

### **SECTION III**

#### **INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCES**

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The debate continues whether high school characteristics such as student/teacher ratios and school size have a positive or negative affect on a student's decision to pursue higher education.<sup>84</sup> More conclusive evidence, however, documents the influence that educators and school personnel have on students' decisions to attend college.<sup>85</sup>

This section analyzes the influence of high school personnel, including school teachers, counselors, superintendents, and principals. Data are drawn primarily from the survey of school personnel, defined to include the above groups, and comparisons are made with data from the other survey instruments where applicable.

The survey was distributed to school personnel in the same 12 counties in which seniors were surveyed. Five schools did not return surveys, so the final sample includes 16 high schools in 10 counties, from which 265 surveys were returned. The sample remains representative of the diversity in the Ohio Appalachia region. The majority of the final sample, 85.9 percent, were teachers, 6.5 percent were counselors, 3.4 percent were principals, 1.5 percent were superintendents, and the remainder either did not specify their position or were other miscellaneous school personnel.

The influence of school personnel will be analyzed from three perspectives: the level of influence that school personnel, particularly teachers, have over students; school personnel as informational resources; and personnel as encouragers and promoters of higher education. These are each evaluated in turn.

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<sup>84</sup>Borus and Carpenter, 171.

<sup>85</sup>Sewell and Hauser, 65.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL**

There is much evidence that high school personnel influence college participation rates in high schools.<sup>86</sup> The majority of personnel, 87.8 percent, thought their attitude influenced students' decision to continue to college; 96.9 percent stated that they attempted to raise interest in higher education.

Although they acknowledge their influence on the decision-making process, personnel do not believe themselves to be the most important influence on students' decisions. A large proportion, 72.5 percent, of personnel cited teachers as influential. However, only 9.4 percent believed teachers to be the primary influence. Seniors view teachers as less of an important influence: only 38.4 percent cited teachers within their top three influences and just 4.7 percent referred to teachers as their primary influence. Other high school personnel were viewed as even less influential by seniors: 25.7 percent of personnel cited counselors as one of the three greatest influences.

Parents were named by 95.1 percent of personnel as one of the groups influential on the decision to go to college. Of those mentioning parents, 68.3 percent rated them the primary influence. This coincides with seniors' responses. However, school personnel are in disagreement with both seniors and parents about the nature of parental influence.

Compared to 96.4 percent of parents who said they encouraged higher education for their children, 39.2 percent of personnel think that less than a quarter of parents encourage higher education. Another 38.2 percent think that between a quarter and half of all parents encourage higher education. Only 22.6 percent of personnel think that more than half of all parents encourage higher education. This discrepancy may exemplify the lack of specificity in the responses about the character and quality of the parental "encouragement." However this is explained, it indicates a higher level of responsibility for actors outside the family to promote educational access.

Specific details about the level and type of support provided by parents were not sought in the survey. The discrepancy between parents' and personnel's perceptions, however, may signify a qualitative difference in the encouragement being provided. Emotional support for a decision to go to college should be distinguished from support in the complex process of choosing a college, completing the application process, and applying for financial assistance. The response to this question from personnel may be an allusion to the lack of support in the *process* of college application, rather than an outright rejection by parents of the utility of a college education. As the majority of parents do not have a college education, they are limited in the experience that they can bring to help their children.

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<sup>86</sup>See, for example, Jose ; A. Carrasco, Assessing the Knowledge that Educators Have About College-Related Information for Students in Four Year Public High Schools, San Jose State University, 5 August 1988, 28, ERIC, ED 307821.

School personnel are almost certainly college educated. The college environment, however, has changed significantly in the recent past, thus rendering their experience less relevant. With increasing national rates of participation in higher education, a college education is both open to and required for a larger proportion of the population than before. If high school personnel are to offer pertinent advice on the college experience, they may need to update their own perceptions of what a college education entails and for whom it would be suitable.

## **INFORMATIONAL RESOURCES**

In order to aid seniors in their decision whether or not to attend college, school personnel must themselves be informed about options in both the educational and labor markets. This demands that colleges make information available to high schools for dissemination to students. Carrasco, in a detailed study of California public high schools, examined what educators knew about the academic entrance requirements for public colleges. He found that educators generally lacked the information necessary to help students make informed decisions.<sup>87</sup>

## **INFORMATION FROM AREA COLLEGES**

Fewer than half of the personnel respondents, 47.1 percent, thought that area colleges provided sufficient information on financial aid and college costs. Although only 11.1 percent did not believe this to be the case, the remaining 41.8 percent were unsure. Similarly, while 39.8 percent of respondents thought that area colleges provided sufficient information on entrance requirements and expectations, 37.5 percent were unsure and 22.6 percent believed that insufficient information was being provided.

In light of the comparatively limited influence college representatives seem to have on the decision to enter higher education, it seems colleges should make a greater effort to deliver timely and pertinent information to high schools.

Teachers in particular, because they have more contact with students and are seen as an influential party, are a potentially invaluable resource for college recruitment strategies.

Only 43.3 percent of high school personnel think that colleges do a good job in promoting higher education, while 9.9 percent think the job is done poorly. Likewise, only a small percentage of personnel believe that seniors are influenced by college recruitment efforts. Colleges must rethink their recruitment techniques and allocate resources where they will be more effective. Opportunities exist for improved links between colleges and high school educators in their shared goal of increasing higher education access.

## **INFORMATION FROM HIGH SCHOOL PERSONNEL**

In contrast to their assessment of information from colleges, high school personnel are less critical of the adequacy of the information they provide. The majority believe that high schools provide sufficient information on college costs and financial aid, 72.6 percent of respondents, and on careers requiring training, 57.3 percent of respondents. Although the proportion of positive responses to these two questions generally coincide with those of seniors and parents, these latter two groups, in comparison to personnel, are more likely to regard the

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<sup>87</sup>Carrasco, 27.

information provided as insufficient.

Personnel, on average, report that they spend approximately ten percent of their time informing students about higher education. Given all the other demands on their time, this seems like an overly generous estimation, perhaps indicative of the importance with which personnel regard informing students about post-graduation options.

## **ENCOURAGERS AND PROMOTERS**

Only 3.8 percent of personnel believe that high schools are doing a poor job of promoting higher education; 65.9 percent believe they are doing a good job and 28.8 percent rate their performance as fair. Parents and seniors are somewhat less enthusiastic: 10.6 percent and 9.6 percent of parents and seniors respectively rate their high school's performance as poor; 40.0 percent and 43.9 percent respectively rate it as fair. If seniors feel their needs are not being met--and this is confirmed in the responses of the nontraditional students--then there is a need for communication between the groups to attempt to fill the gap.

Although 96.9 percent of personnel say they attempt to raise interest in higher education, it was not asked whether they targeted any particular student groups for this. "Teachers apparently are perceived [by students] to base their encouragement on ability and grades."<sup>88</sup> If teachers are directing their encouragement towards only certain types of students, then other students may not be receiving the information or encouragement they require to improve their chances of entering higher education. Teachers' perceptions of a student's level of ability can condition the amount and type of interaction regarding higher education.

If personnel do not regard their students as capable of higher education, they may not make an effort to promote it as an alternative. The mean percentage of students personnel thought to be educationally prepared for college was 45.0 percent. A third of respondents considered one-quarter or less of their students to be prepared; another third of respondents estimated that between a quarter and half of all students are prepared. These figures are within the range of the estimated participation rate for the region.

A little more than half, 52.5 percent, of respondents believe, however, over half of all students *should* go on to higher education. It is unclear exactly how this question was interpreted, so it is difficult to explain the significance of the responses.

When asked to estimate the percentage of students from their high school who would be able to succeed in higher education, the percentages were significantly higher than those for the number of students educationally prepared for higher education. Over half of the respondents thought that 51 to 100 percent of all students should go on to higher education. This at least demonstrates that high school personnel are aware of the value of higher education and could therefore be useful in attempts to increase participation rates.

One method by which personnel--teachers in particular--can influence a student's decision to continue on to college is in the student's selection of an academic track and courses in high school. Past research has demonstrated the correlation of certain "gatekeeper" courses and

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<sup>88</sup>Sewell and Hauser, 73.

the type of high school curriculum with improved access to higher education.<sup>89</sup> Having taken algebra and geometry, laboratory sciences, and foreign languages in high school was found to be strongly correlated with college attendance.<sup>90</sup> If teachers can direct students into these classes, college attendance rates may increase.

## **BARRIERS**

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Lack of finances is seen as the major barrier, referred to by 62.6 percent of personnel. This is followed by lack of parental support, 54.7 percent of respondents, wanting an immediate income, 28.3 percent, and the student feeling that she or he won't fit in, 27.2 percent of respondents. The large discrepancy between parents' and personnel's perceptions of parental support reflects different perceptions of the type and quality of encouragement required.

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<sup>89</sup>Sol H. Pelavin and Michael Kane, *Minority Participation in Higher Education* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 1988); Pelavin and Kane (1990), 72.

<sup>90</sup>Pelavin and Kane, *Changing the Odds*, 38.