Getting students from under-represented populations to consider college is one thing. But an urban school counselor’s work doesn’t stop there. It’s also imperative to ensure they have the skills necessary to succeed in college.

BY MANDY SAVITZ-ROMER, PH.D.

Consider minorities from the big city. What are the chances they’ll go to college – or finish if they do go? Not very good. Reports revealing low college enrollment and completion rates among students of color and economically impoverished students, especially in comparison to their white, middle- and upper-class peers, have raised concerns about educational equity.

Researchers are examining strategies to prepare students for college. Policymakers are considering the implications of federal and state programs, and preK-12 practitioners are implementing best practices to prepare their students for a successful transition to college.

The good news is this growing gap in equity has called attention to what works when promoting post-secondary opportunities for all students. Even more encouraging, the debate over whether responsibility falls to K-12 or higher education has shifted to new conversations about collaboration, as seen by school-university partnerships, K-16 curricular alignment and pre-college outreach programs. Today, preparing students for access to and success in college is a shared responsibility.
The troubling news is that despite the fact that school counselors are the ones primarily charged with promoting students’ personal, academic and career development, their voices are noticeably missing from research reports, policy decisions and, most importantly, recommendations for improved practice. Although this is disconcerting for the school counseling profession at large, it is particularly concerning for those working in urban settings where first-generation, low-income and minority students are heavily concentrated. The urban school counselor is a critical element of students’ post-secondary success.

A resounding theme in much of the research is that low-income students and those who are first in their family to go to college rely heavily on help from school counselors, teachers and coaches for college planning and support rather than obtaining it from family members or peers.

**Drawing on Skills**

Although there is no shortage of Web sites or guidebooks designed to help students plan for college, many fall short of providing specific recommendations to help urban school counselors navigate the complex college counseling process. Very few traditional college planning resources address how to help undocumented students secure financial aid, provide information appropriate for parenting teens or suggest college counseling strategies for students living in foster care. Even more noticeable is the pervasive assumption in resource guides that students themselves believe they can be successful in college when, in fact, many feel hopeless about their future and see college as unachievable.

School counselors working with urban students must draw on their counseling, teaching, advocacy and leadership skills to overcome the risk factors, both personal and environmental, that otherwise prevent students from developing and realizing their hopes and dreams. However, such a task calls for a process quite different than those found in broad-based approaches.

Three elements are essential to post-secondary success: strong academic preparation, high educational aspirations and expectations and high-quality college counseling. All three of which fall squarely within the scope of school counselors’ roles.

**Strong Academic Preparation**

Successfully undertaking a rigorous curriculum is believed to be one of the best predictors of college enrollment and success. Thus, implementing a college preparatory curriculum is a must. However, most school counselors know that raising standards in the classroom is only effective if the appropriate structures and supports are in place to meet all students’ needs. Urban school counselors can support students’ academic preparation in the following ways:

- **GET THE WORD OUT:** Provide information and encouragement to all students about the importance of taking a rigorous course of study. Deliver this information via multiple people and multiple strategies. Posting information or sharing in an assembly is unlikely to influence course-taking patterns, unless it is reinforced by all staff members and others who have influence over students’ decision making. Educate students about the importance of their GPA, and give them multiple opportunities to see and understand how their GPA relates to future goals.

- **OPEN THE GATES:** Ensure that students in all grades have access to gatekeeper courses, such as Algebra I and advanced math courses. Encourage administrators to offer Algebra I in eighth grade, and link appropriate academic tutoring to that class. In addition to math, be sure world languages and laboratory sciences are open and accessible to students. Use data to assess the extent to which programs, courses and services are equitable, and promote opportunity for all students. Advocate for the inclusion of multiple Advanced Placement courses.

- **GET REAL ABOUT SUPPORT SERVICES:** Make certain appropriate academic supports are in place to ensure students are able to succeed in rigorous courses. Leverage community partners to provide the academic tutoring and skill development necessary for students to succeed. Establish partnerships with local universities, community-based agencies and public service organizations that can provide academic instruction and support tied to specific class goals, objectives and curricular methods.

- **GET SCHOOLED:** Read some of the reports identifying the skills and content knowledge necessary for success in college. Build your own college knowledge so you can educate teachers and administrators. Sign up for daily alerts from higher education and related media outlets that link to executive summaries of new reports.

- **GET GOING:** Target efforts to students in the earlier grades to ensure they make academic choices that keep them on the academic pipeline to college. Use ninth-grade orientations, visits to middle schools and partnerships with middle school counselors to convey the importance of taking rigorous courses in high school. Set aside the time to work with early grades to ensure students understand both the importance of post-secondary education and the steps necessary to realize future college opportunities. Utilize graduate student interns, Americorps volunteers and others to work with ninth-grade teachers and orientation programs.

**High Aspirations, Expectations**

In the past few years, educators have done a good job of sending the message that going to college has long-term benefits. And if this important message weren’t enough, eye-widening charts showing the difference in salaries between those with a college degree and those without certainly have had an impact on students’ aspirations. Ask a class of ninth-grade students if they plan to go to college, and most will raise their hands. However, the chorus of hands may not necessarily reflect students’ expectations but rather their hopes. Many reports suggest that urban students’ early intentions of attending
college don’t necessarily translate to enrollment in, or even application to, college, thus showing a decline in aspirations over time. Similarly, students’ aspirations aren’t necessarily matched by their academic behaviors, possibly suggesting a gap between students’ hopes and their actual expectations. Therefore, urban school counselors need to draw on their training in human development to foster and maintain the aspirations and expectations necessary for college enrollment and graduation in the following ways:

**GO DEEP:** Facilitate early conversations with students to explore whether they expect to go to college, and examine any perceived barriers that might prevent them from pursuing their college hopes. Use professional development, common planning time or school counselor coffee hours to educate teachers and school staff about the importance of high educational expectations and the barriers students may see as in their way.

**ENGAGE PARENTS AND FAMILIES:** Move beyond simply informing parents about educational opportunities to drawing on the important influence they have over their children’s developmental plans. Consider partnering with family engagement centers, community churches and organizations parents already participate in, and encourage these groups to host their own parent nights and information sessions. Hire parents of alumni or upperclassmen to lead workshops and trainings for parents of ninth-graders. At school events, celebrate the quiet ways families support their children’s education. Disseminate information about school and community programs and resources to all those who come in contact with parents, and utilize parent open house events to consistently provide parents of children in all grades with college knowledge and program opportunities.

**TEST YOUR SCHOOL:** Assess and build your schools’ college-going culture by ensuring professional development, language, mission statement, resources and policies all reflect a commitment to students’ post-secondary aspirations and potential for success. Schools that embody a college-going culture send the message that all students have the opportunity to realize a college degree or other form of post-secondary training. Use programs, such as dual enrollment, to motivate students to aspire to college rather than reserving them for high-achieving students.

**BUILD A TEAM:** Capitalize on the fact that adolescents spend more time with their peers, and target interventions to a cohort of peers. Establish peer-counseling programs offering direct benefits to students while also shifting the norms and culture of peer groups. Using groups or classroom lessons to raise aspirations will not only disseminate
information but also affect the school and classroom culture. When possible, use students and/or alumni to lead workshops, panels and guest visits to middle and elementary schools, thereby reinforcing presenting students’ own aspirations and plans.

High-Quality College Counseling

Low-income and first-generation college students who have been successful in college routinely acknowledge that one person or organization provided them with comprehensive college counseling. Reports indicate that urban students benefit from college counseling that is both comprehensive and personalized, sometimes suggesting that school counselors are too overburdened to provide adequate counseling to urban students. Those on the front line, however, know that getting kids into and through college is never a one-person or one-organization job. By using the ASCA National Model and building partnerships with school staff, families and community-based organizations, school counselors can ensure all students have access to high-quality college counseling by doing the following:

PERSONALIZE COLLEGE COUNSELING: Use the school counselors’ role in fostering students’ personal, social and emotional development to personalize college counseling. Students’ ability to see themselves as succeeding in college is tied to their self-efficacy and self-competence. Implementing a developmental and comprehensive guidance curriculum that includes identity development, explores students’ barriers to learning and achievement and fosters hope about the future will help students move those aspirations to expectations.

SPREAD THE WEALTH: School staff serve as important mentors and advocates for students, yet they often lack the information and experience to support students’ college-planning needs. Provide teachers, administrators, community partners and families with resources that cultivate their role in this process. Distribute information about pre-collegiate support programs, common misperceptions about admissions and financial aid, tips for writing strong letters of recommendations and general information and deadlines for college admissions. Doing so will further reinforce a schoolwide college-going culture. Use this approach with advisory programs, professional development seminars and developmental guidance lessons.

ALIGN SUPPORT PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS: Too often pre-college outreach programs over-service the same small percentage of students, while other students are left without the opportunities that could provide them information they need. This is especially true in urban areas where...
there are multiple programs and organizations competing for the same group of students. Urban school counselors should use data to track students served through these programs and identify barriers preventing others from participating. Sharing such data with university and community partners will improve recruitment and service delivery.

**PASS THE BATON:** Unfortunately, many students’ plans fall apart during the summer between high school and college, a time when neither K-12 nor higher education takes responsibility for them. Consider school or communitywide events that bring high school graduates and college and university representatives together to support and celebrate the transition the students are making. Encourage high school alumni attending those colleges to provide support to the incoming students from their community, thereby creating a post-high-school community of learners. Invite support services staff from colleges heavily attended by your schools’ students to discuss their services and how to access them over the summer.

**COLLEGE SUCCESS VS. COLLEGE ACCESS:** Talk with students about the importance of retention at the college level. Use data systems such as CollegeResults Online to help students make decisions about post-secondary schools where they are most likely to be successful. Invite admissions counselors to informally share results of previous admitted students to inform your own awareness of where students experience college success. Bring high school alumni to the school to discuss the challenges and accomplishments they experience in college and to discuss how they manage housing, employment and financing college.

**USE THE ASCA NATIONAL MODEL:** Student-to-school-counselor ratios will remain high, especially in under-resourced urban schools. However, the ASCA National Model provides a useful framework to maximize the strategies described here so school counselors can be deliberate and strategic in their work.

Most urban school counselors know a comprehensive approach to college counseling is needed, although it’s not easy. However, the research on college access and success is clear. Urban school counselors play a key role in ensuring post-secondary attainment among their students. Doing so is consistent with their commitment to social justice. More importantly, it’s consistent with school counselors’ commitment to their kids.

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