School Counselors and College Counseling During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The onset of COVID-19 brought myriad challenges to educational systems and the students they serve. Our study set out to explore specifically how the pandemic influenced students' college-going processes. Using the conceptual model of student college choice by Perna (2006) and the school counseling equity framework by Savitz-Romer and Nicola (2021), we examined students' college-going processes through the perspectives of school counselors, who are professionals uniquely positioned to speak to students' college-planning behaviors and the institutional changes that directly affect students. Findings suggest that students' college-going and planning was directly compromised by challenges from the pandemic and indirectly by changes in their college access support landscape.

Keywords: COVID-19, school counseling, college access, college choice, pandemic

COVID-19 drastically altered the college-going landscape for graduating high school students in the United States. Reports from the National Student Clearinghouse have revealed notable declines in college enrollment, the number of high school graduates matriculating during fall 2020 down 6.8% from the prior year—4.5 times greater than the drop in enrollment between the classes of 2018 and 2019 (Causey et al., 2021). Accompanying this enrollment slide was a decrease in Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion, with an estimated 270,000 fewer seniors completing the FAFSA than expected since 2020 (DeBaun, 2021).

There is evidence not only that the global pandemic affected students' college plans, but also that it exacerbated existing inequalities in college access specifically for low-income and minoritized students (Jaschik, 2021; Rath & Beland, 2020). For example, the decline in immediate college enrollment was steepest among students who attended minority-serving (10.7%) and high poverty (11.4%) secondary schools and, furthermore, the enrollment gap between students from high and low poverty schools expanded nearly six percentage points between 2019 and 2020 (Causey et al., 2021). Similarly, FAFSA completions declined 6.5% at Title-I eligible schools compared to 3.7% at their higher-income counterparts, and decreased 8.1% at schools with more than 40% Black and Latinx students compared to only 2.2% at schools with fewer students of color (DeBaun, 2021).

These statistics thus clearly suggest that COVID-19 impacted high school students'—particularly minoritized students'—thinking about higher education. However, while revealing, these data points do not explain how the pandemic influenced students' college-going aspirations and choices and the systems in place to support their postsecondary planning.

In this article we document exactly how the COVID-19 pandemic altered the college-planning behaviors of high school students. We approach this study through the lens of school counselors, who are uniquely positioned

to speak to shifts in college-planning behaviors of students and how institutional changes in the education sector during COVID-19 informed those behaviors. Drawing on rich qualitative data from a larger mixed-methods study exploring school counselors' experiences during the COVID-19 crisis, we investigated two key questions:

1. How did school counselors perceive COVID-19's impact on students' college-going behaviors and planning experiences?
2. How did the changing school and higher education contexts during the pandemic alter how school counselors provided college counseling and how their students navigated the college-going process?

We found that students' college planning processes were negatively influenced directly by the pandemic and indirectly by changes in their college planning support landscape. These findings suggest that counselors will need to reflect on their pandemic-driven college counseling adaptations to determine how to strengthen their programs for future students. Furthermore, at the postsecondary level, both school counselors and students would benefit from stronger institutional support moving forward. This study has important implications for school counselors and school and district leaders, as they continue to navigate the short- and long-term challenges brought on by the pandemic.

Literature Review and Conceptual Frameworks

Since the initial onset of school closures in March 2020, COVID-19 has dramatically changed the educational landscape in K–12 schools in ways that have negatively impacted the academic and social development of students. Remote and hybrid schooling meant students received fewer hours of academic instruction than typical and had more limited interactions with teachers and other school professionals, including school counselors (Flanagan et al., 2021; Meyers, 2020). This disconnect from their school support networks, coupled with pandemic-induced feelings of anxiety and loss, left many students struggling: one national survey in 2021 found that 72% of high school students reported experiencing signs of poor mental health during the pandemic, such as feeling happy less often or struggling to concentrate, and 46% thought that depression, stress, or anxiety was an obstacle to their learning (YouthTruth, 2021).

College planning by high school students has also not been spared from the negative effects of the pandemic. Navigating changes to the college admission process, including standardized testing policies and reduced access to school-based supports and college campuses, has caused significant stress for high school students (Jaschik, 2021; Rath & Beland, 2020). COVID-19 appears to have not only heightened anxieties about the college admission

process but also led students to reconsider their college plans. Indeed, in one 2021 national survey of high school juniors and seniors, a staggering 78% reported that COVID-19 impacted their postsecondary plans in some way, with almost half citing financial or family reasons (Flanagan et al., 2021). About a quarter of these students actually lowered their aspirations, intending to enroll in a two-year rather than a four-year college, and a similar percentage of students reported delaying enrollment or forgoing college altogether (Flanagan et al., 2021). These figures, combined with the previously noted drops in college enrollment and FAFSA completion numbers, offer compelling evidence of COVID-19's widespread impact on postsecondary planning by students (Causey et al., 2021; DeBaun, 2021; National Student Clearinghouse [NSC], 2021).

One way that COVID-19 influenced students' college decision-making was by limiting their access to school counselors—the primary school-based professionals who assist students with the postsecondary transition process. While school counselors typically guide students through the personal, financial, and logistical challenges of the college application and enrollment processes, school closures and distance learning left counselors struggling to connect with their students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2021; Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). In fact, in a national survey conducted at the beginning of the pandemic, school counselors overwhelmingly cited trying to access students and provide counseling services and lessons in a virtual environment as their greatest challenges (ASCA, 2021). Many counselors described how a lack of direction from their schools and districts about fulfilling their roles in virtual and hybrid formats further compounded these struggles (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). Counselors also reported facing significant time constraints from taking on additional duties due to COVID-19, including: following up with students not participating in virtual classes (73%), monitoring attendance (47%), implementing social–emotional learning initiatives (45%), and conducting health-related tasks such as temperature checks (20%; ASCA, 2021). As a result of school leaders asking counselors to oversee these extra duties—many of which fell outside the role of the school counselor—counselors had fewer opportunities for providing direct counseling to students, including college and career counseling (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021).

Counselors' difficulty accessing and building relationships with students had especially significant implications, given that school counselors play a central role in supporting students' postsecondary planning and transitions. Research has consistently found positive relationships between access to school counselors and improvements in students' college-going aspirations (Belasco, 2013; Radford & Ilfill, 2012) and their likelihood of submitting the FAFSA (LaManque, 2009; Owen & Westlund, 2016) and applying to college (Bryan et al., 2011; Radford et al., 2014). Empirical evidence, both

observational and causal, also suggests that counselors impact whether and where students enroll in college (Dunlop Velez, 2016; Hurwitz & Howell, 2014; Mulhern, 2020; Woods & Domina, 2014). Counselors are especially valuable resources for low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students, who tend to have less access outside of school to the types of resources that counselors provide (Cholewa et al., 2015; Mulhern, 2020). As such, students—especially those who are most marginalized—are directly affected when counselors are unable or limited in their ability to fulfill their college counseling roles.

Conceptual Frameworks

Emerging evidence thus suggests that COVID-19 fundamentally altered students' educational contexts and thus, their access to critical college counseling support. Scholars have long drawn on organizational frameworks to illustrate the impact of context on students' college going behaviors and choices (e.g., McDonough, 1997). In this article, we utilize a contextualized model of college choice (Perna, 2006) and an ecological model of school counseling equity (Savitz-Romer and Nicola, 2021) to examine how these changes shaped students' college decision-making process (see Figure 1). Through emphasizing the role of school counselors, both frameworks underscore how limited access to these resources during COVID-19 had the potential to alter students' postsecondary enrollment.

(Perna, 2006) Conceptual Model of Student College Choice

Perna's model of college choice (2006) blends economic and sociological perspectives on the college decision-making process. At the center of the model, students make decisions about whether and where to enroll in college based on their evaluation of the costs, including direct and opportunity costs, and the expected monetary and nonmonetary benefits of obtaining a degree. When making this evaluation, students also take into account the financial resources they have available to pay for college, as well as their personal "demand" for additional education, based on their prior academic achievement and preparation. This cost–benefit analysis is undertaken by an individual student but does not occur in a vacuum; students' decisions also occur within and are influenced by their social contexts.

Perna's model (2006) emphasizes four contextual layers: (1) the student's habitus; (2) the school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the larger social, economic, and policy context. These layers of context illustrate the ways that students' environments and the institutional agents within them impact students' decisions about college. Importantly, the nested design of the model also highlights the ways that each layer influences the interplay between these environmental impacts (Perna, 2006). Using COVID-19 as an example, the model illustrates how the broader social and
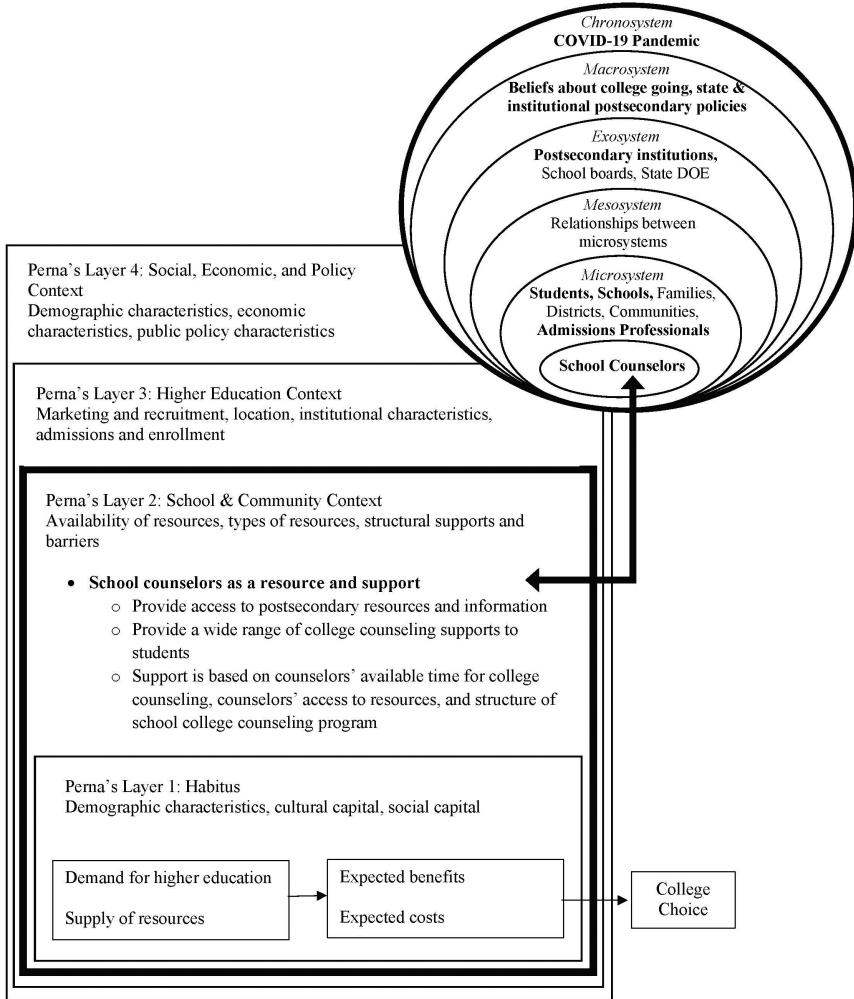
Adapted from Perna's (2006) *Proposed conceptual model of student college choice* and Savitz-Romer & Nicola's (2021) *A school counselor's ecosystem*

Figure 1. Combined Conceptual Model Counselors' Influence on College Choice

economic context of the pandemic might impact systems, processes, and policies for institutions of higher education, secondary schools, communities, and individual students. Further, changes in each environmental layer, in turn, influence the other contexts nested within them; for example, process changes in the higher education environment would likely influence both the ways that secondary schools prepare students for college, as well as the ways that individual students approach college applications.

This study considers the second layer, the school and community context, within which the school counselor is situated as our analytic focus. School counselors are one of the main actors in the school and community context that support students during the college choice process, providing information and resources and facilitating access to higher education actors such as admission offices. In this study, we consider how the higher education context and the larger social, economic, and policy contexts both influence school counselors' college counseling work and the behaviors of students participating in the college choice process.

Counselors' Ecological Context as Mediating their Influence

Although counselors are trained to support students' academic, social emotional, and postsecondary development, for students, the degree to which counselors can actually carry out their professional roles directly shapes whether and how students benefit from their efforts (Savitz-Romer, 2019). Therefore, in addition to drawing on Perna's (2006) model to conceptualize the forces influencing students' college decision-making, we also considered Savitz-Romer & Nicola's (2021) school counseling equity framework, which delineates the nested systems determining counselor efficacy (see Figure 1). Savitz-Romer & Nicola (2021) apply Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory to the school counseling field, placing counselors rather than students at the center of the model. They argue that five interconnected systems impact the ability of school counselors to support student needs— including their ability to undertake postsecondary counseling work.

As shown in Figure 1, the microsystem is the innermost system and encapsulates actors such as students, teachers, schools, and districts that directly determine the day-to-day work of counselors. Next is the mesosystem, which includes relationships between actors in the microsystem (e.g., teachers and families), followed by a layer called the exosystem that encompasses actors (e.g., professional associations, state departments of education) that are more distally situated but still indirectly influence counselor work. Finally, the macrosystem reflects the ideologies, beliefs, and values of society as well as those of stakeholders in the education sector that affect the counselor role, while the chronosystem considers how larger environmental factors shape the counseling profession overtime. Like Perna (2006), Savitz-Romer and Nicola (2021) highlight how each system influences the subsystems nested

within them. This model provides an organizing framework for considering the various environmental factors shaping school counselors' college counseling practices, which indirectly shape students' experiences.

In applying the framework to this study, we consider how a chrono-level factor—the rise of COVID-19—has influenced salient micro- and exosystem actors that in turn inform the college counseling services that counselors provide. Specifically, we explore the interplay between counselors and micro-system actors including students, school leaders, and college admission officers who directly engage with counselors. We also consider the relationship between counselors and exosystem actors such as college admission offices and professional associations that inform college admission policies. In doing so, we are able to chart how COVID-19 has affected counselor practice through influencing the larger systems that inform their work.

Methods

This study was part of a multi-phase project examining the experiences of school counselors amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). Embracing a pragmatic epistemological approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), the project incorporated a sequential explanatory mixed methods design (see Figure 2; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010) that combined rich quantitative and qualitative data to ascertain how the emergence of COVID-19 impacted the school counseling profession. Project components included a national survey with over 1,000 counselor participants administered during the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak in spring 2020 (Phase 1). We then conducted six follow-up focus groups with survey participants in winter 2021 (Phase 2), and 10 interviews with a subset of high school counselors who had both completed the initial survey in summer 2021 and participated in a focus group (Phase 3). Whereas the quantitative survey data offered a macro-level understanding of how school closures and the shift to remote and hybrid learning affected the ability of counselors to serve their students, it did not provide enough specific data that would allow us to answer our questions related to college counseling. The focus groups and interviews enabled us to address these questions, providing more nuanced information about counselors' experiences. As a result, the present analysis draws on data from the high school counselor focus groups and interviews, which we will now describe.

All of the participants in our focus groups and interviews entered our study during Phase 1 by completing our national survey (see Savitz-Romer et al., 2021 for additional detailed information). For the survey, we recruited participants through national and state professional association listservs, as well as social media. To ensure that we obtained a diverse sample, we also purchased contact details for 3,000 counselors at urban and rural schools
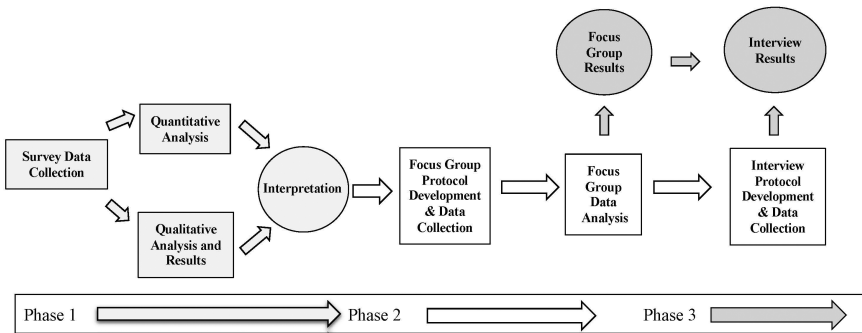
Figure 2. Explanatory Sequential Design Components

through MDR Education. In total, 1,060 counselors from 48 states and Puerto Rico—including nearly 400 who work with high school students—completed the survey.

Phase 2: Focus Groups

To delve deeper into the survey findings, we conducted semi-structured focus groups with survey participants. The 90-minute online focus groups took place in February and March 2021 and probed counselors about a number of topics that were consistently mentioned in the survey, including how they adapted their role during shifts to remote learning; the quantity and quality of direction they received from school leaders; and the most pressing day-to-day challenges they faced. We invited 232 of the original survey participants who expressed interest in future research opportunities to take part in a focus group. We conducted 11 focus groups with 47 of the survey participants. The focus group sample was predominantly White (73%) and female (80%), which largely reflects the school counseling profession (ASCA, 2021; Bruce & Bridgeland, 2012). See Table 1 for more information.

Because the counselor role varies across grade levels, we grouped participants by grades served. Six of the 11 focus groups contained only high school counselors, and one included counselors from across all grade levels. The high school counselor focus group protocols were focused on how they and their students navigated the shifting college admission landscape, how counselors were supporting students during the pandemic, and challenges that students were facing. This analysis focuses on data from the six high school counselor focus groups and the pilot focus group. Please see Appendix A for the focus group protocol.

Phase 3: Interviews

Intrigued by the information counselors shared during the focus groups about their college counseling work, the research team undertook interviews

TABLE 1.
OVERVIEW OF SURVEY, FOCUS GROUP, AND INTERVIEW SAMPLES

	Survey		Focus Group		Interview	
	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	N
Race		915		30		14
American Indian	<1%	8				
Asian	5%	49	7%	2	7%	1
Black	10%	87	10%	3		
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	<1%	2				
White	77%	705	73%	22	86%	12
Two or More	2%	15	7%	3	7%	1
Prefer Not to Answer	5%	49				
Ethnicity		922		31		14
Latinx	11%	100	23%	7	7%	1
Gender Identity		929		31		14
Female	84%	783	81%	25	71%	10
Male	15%	139	19%	6	29%	4
Genderqueer/Nonbinary	<1%	7				
Years in Counseling Field		926		31		14
0-2 years	11%	106	19%	6		
3-10 years	44%	406	42%	13	57%	8
11-19 years	25%	234	16%	5	21%	3
20+ years	19%	180	23%	7	21%	3
Grade Levels Served		1,060		31		14
Primary (K-5)	24%	249				
Middle (6-8)	19%	199				
High (9-12)	36%	376	80%	25	100%	14
Mixed[a]	22%	236	19%[a]	6		
School Urbanicity		1,059		31		14
Urban	30%	322	26%	8	36%	6
Suburban	37%	392	48%	15	50%	7
Rural	33%	345	26%	8	14%	1

[a] Includes counselors at K-12 and 6-12 schools.

with a subset of the high school focus group participants. We invited the 14 public high school counselors who noted during the focus groups that they undertook college counseling work as part of their role and interviewed ten. Like the survey and focus group samples, the interview sample was also composed of mostly White and female counselors as well as those from suburban schools (see Table 1).

The semi-structured interviews, which took place on Zoom and lasted approximately 60 minutes, offered rich insight into the lived experiences of individual counselors (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015); they also allowed the research team to probe participants further about the themes mentioned during their focus group. Counselors were asked to explain how they personally navigated changes in the college admission landscape, identified pain points for students in college planning during the pandemic, and shared examples of how students navigated difficulties in applying to college. See Appendix B for the interview protocol.

Analysis

Our analysis focused on the transcripts of seven focus groups and 10 interviews. We thematically coded each of these sources in Dedoose. In Phase 1 of the project, three members of the research team applied open coding to all of our open response survey items in order to identify 76 inductive and descriptive codes. We initially carried this codebook over into Phase 2 of the project to conduct deductive coding. The research team met frequently to iteratively refine the codebook after the focus group and interview data collection in order to identify new codes related to college counseling, which we grouped into six major categories based on emerging themes from the data: college processes, school processes, student processes, counselor actions, counselor attitudes and beliefs, and standardized testing. The research team double coded focus group and interview transcripts to ensure consistency in how codes were applied, using simultaneous coding and subcoding throughout (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2013). Two members of the research team then pulled codes by category to examine how each code related to our research questions, discussing larger themes from the data with the full research team and drafting our initial findings.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

We adopted multiple strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of our study. First, we triangulated findings across the study's sequential mixed methods design; consistency of themes across these data sources increased our confidence in the validity of the findings (Creswell, 2015). Second, at least two members of the research team coded each focus group and interview transcript. Not only did this ensure that codes were being correctly applied, but also offered an opportunity to discuss collectively how to craft

the codebook to best capture emerging themes. Finally, the research team embraced memo-writing throughout the data collection and analysis processes, both as a means of documenting emerging findings and reflecting on how our own identities and experiences in the education sector tinted our perception of the data. The research team consisted of five White, cis-gendered women; Stephanie Carroll and Tara Nicola are doctoral candidates in higher education and policy programs, while Heather Rowan-Kenyon is a professor who studies college student success, and Mandy Savitz-Romer is a school counselor educator and professor whose work focuses on increasing access to quality school-based counseling. As researchers with varied levels of experience in K–12 schools and with high school counselors specifically, memos were a useful tool for remaining cognizant of how our own biases, beliefs, and experiences shaped our interactions with counselors and the analysis of the data they shared.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are important to consider when interpreting the findings. First, the focus group and interview samples limit generalizability. Furthermore, because large percentage of participants identified as White women, our study does not fully capture the experiences of male counselors, as well as counselors of color. These professionals likely faced different sets of challenges during remote and hybrid learning not reflected in our findings. Likewise, we did not capture focus group participants' school level information and thus cannot differentiate between the unique experiences of those counselors working in urban, rural or suburban schools or the specific student populations in their schools. Finally, this study is cross-sectional in nature, with data collected at specific points in time during the unfolding pandemic. The information counselors shared may thus not reflect the full range of their experiences during the entirety of the global health crisis.

FINDINGS

Three primary themes demonstrate how rapid shifts in the college application landscape and organizational constraints at the high school level challenged the college counseling process for school counselors and students alike. In this section, we first present the perspectives of school counselors on how the global pandemic influenced their college planning. We then detail how changes in the high school and higher education contexts complicated the ways counselors carried out the college counseling aspect of their jobs.

The Broad Impact of the Pandemic

Since March 2020, school counselors have observed changes in behaviors of college-going students as a result of the pandemic. The impact of trauma,

changing family situations, and mental health issues on students' college plans and general well-being caused counselors to be deeply concerned about how their students would recover from the challenges of COVID-19. Their students were experiencing stress and anxiety over personal loss and housing and food insecurity. As a result, counselors reported that students considered college to be less of a priority. Many students were simply not in the right mental space to think about college; as a focus group participant shared, "It's kind of difficult for folks to be focusing on the college process when both the parents are on ventilators."

School counselors repeatedly shared that they spent more hours than ever before trying to ensure that students had their basic needs met, which left little time and space for college counseling. One counselor explained that while she was helping to support some students in their college search, she was simultaneously trying to convince other students not to drop out of school in their senior year. Indeed, some students were falling so far behind academically due to pandemic challenges that college seemed to be too far a reach. As one focus group participant in a predominantly low-income school stated:

> We're really finding that kids are kind of like, 'I'm not even touching college at this point.' They've really disengaged—they're not even sure they're going to graduate high school because they've kind of fallen off the wagon. And so really our college interest has just plummeted.

As a result of hardships caused by the pandemic, counselors described students who lowered their college aspirations or canceled their college plans altogether. For example, a focus group participant explained that, "I personally have a lot of kids who are thinking, 'I'm not ready to go to college next year, I'm going to take a year off.'" As family members lost jobs or became ill due to COVID-19, students often took on additional responsibilities or needed to work in order to financially support their loved ones. Another counselor shared in her interview:

> It was not uncommon for students who had full hopes of going to a four-year college, watching … as in their minds, it became further and further from being a reality. They have taken on additional responsibilities at home and so now their parents or guardians are really relying on them to take care of younger brothers or sisters, and so now that the student is like, 'Well, I can't go to college now because my family needs me.'

Counselors underscored how taking time off from going to college to support family members was a common reality among their low-income students especially.

When students did apply to college, counselors frequently cited changing geographic patterns in college application and matriculation, with many students opting to stay closer to home. While uncertainty about whether colleges would resort to virtual learning played a role in these decisions, counselors described many situations in which students "settled" for two-year colleges because of concerns about costs or about being able to support their families.

Changing High School and Postsecondary Contexts

Institutional changes at the high school and postsecondary levels further complicated high school counselors' ability to provide college counseling, and hindered student enrollment in college. Counselors reported that shifting school grading policies and graduation requirements, as well as colleges' standardized testing policies, made their jobs more difficult. One counselor illustrated how the knowledge base related to college planning was constantly shifting in spring 2020: "There have been weeks where what was 'true' on Monday was different on Tuesday and then changed a second time on Wednesday," she shared. Counselors emphasized how an already complex and anxiety-producing process became even more so in the midst of the pandemic, causing immense stress for students.

Influence of High School Context on the College Counseling Process

School counselors agreed that changes to school environments and administrative priorities resulted in substantial changes to their responsibilities, often requiring them to sideline their college and career counseling duties in order to meet the immediate needs of students and colleagues. In alignment with our earlier survey findings (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021), counselors reported spending less time on career development and college counseling duties in the spring of 2020 as compared to pre-COVID-19. One counselor described in her interview how her responsibilities shifted and as a result of these changes, "I lost a lot of valuable time where I could have been preparing my juniors for the college process and/or working with my seniors who needed extra help with financial aid and matriculation to college." Counselors were also concerned about students in lower grades, in part because they had yet to build strong personal relationships with these students and were unsure of how they were acclimating to high school in a virtual world. Counselors talked about a need for more intervention and interaction with the younger students to "remedy those things that we missed"; however, many counselors wondered how and whether they would be able to provide additional support for these students. In sum, counselors in our study felt their school counseling programs—and their ability more broadly to support students—suffered as a result of the multiple and conflicting demands on their time.

Changing school schedules and limited in-person time with students further constrained efforts of counselors to engage in college counseling with students. While counselors shared that, in a "normal" year, they regularly

gave class presentations about the college processes to students across grade levels, such as lessons on college essay writing or completing the Common Application and FAFSA, these opportunities disappeared as schools prioritized academic instruction during the school day in order to make up for lost instructional time. One focus group participant shared, "we weren't really allowed to go into the class for classroom lessons because it impeded too much upon instructional time." As a result, college counseling activities were often relegated to after-school hours and were moved to virtual formats, with varying levels of success.

This remote format prompted counselors to expand their programming and connect with students and parents in new ways. Counselors created extensive libraries of online resources, conducted remote workshops in multiple languages, and experimented with creative program delivery approaches such as using social media, and creating TikToks on how to fill out the FAFSA. One counselor shared how their school creatively used Instagram to help fill the gaps of campus visits and college representative school visits,

> We tried to try to find ways to connect students with different colleges, knowing that students were going to be more independent in their search process…so we had about 60 [colleges], who did a virtual live tour on our Instagram page, you know so like our students would be able to follow that…We tried to bring the information to them and then save that onto our Instagram page so that way you know, like if we, you know, wanted to be able to highlight a school to a student rather than us sitting and talking through it we could direct them to our Instagram page just to see you know, a tour, so that actually was really, that was a big success.

Despite embracing innovative approaches to sharing information about the college process, school counselors struggled with limited engagement from students and found that students' uptake of these resources was uneven. Many counselors pointed out that the virtual format left them relying on students to take the initiative to use these resources. Multiple counselors shared that pre-pandemic practices that required attendance at some of these events did not carry over to the virtual format; students perceived these meetings to be voluntary, especially since there were no consequences for not attending. Counselors struggled to figure out how to connect with students in a virtual space since many students were not regularly checking or responding to emails. The lack of engagement in virtual events led counselors to do more individualized follow up with students to answer questions or provide college-related support. Counselors also found that college counseling work took more time because communication and advising that would typically take a few minutes in person now needed to happen over email, often leading to multiple exchanges and delays when students failed to check their email regularly.

Since many students spent less time physically in the school building due to hybrid or remote learning schedules, or were unable to move around the school as easily as when they were in-person, counselors were not able to make informal connections with students or check-in on a regular basis. Whereas students in the past might stop by the counseling office to ask a question about college in between classes or during lunch, students now had to take the initiative to make formal appointments to discuss college with school counselors, typically outside of school hours. If students did not initiate college conversations, counselors often found it difficult to connect with students about college or to know which students needed more support. As a focus group participant noted:

> You can't easily get a kid who doesn't show up on Zoom, doesn't answer the phone, doesn't respond to a text, doesn't respond to an email. The student doesn't respond to you calling the parent. They've, you know, I guess the word is ghosted you.

This lack of engagement led to students falling behind in the college application process. At times students were late in initiating college conversations, and asking questions about missed deadlines or processes that should have happened earlier in the year. One counselor shared her experience with a student that due to a "lack of connection...I really wasn't aware that she hadn't turned in the FAFSA and her mom had had some issues filling it out." Counselors missed sustained in-person interactions with students and opportunities they presented to easily follow-up with students and answer their questions about the college process.

Influence of the Higher Education Context on the College Counseling Process

Counselors' depictions of their organizational working environment included references to changes in the higher education landscape and their influence on student needs and thus, counselors' practices. Counselors described shifting application deadlines, new questions about COVID-19 on college applications, and test-optional policies, all of which added complexity to the college counseling process. With so many changes happening, counselors felt like "there's a lot of moving targets going on." One counselor described in her interview:

> It seems like you're getting a new email every single week like, 'Oh, this date's extended, oh you don't need to do this, or oh, now we need this'...huge shifts on what the colleges are doing. So yeah, that I think has definitely been a challenge for not only students to keep up with but counseling staff and people who are supporting these students.

For many counselors, the pace and constant onslaught of communication around higher education changes was overwhelming, creating more uncer-

tainty and stress for them and the students they tried to guide through the process.

Due to college campuses being closed to visitors, school counselors had to advise students who had a hard time knowing if or where they wanted to go to college. Students were neither able to visit colleges nor interact personally with campus admission staff during high school visits during the height of the pandemic. Instead, they learned about institutions through virtual information sessions and tours and from the experiences of friends or family members. As a result, counselors shared increased concern about students' decision-making processes and whether they had enough of the information they needed to make the right decisions. Counselors also reported an increase in students choosing to take a gap year so that they did not spend the first year of college "in their parent's basement" or spending a lot of money to "sit in a dorm room and take classes on the computer." A counselor in one of our focus groups aptly summed up this challenge, stating:

> Definitely, the senior class is struggling with being motivated for what they're going to do next year, because they don't know what September and August is going to look like. And I don't blame them because how can you be excited when you don't even know if you can see the school that you're interested in, let alone going to live there.

Another way in which school counselors' reported changes to their practice due to shifts in higher education included their efforts to help students narrow down a list of schools. Many counselors described uncertainty about admission standards as selective institutions shifted to test-optional policies. While school counselors were supportive of the shift, it was more challenging for counselors to continue using tools such as Naviance, that include test scores as criteria to help students create college lists. When discussing the test-optional movement, one interview participant lamented that the lack of test scores actually creates "more uncertainty in the process" and thus as a result "students feel more uncertain about their chances at schools."

Counselors in our study also emphasized that students were significantly stressed about whether to take standardized tests. The large majority of counselors we spoke with mentioned they had conversations with students about whether to take the SAT or ACT, even if they were optional, with one counselor detailing how she called the college admission office with the student to confirm that not submitting SAT scores was acceptable. Further complicating the testing landscape, many counselors described logistical barriers to taking standardized tests, as fewer schools were offering testing sessions during the pandemic and students might have to travel for several hours to find an open test site. In one focus group, a counselor described the limited testing options in their state, noting that the "SATs have been pretty much canceled since last March. And I anticipate that they'll be canceled

right through June because districts just don't want strangers coming into their buildings."

Counselors also voiced concern about standardized testing requirements in future years, wondering if many colleges would return to requiring test scores in the near future. As one focus group participant related, "we don't know yet if our public school system in [state] is going to be test optional for next year. So I still need these kids to be pursuing that process." This uncertainty made it especially difficult to provide guidance to students who would be applying in future admission cycles.

School counselors provided coaching on how to approach the components of the application process differently in order to account for challenges faced during the pandemic. Counselors shared how they helped students with the Common Application, and in particular the new questions related to COVID-19 where they could include explanations of COVID complications in their lives, including family challenges and low grades. One counselor shared in her interview that she coached students that this section provided

> a chance to explain how difficult this last semester was for you. Or how it affected you, so that small little code section on the Common App was a relief for the students to see, 'I can still, you know, pick this back up next year just do as best I can in that first semester…Okay, I had a really rough time this past year', it may not be their dream [school], but we are going to still try for that one.

Additionally, counselors shared that juniors and seniors were worried about finding teachers to write recommendations, or the strength of those letters, given that they had rarely met in person due to remote schooling. As one interview participant shared, "Kids are really nervous that they don't have a teacher who is going to be able to write them a recommendation, like you know, do I go back my sophomore year?" Another counselor stressed the importance of the quality of recommendation letters with his teacher colleagues in light of the pass/fail grading policies that some schools adopted, emphasizing that students may be more reliant on teacher recommendations to explain their academic abilities.

For many school counselors, strong relationships with admission officers helped to ease some of the burden of keeping track of higher education changes and communicating shifts in college processes to students. These counselors were able to easily reach out to their higher education colleagues for updates on application and admission requirements. Counselors also shared that close relationships helped them to advocate for their students in the application process or to gather information on their behalf. A few counselors shared that they were also able to outsource some of their college programming to admissions officers, who were willing to conduct virtual sessions with students on general application guidance, hold transcript reviews, and run essay workshops. One counselor from a focus group provided the

example of a local university with whom she had close connections proactively reaching out to provide support: "They turned to us, like when we met last month, and they said, what do you need us to do? What do you want us as a college to do for you, because we have time right now." Most counselors shared that operating in a virtual format also allowed them to connect with a larger number or range of colleges than they had in the past. This benefit also translated to creating more connections between colleges and students and families.

A few participants noted that their relationships with admission officers suffered during the COVID pandemic for various reasons, ranging from school counselors' lack of time to a lack of outreach on the part of admission staff. For school counselors who were strapped for time, they missed out on the opportunity to keep relationship touchpoints open when they were unable to join virtual visits from admission officers. Other counselors shared that while the transition to virtual environments created greater access to admissions professionals in some ways, it also made these connections feel less personal. As one counselor shared:

> I think those relationships help, especially in the college admission process, because I'm not saying they admit your students 'cause they like you, but at least they know you and have that connection. Or they'll call you and say, 'yeah, I know we talked about so-and-so, tell me more…'

Counselors felt that this lack of connection or strained relationships hindered them in the college counseling process and in turn impacted their ability to support their students.

Discussion & Implications

In this study, we set out to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic altered the college-planning behaviors of high school students through the perspectives of school counselors, who are centrally involved in that developmental process. We found that COVID brought about pressures on K–12 schools and shifts in the college application landscape that changed how counselors engaged in their work, modifying their practices to account for limited access to students, competing demands on their time, and rapid changes to admissions policies and practices. Accounting for these changes exacerbated the existing pandemic-related pressures directly impacting students. Together, these findings illustrate the inherent complexity of college counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although many of the school counselors demonstrated adaptability as they adjusted to newfound challenges, it is apparent that growing concerns over reduced enrollment in higher education must look to the educational ecologies in which students engaged in the planning process. This work il-

lustrates how the rise of COVID-19, a chrono-level factor, influenced salient micro- and exosystem actors that influence the work of counselors, and impact the college choice process for students as part of a student's school and community context (Perna, 2006; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2021).

Due to the changing demands on their time and the logistical obstacles to connecting with students, counselors often simply could not provide the types of college counseling support that research suggests are so important to students' success in the college planning process (Perna et al., 2008). Despite counselors' ingenuity in adapting their counseling programs for a virtual world, many aspects of their traditional college counseling programs were lost in the online transition, and counselors believed that students suffered as a result.

Counselors' observations of different student application and matriculation behaviors aligns with previous findings on the ways that the pandemic has altered students' college aspirations (Flanagan et al., 2021). In addition to confirming the impact of financial and familial stress that has been found elsewhere (Flanagan et al., 2021), our participants also shared that changes to college instructional formats were a concern for students who did not want to pay high tuition rates for virtual learning. Counselors also observed that participating in college counseling and other school activities only in a virtual format had a negative impact on the engagement and well-being of their students, leaving counselors with concerns about how students would manage the social, emotional, and academic challenges of the transition to the college environment. Such concerns are well-founded, given the research showing that college students also struggled with the transition to virtual academic environments and social isolation prompted by the pandemic (Fruehwirth et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020).

Our findings suggest a number of implications for counselors and higher education professionals. As schools continue to transition back to in-person instruction, counselors will need to reflect on their pandemic-driven college counseling adaptations to determine how to strengthen their programs for future students. Since some of the adjustments they made to accommodate virtual programs or to introduce new technologies into their counseling repertoires had positive impacts on students and families, they will need to assess ways to continue to incorporate these tools into their college programs. This is especially true for strategies they used to connect successfully with students and families who struggled to engage in the college counseling process, many of whom came from low-income backgrounds. For some counselors, this may mean finding a balance between virtual and in-person college counseling activities, finding outside resources or partners to support intrusive college counseling for hard-to-reach students, or finding continued funding to support college program incentives. Additionally, finding ways to create

more buy-in among students to participate in virtual programs may broaden the reach of these programs and make them more successful in the future.

For professionals working at the postsecondary level, the findings of this research suggest that both school counselors and students would benefit from more institutional support moving forward. Given the rapidly changing landscape of college admissions during the pandemic, admissions offices will need to provide more resources for counselors and students to ensure that they understand any lasting implications of these changes, such as whether specific institutions will continue to adhere to test optional application policies or offer opportunities to address pandemic challenges in the application. Additionally, finding creative virtual ways to partner with high school counselors to deliver college counseling programming could serve as both a valuable marketing tool for the admissions office as well as an incredibly useful resource for counselors, who are often strapped for time, and for students. Admissions officers and enrollment managers will also need to think about how the pandemic may impact their first-year and transfer applications in the future, since our findings support earlier research that students may have decided to delay enrollment (Flanagan et al., 2021), or that they may have made matriculation decisions with limited information. Admissions professionals will need to consider how to expand their recruiting efforts beyond high school juniors and seniors in order to support students who will be approaching college applications through different avenues.

Beyond the admissions office, higher education professionals will also need to think critically about their plans to support students once they arrive on campus. It remains to be seen how the lingering impact of the trauma, stress, anxiety, and depression that so many students struggled through during the pandemic will affect these students' success in college. The concerns that counselors expressed about how their students would fare in the postsecondary environment suggest that incoming classes will have different, and likely greater, needs for mental health and academic support. As a result, mental health counseling offices and academic tutoring centers on campus should be prepared to increase their capacity to deliver student services and should plan ways to proactively reach out to students to make their services more accessible. Faculty and advising staff will also need to keep in mind that many students experienced an academic gap during the pandemic, losing out on months of academic instruction. Finally, as gatekeepers, admissions offices should intentionally share information with students about how to connect with appropriate campus resources once they arrive, especially since students may include information on their applications about COVID-related struggles that indicate specific support needs during their time at an institution.

CONCLUSION

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 had an indelible impact on students' postsecondary planning process. The findings from this study illuminate high school counselors' experiences providing college counseling during an unprecedented time. From school counselors' perspectives, the pandemic directly influenced students' thinking about the value of going to college, as well as where to apply and eventually enroll. In addition, school-level changes altered their own college counseling efforts, thereby making it more difficult to provide support at a time when students needed it most. Thus, we contend that decreases in college enrollment and related behaviors may be attributed to the pandemic directly, as well as to consequential shifts in students' college planning support landscape. These findings offer valuable insight into areas for improvement in programming. School counselors adapted to the challenges brought on by the pandemic by innovating and creating new ways to deliver postsecondary information and support. However, students' college choice experiences, as described by their counselors, also reveals opportunities for higher education officials and admissions officers specifically, to provide additional support during students' transition to and through college.

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APPENDIX A. HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELOR FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL QUESTIONS

COUNSELOR EXPERIENCE DURING COVID
(these questions are in reference to the current school year)

To start out, I want to hear about your particular role as a school counselor. How has your role shifted in this past year? This is both the content of what you do, and the ways that you are doing this work.

- Are there things that you used to do but can't do now?
- Any bright spots-of things you have been able to do that you couldn't in the past?
- Has any part of your role improved for the better?
- What are you now able to do that you originally were not?
- What are you no longer able to spend time on?
- How do your administrative responsibilities look different than before the pandemic?

What are the issues you are spending the most time working with students? Is this a deviation from what you were doing before?

- Academic
- Social emotional/personal
- College/career?

What has your role been in providing mental health supports to students? What tasks/activities have you engaged in to address mental health needs?

- What messages have you received or expectations have been set for you in your school or district for addressing mental health?
- To what extent are you referring students to outside agencies? Is this a change from pre-COVID?
- Have you collaborated with others to address these needs?
- Has confidentiality continued to be an issue and/or how have you managed it if so?

Describe the shifting landscape in college admission.

- How are you navigating these changes? Have you collaborated with others to address this issue?
- Do you see different patterns in the process compared to past years?
- Specific questions about college admissions
  - How do you keep track of changes in the college application process?
  - How are you helping students to learn about colleges and universities in this time where visits from admissions reps and to college campuses are almost nonexistent?
  - Have your interactions with parents and guardians related to college-going changed compared to past years?
  - How are you helping students in earlier years of high school develop postsecondary plans/aspirations?

- Have your interactions with admission officers changed compared to past years?
- Could you talk to us about your interactions/involvement with students' families during the course of the year? Is this different from the past?

SUPPORTS

Related to your shifting responsibilities, we would like to hear about how your school has or has not provided clear direction or vision over the course of this school year **RELATED TO YOUR ROLE AS A SCHOOL COUNSELOR.**

- Created policies that enabled your work?
- How does this compare to pre-covid?

Going up a level, now I want to ask whether your district has provided clear direction/vision **RELATED TO YOUR ROLE AS A SCHOOL COUNSELOR** since the beginning of this school year?

- Created policies that enabled your work?
- How does this compare to pre-covid?

Has your state helped or hindered your work as a school counselor over the course of this school year?

In the survey many counselors brought up how the amount of autonomy they had, which varied depending on their school and district, was reported as either beneficial or detrimental to getting their jobs done in the spring; for example, given freedom to do their jobs as they see fit or left without support.

- Did you experience this type of autonomy and how did you experience that?
- How did that impact your ability to do your job?

Please share your experiences with counseling-specific professional development?

LOOKING FORWARD

As we think about the 2021-22 academic year, what are your recommendations for school/district/state leaders in regards to school counseling?

- Have you been involved in any planning for the future?

Is there anything else we haven't touched on today?

Appendix B. High School Counselor Individual Interview Questions

OPENING/WARM UP QUESTION

Can you please give us a brief overview of the context of your school, and your role within it?

- How would you describe your student population?
- How have your students primarily gone to school this year?
- Where have you carried out your work (remote, hybrid, in-person)?
- How would you describe the college-going culture at your school? What is the college-going rate, where do students go, what were things that students did to prepare for college?

As you think about the time since the start of COVID (*maybe starting last spring through now?*), what has changed about the college going process

- How are you navigating these changes? Have you collaborated with others to address this issue?
- How are you helping students in earlier years of high school develop postsecondary plans/aspirations?
- What are you no longer able to do during college counseling that you used to be able to do pre-COVID?

Outside of these things, what stands out to you about college counseling during the last year—in the midst of a pandemic?

- Are students different? Is the process different?

Describe the changes to the admissions process in higher education due to COVID from your perspective?

- How do you keep track of changes in the college application process?
- How are you helping students to learn about colleges and universities in this time where visits from admissions reps and to college campuses are almost nonexistent?
- How have shifts in admissions tests (SAT, ACT) impacted your work?

What have you noticed about college planning behaviors

- Students' decision making at multiple points in the process (decision to apply, where to apply, where to go)?
    - Has anything shifted? Are students considering different qualities/factors these days as opposed to pre-pandemic?
- Do you see different patterns in the process compared to past years? (e.g., later application submissions, applying to fewer or more schools)

What are your concerns for students' preparation for college, due to the academic/social emotional challenges students have faced because of the pandemic?

- Have your concerns changed the way you provide college counseling?
- What are your concerns for younger high school students' (9th/10th graders) college preparation?

How did changes in students' decision-making/planning processes affect your work?

- What services do you offer?
- How do you support students?

Were your connections or relationships with college admissions officers any different?

- Were you more in touch? Less? Did you engage with them the same?
- What information would you want to share with admissions officers to take into consideration when reading applications for your students next year?

There has been a lot of media attention around how shifts in the admissions landscape and other challenges due to COVID have disadvantaged particular groups of students. Can you walk us through an example of a student who you worked closely with who especially struggled with any part of the college-going process?

- What were you able to do to support this student in meeting postsecondary planning goals? What were you unable to do for this student, due to the pandemic?
- If time-ask for a counter example
- Who are the students you are most concerned about outside of these examples?

What new practices, if any, did you adopt this year that you hope to carry forward?

- Early college awareness
- Information Sharing
- Decision Making
- Financial Aid Counseling/Support

Is there anything else we haven't touched on today regarding your work delivering college counseling this past year?