

## **TESOL 2013: Advising Resident Multilingual Writers**

(NOTE, before showing my slides, maybe you could do an introduction to both papers? You could read what you wrote for our CCCC panel, minus the overview of Robin's presentation)

### **(slide- 1) College Preparatory Advising for High School ELLs.**

**(slide 2)** In recent years, an increasing amount of attention has been paid to academic outcomes for English Language Learners, or ELLs (also known as U.S. resident immigrant students). One of these outcomes is attainment of postsecondary education. It has been difficult for researchers to chart the progress of ELLs in higher education, because many colleges and universities do not monitor this population. Hence, there are very few nationwide estimates of how many ELLs enter college, and how many complete a degree program. A recent review of literature by Yasuko Kanno and Linda Harklau (2012) did identify a few studies in this area, indicating that the rates of college completion for ELLs are often less than *half* that for non-ELLs. Kanno and Harklau also cite studies showing that language proficiency is not the only factor limiting ELLs' access to higher education: Non-linguistic factors such as academic tracking into remedial classes, social isolation, financial concerns, and family expectations, also play a major role.

This confluence of factors makes the pre-college advising process for ELLs particularly complex. In addition to facing these linguistic and structural challenges, many ELLs are first-generation college students, whose parents may not be able to help guide them through the college decision-making process. As a result, high school guidance counselors have an important role to play in academic planning for college-bound ELLs. Yet very little research has been done on the relationship between ELLs and high school guidance counselors. The current study aims to address this gap in research, focusing on students' experiences with guidance counselors, as well as with other individuals who help them navigate the college decision-making process.

**(slide 3)** Research into pre-college advising with first-generation students has found that guidance counseling has a number of facets. Although one goal of guidance counselors is to provide students with information about colleges, this role has become increasingly less prominent, given the availability of information online. The more important functions of pre-college advising today are to help students make college-positive decisions early on, to guide students through the decision-making process, and to teach students how to utilize available resources and support networks. For many students, especially those whose parents did not attend college, pre-college advising is a process of identity development. First generation students in particular need ongoing feedback and encouragement in order to begin to see themselves as college-bound.

**(slide 4)** Research on the effectiveness of high school guidance counselors has found that there is an advising gap, however, for first-generation college students. This is due in large part to high caseloads (sometimes up to 500 students, despite the limit of 250 recommended by the American School Counselors Association, or ASCA). In addition, guidance counselors have numerous responsibilities besides pre-college advising, including course scheduling, psychological or social work, and involvement in disciplinary action. Guidance counselors may also feel

unprepared to assist with financial aid, family expectations, and other “non-academic” issues that are central to access to higher education for first-generation students—particularly ELLs. Finally, the work of guidance counselors may be compromised by their own implicit biases: Research has found that counselors may direct certain groups away from traditional college pathways and toward vocational or community college tracks, based on those students’ racial, socioeconomic, or linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Cooper & Liou, 2007). Hence, students may not receive the information and support they need to access the full range of postsecondary opportunities available to them.

Some of these challenges are logistical--pointing to the need for expanded resources, coordination, and support for guidance counselors. However, they are also political: Many schools are under pressure to increase high school graduation rates, and expect guidance counselors to make this their primary goal. Guidance counselors are also under pressure from teachers and administrators to ensure that students are in appropriate classes, and they may be criticized if they place a student into a course for which the teacher deems him or her unprepared. Therefore, because schools wish to prevent failure—both for students and for themselves—they may force guidance counselors to function as gate-keepers rather than advocates. Indeed, in a 2011 survey by Bridgeland and Bruce, many counselors reported that they were underutilized as a resource in improving inclusion and access for the most vulnerable students.

In sum, while guidance counselors have an important role to play in improving pathways to higher education for English Language Learners, they may not be effective in doing so, because of a variety of logistical, political, and systemic factors. An awareness of these concerns motivated the current study, which focuses on the question “Where, and from whom, do ELLs get information and guidance about college?” More specifically, “What is students’ experience with high school guidance counselors,” and “Who else plays a major role in advising them?”

## **Methods**

**(slide 5)** For this project, I interviewed fifteen students who had graduated from high schools in a midsized refugee resettlement community in New England, which I am calling “Laketown.” All of the students were either enrolled or planning to enroll in college. Interviews were semi-structured, lasting approximately an hour. They were audiotaped, with written consent from the participant. Interview topics ranged from questions about students’ initial transitions into U.S. schools, their academic successes and challenges, and their college and career goals. Detailed outlines were made of each interview, and specific sections were transcribed for more in-depth analysis. This study focuses on two particular questions that I asked of interview participants: 1) Where did you get information about college? 2) Who helped you make decisions related to college?

## **Findings**

**(slide 6)** Overall, there was a great deal of variation in the sources of pre-college advising for participants in this study. Although most participants did see guidance counselors as playing a role in the process, that role was a fairly contained one. All of the participants mentioned

additional individuals, whom I call “alternative advisors,” who helped support them throughout the college decision-making process. Although the types of individuals serving in this “alternative advisor” capacity varied widely, there were trends in the nature and function of these relationships. With the next few slides, I will first outline students’ comments about the role of high school guidance counselors. Then, I will discuss patterns in their relationships with “alternative advisors.” Finally, I will suggest implications for policy, practice, and future research.

### **Experiences with guidance counselors**

**(slide 7)** When asked who supported them in the college decision-making process, only a few students mentioned their guidance counselors initially. When asked more directly about the role of guidance counselors, students often made comments such as “They give us A LOT of papers.” Many students said that the amount of information they was so overwhelming that it made them reluctant to request future meetings with guidance counselors. As one student put it, “They just give you the information ...[but] you don’t know if you’re doing it right.”

Some students expressed concerns as well that their guidance counselors were not directive enough about what they needed to do *early on* in high school in order to be on a college preparatory track. One student’s comment-“I wish I’d started earlier—way earlier” -was echoed by many. This comment was particularly prevalent among students who wanted to go into college programs that require a strong foundation in math and science, such as nursing and pre-med. One student, who aspires to be a pediatrician, said no one had ever talked to him about the path toward achieving this ambitious goal: “What are the steps?” he asked. “They don’t offer the ways to be a doctor: You have to take these kind of classes, these kind of tests. You can have this kind of money.” This latter point about finances was raised by a number of interview participants: Money concerns were seen as the greatest barrier to college for these students, yet guidance counselors seemed unwilling or unable to offer guidance on financial aid options.

**(slide 8)** Some students questioned whether their guidance counselors even saw college as a viable path for them—whether they were truly seen as “college material,” as some students phrased it. Several students said that when their guidance counselors did talk to them about college, the only option discussed at length was community college. This is unfortunate, given the fact that several of the four-year colleges in the local community had special programs for recruitment and support of English Language Learners.

The gatekeeping role of guidance counselors reinforced these doubts, as students were sometimes encouraged to take classes that they felt were below their capabilities. Two male students, for example, said they had had the option to choose a more challenging math course in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but had been advised against it. Both regretted the decision, and said they could have “gone further” if they had been pushed to take more challenging classes. Many students were similarly resentful about being placed in ELL English classes, feeling that their language acquisition and academic literacy would be accelerated if they were mainstreamed: “When you have people that speak the same language, and you have them in the same class, they won’t improve,” said one interview participant. He felt that being in ESL classes was “a waste of time” for some students.

These data indicate, therefore, that the role of guidance counselors in institutional gate-keeping may be seen as incompatible with their role as academic mentors. Not all students felt this way, however. Two of the fifteen participants said guidance counselors were a central component of their college support network. One said her guidance counselor began contacting her in sophomore year, and had been met with her regularly throughout junior and senior years. She said this early and frequent contact was extremely beneficial. Another student said his guidance counselor had used her professional network to help him make connections at the college he wanted to attend: “She was able to pull strings to get it done,” he said, approvingly. These two students’ experiences seemed to be the exception, however, rather than the norm.

### **Alternative advisors**

**(slide 9)** Students identified a number of other individuals who were part of their college-advising support network. This group of alternative advisors included ESL teachers, mainstream teachers, coaches, community service providers, family friends, and peers. There were four trends in these sorts of relationships. First is that most of these individuals had known students, and often their entire families, for a long period of time. One student described with great affection a woman in the community who was “like family” to him. She had taken him to visit colleges, helped him fill out paperwork, and even contributed financially to help him meet his initial college expenses. Other students spoke warmly of school teachers and athletic coaches who had taken the time to mentor them outside of class. At the core of these relationships was an ethic of caring. As one student explained, “Everyone needs to have that one person they’re afraid to let down or disappoint.”

A second trend was that these alternative advisors made themselves available outside the regular school day. Students mentioned meeting these individuals after school, on weekends, or during school breaks. One local community center, for example, offered open-court basketball in the evenings, but also had staff available for homework help and other academic support, including pre-college advising. Most of the students who came regularly to play sports eventually took advantage of these other resources.

Students also sought out individuals who knew their strengths—not just their challenges. Some students looked to their ESL teachers for help with filling out college applications or for letters of recommendation, in part because those teachers had seen first-hand how much they had progressed over time. Other students, however, felt that their ESL teacher may have underestimated their abilities, and therefore tended to look for guidance from mainstream teachers, whose courses they had found to be more academically demanding. Ultimately, students wanted individuals who saw their academic potential, and genuinely believed that they could be successful in college.

A final trend in alternative advisors is that they were able to talk holistically with students about a range of academic and non-academic issues. At the community center, for example, staff helped direct students to institutions that had programs well-matched to their career goals, but also knew which colleges offered the best financial aid packages, as well as which ones had high-ranking sports teams. These staff were also well-respected within the local ethnic communities, and could help students negotiate difficult decisions with their families, such as

whether to go to school full or part-time, when to consider an out-of-state school, and how to factor in long-term goals such as marriage and child-bearing.

## **Implications**

**(slide 10)** This study echoes and deepens existing research on the pre-college advising process for college-bound youth—particularly first-generation college students from immigrant backgrounds. These findings affirm first that *relationship* is central to the advising process: Students are more likely to seek guidance from individuals they know and trust—even if those individuals do not have as much expertise as their high school guidance counselors. As scholars such as Angela Valenzuela (1999) have shown, the “politics of caring” are at the center of educational equity: Guidance counselors must find ways to convey their care for students, their families, and their communities, in order to be effective in working with refugee/immigrant populations. The tension between gatekeeping and guidance cannot be ignored: Students are unlikely to seek pre-college guidance from someone that they think may have prevented them from being on a college-bound academic track in the first place.

This study also reinforces the notion that the process of becoming “college-bound” starts early, and is closely tied to decisions made as early as 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Hence, pre-college advising must be seen as a longitudinal, student-centered process. By having more frequent and explicit conversations about students’ career goals, and including families in the advising process, high school guidance counselors can establish the rapport needed to be effective in their in their work.

Finally, I believe it is a benefit—not a problem--that students seek pre-college guidance from a variety of sources. However, if those sources are not in dialogue with one another, there is the danger of duplication or gaps in support. Schools should seek to identify these organizations and individuals that are working with students already, and should to work with them to create a “wrap-around” vision for pre-college support. Perhaps schools and community organizations can partner together to share data, seek funding, develop new programs, and assess the effectiveness of their services.

**(slide 11)** Perhaps one final question for consideration is this: Are we as TESOL specialists prepared to serve as *de facto* advisors and advocates for our students, as they pursue higher education? If we truly wish to promote educational opportunity, we may need to consider advising more centrally in our work as teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and activists.

## **(slide 12) References**

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