



The Bell Policy Center

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Public policies are undermining their ability to help students through the admissions process

By Adrian Miller

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"You're just not college material." No high school senior wants to hear those words, especially from his guidance counselor. For many years, this was code for saying a student was not the right race, religion or gender to attend college. But today, most students have few opportunities to even meet with a guidance counselor, and this too can make the difference in whether they go to college.

I was one of the lucky ones; I was going to college no matter what my guidance counselor said. I was an honor roll student, and I had parents, other adults, and friends around me who all expected me to go - and helped me get there. But for too many students, especially those who are the first generation in their families to apply, the college admissions process can be a guessing game - with high stakes.

For years, a high school diploma was a sufficient ticket to a good job with adequate benefits. Those days are gone. One of the clearest lessons of Colorado's New Economy is that a post-secondary degree is no longer a luxury; it's a necessity for those who want to be economically self-sufficient. A guidance counselor's advice can foreclose or inspire collegiate dreams, but the importance of this role tends to be overlooked and undervalued.

Guidance counselors have a precious commodity for disadvantaged students who are curious about college: information. They know what courses to take, the important deadlines that must be met during the application process, and how to get money to pay for college. Yet, our public policies have undermined the ability of guidance counselors to help students through the admissions process.

The first major hurdle is a practical one: Many schools lack a sufficient number of guidance counselors. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the average school district has one counselor for every 407 students. In Colorado, the average is one for every 616 students. While Boulder Valley School District fares better than the state average (1:514), the Denver Public School District exceeds the state average (1:1,049).

There are a number of reasons for these disparate ratios, but a common problem is budget cuts. Guidance counselor positions are often seen as a "luxury," so these jobs are often eliminated when a fiscal crisis occurs. The end result is that they have to advise more students with fewer resources. Even at the national average, is it realistic to expect a guidance counselor to be sensitive to more than 400 individual students' needs? With these types of caseloads, they understandably have their hands full in trying to cater to individual academic needs - and some balls are dropping.

One "dropped ball" is coursework recommendations. Counselors have the ability to steer uninformed students to courses that most colleges require or recommend. Still, many students are not getting the message. ACT Inc., which provides the popular college entrance exam, recently reported that in 2004, only 56 percent of students were taking the minimum core of college preparatory courses.



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ACT defined the "minimum core" as four years of English, and three years each of math, science and social studies. Here, the picture gets complicated. There are a number of explanations for such low academic participation, the most obvious being the student's individual choice. In 2002, the Colorado Commission on Civil Rights released a study on the achievement gap between black and white students in the Denver public schools. Although it doesn't reach any firm conclusions, the study suggests that, based on anecdotal evidence, there is a possibility that some guidance counselors are actively discouraging certain students from taking college preparatory classes. If this is true, it represents a step back from opportunity, not a step forward.

Another "dropped ball" is information on financial aid. Many students are daunted by the rising costs of college, and thus believe that they won't have enough money to attend even if they qualify academically. Here, the guidance counselor can play a pivotal role by informing students of the wide variety of public and private financial assistance that is available to applicants. Once again, many students are not getting the message. According to the American Council on Education, during the 1999-2000 academic year, roughly 1.7 million low-income and moderate-income students did not receive financial aid from the federal government simply because they never filled out the necessary forms to get aid. In essence, these students are denied educational opportunity because they are not informed.

At a time of increased competition for slots, skyrocketing costs and greater economic pressure to earn a degree, college is more important than ever. Yet Colorado is failing to provide educational opportunity to many of its disadvantaged high school students: They are graduating from high school at low rates, and very few attend college. In fact, only about 17 percent of Colorado students from low-income families finish high school and go on to college. These students are often left behind because they don't have the private resources - such as funds to hire tutors for standardized tests - that make them more competitive applicants for college. That's why the guidance counselor can tip the odds in their favor. Without such help, our policies are silently signaling to a generation what counselors used to say aloud: You're just not college material.

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