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# What Counselors Need to Know About Community Colleges

While admission to a community college is simple—“apply and you’re in!”—the institution itself is quite complex. Community colleges serve several purposes: transfer, vocational, recreational, and remedial. Community colleges see students through many lenses. Can we bring clarity and focus to the picture of the community college student? What should counselors know in order to help their community college-bound students make the successful transition from high school? This article outlines the top 10 ideas that counselors should know about community colleges.

## 1. Community colleges are open to all students.

As open enrollment institutions, community colleges accept and enroll all prospective students who pay the fees and successfully enroll in classes. For counselors, this option can be very attractive in counseling the student who comes into the high school College Center and says, “I know I have not been the best student, but I’m ready to work really hard this year.” Of course, counselors are trained to respond in a non-judgmental manner. I call this student the “Born-Again Senior,” and while the counselor may be elated that this student has finally awakened to the importance of a college education, a look at the student transcript might reveal something akin to a negative grade point average. At this point, seniors don’t have enough time to boost their grade point average or to take the courses required for admission to four-year colleges and universities. The answer to this dilemma is the community college, which provides the student with a second chance, or “clean slate.”

However, the pitfall in prescribing a “college for all” counseling strategy is that students may be under the impression that “open enrollment” equals “free ride,” and students may be surprised about what is truly required for success in college. (Rosenbaum, 1996). Counselors should remind students that community college is still college.

## 2. English and math matter.

Student achievement in core courses, especially in English and math, strongly influences success in core courses. Proficiency in English-related skills is related to the study of several areas, such as Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology, as students are required to do extensive reading and writing. Students who show the highest success rate in transfer have completed Algebra 2 while in high school (Adelman, 2006). The fact that the overwhelming majority of students enrolling in community

college from high school are being placed in English and math below the college level has not been translated into an action plan (Hayward, 2004). A common understanding about course expectations and student academic performance can be part of the connection that facilitates transfer. Curriculum is key and high school preparation is critical to later success.

An intense, high impact high school curriculum is cited as the biggest factor in degree completion, especially for African-American and Latino students (Adelman, 2006). Students need to take a full complement of challenging courses throughout the senior year of high school, and counselors can encourage rigorous course-taking. Students need to maintain their skills in math and English, or they will be forced to begin at a remedial level when they take the community college placement tests.

## 3. Prepare for the community college placement tests.

While it is true that community colleges admit all applicants regardless of course requirements, students interpret this as a way to avoid challenging high school courses. All community colleges require placement tests in math and English. These tests are important because they determine the level of coursework students are eligible to take. If students test into remedial levels, then they must take courses that will not count for transfer until they work themselves into college-transferable level. This results in spending hundreds of dollars and hours on textbooks and classes that will not contribute to a transfer program.

Compounding the issue is the “disconnect” between college entrance requirements and high school graduation requirements. If, for example, high schools require only two years of math for graduation, students may take the assessment when they have been away from math for an entire year. They may be aware of some of the math required, but haven’t experienced it in a year or more. What is not used is lost.

Students are often surprised to learn that they have tested into remedial levels. Indeed, 42 percent of community college freshmen enroll in at least one remedial course (NCES, 2004). Remediation for high school students costs the United States more than \$1.4 billion each year, according to a report from the Alliance for Excellent Education (2006).

Counselors can remind students that they need to take some time and prepare for the placement tests. Most colleges offer free preparation materials, and students can practice with any SAT or ACT practice books and review key concepts before they take the examinations.

#### **4. Understand all options.**

Exposure to college can be facilitated by early enrollment in community college courses. Students who need more challenging coursework can get a head start on their community college coursework by enrolling in a course in the afternoon or evenings. Surveys conducted by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (reported in the *State of College Admission 2006*) cite the paramount importance of the student's academic record; the student's academic program in college preparatory courses is the single most important factor in the college admission process. A concurrent enrollment program provides a curricular means for students to augment their academic portfolio. Counselors can encourage their academically motivated students to enroll in community college courses.

In California, for example, students are able to take at no cost—except for books and supplies—college-level courses that will enhance the academic profile they present for college admission. For students in schools where elective and supplemental academic opportunities are meager, such as inner-city schools, the program provides substance and academic capital (Hugo, 2001). The more quickly students gain access to challenging courses, the more likely they are to complete a degree program (Education Trust, 1999). Counselors may wish to establish a relationship with their local community colleges to learn procedures about concurrent enrollment and ascertain which classes might be best suited for their high school students.

Counselors should also know that successful completion of high school foreign language courses will “count” in the transfer pattern. In our state's inter-segmental course pattern, students don't earn unit credit, but studying two years of a foreign language and passing with a grade of “C” or higher will satisfy the foreign language requirements. Counselors should inform their foreign language departments about the importance of earning good grades in foreign language coursework.

#### **5. Communicate student achievement to your high school community.**

As counselors establish a relationship with their local community colleges, they can request enrollment and placement test data for their schools. While FERPA regulations prohibit sharing information on individual students, community colleges can provide aggregate information on the number of students enrolled, the most popular majors and student achievement in English and math. This information, in turn, could be communicated to the chairs of key high school departments, as well as the entire

counseling department. In addition, seniors and parents should know how well the students are prepared for the rigor of the community college program.

At Santa Monica College, the Outreach program prepares an individual school report, which highlights enrollment trends, English and math placement levels, popular majors, and the number of students enrolled in special programs. This profile is distributed to the college counselor, the principal, and the English and Math Department chairs. Oftentimes, schools have little or no feedback regarding their students' achievement. The profile provides an important point of articulation between the high school and the college. If this data is not provided, then counselors may request the information.

#### **6. Apply Early.**

While anyone who applies to community college is admitted, oftentimes, the student's enrollment date is connected to the application date. An application submitted early gives the student the best chance at enrolling in classes. The earlier, the better. Community colleges see many students who wake up in September and decide that they want to go to college. The reality is, college probably started in August and students will have to piecemeal a schedule of “crashed” classes. Counselors can encourage their students to apply as early as spring of the senior year. Many community colleges have online applications and there is no application fee. This early application ensures an earlier enrollment date, a distinct advantage for new students.

Recent research suggests that students who enroll in community college immediately following high school have a much higher propensity to transfer. (Adelman, 2006). Community colleges feature summer bridge programs that offer students a preview of the regular academic year, allow students the chance to earn college credits, and maintain skills through continuous enrollment. While summer classes might be a hard sell for seniors plagued with “senioritis,” once students understand that they can expedite remedial coursework, they may be more likely to enroll.

#### **7. Consider honors programs.**

Community colleges have programs that offer exceptional rigor. Most have a scholars or honors program, which features specialized faculty, smaller classes, a higher level of discourse, and individualized counseling services.

Students in honors programs experience intense academic preparation and study in programs designed to promote mastery of subject matter through writing, research, critical thinking, and analysis. Honors programs also offer workshops for students in course planning, transfer admission applications and essay writing. Some honors programs feature additional benefits, such as library privileges with local universities, and special scholarships. Some provide transfer agreements with top four-year colleges and universities, and even offer guaranteed and priority consideration for admission. For high-achieving students who want the highest level of rigor possible, counselors can inform students about the advantages of honors programs. Honors program applications usually require additional application components, such as letters of recommendation and an essay.

## 8. Explore the Resources.

One of the most under-utilized resources at the community college is the career center, where counselors work individually with students to help them explore career interests, evaluate job skills and create effective resumes. Counselors work with students to explore specific majors and careers and set goals regarding career and major choices.

Unlike their four-year counterparts, community college students often have to select a major during their first year in college. Students study general education courses, but what matters most in terms of transfer are the lower-division courses in the selected major (Nannini, 2001). Community college career centers have programs, assessments and personnel to assist students in identifying interests and translating those to college majors.

Community colleges also offer workshops in subjects such as transfer strategies, overcoming math anxiety and stress management. Most community colleges feature tutoring labs in math, English and language study. Counselors can remind students that they need to be proactive and seek out such services.

## 9. Financial Aid is available.

Although community colleges are typically low-cost institutions, students may be eligible for Pell Grants, federal work-study, loans, fee waivers, and book grants. Students often hear the low cost per unit price of attendance, but they do not hear the true cost of their education. In California, students enjoy a \$26 per unit fee (\$20 scheduled for January 2007), but they do not realize the cost of books at over \$100 per class, or the cost of transportation or other supplies they may need. Since the majority of low-income students begin their college careers at a community college (Wellman, 2006) students should be encouraged to apply for financial aid.

Instead of securing financial aid and concentrating on being a student, many students focus instead on a part-time job. Students end up folding t-shirts into neat little squares at the GAP, or work at being a store greeter at Banana Republic, or stuffing burritos at Taco Bell. Financial aid can give them the money to work and stay on campus. Even a work-study job in a community college office can provide the connection the student needs to the institution. For many first-generation students, the financial aid process can present serious challenges. To address these challenges, counselors should involve students and parents aggressively in the financial aid process.

Counselors should remember that when they conduct financial aid workshops, they should include the community college-bound students and parents.

## 10. Celebrate the process.

When I was a high school counselor helping my students through the college admission process, I did not celebrate fully the fact that these students had also taken the necessary steps for higher education—they had applied, tested, applied for aid, and taken a campus tour. Our profession often rewards acceptances to four-year schools, but not to community colleges. Now that I work on the “other side,” I regret that I didn’t recognize my students’ accomplishments. Counselors can congratulate their

students, through announcements, publicity or recognition at senior awards night programs.

Counselors may wish to utilize these top 10 ideas by using these concepts with their students and parents. This information may provide an outline for a presentation or serve as a handout to be used in the high school college center.

### What Students need to know about Community College:

1. To realize your goals, you must self-assess. Students may automatically “sign up” for transfer, but is that the best goal? Go to the career center for help.
2. Investigate all options. Community colleges offer vocational programs, certificates and transfer options. Check them all out carefully.
3. Be aware of the importance of English and math. Your performance on the placement tests determines the level of classes you can take.
4. Apply for Financial Aid. Students should file the FAFSA and investigate college-based fee waiver and support programs. Book grants are available, too.
5. College is different from high school. You’ll be in class for fewer hours, but you’ll be expected to study more. Consider travel time and study time.
6. College is about more than just going to class. You’ll be more successful if you can connect with college through an activity or club.
7. Get organized or learn how to. If you weren’t a model student in high school, then think about taking a study skills class to learn to become more organized.
8. Get a respectable email address. You will communicate with your professors and fellow students via email.
9. Learn to become proactive. Try to get help before you need it. Community colleges offer free tutoring services and labs for writing and math.
10. Community college is still college. The work represents the first two years of college. Time to get serious!

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