

# Students and Their Meetings with Guidance Counselors: Findings from a National Study

by Peter Freedman-Doan and Margaret Libsch

Many local school boards and state departments of education require principals to prepare annual reports to demonstrate the effectiveness of the educational process in their school.

The guidance counseling program is particularly difficult to assess, as confidentiality shields much of the interaction between students and counselors. Principals and counselors like lack suitable assessment instruments (Myrick, 1984).

Finally, the guidance profession is in the midst of a change in philosophy.

### Developmental Counseling

Recently designed developmental counseling programs emphasize services for all students and the delivery of those services in group settings, while they de-emphasize traditional

one-on-one interactions between counselors and students.

The traditional methods principals have used to evaluate their school's counseling program may have been outdated by the widespread implementation of developmental counseling programs. For those reasons, researchers may find little in the way of systematic assessment of guidance counseling activities (Vacc et al., 1993).

To help principals and counselors assess their guidance program, we report on data drawn from the University of Michigan's "Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth." Questionnaires from that survey cover a wide variety of personal, social, and educational issues, including student perceptions of the quantity and quality of their interactions with their guidance counselors.<sup>1</sup>

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1. In the spring of each year since 1975, the Monitoring the Future study asks about 17,000 high school seniors to participate in a self-administered, 45-minute, in-class, pencil and paper survey supervised by trained field staff from the University of Michigan. The sample is nationally representative and includes students from approximately 150 public and private high schools. We report student responses for the years 1977 through 1992. See Appendix 1 for the exact wording of the questions. We have collapsed some of the response categories to facilitate presentation here.

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These data may help to answer questions in three areas: Are all students being served? Is the delivery of counseling service shifting from one-on-one to group settings? Are all groups of students getting the same quantity of service?

### **The Frequency of Student Contact with Counselors**

One crucial step in evaluating a counseling program is to note the frequency and setting of student contact with counselors.

In the past, counselors met with most students on an individual basis to help with course selection, career counseling, and college applications. Smaller numbers of students with special behavioral and emotional needs were served in a quasi-therapeutic setting.

The advocates of developmental philosophy in guidance counseling assert that all students have social, emotional, intellectual, and vocational needs that counselors can help meet. Just as teachers deliver academic curricula, a developmental counseling program should deliver affective and vocational curricula to all students.

A developmental guidance program should "de-emphasize administrative and clerical tasks, one-to-one counseling only, and limited accountability" (Terrill, 1990). Instead, the developmentally oriented counselor

should, as Norman Gysbers says, develop "activities and structured group experiences for all students" to address their social, emotional, and vocational needs (Coy, 1991).

The guidance profession's aspiration to provide services to all students has proven difficult to achieve. From 1977 to 1992, the proportion of high school seniors who reported having contact with a guidance counselor during their senior year fell by more than 10 percent. In 1977, 92.3 percent of all seniors reported contact with a counselor during the year. That proportion had fallen to 81.5 percent of all seniors by 1992.

Obviously, most students continued to see their guidance counselors during the final year of high school. While the annual declines were very small, the proportion of seniors with no contact more than doubled. That is troubling, given the counseling profession's emphasis on serving all students.

### **Changing Trends**

The seniors were also asked how often they had seen their counselor individually and how often as part of a group. The percentage of seniors who reported they never saw their counselor on an individual basis rose from 11.3 percent in 1977 to 25.7 percent in 1992.

At the same time, the proportion of seniors who reported one to four

visits to their counselor decreased from 64.1 percent to 53.2 percent. The proportion of students who reported five or more visits to their counselor fell only slightly, from 24.7 percent in 1977 to 21 percent in 1992. These trends would seem to fit with the new philosophy in the counseling profession. Individual interactions should decrease as counselors devote less time to therapeutic remediation and increasingly meet with students in a group.

However, the trend since 1977 is for fewer students to see their counselor as part of a group. From 1977 to 1992 the proportion of seniors who never saw their counselor in a group setting during their senior year increased from 51.9 percent to 60.9 percent. The proportion of students who saw their counselor as part of a group from one to four times during the year decreased from 41.6 percent in 1977 to 32.1 percent in 1992. The proportion of students who saw their counselor five or more times as part of a group stayed relatively stable.

### Senior Survey

The survey of seniors also broke down their responses according to their college plans. The students' reports indicate that counseling practice is not yet fully attuned to counseling philosophy's new emphasis on meeting the needs of all students. A greater percentage of seniors with plans to attend a four-year college reported contact

with their counselor. Contact with guidance counselors fell both for students with four-year college plans and students who do not have four-year college plans. During the 16 years of data collection, the average difference between the college bound and the non-college bound in the percentage of seniors who report contact with their counselor was 6.87 percent. While that is not a major difference, it is not narrowing as advocates of developmental approaches to counseling might expect.

### Satisfaction with Counselor Contacts

The seniors were also asked to evaluate the frequency and helpfulness of their contacts with guidance counselors. Throughout the 16 years examined, the proportion of seniors who were satisfied with the frequency of their meetings with their guidance counselor fell modestly. In 1977, 52.1 percent of seniors reported they preferred to see their counselor as often as they actually had over the course of the past year.

By 1992, the proportion fell to 48.5 percent. The proportion of students who wanted more contact with their counselor fell from 33 percent to 30 percent between 1977 and 1992. The proportion of seniors who expressed a desire for less contact with their counselor rose from 14 percent to 21 percent during the period.

We have already noted differences between college bound and non-college bound seniors in their reports of the quantity of counseling services they received. There is less difference between those two groups in their satisfaction with the frequency of counselor contact.

From 1977 to 1992 slightly more than 50 percent of the college bound seniors reported that they were satisfied with the frequency of contact with their counselor. Among the non-college bound, from 1977 to the mid-1980s, slightly less than 50 percent of the seniors reported they were satisfied with how often they met with their counselor. After that the proportion of the satisfied, non-college bound seniors declined slowly but steadily to about 45 percent. In 1990, the proportion of satisfied, non-college bound seniors declined to less than 40 percent.

### **Student Dissatisfaction**

Their dissatisfaction, however, does not seem to stem from a desire for a higher frequency of counselor contacts. The proportion of non-college bound seniors who desired more frequent meetings with their counselor remained steady at about 30 percent. The proportion of non-college bound seniors who wanted less frequent contact with their counselors rose from less than 20 percent in 1977 to almost 35 percent by 1992.

Thus, although the college bound seniors saw their counselors more frequently, the non-college bound did not seem to be dissatisfied with that state of affairs.

Seniors were also asked to evaluate the helpfulness of their meetings with their counselors. As we have noted, the proportion of seniors who actually have counselor contact has been slowly but surely declining through the years. Fewer and fewer seniors are able to evaluate the helpfulness of their contacts.

The proportion of seniors who reported their sessions with a counselor were helpful dropped from 39.4 percent in 1977 to 34.6 percent in 1992. The proportion who reported that their sessions with their counselor were somewhat helpful increased from 45.8 percent to 48.8 percent. The proportion of seniors who found their counseling sessions unhelpful increased as well. In 1977, 14.9 percent of the seniors found their sessions unhelpful. In 1992, 16.7 percent made that same report.

### **Conclusions**

Given the new philosophy of guidance, we would expect the level of group meetings between counselors and students to increase. Differences in quantity of service to students based on their college plans should begin to disappear as all students are equitably served. However, our findings do not bear out these expectations.

It appears that counselors are serving fewer students. They are not increasing the frequency of contact with students in a group setting, and the gap between service provided to the college bound and the non-college bound is not disappearing. Those who value counseling services may see these findings as an opportunity to examine the quantity, quality, and style of service in their school.

The survey results cannot definitively tell us why counseling services to students have declined over the years. We offer three possible explanations.

First, the increase in the proportion of seniors who want less contact

with their counselor suggests an analogy to market economics. As consumer demand for counseling service declines, the supply of that service may also decline. Of course, the analogy is less than perfect. Schools are not open markets where consumers freely choose among a variety of services. For some students, contact with a guidance counselor is mandatory. Yet, it is also true that students do, at times, freely opt to see their counselors. If fewer and fewer students wish to do so, reports of counseling service will decline.

Second, it may be that important services to students have not declined overall. Tasks we might have assumed

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## Table 1

### Guidance Items on the Monitoring the Future Survey

How many times this school year have you seen a counselor individually?

- 0) No times. 2) 1 time. 3) 2 times. 4) 3 or 4 times. 5) 5–7 times. 6) 8–10 times.  
7) 11 or more times.

How many times this school year have you seen a counselor as part of a group of other students?

- 0) No times. 2) 1 time. 3) 2 times. 4) 3 or 4 times. 5) 5–7 times. 6) 8–10 times.  
7) 11 or more times.

Would you have preferred to see a counselor more or less often than you have during the past year?

- 0) Much more often. 4) A little more often. 3) About as often. 2) A little less often. 1) Much less often.

How helpful have your sessions with a counselor been to you?

- 0) Extremely helpful. 4) Quite helpful. 3) Somewhat helpful. 2) A little helpful. 1) Not at all helpful. 8) Did not see a counselor this year.

were traditionally guidance functions may now be allocated to other professionals in the building. School nurses, school social workers, physical education and health teachers, and others may be taking over roles that counselors would have filled in the past. However, given our impression of school budget cuts over the years, we consider it highly unlikely that services counselors provide have been divided up into many new hands.

The most likely explanation of the decline in counselor contact with students is that faced with shrinking staff resources, principals and counselors continue to give the highest priority to traditional therapeutic-style interventions. The proportion of students who see their counselor 11 or more times a year remained stable at slightly less than 6 percent between 1976 and 1992 while, as we have noted, the number of students who report no visits increased. If, faced with cuts in the size of the counseling staff, schools have decided to concentrate on intensive service for a few students, then counseling practice has yet to catch up to the changes in counseling philosophy.

We hope these data will encourage principals and counselors to think not only of the quantity and quality of student contacts with their counselors, but also about the distribution of counseling services.

While the character and goals of individual counseling programs may differ, we hope the data in this paper will help high school principals make useful comparisons between their own guidance program and programs nationwide. ~B

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