

Connecting with your School Counselor

School counselors are one of the best ongoing sources of support for students who plan to go to college. They can provide guidance and support throughout the entire process. If you are lucky enough to have access to a counselor in your school, it is in your best interest to visit that person on a regular basis. Start by making an individual appointment to introduce yourself to your counselor. If small-group college counseling or information sessions are offered, sign up. But don't only settle for a "group" meeting in which you will have to share time with other students. Make sure you schedule an uninterrupted time for a private, one-on-one session. Begin by introducing yourself and stating clearly that it is your definite goal to attend college. Make sure your counselor realizes that this is IMPORTANT to you and you are highly motivated!

Throughout your high school years, your counselor can help you:

- **Plan classes** that will prepare you well for college admission and success. Your counselor will know which high school classes are required for college admission.
- **Review your academic record** with you and suggest areas that need improvement. If you need to do some catching up, your counselor can suggest ways in which to do that.
- Begin the admission process by **identifying the questions you should be asking**—and finding honest answers. Questions such as: "Do I want to stay near home? Does the college have my major? How important is size?"
- **Clarify and understand terms, ideas, and experiences** for you that will encounter during research, campus visits or meetings with college representatives. Your counselor will know where to find information; for example in books, catalogues, brochures, and CDs that deal either with the admission process or a specific college or university. In addition, your counselor will be able to point you to websites that offer RELIABLE and FREE information about college.
- **Identify special opportunities** that may maximize your chances for being a well-prepared and appealing candidate for colleges. These might include weekend or summer programs on college campuses (often free for first-generation students), internships or community college classes open to high school students. Your counselor will know about local college fairs, opportunities to visit college campuses, and even overnight visits to colleges that may be offered.
- **Familiarize yourself with everything you need to know about the required college admission tests.** Your counselor can make sure you get registered for the PSAT (the practice test for the SAT). She/he can help you know which tests (SAT, ACT, SAT Subject tests, or TOEFL -Test of English as a Foreign Language) will be required by the colleges to which you may apply. Counselors know how and when to register for tests. She/he can even help with fee waivers if your family can't afford to pay for tests.
- **Secure applications, identify application deadlines and prioritize** in order to make sure that everything gets done carefully and ON TIME! Here also, if you do not have enough money to pay for application fees, your counselor can assist in asking colleges to waive application fees.
- **Complete your applications** and polish any required college essays so that the product you send to colleges will represent the best of your thinking and writing abilities. Make sure you take a "rough draft" to your counselor early on. Leave plenty of time for revision and rewriting, prior to deadlines.
- **Figure out how to PAY for college.** First, your counselor can give you essential information about the "need-based" financial aid application process. He/she can help you understand how to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and, if required, other aid applications—such as those required by individual colleges or the College Board's "College Scholarship Service Profile." Your counselor may also be able to help you research scholarships that are based on factors other than your ability to pay for college.
- **Write a letter of recommendation** to colleges or universities. Many colleges will require that you obtain recommendations from both a counselor and one or two teachers. In addition, counselors are often asked to complete "secondary school and mid-year reports" (included with applications).
- **Compare offers of admission and financial aid** after you have heard from all of your colleges. This can be an essential step in making a final decision. Your school counselor can help you decide which programs are best suited to your educational goals. She/he can also help you compare offers of scholarships and need-based financial aid that may be sent to you in very different formats from different colleges.

There are a few other very important things to remember about working with your school counselor. Most school counselors have many, many students whom they want to help. So make it as easy as possible for your counselor to help you.

- **Make appointments** early and show up on time.
- **Submit any forms** that require counselor completion well in advance of due dates.
- **Carefully follow any procedures** that have been established by your school for turning applications and related forms or for securing transcripts.
- Whenever possible, **make copies of everything you mail or give to your counselor**. Sometimes, with so much paper, things get lost. When you have a copy easily at hand, nothing is ever lost forever.
- Make sure you **keep your counselor “in the loop”** in terms of what you are hearing from colleges. If there are any problems which arise, your counselor can act as your direct advocate with colleges.
- Whenever you have questions **don’t hesitate to return to your counselor for advice**, especially if you feel you are being asked by a college to do something that doesn’t seem “just right”. Your counselor will know the rules of the game by which both students and colleges are supposed to play.
- If you think it would be helpful, **try to schedule a meeting with your counselor AND your parent(s)**. There are parts of the college process for which you will need lots of help from them. This is particularly true when it comes time to completing the financial aid applications.
- **Be sure to thank your counselor for assistance given**. The counseling door is always open to students who show they are appreciative of a counselor’s time and effort.
- Finally, when all is said and done, and you have made it successfully through the college selection and admission process—**make sure you take time to THANK your counselor one more time** with a handwritten note (as well as any teachers who helped). If you have made good use of your counselor’s knowledge and assistance, the thanks will be more than well-deserved. When the student-counselor relationship “clicks,” your counselor will be able to offer the essential emotional support and encouragement you will need during one of the most important times of your life. And your expression of gratitude will build a reservoir of good-will, should you need to return for further assistance at any time in the future.