

STRENGTHENING IEC–SCHOOL COUNSELOR COLLABORATION FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES

By Eric Endlich

To enable students with learning differences to thrive in high school and college, it's essential for professionals working with them to collaborate effectively. When independent educational consultants (IECs) are part of this team, communication between the IEC and school-based counselor can be a vital component of this collaboration.

To better understand and improve the current state of these professional relationships, I partnered with Jill K. Corbin, director of college and transition counseling at Denver Academy (CO), created a survey, and distributed it widely via the NACAC, Higher Education Consultants Association (HECA), and Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA) listservs, as well as Facebook groups of college admission counselors and independent educational consultants.

WHO TOOK THE SURVEY

A total of 250 counselors and consultants completed the survey. Fifty percent were IECs and the remainder were private/independent school counselors (32 percent), public school counselors (8 percent), or other (10 percent). Most of these “other” professionals appeared to have both independent consulting and school-based roles.

As expected, school counselors had substantially larger caseloads

of juniors and seniors. Twenty-eight percent reported having 71-100 students, 22 percent had 51-70 students, 14 percent had 101-150 students, and 10 percent had more than 200 students. In comparison, 41 percent of IECs had 21-50 juniors and seniors, 28 percent had 11-20, and 15 percent had 1-10.

Ninety-five percent of respondents were US-based, with the top three states represented being California, Massachusetts, and New York. The most common professional association memberships were NACAC (72 percent), regional ACACs (68 percent), IECA (36 percent), HECA (31 percent) and the Association of College Counselors in Independent Schools (30 percent). Clearly, many respondents belonged to more than one organization.

WHAT WE LEARNED

In the next section, we inquired: “If you are a school-based counselor, do you ask your students if they are working with an IEC?” Just over half of the school counselors (51 percent) replied “yes.” Some of the comments in response to this question included:

- “Sometimes”
- “Only when we pick up on the idea that they are working with someone”
- “Yes, though MANY do not answer honestly”



- “We do not ask directly but students will almost always share that information at their initial meetings”
- “We encourage families to let us know, but we do not specifically ask individuals”

Next, we asked: “If you do not ask your students if they are working with an IEC, why not?” The most common responses were:

- “The information doesn’t seem relevant” (25 percent)
- “The topic has never come up in our conversations” (25 percent)
- “It doesn’t occur to me” (21 percent)
- “Too many students on my caseload” (5 percent)

While 37 percent reported no experience with school counselor-IEC collaboration, those with such experience clearly saw many upsides. The most common benefits endorsed were the following:

- “Counselors and consultants develop a more thorough understanding of students” (37 percent)
- “The added perspective enhances our relationships with families” (31 percent)
- “Students’ college lists are improved” (30 percent)
- “Students are more likely to complete all their college application tasks in a timely fashion” (29 percent)
- “Parents better understand their children’s profiles and support needs” (23 percent)
- “Reduced stress because I’m not alone on the case” (23 percent)

The key elements cited in successful collaboration were “respect for each other’s role” (91 percent), “open communication” (83 percent), “clear understanding of school-based processes” (78 percent), “clear understanding of the school counselor role” (74 percent), and “clear understanding of the IEC role” (71 percent).

Most participants were either “very open” (49 percent) or “somewhat open” (22 percent) to such collaboration, though a significant minority were either “neutral” (12 percent) or “somewhat hesitant” (14 percent). When asked what the barriers to collaboration were, the top replies were:

- “Few opportunities to establish a working relationship” (52 percent)

- “Misunderstanding of the other’s role” (50 percent)
- “Past experiences with counselor/consultant were less than ideal” (50 percent)
- “Student information privacy policies prevent potential collaboration” (50 percent)
- “Not enough time” (23 percent)

Many respondents noted that the following factors/approaches have not been beneficial for students: “working individually, rather than collaboratively, on students’ college lists” (44 percent); “not discussing professionals’ differing views on student support needs” (42 percent); and “not brainstorming together on how to work most effectively with students” (23 percent).

An additional noteworthy fact was that most IECs reported not having a release form for students to give permission for school counselor-IEC communication.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Several ideas for collaboration seemed to have broad appeal, including:

- “IECs can reach out to school counselors more proactively” (60 percent)
- “Share ideas at a professional conference/event” (51 percent)
- “Meet one-on-one with each other to discuss the student’s goals” (40 percent)
- “Invite IECs to present at college information nights sponsored by schools” (36 percent)

- “Create opportunities to meet in larger groups” (32 percent)
- “Schools can give student handouts to share with IECs” (32 percent)
- “Post application process/information on school websites” (28 percent)

There seems to be a sort of disconnect here, however. On the one hand, most counselors and consultants surveyed were at least somewhat open to collaborating with each other and were able to see numerous benefits of doing so. On the other hand, only half of the school-based counselors ask their students if they’re working with an IEC, and fewer than half of the IECs have a release form prepared for the purpose of communicating with school counselors.

While some of the barriers to collaboration (e.g., “not enough time”) are not easily remedied, others (“few opportunities to establish a working relationship”) could be addressed through proactive effort. Recognizing that we all share common goals of advancing our students’ well-being and academic success, IECs and school-based counselors can intentionally develop projects together, cultivate a habit of routinely reaching across the desk to communicate with other professionals, and influence their employers and associations to foster greater collaboration. Our students will reap the rewards. ▢

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