HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS:
Managing Large Caseloads

For high school counselors juggling wide-ranging tasks and heavy caseloads, this tip sheet offers advice, planning ideas and resources from expert counselors and college admissions advisors.

A Three-Pronged Approach

The Link for Counselors website blog “Helping Counselors Manage the Workload” turned to the 2016 and 2017 National School Counselors of the Year Katherine Pastor and Terri Tchorzynski, who agreed on this three-pronged approach for managing growing caseloads:

1. Assess student needs.
2. Develop a counseling plan.
3. Manage your time.

Assess Student Needs

Data provides a strong foundation for any well-structured counseling program, as it creates a basis for goal setting and strategies. It also validates program components in the eyes of school administrators. Having solid information on what students need and want helps achieve buy-in from faculty and parents, as well.

Calhoun Area Career Center (CACC) in Battle Creek, MI, where Terri Tchorzynski is a counselor, gathers needs assessments from students at the beginning of each school year. While counselors are generally expected to address three important areas – academic success, educational and career planning, and socio-emotional issues – needs assessments can help zero in on specific priorities.

Develop a Plan

“A comprehensive school counseling program will allow a strategy to be in place and help with the day-to-day operations of the job.”

– Katherine Pastor, Head of Counseling, Flagstaff, AZ, High School

Solicit the Support of Administrators: Counselors may often feel as if they spend their time on everything but what they have been hired to do. So, having a plan to follow does not just make organizational sense. It can also keep you on track when you are being pulled in several different directions by students, parents and colleagues. That is why it is crucial to get the support of administrators in the plan development phase, and to educate staff and faculty about program structure and systems.
Being in agreement on these elements helps expedite the planning process, and it establishes a solid support system for counselors within the school, which makes implementation that much easier. If there is a clear understanding of the function of the counseling department, counselors can more easily serve the greater student population systematically and consistently, rather than working reactively in a piecemeal fashion.

**Measure Your Progress:** Of course, self-evaluation and flexibility are important, as well. Assess the progress of your program on a periodic basis, along with your own individual work. You may want to create an assessment form, or forms, to gauge your headway in various areas and help you decide whether to re-direct your efforts or adjust your methodology.

The [Maine Comprehensive School Counseling Program Model K-12](#) offers an excellent example of a detailed counseling plan. It addresses collecting needs assessments, the use of time, program components, implementation, evaluation, and much more, and it provides a variety of practical forms and templates, along with a list of resources.

In addition, [Missouri Professional School Counselors and Counselor Educators](#) have created a detailed guide to using small-group counseling to help students improve skills in the areas of personal/social, academic and career development.

**Manage Your Time**
At the heart of dealing with a heavy caseload is the issue of time, or rather, the lack of it. So, making the most of the time you have is a necessity. While you may still need to assist a drop-in student requesting advice or a last-minute referral from a colleague, a disciplined overall approach to time management can reduce non-essential interruptions and enable you to attend more readily to urgent matters.

**Stick to a Schedule:** Adhering to a routine puts you in control of your time. It is a mechanism for setting appropriate boundaries and it reminds students and colleagues of your various commitments. So, work from your overall plan to create a schedule for your office:

- Plan the year, the week, the day.
- Circulate your schedule and post it on your door.
- Concentrate on seasonal priorities and deadlines.
- Restrict student meetings to certain days/hours.
- Allow some closed-door time for work that requires serious concentration.

**Get Support:** As explained above, getting administrators and faculty on board with your counseling program will help assure their support of your time-management efforts. However, to move beyond the amount of work you alone can accomplish, you’ll need reinforcement of another kind. If you have other staff available and the authority, think about what you can delegate, and to whom. Some suggestions:

- Utilize outside social services or counselors for socio-emotional cases.
- Partner with local non-profits, workforce boards, and [American Job Centers](#) to connect students to
career training opportunities.

- Recruit volunteers for any tasks that you can assign to someone else.
- Find an independent consultant or admissions counselor to assist with college application preparation.

**College Planning for Large Student Populations**

A major priority for school counselors is, of course, college planning – an on-going project that can be particularly overwhelming with a sizable student body. College Admissions Advisor Kathryn Favaro supplied some useful ideas for shepherding large student populations through the college application process in her 2012 presentation to the Western Association for Admission Counseling (WACAC):

1. Enlist outside help, including non-profit organizations.
2. Make use of online tools like [Get My Future](#).
3. Hold group presentations and workshops.

**Enlist Help**

Echoing Katherine Pastor and Terri Tchorzynski on the idea of getting additional personnel support from any and all available sources, Ms. Favaro made some specific suggestions with regard to college planning:

- Seek out independent college advisors and retired counselors or teachers to conduct student advisement sessions.
- Call upon parent volunteers who can help with organizing, filing, creating flyers, and promoting and staffing events.
  - For additional parent engagement ideas, see the [YCC Parent Engagement Tip Sheet](#).
- Recruit interns preparing for school and college counseling careers, or even recent grads looking for work experience, who can assist with research, student career training coordination, college applications, and more.
- Team up with non-profit organizations that offer college admissions services to low-income, first generation or underserved student communities.

**Make Use of Online Tools**

There are any number of internet resources to help with all aspects of college research and admissions:

- College discovery.
- Financial aid, loans and scholarships.
- Free SAT prep and other testing information.
- College cost calculators.
These are time-savers for your office as well as for students and parents, who may be able to work independently once you point them toward these useful aids. A number of them are included at the end of the Resources List in Appendix A. Among the many websites are: College Board, cappex.com, finaid.org, niche.com, simpletuition.com, petersons.com, fastweb.com, assist.org, collegeconfidential.com, American School Search, and CollegeTransfer.

**Hold Group Presentations and Workshops**

Finally, try to reduce the labor- and time-intensive task of individual consultations. Disseminate information to the student body at large wherever possible and drill down to specific areas with group sessions or guided group activities.

- Use assemblies, parent nights, morning announcements, and other events where you have a captive audience to circulate general information, notifications and reminders.
- Organize presentations by independent advisors, test prep professionals, admissions reps, etc. for groups of college-bound students.
- Facilitate (or use volunteers or interns to do so) special groups to work on essay writing, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or other parts of the process.

Making college admissions prep a group undertaking may also make it less stressful for students. Going through the experience together and working on tasks side by side will enable them to help and encourage each other while keeping them on track for meeting major milestones.

**Case Study:** Skyline High School Counseling Department in Dallas, Texas, Independent School District (whose counselor-to-student ratio is 1 to 390) is an example of a successful use of the group model. Their “Senior Start-up Program” increased their percentage of college applications submitted, FAFSA forms completed and scholarships received.

The Skyline counseling team shared their strategy for building a college-going culture in a February 2016, presentation to the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NANAC). They initiated their Senior Start-up Program with the goals of:

- Informing seniors about the college application process.
- Enabling them to start the application process in a small group setting.
- Introducing them to essay topics.
- Offering scholarship information.
- Providing financial aid information.
- Discussing entrance exams and waivers.
- Meeting counselors.
Skyline’s event was held over three days in August with four morning and four afternoon sessions and approximately thirty students attending per session. A Google Form link was used for registration. Students were provided hand-outs containing a schedule of action items to be completed throughout the Fall and Spring, each to be initialed by the student’s counselor. Assignments included:

- Registering for ACT/SAT tests.
- Submitting at least three college applications.
- Creating a federal aid profile.
- Submitting FAFSA form.

The complete presentation by Skyline High School, which contains their Fall and Spring Activities hand-out, can be found here: [Skyline High School Senior Start-up Program](#)

**Summary**

Despite the daunting task of working with large caseloads, a school counselor can function more effectively and with less job-related stress. An administration-backed program based on verifiable student needs is the first step. Delegating tasks, utilizing a group model where possible, and taking control of one’s schedule is the follow-through. In tandem, these measures will enable counselors to perform at their highest level and use their expertise and experience to serve their students in the best possible way.
APPENDIX A: Resources

Referenced Resources


Additional Resources


LINK for Counselors. A free online publication that provides information to keep High School and Transfer Counselors informed. http://www.linkforcounselors.com

From the Counselor’s Office. Links to a number of useful resources, including professional organizations, college testing and planning, school counseling and technology, and more.  
http://www.counselorsoffice.org/p/links.html

The Spirited School Counselor. General information site.  
https://thespiritedschoolcounselor.wordpress.com

Western Association for College Admissions Counseling. General counselor and admissions toolkits by WACAC.  
https://www.wacac.org/resources/toolkits/

What’s Up Next? Free app and college access tool that gives high school and college students, parents, and college counselors across the country personalized support on all things college – all through texting.  
https://bettermakeroom.org/up-next

http://www.thehelpfulcounselor.com/time-management-tips-for-school-counselors/

Websites

American School Search  
Easy-to-navigate information about U.S. colleges with a click-on map to access by state and drop-down menus for advanced searches by degree and program.

assist.org  
The official repository of articulation for California’s public colleges and universities providing up-to-date information about transferring course credits among those institutions.

College Board  
The leading source of information, tools and services for college planning from Advanced Placement to testing, financial aid and much more.

collegeconfidential.com  
Features an active college-bound discussion community, first-person reports on college visits by students and parents, and hundreds of articles.

CollegeTransfer.net  
Allows users to compare transfer information and policies at 1,200 U.S. institutions, search for transfer equivalencies, and build a transcript to see how and where credits will transfer.

cappex.com  
Matches student profiles to potential scholarships and offers wide college search capability plus numerous articles.
**fastweb.com**  
Gives users access to an extensive scholarship database, financial aid resources as well as career advice and college searches.

**finaid.org**  
A comprehensive guide to financial aid with information on loans, college savings accounts, grants, military aid, and more. Also provides calculator tools and other information.

**niche.com**  
Parents and students can explore schools and rankings for K-12 and college by location, test scores, price, and other factors, while also searching for scholarships.

**petersons.com**  
For educators, institutions, students, and parents, this offers information on colleges and grad schools, tips and strategies for test prep, help with loan preparation, and insight on college life.

**simpletuition.com**  
This LendingTree service features information and interactive tools that help plan for college financing including loan comparisons, pay-back options, re-financing possibilities, and financial aid advice.