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## Characteristics of Effective Postsecondary Advising: How Often to Meet and What to Focus On

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Characteristics of Effective Postsecondary Advising: How Often to Meet and What to Focus On



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## ABSTRACT

Using data from a large-scale senior exit survey administered at public high schools in New York City, this study aims to parse out what quantitative and qualitative characteristics of postsecondary advising are most influential in predicting students' likelihood to attend college. We apply a broader conceptual framework for postsecondary advisement that includes school-based college advising as well as parental advisement on college and career planning. Results from logistic regression analyses show receiving help in completing college applications, along with talking to a counselor and parents/guardians at least three times in their senior year, to be salient predictors of college-going.

**Keywords:** college and career readiness, postsecondary plan, college counseling

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There is widespread consensus that high school students' entry into college largely hinges on their knowledge of and ability to successfully navigate a long and complex process that includes understanding what it takes to get into college, conducting a college search, submitting college and financial aid applications, completing college admissions requirements such as an entrance exam, and ultimately matriculating (Holzman et al., 2020; La Rosa et al., 2006; Poynton & Lapan, 2017; Roderick et al., 2011). Many students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, students of color, and English language learners often face additional difficulties throughout this process, such as understanding college admissions materials and financial aid jargon (Taylor, 2020; Taylor & Bicak, 2020) and being selected for financial aid verification (Lee et al., 2021). These major and minor tasks become a systemic series of informational and procedural barriers that cannot be addressed in isolation (Arnold et al., 2020; Bryan et al., 2011; McDonough, 1997; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Roderick et al., 2008; Schuyler et al., 2021; Tevis et al., 2021).



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Literature on school and college counseling has identified the major role that school counselors, school-based college advisors, and college coaches play in developing students' college readiness (Bryan et al., 2011, 2017; Engbert & Gilbert, 2014; Lapan et al., 2017; McDonough, 2005; Poynton & Lapan, 2017; Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013; Villares & Brigman, 2019). For students with limited resources and social capital needed to succeed in getting to and through college (Glass, 2022), counselors can provide students with essential college knowledge, support on application completion and enrollment, and financial aid advisement (Bryan et al., 2011; Stephan, 2013; Villares & Brigman, 2019). Yet, the national counselor caseload average is about 400 students per counselor (ASCA, 2021; Shen-Berro, 2023), and the number of matriculation milestone activities that a college counselor or advisor must guide a single student through is numerous. In developing the College and Career Readiness Support Scale for example, Lapan et al. (2017) initially generated a list of 54 postsecondary planning activities that a counselor would ideally assist every student with. Considering this workload, it is not surprising that there might be college advisement or opportunity gaps by factors like race, gender, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, and homelessness status (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Havlik et al., 2018; Hill & Mirakhur, 2018; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010).

Against this backdrop, this article uses data from a high school senior exit survey to delve

more deeply into what “high-quality” college counseling entails. By examining the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of postsecondary advising – including that from parents/guardians – we aim to gain a more nuanced understanding of the support that high school students need to achieve all the milestones on the path to college. Specifically, our study asks:

To what extent do the following postsecondary advisement characteristics predict students' likelihood to attend college: advisement focused on college admissions, match, and application support; frequency of school-based college and career advising in early (i.e., 9-11th grade) years; and frequency of school-based as well as parental/guardian college and career advising in 12th grade?

### Literature Review

Research identifies student interactions with a school counselor as a significant predictor of aspiring to attend college, applying to college, and ultimately enrolling in college (Bryan et al., 2011; Bryan et al., 2017; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; McDonough, 2005; S'aenz et al., 2018). Seeing a counselor early and consistently also plays an important role in predicting college application submissions, especially in schools with moderate college-going cultures (Robinson & Roksa, 2016). Certain student subgroups benefit even more from college counseling. For instance, students from lower-income backgrounds who meet with college advisors in their senior year to develop lists

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and apply to well-matched colleges are more likely to enroll in a four-year college and persist through the first two years (Castleman & Goodman, 2018). Counselors also play an important role in the college aspirations of first-generation students (Martinez et al., 2019), who often possess less college knowledge than continuing-generation students and who rate their school counselor as the most helpful and preferred source of college information (Owen et al., 2020; Poynton et al., 2021; Um, 2021).

In terms of how counseling is empirically examined, many studies measure the impact of counseling by the presence or frequency of counselor-student contacts (Bryan et al., 2011; Bryan et al., 2017; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Besides the quantity of advisement, the role that the quality of advisement plays in influencing students' college enrollment decisions also needs to be considered (McDonough, 2005; Perna et al., 2008). While many have called for "high-quality" college and career counseling (Lapan et al., 2017; Poynton & Lapan, 2017), precisely what "high-quality" counseling entails is difficult to capture amidst the shifting roles that counselors have had to play over the last few decades. With more students expecting to go to college, counselors are increasingly tasked with providing tailored supports to help students make individually meaningful decisions (Ballysingh, 2016; Smith, 2011). Considering the high-stakes decisions that students and their families make at this critical life junction, there is surprisingly little

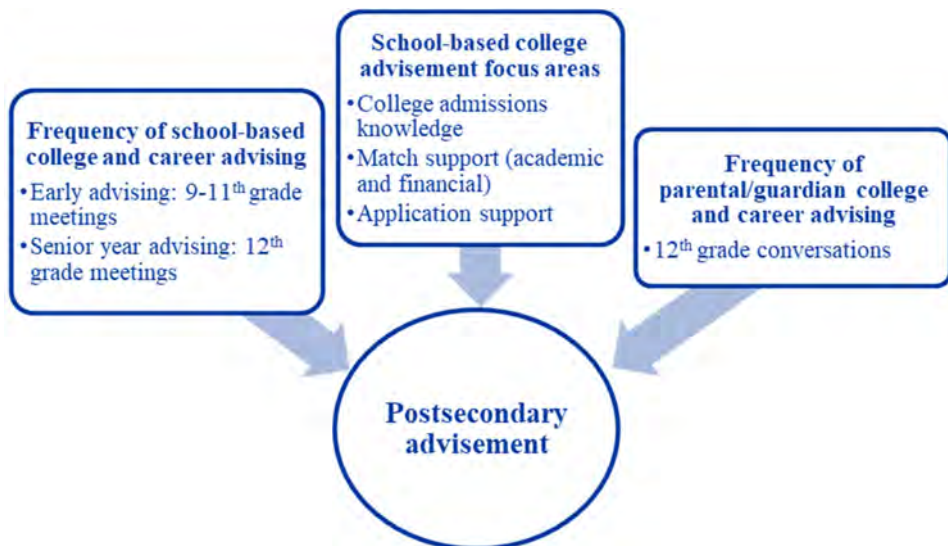
understanding of the relative importance of specific counseling supports in helping students attend college.

Driven by this existing gap in knowledge, we use data from a survey of high school seniors in New York City to operationalize and explore what characteristics of college counseling may be most effective in influencing students' likelihood of planning to attend college. We intentionally elect to use the more inclusive term of postsecondary rather than college advising because such counseling sessions could be used to discuss college and/or career plans. We also apply a broader framework for postsecondary advisement that includes school-based college counseling (recognizing that that may not always be delivered solely by a school counselor), as well as parental/guardian advising (see Figure 1 on next page).

Central to our conceptual framework of postsecondary advisement is the domain of school-based college advisement focus areas. Specifically, we draw on literature that demonstrates the importance of students: developing college admission knowledge (Poynton et al., 2019), receiving guidance on well-matched colleges that offer good academic and financial fit (Dillon & Smith, 2017; Roderick et al., 2011), and receiving support in completing college applications and personal essays (Avery & Kane, 2004). A second domain is the frequency of advising sessions based on the previously mentioned literature that has shown the number of

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Figure 1.  
Conceptual framework for postsecondary advisement.



counselor contacts to be a significant predictor of college-going. We thus hypothesize that the number of meetings with school-based staff matters. In accordance with literature on the importance of receiving early counseling (Bryan et al., 2022; Robinson & Roksa, 2016), our framework for the quantity of advisement first includes whether students received postsecondary guidance in 9-11th grades. Because there are so many tasks that a high school senior has to complete to successfully matriculate, we believe that the frequency of students' interactions in their senior year with a counselor about their postsecondary plans is a separate, significant predictor of going to college.

Finally, we include the frequency of parental/guardian advising in our model since research has also highlighted the important role that parents play in college access (Brown et al., 2021; Bryan et al., 2011; Owen et al., 2020; Perna & Titus, 2005). In contrast with Bryan et al.'s (2011) study that defines parental involvement using broader factors like participating in parent-teacher organizations, as well as their more recent study where parental involvement is measured by parents' engagement with the counselor (Bryan et al., 2022), we focus

on the direct postsecondary planning conversations that students themselves are having with their parents/guardians in their senior year. This inclusion is further corroborated by evidence of students in general rating their parents as among the most helpful sources of college information (Owen et al., 2020). We return to this framework in the next section when we describe the survey items used to measure each domain.

### Methods

#### Data source

This study draws on data from the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) 2018 Senior Exit Survey. The NYCDOE Senior Exit Survey was founded as part of the College Access for All-High School (CA4A) initiative that was launched by the NYCDOE in 2016 in schools with a relatively large gap between high school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment rates. The survey was designed to serve as an important tool for informing Central Office policies and school-based supports by gathering information directly from



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students as they finalize their postsecondary plans in their senior year. It also serves as a resource for schools in that aggregate school-level results can inform schools' program planning, particularly for their rising senior cohorts.

The 2018 Senior Exit Survey was administered to all high school seniors in 267 schools that participated in CA4A in 2017-18. To provide actionable data, the survey was created in collaboration between Central staff and practitioners. We began by creating a large survey item bank of potential questions from the College and Career Readiness Counseling Support (CCRCS) scale (Lapan et al., 2017), advising activities from the NYC-based organization College Access: Research and Action (CARA), and questions from the publicly available Chicago and Milwaukee Public Schools' Senior Exit Surveys. Together with our team of Central staff and practitioners, we adapted questions and narrowed the bank to a small core set of survey items aligned to the three advisement focus areas in our conceptual framework (described later in the measures section). Rather than being evaluative of schools, individual staff, or counselors, we opted to make the survey scales behaviorally based by asking students how much help they received from their school in each of the advisement focus areas as opposed to rating how helpful a counselor was. Practitioners also noted that matriculation milestone support, such as writing a personal statement or understanding what it takes to get into

college, is often delivered by an array of school-based staff such as near-peer coaches, advisors, or teachers during advisory periods throughout high school. This informed specificities such as the development of the survey question about frequency of meetings in 9-11th grade to be inclusive of teachers and advisors, as compared to a distinct question asking the number of times a student met specifically with their counselor in 12th grade since it is standard for school counselors to provide college counseling to students in their senior year. Notably, the survey development process also included conducting cognitive interviews with school counselors and, most importantly, students with a range of academic performance and future plans. Students provided feedback on potential survey fatigue or confusion and helped us adopt more "student-friendly" language, such as using response choices like "some" and "a lot" over "a moderate amount."

The 2018 Senior Exit Survey, which was also translated into Spanish, launched on May 1, 2018 to coincide with Decision Day when most seniors' college or postsecondary plans were being decided. The survey remained open for eight weeks until the last day of the academic year. Students could complete the survey using their phone, computer, or tablet. Schools were asked to provide all seniors the opportunity to complete the survey – no matter their postsecondary plans – and were instructed that it was voluntary to complete.

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### Measures

#### Independent variables

Similar to Lapan et al.'s (2017) CCRCS scale which measures the frequency and helpfulness of counseling services, we first measure the advisement focus areas domain through a survey question with seven sub-items asking students to rate how much their school has helped with:

- understanding what is needed to be ready for college,
- understanding what colleges one can get into,
- understanding different ways to pay for college,
- completing college applications,
- understanding the difference between for-profit versus not-for-profit colleges<sup>1</sup>,
- applying to opportunity programs (which are New York programs that offer students from low-income backgrounds academic and financial supports to attend college), and
- writing personal statements and/or supplemental essays.

All items were measured on a three-point Likert scale (1=Did not help at all, 2=Helped some, 3=Helped a lot) and had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.88. We expected some students to be uncertain about items such as opportunity

programs and accordingly provided an "I'm not sure" response option; this also falls in line with research recommendations on including an I don't know or N/A option to prevent a midpoint on a Likert scale from becoming a "dumping ground" (Chyung et al., 2017).

Frequency of early postsecondary advising received is measured through responses to a binary survey question with three sub-items asking students (yes/no) if they had a meeting to discuss college or career plans with a counselor, teacher, or advisor in: 9th, 10th, and 11th grade. Frequency of 12th grade advising received is then measured separately through a survey item asking students how often they met with their counselor in their senior year about their college or career plans. Response options included: Never, 1-2 times, 3-4 times, and 5 or more times. Similarly, students were asked in an additional question how often they talked with their parents/guardians about their college or career plans in their senior year, with the same aforementioned response options.

To control for differences across demographic groups, we also added the following covariates in all our models: gender (male, female), race (Asian, Black, Hispanic, White), poverty status (defined as students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch or receiving public assistance), disability status, English language learner status, and first-generation status (defined as students who self-reported not having at least one parent/

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<sup>1</sup> Staff and practitioners advocated for the inclusion of a question on for-profit schools based on concerns with the predatory behavior and low completion rates of for-profit institutions (NYC Department of Consumer Affairs, 2018), as well as a question about opportunity programs.



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guardian complete “some college”).

### Dependent variable

The outcome variable of interest is a categorical survey item that uses students’ self-reported college plan as a proxy for college-going. Specifically, students were asked in the survey about their primary postsecondary plans for the fall, in which students could select the response of “attend a college full-time.” It is important to emphasize that the exit survey was administered by high schools on or after May 1st, College Decision Day, to gather information on the college to which the student is enrolling. This timing of the survey administration was critical in ensuring that this measure extends beyond simply capturing a student’s aspirational plans, to capturing their actual college commitment. The survey item was dichotomously re-coded with those who reported attending a college full-time as their primary plan coded as 1. The focus on full-time status stems from research on the significant increase in efficiency and likelihood for students to earn a college degree when enrolled full-time (Black & Coca, 2017). Data from the U.S. Department of Education shows that fewer than 1 in 5 students who enroll part-time from the start at a two- or four-year college have earned a degree eight years later (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Furthermore, we chose not to conflate part-time and full-time attendance because most financial aid programs only give grants to full-time students. Those who reported other plans (e.g., attending college part-time, attending a vocational/technical school, working, joining

the military, going into public service) were coded as 0.

### Sample

There were 14,769 students from 234 high schools (out of 28,964 students from 267 schools) who responded to the survey, resulting in a 51% student response rate and an 88% school response rate. While students were instructed that individual survey responses would be kept confidential, identifiers like name, school, and date of birth were asked to match students to administrative records. Of those who completed the survey, 92% of the responses (13,610 students) were matched to administrative records containing demographic data.

Complete case analysis—where “I’m not sure” responses to survey items were also coded as missing values—led to further data attrition resulting in a final analytical subsample consisting of 7,897 students with 53% being male, 14% being Asian, 32% Black, 43% Hispanic, 10% White, 11% being students with a disability (SWD), and 7% English language learners (ELL). Both the subsample and matched survey full sample generally mirrors citywide demographic trends (see Table 1).

### Analytical strategy

Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, we conducted logistic regression analysis

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Table 1.

2017-18 student demographics: 12th grade citywide, Survey full sample, Survey sub-sample

	12 <sup>th</sup> grade citywide		Survey full sample		Survey sub-sample	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Total</b>	80,124		13,610		7,897	
<b>Race</b>						
Asian	13,338	16.8	1,813	13.3	1,073	13.6
Black	23,186	29.2	4,297	31.6	2,503	31.7
Hispanic	31,009	39.0	5,971	<b>43.9</b>	3,356	<b>42.5</b>
White	10,667	13.4	1,178	8.7	747	9.5
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	41,281	51.5	6,505	<b>47.8</b>	4,206	<b>53.3</b>
Female	38,843	48.5	7,105	52.2	3,691	46.7
<b>Disability Status</b>						
Student with disability	14,479	18.1	1,714	<b>12.6</b>	873	<b>11.1</b>
Student without disability	65,645	81.9	11,896	87.4	7,024	89.0
<b>Language</b>						
English language learner	6,650	8.3	927	<b>6.8</b>	444	<b>5.6</b>
Non-English language learner	73,474	91.7	12,683	93.2	7,453	94.4
<b>Poverty</b>						
Student in poverty	60,613	75.6	10,520	77.3	6,092	77.1
Student not in poverty	19,511	24.4	3,090	22.7	1,805	22.9
<b>First-Generation</b>						
First-generation	-	-	6,925	<b>52.2</b>	3,940	<b>49.9</b>
Not first-generation	-	-	6,332	47.8	3,957	50.1

Note: “-” indicates data not available. Demographic data are available on the matched sample students that could be matched to administrative records. The matched sample represents 92% of all Senior Exit Survey respondents. Citywide demographic statistics are aggregated from student-level records of biographical information for all 12<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled in a NYCDOE school at any point between October 31<sup>st</sup> and June 30<sup>th</sup> during 2017-18. Due to missing demographic information, demographic categories do not always add up to citywide totals. Percentages in bold represent significant differences at the .01 level between the full sample and sub-sample based on Chi-square tests.

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where the log odds of the “successful” outcome of attending college was modeled as a function of our conceptual framework variables and demographic covariates.<sup>2</sup> Similar to Brookover & Johnson (2022), we conducted sequential logistic regression specifying an order for how our predictor variables would be entered into the model (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). This order was aligned to the domains of our postsecondary advisement conceptual framework.

First, a base model included our college advisement focus area indicators as a block, along with all of the demographic covariates listed above. Models with interactions between race and gender were tested, but Likelihood Ratio Tests failed to show better model fit. To test whether there are differential associations between 9-11th grade advising and college-going compared to 12th grade advising, we separate the frequency of school-based college and career advising domain into two models. Model 2 included the block of variables capturing whether or not students received early postsecondary advising at school in 9-11th grade. The third

model included how often they met with their counselor in their senior year about their college or career plans. The final full model included frequency of parental/guardian postsecondary advising in 12th grade. Interpretation of results focused on indicators with a significance level of  $\alpha = .01$ .

### Results

Controlling for differences in gender, race, poverty, disability, English language learner, and first-generation status, logistic regression analyses showed the following college advisement focus areas to be the most salient predictors (significant at the  $\alpha = .01$  level) of planning to attend college full-time in the fall: receiving “some” to “a lot” of help in completing college applications; receiving “a lot” of help in understanding the difference between for-profit and not-for-profit colleges (though in reverse direction); and receiving “a lot” of help in writing personal statements and/or supplemental essays (see Model 1 in Table 2). This first block comprised of demographic variables and advisement focus areas was significant and explained 6.5% of the variation in postsecondary plans (Wald  $\chi^2(23) = 518.99, p < .001, R^2 = .0654$ ).

The addition of indicators for early advisement in 9-11th grade only explained an additional 0.24% of variation in postsecondary plans (see Model 2; Wald  $\chi^2(26) = 537.22, p < .001, R^2 = .0678$ ). Early advisement in 9th and 10th grade were not statistically significant at the  $\alpha = .01$  level (although 9th grade advisement was significant at the  $\alpha = .05$  level);

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<sup>2</sup> We also estimated multilevel logistic regression models with random school intercepts that allow for the mean college attendance rate to be systematically higher or lower among schools. However, results showed only a small school effect. The estimated random intercept variance was small (e.g., 0.3 for the full model with all predictors), and the intraclass correlation coefficient revealed that only 8.7% of the variance in college attendance was explained by schools. Furthermore, results from these models yielded little substantive differences in findings, where the statistical significance and coefficient direction of all predictors remained the same. We thus elected to present results from regular logistic regression models that are more intuitive and easier to interpret.

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Table 2.

Odds ratios of likelihood of planning to attend college full-time (n=7,897).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Variables	Base model	Early advising	Senior advising	Parental/guardian advising
College applications –	1.662***	1.680***	1.573***	1.593***
Helped some	(0.248)	(0.254)	(0.240)	(0.244)
College applications –	2.236***	2.258***	1.981***	2.003***
Helped a lot	(0.353)	(0.360)	(0.318)	(0.323)
Understand for-profits –	0.856	0.858	0.859	0.877
Helped some	(0.0850)	(0.0855)	(0.0867)	(0.0886)
Understand for-profits –	0.670***	0.684***	0.682***	0.698***
Helped a lot	(0.0754)	(0.0775)	(0.0782)	(0.0800)
Write personal statements –	1.143	1.128	1.097	1.093
Helped some	(0.125)	(0.124)	(0.123)	(0.123)
Write personal statements –	1.384***	1.379***	1.289**	1.281**
Helped a lot	(0.157)	(0.158)	(0.149)	(0.149)
Met 9 <sup>th</sup> grade		0.833**	0.833**	0.848**
		(0.0661)	(0.0663)	(0.0676)
Met 10 <sup>th</sup> grade		0.915	0.882	0.872
		(0.0758)	(0.0734)	(0.0727)
Met 11 <sup>th</sup> grade		1.293***	1.133	1.144
		(0.104)	(0.0947)	(0.0959)
Met 12 <sup>th</sup> grade –			1.172	1.154
1-2 times			(0.122)	(0.124)
Met 12 <sup>th</sup> grade –			1.632***	1.467***
3-4 times			(0.185)	(0.172)
Met 12 <sup>th</sup> grade –			2.400***	2.016***
5+ times			(0.276)	(0.240)
Talked to parent/guardian–				1.031
1-2 times				(0.129)
Talked to parent/guardian–				1.421***
3-4 times				(0.181)
Talked to parent/guardian –				1.620***
5+ times				(0.200)
Constant	4.409***	4.167***	4.008***	3.049***
	(0.828)	(0.787)	(0.767)	(0.618)
Pseudo $R^2$	0.0654	0.0678	0.0803	0.0852
Wald	$\chi^2$ (23) =518.99	$\chi^2$ (26)=537.22	$\chi^2$ (29)=616.01	$\chi^2$ (32)=646.88

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. \*\* p<0.05 \*\*\* p<0.01. Odds ratios calculated from logistic regression models are reported. For quality of counseling, only indicators with a significance level of p<.01 are included in the table. All models include covariates for gender, race, poverty, disability, English language learner, and first-generation status, which are suppressed from the table. N=7,897 in all models. Reference group for quality of advisement items is “Did not help at all,” and for quantity of advisement items is “No” or “Never.”

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meeting with a counselor, teacher, or advisor in 11th grade was significant.

However, this significance in 11th grade disappeared once quantity indicators for postsecondary advising in senior year were included in the model (see Model 3). The odds of going to college was 63% higher for students who met 3-4 times with a counselor in their senior year than the odds for students who never met with a counselor (OR=1.632). Furthermore, the odds of committing to a college for students who reported meeting with a counselor at least 5 times were 140% more than the odds for those who did not meet with a counselor in their senior year (OR=2.400). It is also notable that this third block or model with the addition of quantity indicators for senior year advising explained an additional 1.25% of the variability in college-going (Wald  $\chi^2(29)=616.01$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $R^2 = .00803$ )

While still significant, the addition of parental/guardian advisement indicators on top of school-based college advising slightly muted the effects of meeting with a school counselor in 12th grade, as guidance from parents/guardians gained significance, strength, and explanatory power (see Model 4; Wald  $\chi^2(32)=646.88$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $R^2 = .0852$ ).

Compared to those who reported never having talked to their parents/guardians, the odds of having a full-time college commitment were 42% higher for students who reported having talked to their parents/guardians about their college or career plans 3-4 times in 12th grade (OR=1.421); this difference in odds increased to 62% for those who have talked to their parents/guardians at least 5 times (OR=1.620).



**“The odds of going to college was 63% higher for students who met 3-4 times with a counselor in their senior year than the odds for students who never met with a counselor...”**

Finally, the full model singled out the consistent importance of obtaining help in completing college applications, where those who reported receiving “a lot” of help with their college application had doubled the odds of having a full-time college commitment, compared to those who reported their schools “did not

help at all” with college applications (OR=2.003).

### Discussion

This study aimed to parse out what characteristics of postsecondary advising are most influential in predicting college-going. Whereas much of the literature on college counseling uses frequency of meetings as a proxy for college advising, we sought to take a more granular approach in identifying specific college counseling activities or focus

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areas that are most salient in predicting the outcome of going to college. Overall, our results highlight the importance of receiving “a lot” of help specifically in completing college applications. This is in line with prior research on the daunting nature of college applications, especially for students of color or those from low-income backgrounds (Avery & Kane, 2004; Bloom, 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Schuyler et al., 2021). It corroborates other evidence of spending time on college applications contributing to enrolling and persisting in better fit colleges (Lapan & Poynton, 2019; Rangel & Ballysingh, 2020).

Results also highlight the importance of concentrated postsecondary advising particularly in a student’s senior year. Our findings show a significant positive association between college-going and students discussing their college or career plans with a counselor in 12th grade at least 3 times, and preferably 5 or more times. This suggests that a series of meetings is needed to complete all the activities necessary to effectively support students throughout their senior year. In general, these results build on Kim et al.’s (2020) call for school leaders to make postsecondary counseling a primary goal of school counselors.

In contrast to the existence of literature showing the prevalence of parents believing high schools will help their children with college access (Brown et al., 2021), having students talk with their parents/guardians at

least 3 times in their senior year stands out as another statistically significant predictor. The odds of having a college commitment is over 40% more for those who talked with their parents/guardians at least 3 times in their senior year than those who reported not discussing college and career plans at all. This finding is consistent with the growing body of evidence since Perna and Titus’ (2005) early study demonstrating the importance of involving parents and families in the college process.

### Implications for practice

Findings from this study carry many practical implications for administrators and practitioners. First, our findings highlight the importance of prioritizing and providing college application support to 12th graders throughout their senior year. Besides one-on-one individual assistance, schools can consider hosting college application workshops where support can be provided to seniors and their families in groups. Administrators can also leverage existing structures, such as embedding application support into an advisory curriculum or dedicating a week to in-class application completion for all students during a flex period.

Second, prior research has shown how connecting families in the college admissions process can help foster college-going as a cultural norm (Rangel & Ballysingh, 2020) and increase students’ use of educational



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resources (Robinson et al., 2022). Providing families with specific supports like FAFSA completion events can further influence students' college attendance (Owen & Westlund, 2016). But besides direct communication between counselors and families and inviting parents/guardians to events like workshops or school-sponsored campus visits, our findings further support school initiatives to design communications or activities that encourage, initiate, and sustain postsecondary conversations between 12th graders and their parents or family members.

Third, results from this study also suggest the need for schools and districts to provide at least three meetings with students throughout their senior year of high school. This expansion of postsecondary advisement can be accomplished in multiple ways that do not simply rely on increasing counselors' workloads. In accordance with research that has shown the positive effects that lower student-to-school counselor ratios can have on college enrollment rates through helping students navigate the "high school-to-college pipeline" (Hurwitz & Howell, 2013; Kearney et al., 2021), districts can continue to strive to meet the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) recommendation of a 250-to-1 student-to-counselor ratio (ASCA, 2021) by hiring more counselors. Progress has been made in places like New York City, which reduced its ratio by about 7.5%, or 28 students, from 2015 to 2018 (Vega et al., 2018). Most recent data show that in 2022, the

average was 202-to-1 at schools with high school grades (NYCDOE, 2022). While this is below ASCA's recommended ratio, this average also masks the variation that exists across the district, as well as the fact that the ratio should be lower for districts with lower socioeconomic status and fewer available community resources (ASCA, 2019). Where it not possible to hire more counselors, it may be possible to create public-private partnerships with nationwide or location-specific counseling programs such as TRIO or College Advising Corps (Avery et al., 2014), which has the added benefit of promoting equity in access to college advisement within schools, particularly in high schools with lower-than-average college enrollment rates (Danos, 2017).

In addition, advisement does not have to be limited to the college or guidance offices. With ongoing professional development on the ever-changing landscape of college admission and financial aid policies, teachers and staff can support a college-going culture by engaging in college talk, encouraging family engagement, and providing tangible support with the college process like helping with components of the college and financial aid applications. Considering how many support areas there are throughout the college-going process, this type of coordinated, divide-and-conquer approach across a school can further reduce the burden on counselors who often serve multiple functions (Dunlop Velez, 2016), so that they can focus on prioritizing several individualized sessions to all 12th graders throughout their senior year.

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### Limitations

First and foremost, this study is correlational in nature, and results should not be interpreted causally. Second, analysis of missing data showed that the vast majority of cases that were dropped were due to “I’m not sure” responses, as opposed to actually being missing. This could be a result of several factors: students may have had trouble recalling this information, been unfamiliar with the terminology, and/or had difficulty extrapolating their experience to a summative evaluation of the postsecondary advising support they received.

About two percent of the survey full sample answered “I’m not sure” on the quality of counseling survey items, with the exception of 5% of the full sample responding “I’m not sure” to the questions about receiving support in applying to opportunity programs and writing their personal statements/essays, and 11% responding “I’m not sure” to understanding the difference between for-profit and not-for-profit colleges. This suggests that those who were retained in the analysis might represent students who possess relatively more college knowledge on areas such as knowing what a personal statement or opportunity program is.

To examine this attrition bias and gain a better understanding of who might be left out, we compared the full and sub-sample along demographic indicators (see columns 2 and 3 in Table 1). Results showed those who were

dropped were significantly more likely to be male, ELL, SWD, and first-generation status. We then further investigated the impact of missing data on the outcomes and found that those who were dropped were more likely to have talked to a counselor and parents/guardians only 1-2 times and significantly less likely to plan to attend college full-time. Generalizing these results outside of New York City and to students who for various reasons are less inclined to go to college should thus be approached with caution. Another limitation of the study is the use of students’ self-reported postsecondary plans at the end of their 12th grade academic year as the main outcome variable. Although we attempted to increase reliability by collecting this data at the end of the school year when most students have already committed to a college, we recognize that there are several tasks students still need to complete before successfully enrolling in college – such as placement testing, submitting deposits, attending mandatory orientations, and registering for classes – all of which could lead to “summer melt” (Roderick et al., 2011). The “summer melt” in matriculation is estimated to affect between 10% to 40% of college-intending students, with some students (e.g., students from low-income backgrounds, those enrolling in community colleges) more susceptible to melt than others (Castleman et al., 2013). We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge that these results do not necessarily reflect students’ ultimate enrollment in college. However, a recent study by Christian et al. (2020) shows that


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student self-report is generally still a good indicator of fall college enrollment.

Finally, since our study only captures the frequency of postsecondary conversations with parents in their senior year, future studies could further break down and identify qualitative aspects of the support that students receive from their families.

### Conclusion

Through quantitatively examining various counseling features that have been shown to matter, this study aimed to gain more clarity on what specific characteristics of college counseling can best predict college-going. Overall, findings from this study suggest that providing postsecondary advisement throughout high school, particularly in 12th grade, is key to students going to college. This study lends strength to the importance of counselors and families discussing a student's college and career plans particularly at the critical juncture of their senior year in high school. That said, our results also suggest that having at least one meeting each year in 9-11th grade dedicated to postsecondary planning can be impactful, especially in 11th grade. Two recommendations for administrators, counselors, and practitioners is to: 1) ensure that there is a focus on college application support, and 2) prioritize providing at least three meetings with students throughout their senior year. This, however, must not come at the expense of increasing existing counselors' workload.

Instead, other ways of expanding postsecondary advisement should be considered, which could extend beyond hiring more counselors to include alternative strategies like developing partnerships with community-based organizations and developing teachers and school staff members to provide college advisement support. 

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