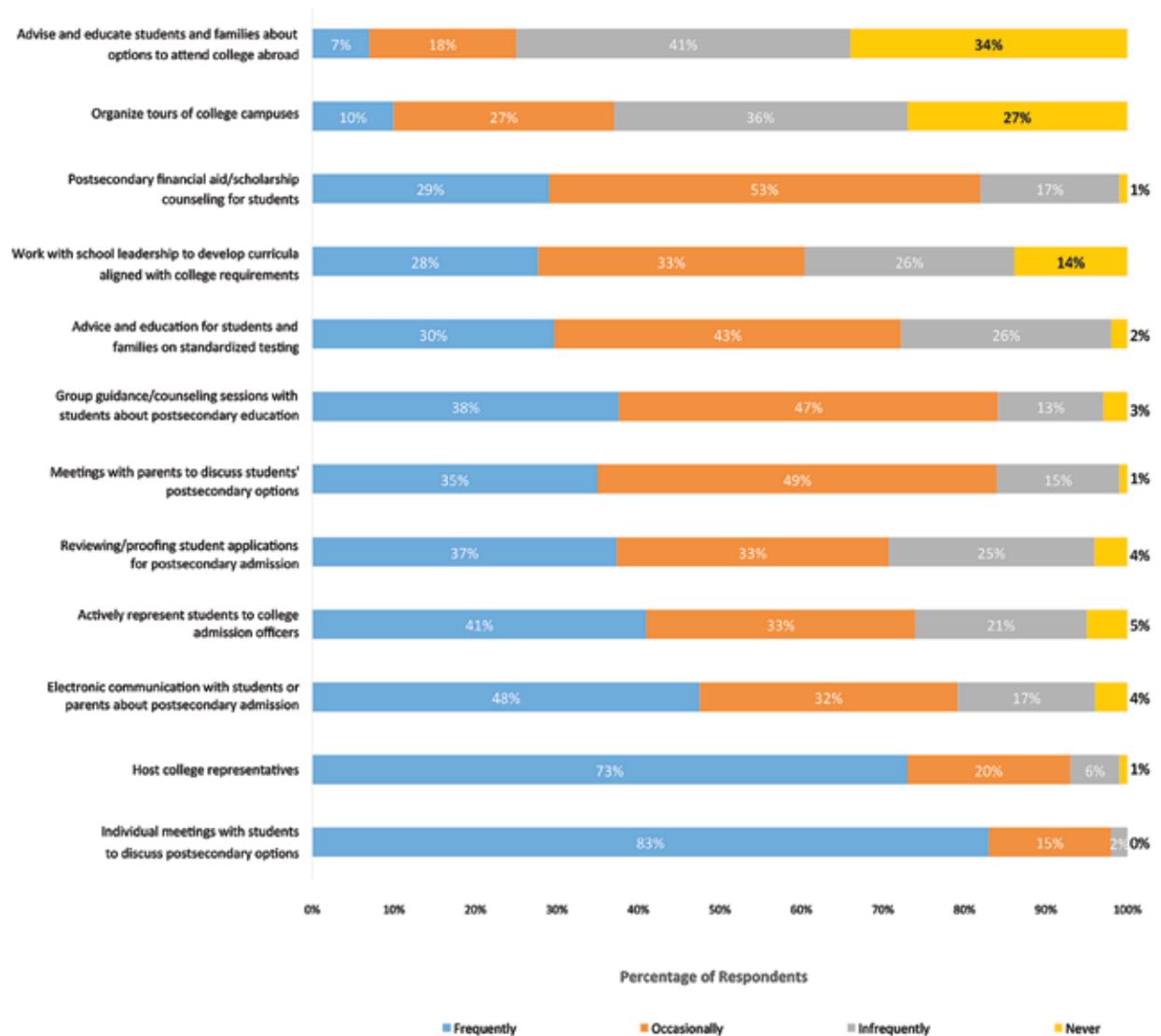


FIGURE 4: FREQUENCY COUNSELORS ENGAGED IN ACTIVITIES RELATED TO POSTSECONDARY ADMISSION COUNSELING



SOURCE: NACAC Counseling Trends Survey, 2014.