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Counselors Need Real Support

The pandemic has created a real crisis that higher education can help solve, write four scholars.

By [Four Scholars](#) // October 12, 2020



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College admission officers are gearing up for an admission cycle like no other. The global health pandemic has generated challenges that could make it difficult for admission officers to recruit applicants and use traditional metrics for evaluating them. To counter these threats to the admissions process, reports suggest that admission officers plan to [rely more heavily](#) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2020/07/20/preparing-chaotic-year-college-admissions>) on their partners on the other side of the desk -- school counselors -- to recruit and evaluate students. However, according to our [recent survey of public school counselors](#) (<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/documents/School-Counseling-Covid-19-Report.pdf>), the COVID-19 crisis is also having a detrimental impact on their ability to deliver college counseling. Counselors will be hard-pressed to compensate for the challenges facing admission officers, especially when it comes to recruiting underserved students, unless we turn to creative solutions for collaboration.

School counselors have the skills to help students navigate their postsecondary choices. However, counselors have long struggled to dedicate sufficient time to college counseling, and according to our data, 25 percent of counselors spent even less time on it between March and June 2020. Counselors were already asked to shoulder many administrative responsibilities, and in the shift to online schooling, they were also tasked with tracking down hard-to-reach students and helping families get connected to social services and technology. The many demands on school counselors continue to grow this fall, as counselors work double-time to embrace remote and hybrid models of schooling and manage mounting mental health concerns.

Just as admission officers lack their usual access to students due to travel concerns, bans on large gatherings and online schooling, school counselors, too, have limited access to students. Remote and hybrid schedules do not allocate time for group or individual counseling, and counselors are missing opportunities for informal conversations.

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This all adds up to a decrease in school counselors' capacity to support students' preparation for the college admission process. While that is a concern for all students, it is likely to have an outside impact on students of color, low-income students and those who could be the first in their family to attend college, because these students typically [rely on \(https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.5330/1096-2409-19.1.144\)](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.5330/1096-2409-19.1.144) school-based counselors to support their college planning process (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.5330/1096-2409-19.1.144>). These students already had less access to college counseling due to high counselor caseloads and administrative burdens placed on counselors in their schools, and the impact of remote schooling has exacerbated the situation. These students were already entering the admission game on an uneven playing field, and now they are even further behind as affluent families continue to benefit from the services of private college counselors or dedicated staff at their schools.

As one example, consider the impact of the current situation on letters of recommendation. Admission officers will likely rely more heavily on such letters this year – even though they have long been [criticized \(https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2018/10/22/do-recommendation-letters-insert-bias-college-admissions-decisions\)](https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2018/10/22/do-recommendation-letters-insert-bias-college-admissions-decisions) as biased – because other metrics will be unavailable. The adoption of test-optional and test-blind policies, combined with cancellations of SAT and ACT testing dates and changes to the administration of Advanced Placement exams in the spring, means that key data sources in the evaluation process will be absent this year. Letter grades will also be missing in some cases, as many secondary schools moved to pass/fail grading options. But how will admission officers reconcile the fact that counselors serving the most disadvantaged students also have the least capacity to write detailed letters because of large caseloads, high needs among their students and higher rates of remote schooling than in affluent communities?

Other examples and questions abound. How will admission officers account for the disparity between students who completed ACT or SAT exams and those who couldn't because they live in high-needs communities forced into lockdown by the pandemic? How will they evaluate the academic progress of students who attend private schools that are offering in-person classes compared to students who attend large urban districts like New York and Los Angeles, both of which are starting the school year with remote or hybrid instruction?

College admission offices must partner with school counselors to offset the myriad of challenges that are sure to compromise equitable access to college. These professionals have long shared responsibility for supporting students' postsecondary transitions, and a collaborative approach is more necessary now than ever before. To strengthen such collaboration, we recommend the following:

- Ensure that updated policies and review processes are transparent and easily accessible.**

According to our survey, school counselors are struggling to follow shifting testing and admission policies at the over 3,000 colleges and universities in the United States. As one counselor described, "there have been weeks where what was 'true' [about a school's admission policy] on Monday was different on Tuesday and then changed a second time on Wednesday." With many colleges and universities to keep track of, counselors need access to updates that are succinct and easy to communicate to students and families. Organizations such as the National Association for College Admission Counseling and FairTest can and should play a key role in curating this information for counselors, and in some cases they have already begun to do so. Additionally, counselors, and the students and families they serve, need more transparency and information about the factors that will affect admission decisions this year, especially when test scores and grades may be missing for many students. Will the essay carry more weight? Will teacher recommendations bridge the academic gaps in a transcript? We imagine that school context information that signals how a school has responded to COVID-19 will be critical. School profiles are one avenue for highlighting this data; however, colleges must publicize the importance of including such information in a profile this year. Given disparities in profile format and the fact that not all schools submit one, admission officers and school counselors might seek additional ways to communicate this important contextual information.

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- **Support the application process by creating tools for K-12 educators.** Given counselors' competing work demands, we recommend that admission offices create videos for students addressing topics ranging from how to write a successful college entrance essay to how the application and review process has changed. Schools can use these videos as asynchronous content in advisories or essay-writing lessons in English class, or they could be offered as asynchronous resources for students and families to access at their convenience. Admission offices could also host Zoom workshops or webinars for family members in collaboration with counselors. A potential silver lining of the current challenges is that these sessions will potentially reach far more students than traditional on-campus information sessions typically do. However, school counselors must communicate their students' unique needs with their admission counterparts in order to effectively create these resources.
- **Create both digital and analog recruiting resources.** Since so few students can visit campuses this year, online campus tours, social media pages and information sessions are critical. However, we need to remember that students in rural and urban areas tend to have [less access to high-speed internet](https://www.crpe.org/thelens/digital-divide-among-students-during-covid-19-who-has-access-who-doesnt) (<https://www.crpe.org/thelens/digital-divide-among-students-during-covid-19-who-has-access-who-doesnt>) at home compared to their higher-income peers, and many are using their phone as their primary device. While drone video tours showcasing the physical campus may seem like a great marketing tool, these and other videos require significant bandwidth that many students cannot access. Having an alternate format available for student materials is necessary. A lack of reliable internet access will also impact students' ability to interact with admission representatives and miss opportunities to demonstrate interest. For example, some students may leave their cameras off during an online information session due to an unstable connection. Admission officers could provide counselors with alternative ways for students to demonstrate interest that are less reliant on virtual connections.

Underlying all of these strategies must be a commitment to considering students' contexts and access to resources. As we all scramble to create workable structures and processes to evaluate applicants for the upcoming year, it is important to keep in mind those students who have fewer advantages in this process compared to their higher-income, continuing-generation peers. With more [private schools](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/upshot/coronavirus-school-reopening-private-public-gap.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/upshot/coronavirus-school-reopening-private-public-gap.html>) offering in-person instruction, admission officers will need to consider the benefits this affords to students in those schools, what it means for students who attend schools that are not open and what resources will be hard for them to access. For example, remote and hybrid schooling may limit the formation of adult relationships shaped through joining clubs and participating in informal learning spaces. These relationships serve as the basis for letters of recommendations and valuable conversations about students' future plans.

Admission officers and school counselors face big challenges with COVID-19. Not considering how this will disproportionately impact students of color and first-generation students is out of the question. Instead, admission officers and school counselors will need to lean on one another to ensure that this pandemic does not worsen inequality driven by uneven access to higher education.

Bio

This piece is by Mandy Savitz-Romer, a faculty member at the Harvard Graduate School of Education; Heather Rowan-Kenyon, a faculty member at the Boston College Lynch School of Education and Human Development; Tara Nicola, a doctoral student at Harvard Graduate School of Education; and Stephanie Carroll, a doctoral student at Boston College Lynch School of Education and Human Development.

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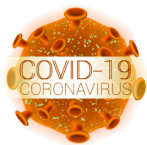
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