EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

US secondary schools are experiencing the effects of globalization, particularly on account of their growing population of international students. The latest data from the United States Department of Homeland Security show that US high schools hosted 22,589 exchange students and 59,392 diploma-seeking students from over 200 countries in 2016 (Farrugia, 2017).

One of the most significant reasons that international students choose to pursue secondary education in the US is the perception that it will increase their chances of admission to top American colleges. With the growth of international students, the high school counselors who advise them on the college admission process are experiencing new professional challenges. Because many colleges have specific application, testing, and financial requirements for noncitizens, counselors can be a key source of guidance as students navigate the undergraduate admission process. Yet, there is limited research to date exploring whether counselors currently possess the resources and skills to adequately serve international students. This study addresses that gap.

Challenges Encountered by College Counselors

Drawing upon interviews with a diverse sample of 20 college counselors from across the United States, this study examines the unique challenges they face in advising international students about postsecondary education. It also highlights ways these professionals can be further supported.

Negotiating Language and Cultural Divides

- Almost all counselors cited negotiating language and cultural barriers as a significant obstacle. Because a minimum level of English proficiency was not required for admission at many of the schools in this study, some students arrived in the US with insufficient English skills. As a result, counselors experienced difficulty communicating with them about the intricacies of the admission process. Effectively engaging with their parents was also a challenge since the families of international students did not always speak English.

- Even students fluent in English often have difficulty understanding the vocabulary surrounding the college admission process. Counselors have to be cautious to not use specific terms, acronyms, or slang without providing thorough explanations or the necessary background context.

Assembling the College List

- Convincing international students to explore college options that are the right “fit” rather than those within a narrow list defined by prestige, cultural expectations, and parental and agent influence can be an insurmountable hurdle.

- University rankings often have an inordinate influence on international students’ college choices, largely because top employers in their home countries prefer to hire students from highly-ranked institutions.
Navigating the Use of Third-Party Agents

- Seventy-five percent of all counselors, and 90 percent of private school counselors, reported their international students work with third-party agents.
- No schools in the study had a written policy outlining the relationship between the counseling office and agents, leaving counselors unsure of how to collaborate with the external consultants.
- All counselors agreed that navigating the admission process with consultants can be challenging. This was largely because agents can sometimes provide inaccurate information or unsound advice to students.

Dearth of Training and Professional Development Opportunities

- Of the 17 counselors who had completed an advanced degree in counseling or education, most reported their programs did not include content specifically about working with nonimmigrant international students.
- Only four schools—all private institutions—offered in-house trainings to faculty and staff, including college counselors, about advising the international student population. The vast majority of counselors neither received any formal training nor were aware of the variety of resources about the international student admission process produced by professional associations, universities, other non-profits, and the federal government.
- All counselors agreed they would benefit from more training opportunities, and the majority thought such training would be useful at their schools.
- This lack of training may contribute to why some respondents did not feel fully confident working with international students. On average, college counselors felt less comfortable advising international students about the college admission process than domestic students.

Recommendations for Supporting College Counselors

The following are recommendations for how college counselors who advise international students can be further supported:

1. Counselors need more training about advising international students, especially regarding the college admission process.

   Curricula for graduate counseling programs should include coursework focused specifically on working with diverse student populations, including international students on nonimmigrant visas. Schools with foreign students should organize trainings or professional development opportunities for counselors that cover topics such as effectively communicating with students and families and navigating cultural differences.

2. More opportunities to share best practices at the state and national level should be created for counselors who work with international students.

   Building a strong network of counselors nationally who advise international students at the secondary level is important in allowing the exchange of ideas and strategies for addressing common challenges. This is especially critical for counselors at public schools, who overall tended to feel more isolated in their work with these students.

3. Higher education stakeholders should create more resources relevant for international students and their counselors concerning the undergraduate admission process. Better dissemination of existing information is also needed.

   Colleges and universities, nonprofit organizations, professional associations, and federal, state, and local governments should ensure their resources focused on postsecondary education are useful for all students, including those from abroad.

   Better dissemination of content that is already available is also necessary, as many professionals are unaware of resources that may be relevant to their work.