



**PATHWAYS**  
TO  
**POSTSECONDARY  
SUCCESS**

Maximizing Opportunities  
for Youth in Poverty

*PATHWAYS to Postsecondary Success* is a series of mixed-methods studies of the educational pathways of California's lower income youth. Through a series of research briefs and reports, the project aims to advance research on poverty, produce useful tools that improve educational practice, and inform the U.S. policy agenda on the relationship between poverty and education.

*'I Need More Information': How College Advising is Still Absent from College Preparation in High Schools* draws on the voices and experiences of students and counselors in San Diego public high schools to shed light on weaknesses in college counseling and to offer recommendations for how high school advising programs can be improved.

# POLICY REPORT

A P R I L 2 0 1 3

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## **'I Need More Information'** **How College Advising is Still Absent from College Preparation in High Schools**

Makeba Jones

In the wake of the Great Recession, unemployment and poverty rates among young adults have dramatically increased, especially for those who have not earned bachelor's degrees (Aud, KewalRamani, & Frohlich, 2011). College attendance and completion are critical for individuals seeking stable employment and economic mobility out of poverty. We know that the institutions at the end of the pipeline—colleges and universities—need to improve graduation rates for students who have grown up in poverty (Johnson & Rochkind, 2010a). As important, students who are earlier in the pipeline—i.e., in high school—need to be prepared for college-level work and expectations (Lee & Smith, 2001). For low-income youth, the transition from high school to college is a pivotal juncture; clearing the college-going hurdle immediately, without delay, increases the likelihood that they will earn four-year degrees (Ashtiani & Feliciano, 2012; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). One of the most important components of preparation for a smooth transition is *college advising*. High school counselors are arguably as important as teachers in preparing low-income high school students for college.

Nationwide, high school counseling is fragmented. Absurdly high student to counselor ratios, counselor knowledge gaps about college requirements, and increasing pulls on counselor time that have nothing to do with advising students have cracked counseling systems in many public schools (Adams, 2010; McDonough, 2005). And, in recent years, slashed education budgets have pushed already fragmented counseling systems to the breaking point.

Our nation's students are painfully aware of how their school counseling programs are failing them. In 2010, Public Agenda publicized troubling survey results from over 600 individuals between the ages of 22 and 30 about their high school guidance systems (Johnson & Rochkind, 2010b). Results showed an overwhelming failing grade; even young adults who had earned four-year degrees rated their school counseling as poor. The fact that the report presented a national portrait of dismal counseling for students from all socioeconomic backgrounds does not diminish the urgency to improve counseling for low-income students in particular.

Low-income students are especially vulnerable to institutional gaps in college advising because they often have limited personal ties to family, friends,

or neighbors with four-year degrees who can offer informed college guidance (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). Middle class and affluent families have the resources to bypass their children’s weak high school counseling departments in favor of private college advising (McDonough, Korn, & Yamasaki, 1997). Low-income students and their families typically cannot do the same, rendering high school counseling departments all the more crucial for increasing their access to college (Stanton-Salazar, 2010).

With these issues in mind, this research draws on the voices of 78 low-income 16- to 19-year-old students

in five San Diego high schools to shed light on their experiences regarding access to postsecondary education. We also include findings from our interviews with 10 school counselors from the five sites. Together, these findings offer an in-depth look at the college advising experiences of high school juniors and seniors, and data-driven recommendations for education policy on college advising.

## Two Key Messages for Improving High School Counseling

As San Diego high school juniors and seniors described their future hopes, dreams, and plans, they often mentioned college as the next step. Unfortunately, only a handful of students talked in detail about the array of options available to them (e.g., community colleges, technical schools, and four-year universities), or about eligibility requirements and costs. Sadly, we also learned that—with only a few notable exceptions—most students’ high school counselors played little to no role in guiding their thinking about postsecondary education (PSE) and their futures more generally.

Two key themes about college advising emerged from our conversations with the San Diego case study students and counselors:

- 1. Students need more and better information about college.**
- 2. Students need more and better interactions with counselors around college advising.**

The remainder of this report uses interview data to describe these two messages and explain how they impact college-going for low-income youth. The report concludes with policy recommendations for systemic improvements to college advising in high schools.

### A Multi-Level Case Study

This research report draws on a broader study of low-income youth, their institutions, and the San Diego region. At six high schools in San Diego County, we examined how students interpreted their options and made decisions about postsecondary education and employment.

Data collection occurred between April 2010 and September 2012 and included three waves of 60- to 90-minute interviews with low-income youth, beginning in either their junior or senior year of high school. We also conducted interviews with administrators, teachers, and counselors, and gathered participant demographic and educational background information through surveys and school- and district-level data sources.

This report presents the analysis of open-ended interviews with 78 students and 10 counselors across five of the six schools. These five schools are conventional neighborhood high schools of varying size and structure. The sixth case study school was excluded from this analysis because it is an alternative school, and this report focuses on high school counseling in conventional secondary school settings.

## Message One

### Students need more and better information about college.

#### Students do not have access to sufficient college knowledge.

The low-income students in our sample reported learning about UC/CSU college eligibility requirements, college application procedures, community college information, SAT/ACT test-taking, and financial aid, but it was clear that they often had insufficient information to make sound decisions. For instance, students often cited the UC system's "A-G" course requirements as part of college eligibility, but they were not always certain that the courses they were taking in high school would meet these requirements. In many cases, students did not have enough information to even know what questions to ask, or had incorrect information that could easily lead them in the wrong direction.

**Students don't know what they don't know about college.** Students who had gaps in their knowledge about PSE preparation and requirements were not sure what information they were missing or what questions they should ask their counselors. For example, one student explained that she relied on her counselor as the primary source of information, but she had to begin the conversation herself. When asked how she might find out more information, she explained, "Honestly I don't really know. I would love to learn more, it's just no one [at the high school] really provides that information. And then, like, I don't really know what to ask." Another, who attended information sessions alone and with her parents, noted that she "would learn and try to understand everything, but it is like something is missing from what they are trying to explain or teach. Or there's something that I didn't understand." In some cases, seniors learned for the first time about the availability of federal financial aid only *after* the deadline for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application had already passed.<sup>1</sup>

#### Students believe wrong information about college.

Without reliable sources of information about PSE options, requirements, and costs, students were vulnerable to believing and acting on grossly inaccurate information. For instance, one student believed that failure to pass the California High School Exit Examination barred individuals from enrolling in community college. She described one friend who "just decided to give up, which a lot of kids do. They just give up because they think they're never going to pass [the CAHSEE]. Then they ask why people aren't going to college, and [not passing] is holding them back from going to college." Another student believed that beginning at a two-year college meant those years would be tacked on to a four-year degree, for a total of six years of school, and this prospect was daunting:

*I was [thinking], 'Do I really want to endure six-plus years of school?' You know? ... I never really had ... a dream, I think. ... I never really said that I wanted to be a biologist or doctor, so ... I didn't have anything to pursue. So I was [thinking], 'Why should I go to college if I'm going to be stuck?'*

#### Student to Counselor Ratios: How Does California Measure Up?

The American School Counselor Association recommends no more than 250 students be assigned to a single school counselor (ASCA, 2012). The average ratio in California is 945:1—the highest in the United States, and well above the national average of 477:1. Nearly one third of school districts in California have no formalized counseling programs (California Department of Education, 2011).

**Message Two**  
**Students need more and better interactions with counselors around college advising.**

**Counselors are just one of many sources of college information.**

We asked students to tell us where they had obtained information on postsecondary education options and requirements. This discussion often happened as students talked about their current plans after high school graduation, including their interests and aspirations, which largely required postsecondary certificates or degrees.<sup>2</sup>

**Forty-three percent of students relied on their personal networks to learn about postsecondary education.** Few of these low-income students knew adults in their personal networks who had four-year degrees or who could offer informed guidance, so it is not surprising that they overwhelmingly said they used the Internet (specifically, Google) to research PSE options, requirements, and costs (Figure 1).

**Students relied on classroom activities and teachers for information about college as often as they did their school counselors.** Second to personal networks (including Internet searches),

20% of students said they learned about PSE from school assignments, individual teachers, and/or guest speakers invited to present to entire classes. Likewise, 20% of students said their counselors were the only source of information (4%) or one in a range of sources (16%) for learning about postsecondary education. This means that students were more than twice as likely to talk about their educational futures with friends and family or to rely on Internet searches as they were to talk to their school counselors.

**Strong relationships between students and counselors are rare.**

**Nearly three quarters of the students in our study had little to no relationship with their high school counselors.** When students were asked about their interactions with their high school counselors, a startling 46% stated they had no relationship with them (Figure 2). Course scheduling often proceeded routinely, almost automatically, each semester for these students. Indeed, they described minimal to no contact with their counselors throughout their time in high school.

The 28% of students who interacted with their counselors but experienced obligatory or perfunctory contact obtained only the most basic information about high school graduation and college, including college eligibility requirements for the UC/CSU system, SAT/ACT test-taking, financial aid options, high school

Figure 1

**Low-Income Students' Sources of Information about Postsecondary Options**

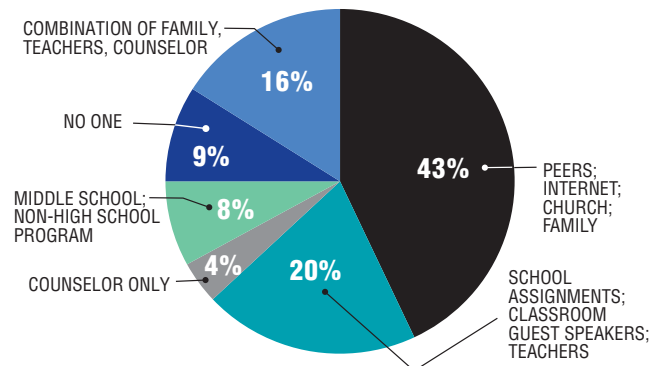
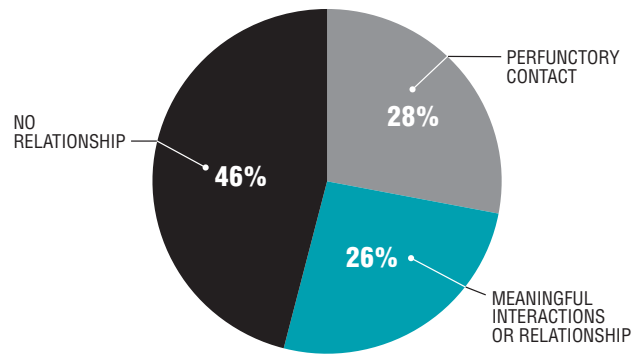


Figure 2

**Students' Characterizations of Their Relationships with Counselors**



transcripts, high school credit checks, and recommendation letters.

**About one fourth of the students (26%) described influential interactions and personally meaningful relationships with their counselors.** Students in this group said they received encouragement from counselors to persevere through hard times in school, praise for various accomplishments toward timely high school graduation and future plans, advice on personal matters, and information about local community colleges and postsecondary scholarship opportunities. For example, students at one case study school described two exceptional counselors who provided in-depth college-going support by making phone calls to community colleges to resolve registration glitches and by tracking down information for scholarships to help pay college fees.

**Limited access may be thwarting the development of strong student/counselor relationships.** Students who initiated contact with their counselors to ask even the most basic questions about, for example, college applications and financial aid sometimes had trouble getting face time. One frustrated senior said, “I can’t even get in to the counselor.” Counselors at her school required a written request from any student who wanted a meeting, and they were then supposed to call the student out of class. Desperate to talk to her counselor, this senior asked her friends who worked in the counseling office to submit a written request in the counselor’s mailbox on her behalf. Her plan failed. She said her counselor “would pick it up, look at it, and put it back in the box.”

This difficulty accessing counselors may be due to the increased responsibilities of the counseling staff. Consistently, counselors interviewed in our case study schools talked about the growth of their non-counselor responsibilities, including supervising students during lunch or after school. They lamented how these increased administrative duties took precedence over their counseling duties, leaving little to no time to meet with students.

Even when students were “lucky enough” (as one student put it) to see their counselors, students did not always perceive the interactions as helpful. One girl described an unproductive meeting with her

counselor to help her parents complete the federal college financial aid application (the FAFSA):

*One of my friends told me I should apply for FAFSA, and me and my mom finished doing that. My mom had trouble, so we went to talk to my counselor. But he only told us how to get our PIN number. They [my parents] had so many questions and [the FAFSA] wanted so much information, like about taxes and stuff, it was difficult. So we sent in my application but they sent it back saying what information was wrong, so my mom and dad had to quickly get everything sorted out.*

Perfunctory interactions and relationships with counselors were pervasive, and in-depth college guidance was rare, and this more than likely had an effect on the postsecondary outcomes for these students.

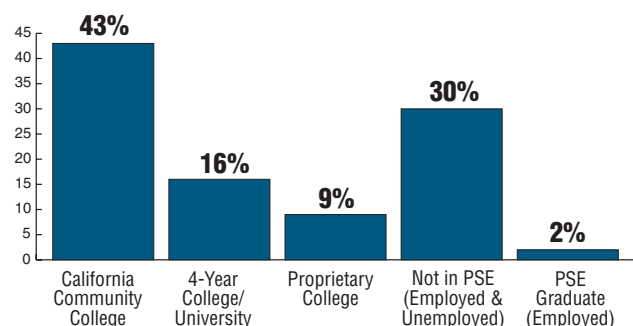
### Weak student/counselor relationships and limited face time may impact students’ postsecondary outcomes.

#### San Diego low-income youth enrolled in two-year colleges more often than in four-year colleges.

As of February 2013, 56 of the 78 students had participated in the final interview of the study. As shown in **Figure 3**, only 16% of these students were enrolled in four-year colleges; 43% were enrolled part-time or full-time in community colleges. A small percentage (9%) were enrolled in certificate programs at proprietary colleges. Only one student had graduated from a proprietary college certificate program in criminal justice and was working full-time as a building security guard.

Figure 3

#### Postsecondary Enrollment Status of Youth at Final Interview





**Youth who had enrolled in two-year and four-year colleges managed to do so with little help from their high school counselors.**

A closer look at students' relationships with their high school counselors is revealing. Of the nine students (16%) who enrolled in four-year colleges immediately after high school, only one student said he had a meaningful relationship with his counselor. Participation in out-of-school college support programs was common among these students, as were college-enrolled siblings and friends who provided accurate advice.

Of the 43% who enrolled in community colleges, only about one third said they had meaningful relationships with their counselors. Some of these students might have been eligible to attend four-year colleges directly out of high school if they had experienced deeper counselor relationships before graduation. Most disappointing are the 30% of students who had not enrolled in any PSE institution by the end of the study. Of these 17 students, a mere four said they had meaningful relationships with their counselors.

### Implications for Educational Policy

As California moves forward with strengthening the economy through job training and education reform, high school counseling departments need to be included in these efforts. The results of our research in San Diego cohere with the Public Agenda survey results that raised troubling questions about the guidance that our youth receive as they prepare for their postsecondary options (Johnson & Rochkind, 2010b). The experiences of our San Diego case study participants point to the need for education policy that overhauls high school counseling. Specifically, three areas require immediate attention: 1) students' and families' need for accurate, in-depth knowledge and guidance about college; 2) students' need for more time with their counselors; and 3) the value of counselors' caring attitudes. Each of these areas is described in greater detail below.

**Low-income high school youth need in-depth information and guidance as they prepare for postsecondary education.** Our San Diego case study youth had minimal basic knowledge about college eligibility for the UC/CSU system and grossly

inaccurate information about college in general. Indeed, low-income students often do not know what PSE information they need or what questions to ask counselors. Thus, counselors need to take a more hands-on approach to guiding low-income students' transitions to PSE. An important step toward this goal is ensuring that the counselors themselves have the most accurate and up-to-date information on-hand. Ongoing professional development and outreach from the higher education sector can help ensure this is the case. Likewise, given the significant role that teachers play in postsecondary guidance, they must also be viewed as partners in the process.<sup>3</sup>

**Low-income high school youth need more time to meet with their counselors as they prepare for postsecondary options.**

The numerous pulls on counselors' time were not lost on the students with whom we spoke. Years of education budget cuts have redistributed more administrative duties to counselors, and the added tasks of managing multiple standardized testing periods, for instance, or of supervising students on campus grounds during lunch or after school take away time that would be better spent advising youth. Students in this study were acutely aware that their counselors were not spending enough time talking with them about their futures and about college.

Student to counselor caseloads must be lowered and then fiercely protected to ensure that low-income students have sufficient access to counselors and that they have the time to become informed about what they need to know about their postsecondary options. Counselors need the capacity to interact with students regularly, because increased contact strengthens the chances for developing positive student/counselor relationships. Mandatory meetings with counselors, for instance, would help ensure students' access to key information at regular intervals and lessen the likelihood of them making uninformed postsecondary decisions.

**Low-income youth benefit from relationships with counselors who are genuinely interested and compassionate.**

Increased time with counselors does not guarantee that they will be positively invested in guiding students. Students in the study were more likely to seek out and listen to counselors

who showed genuine regard for their well-being and futures. Students who had personally meaningful, caring relationships with their counselors clearly benefitted from this type of relationship, but these examples were too few and far between; the exceptional efforts of rare individuals are inadequate.

Low-income high school students need entire departments of caring counselors who can invest time in guiding them. Part of this will come naturally if counselors are afforded more opportunities to work directly with students. But schools must also make active efforts to recruit and retain counseling staff who demonstrate a commitment to meeting the needs of low-income students, who may rely on school counseling staff to a greater degree than their middle- and high-income counterparts. Counselors who have experience developing innovative programs and activities—in other words, who go beyond perfunctory contact—can inform low-income youth about postsecondary options while building vital, caring relationships.

The implications outlined in this brief may appear to be common sense. But the fact is, low-income students are not receiving the level of college counseling that they both want and deserve. Our case study participants told us that college advising in their high schools was, at best, happenstance and, at worst, non-existent. Their counselors confirmed that they are currently unable to serve low-income students as effectively as they would like, as their increased administrative responsibilities have taken precious time they would normally use for college advising. For high school graduates who have not enrolled in college, access to a better advising system in high school might have steered their pathways toward postsecondary education. High school graduates who have grown up in poverty face harsh economic prospects without college degrees. California's low-income young adults are counting on policymakers to seriously consider these implications in order to rebuild guidance systems that will increase college enrollment immediately after high school and better their chances for economic stability and success.

## Notes

I would like to thank Susan Yonezawa, Hugh “Bud” Mehan, and Karen Jarsky for their assistance with this policy report.

- 1 For additional detail concerning the challenges that students face as they initiate and complete the FAFSA, see Yonezawa (2013). This brief, another in the PATHWAYS series, draws from the same dataset and is available at [http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/201304\\_FinancialAidPR.pdf](http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/201304_FinancialAidPR.pdf)
- 2 Students' aspirations included: architect, nurse, auto mechanic, interior designer, law enforcement/criminal justice, doctor, civil engineer, counselor, business owner, graphic artist, computer technician, firefighter, professional boxer, teacher, university professor, border patrol agent, game designer, cosmetologist, pharmacist, fashion design, film director, accountant, probation officer.
- 3 These topics are explored in greater detail in another set of briefs in the PATHWAYS series. Oseguera's (2013a, 2013b) examinations of the high school conditions that are essential in preparing students for a range of postsecondary options will be available on the PATHWAYS site (<http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/publications>).

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