

Chapter 5: Using Data in Your College Admission Counseling Program

Robert Bardwell
Monson Public Schools (MA)

Schools have been undergoing massive changes in recent years. In many cases, the education methods traditionally relied upon are no longer acceptable. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the federal government became more involved in ensuring American students obtain the education needed to be successful in our quickly changing and increasingly competitive global economy. The American School Counselor Association National Standards (1998) and National Model (2003) provide school counselors with templates for education programs and interventions and how best to implement them. All these initiatives require school counselors to collect, analyze and report data. For the sole reason of improving student performance and the services that help them navigate the transition from high school, the use of data, action research and standards-based curriculum must be implemented.

The problem is that for many school counselors, data, research and statistics are considered dirty words. They did not enter this profession to crunch numbers and gather data, but to work with students. Yet the effective secondary school counselor of today has no choice but to do both. This chapter will seek to demystify the issues surrounding data and demonstrate how, in most cases, it is likely that counselors are already collecting data they can manipulate with minimal effort.

Data gathering and manipulation is so intimidating to many counselors because most were never properly trained in what data can be used for, how to collect it or how to interpret it. Some fear they cannot use it effectively and therefore may be criticized or judged negatively. For others, the unwillingness to work with data is caused by a refusal to change (“It’s worked well so far, so why change it?”).

But such fears are unwarranted. If a counseling program is good, then evaluating it will prove what is already suspected to be true. What is more, citing lack of knowl-

DATA COMMONLY FOUND IN A COUNSELING PROGRAM

Placement Data

Many counseling programs collect placement data, which consists of information about where students go after graduating from high school. Are they headed to college, a job, the military or some other activity (such as parenting, travel or volunteer work)? And for those who applied to college, what types of schools did they apply to, what was the admission decision and where are the schools located? These are essential questions to be answered. Whether for the state department of education, the school board of trustees or the local real estate agent, the report of placement data is very commonplace.

Placement data also typically includes other useful data, such as grade point average, standardized test scores class rank, colleges to which students applied, and the admission decision of those applications (accept, deny and waitlist). This information is collected in a database, often

If a counseling program is good, then evaluating it will prove what is already suspected to be true.

edge as a reason to avoid data analysis is contradictory to what counselors stand for. After all, counselors encourage students to learn new things and adapt to new situations; they can set a powerful example by developing new skills themselves.

Lack of time is another reason data often takes a backseat. While this is an understandable challenge, especially for counselors with large caseloads and non-counseling duties, it’s important to overcome it. Data causes people to listen, and it is often necessary for change. If there’s no data, either change will not occur or change—not necessarily in the best interest of students—will be made by someone else. For these reasons, it’s vital to show administrators how essential data is to the counseling program and the school in general.

a commercial program like Naviance or Inresonance, an application such as Microsoft Access or FileMaker Pro, or a program created specifically for their school or college counseling program. The type of database used isn’t important; what matters is that the information is gathered, analyzed and then distributed to those who need it.

Why is this information important to share? The data from the preceding graduating class is most helpful to families who may be looking at a particular school. If a student’s GPA, class rank and standardized test scores are greater than those of the applicants of the most recent graduating class applying to the same non-highly selective school, then it will likely be a safe bet the student will be admitted. Conversely, lower scores, GPA and rank may mean admission is unlikely. In some schools this is

the most often sought information because it helps students look at what happened to applicants from their own school the previous year(s).

While colleges often will publish the profile of an accepted student, students (and parents) often want more specific data on which to base their chances of admission. Since secondary schools are vastly different, the college's accepted student profile may not accurately reflect decisions from a particular secondary school. For example, take a moderately selective college to which dozens of students from the same secondary school apply for admission. The likelihood of all those students being admitted is slim, even though they may fit the accepted student profile. The high school placement data may provide some insight into the possibility of admits during the next admission cycle.

However, counselors should take a few precautions when working with placement data. First, be sure to use data only from the most recent classes. Information more than three years old is unreliable because the profile of an accepted student at a particular institution will likely have changed. Second, understand that data can be misleading—many students, for a variety of reasons (for example, intended major or hook), may have been offered admission even though the placement numbers wouldn't necessarily support that decision. Finally, be careful not to release data that could reveal the identity of a student. Some schools will not release placement data unless a minimum number of students have applied to a specific school (often the number is at least 10). This will help to ensure that a student's identity is concealed, which is particularly important in communities where college admission decisions are known to contribute to pressure and anxiety.

School Data

In general, school data is information collected routinely by office staff—it is not expressly the school counselor's responsibility. However, school data should be relatively easy for counselors to access through the school's administrative software (e.g., Rediker, PowerSchool, iPASS, SchoolPro, Schoolmaster, etc.) and can be very helpful when working with a student through the college admission process. A student's attendance, discipline and academic records will be of significant help to a counselor,

particularly when it comes to helping select schools and writing a letter of recommendation. Curriculum data can also be helpful, although it is not necessarily part of the school's administrative database. Information such as how many honors or Advanced Placement courses are offered or about special course offerings may be relevant to a student's application and improve the likelihood of acceptance. New counselors in particular must learn the specifics of the curriculum and what might make some students stand out over others. Such information may be critical to share with a college. The counselor is usually in the best position to report such data, and thus help distinguish the student in some way.

Standardized Testing Data

Whether or not one is a proponent of standardized testing, the value of testing data can be helpful to a counseling program and overall school curriculum. And because this data is provided by the testing service, it is easy to gather. Both ETS and ACT provide school districts multiple options for data reporting. While some of these options have a fee (such as some electronic formats), schools can still receive the information free of charge in paper form. Schools that use a commercial program to track placement data can easily download testing data to the student's file. Consult with the school's technology coordinator for assistance in setting this up. Once in place, the transfer of data should be seamless and effortless.

The fact of the matter is that standardized testing data is permanently ingrained into the college admission process. While many institutions do not require testing scores or have de-emphasized their value in the admission process, the data continues to be important to many colleges and communities. For counselors who have ethical concerns about standardized testing this may require some restraint. Counselors have a professional obligation to students in this process; as such, personal beliefs should not influence the information or advice given.

Historical Data

Some may confuse historical data with other types of data, particularly placement data. While they are similar, they have notable differences. Historical data is often based on programs or opportunities unique to a specific school. For example, data may be based on a secondary