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CHAPTER 4 SCHOOL COUNSELING

Introduction

Using data from NACAC's 2016 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.¹ 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 process.

Student-to-Counselor Ratios

According to the US Department of Education, in 2014–15 each public school counselor (including pre-kindergarten, elementary, and secondary counselors²) was responsible for overseeing 482 students, on average.³ Counselors at public secondary schools had smaller caseloads than their primary school counterparts, serving an average of 437 students. As highlighted in Figure 3, these ratios have changed very little over the past 10 years.

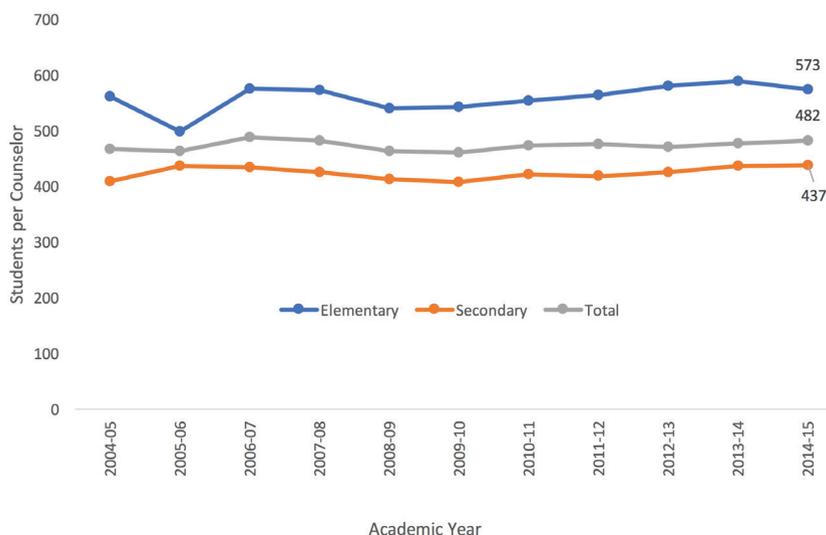
Results of NACAC's 2016 Counseling Trends Survey indicated the average student-to-counselor

¹ National Association for College Admission Counseling. (1990). *Statement on Precollege Guidance and the Role of the School Counselor*. Available at: <https://www.nacacnet.org/advocacy—ethics/statement-of-principles-of-good-practice>.

² For this analysis, elementary school is defined as grades K-5 and secondary as grades 6-12.

³ US Department of Education. (2016). *Common Core of Data State Nonfiscal Survey Public Elementary/Secondary Education: School Year, 2014–15 Version 1a*. Washington, DC: NCES.

FIGURE 3. PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT-TO-COUNSELOR RATIOS BY SCHOOL LEVEL: 2004–05 TO 2014–15



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 thru 2014–15*. Washington, DC: NCES.

ratio for both public and private secondary schools combined, taking into account part-time staff, was 281-to-1. This number exceeds the 250-to-1 maximum ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association.⁴ Data regarding the extent to which college advising is part of counselors' job responsibilities showed the average student-to-college counselor ratio was 314-to-1.⁵

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 13).

Notably, while nearly half (49 percent) of private schools reported that they had at least one counselor (full- or part-time) whose sole responsibility was to provide college counseling for students, only 28

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 250:1 recommended threshold. The states with the highest number of students per counselor included Arizona (924), California (760), Michigan (729), Minnesota (723), and Illinois (664).

(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.)

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 (21 percent)
- Choice and scheduling of high school courses (23 percent)
- Personal needs counseling (23 percent)
- Academic testing (14 percent)
- Occupational counseling and job placement (7 percent)

⁴ American School Counselor Association. (2016). *The role of the school counselor*. Alexandria, VA: ASCA.

⁵ 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.

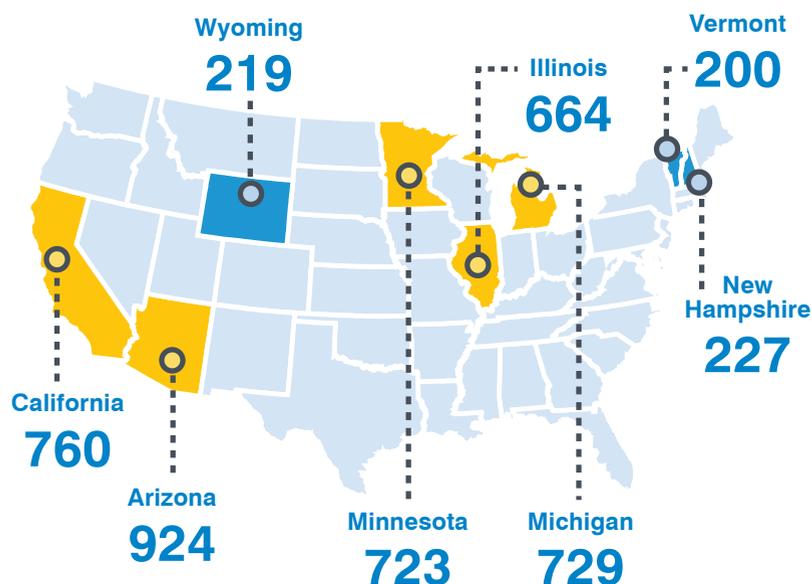
TABLE 12. AVERAGE STUDENT-TO-COUNSELOR AND STUDENT-TO-COLLEGE COUNSELOR RATIOS, BY SCHOOL TYPE AND ENROLLMENT, 2016

	Students per Counselor	Students per College Counselor
Total	281	314
<i>Type</i>		
Public	287	316
Private	235	296
<i>Enrollment</i>		
Fewer than 500 students	223	238
500 to 999	329	378
1,000 to 1,499	325	366
1,500 to 1,999	342	385
2,000 or more students	394	473
<i>Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL)</i>		
0 to 25% of students eligible	277	314
26 to 50%	291	319
51 to 75%	297	326
76 to 100%	258	284

NOTE: Independent *t*-tests and one-way ANOVAs showed there was a statistical difference between the number of students per counselor and: school type: $t(2017)=4.3, p < .001$; Enrollment: $F(4, 2019) = 54.0, p < .001$; and FRPL: $F(3, 1637) = 3.8, p = .01$. There also was a statistical difference between students per college counselor and Enrollment, $F(4,1999) = 64.6, p < .001$; and FRPL: $F(3, 1621) = 2.6, p < .05$.

SOURCE: NACAC Counseling Trends Survey, 2016

STATES WITH HIGHEST AND LOWEST RATIOS



- Teaching (6 percent)
- Other non-guidance activities (6 percent)

However, the division of time among these task differs significantly based on school characteristics. For example, private school counselors spent substantially more time on college counseling when compared to their public school counterparts (31 percent versus 20 percent). Counselors at schools with more students eligible for free and reduced price lunch spent less time on postsecondary admission counseling.

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

Counselor Activities

As part of NACAC's 2016 Counseling Trends Survey, respondents were asked to indicate the counseling department's level of involvement in developing curricula that aligns with postsecondary requirements. Only one-quarter (25 percent) of counselors reported being an integral part of this process and 30 percent had some involvement. Counselors at private schools were more likely to report being integral to the curriculum development process (36 percent) in comparison to those at public schools (24 percent). Counselors who worked at smaller schools also were more likely to be an essential part of curriculum development (28 percent at schools with fewer than 500 students compared to only 16 percent at schools with 2,000 or more students)

Results of a recent NACAC report based on a longitudinal study of more than 23,000 high school students showed that high school seniors who talked one-on-one with a school counselor were:

- 6.8 times more likely to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)
- 3.2 times more likely to attend college
- 2 times more likely to attend a bachelor's degree program⁶

Speaking with a counselor in ninth grade also was found to have a positive outcome on students' college-going behavior. Students who met with a counselor in ninth grade to discuss going to college had 22 percent higher odds of meeting with a counselor as a senior to specifically discuss financial aid.

NACAC's 2016 Counseling Trends Survey asked respondents to report the percentage of students who they met with individually at each grade level. As expected, the proportion of students who had these individual meetings with counselors increased at each grade level—29 percent in ninth grade, 36 percent in 10th grade, 62 percent in 11th grade, and 81 percent in the senior year of high school. The proportion of students benefiting from individual meetings varied predictably by the school type, but only during the junior and senior year. During 11th grade, 60 percent of students at public schools, on average, met individually with counselors, compared to 75 percent at private schools. During the senior year, the difference between public and private schools was smaller (80 percent versus 88 percent), but still significant.

COUNSELING DEPARTMENT PRIORITIES



Public Schools

60 percent of students met individually with a counselor in 11th grade.



Private Schools

75 percent of students met individually with a counselor in 11th grade.

⁶ Dunlop Velez, Erin. (2016). *How Can High School Counseling Shape Students' Postsecondary Attendance?* National Association for College Admission Counseling.