



P.O. Box 4071
Madison, CT 06443
(203) 421-5169

www.catholicschoolmgmt.com

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Guidance and Counseling in the Catholic Secondary School: Contemporary Expectations in Support of Marketing and Enrollment Goals

Why does a Catholic high school need to market the existence and availability of its guidance and counseling services? How do effective guidance and counseling services contribute to strong enrollment? These seemingly straightforward questions can actually be answered from a number of perspectives:

- 1. Prospective and Current Parents:** When considering the decision to “buy” high school for a child, a parent considers both the short and the long term value of the high school’s programs. In exchange for paying tuition, parents expect that high quality guidance will be provided as part of ensuring student success both during and after high school, be that college or other post-secondary options available to students not interested in higher education. Now more than ever, there is a tremendous amount of anxiety for parents regarding where their children will be admitted to college. The selection process has become increasingly competitive to the point that so called “second-tier schools” are no longer a safe bet for many of the most qualified students.
- 2. Prospective and Current Students:** Research has also shown that schools with high retention rates recognize the importance of their students enjoying a perception of success in the academic program. Effective academic counseling contributes to this perception. Furthermore, the vast majority of students that CSM consultants interview during their ongoing research in Catholic high schools across the country report that they see the Catholic high school as a means for not only being academically prepared for college, but being guided and assisted in the process of “getting into” the right college.
- 3. Academic Image:** A high quality Catholic education is not just about academics. Various additional factors influence perception as to the academic image of a school. The expectations of today’s parents and their children not only include receiving a great education and academic experience, but also that students are provided with services and other support mechanisms to ensure their success spiritually, socially, and emotionally. A guidance and counseling department with a strong reputation can be the “tipping point” in the decision-making process of students and families.

Richard J. Burke, *President*
Jacqueline Abrahams
Shirley A. Arnold
Edward J. Barrett
Joseph W. Bracco
Albert E. Catelli
Lois J. Cavucci
Carol Cimino, SSJ, Ed.D.
Michael M. Denison
Lois K. Draina, Ph.D.
Donald L. Edwards, Ed.D.
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Deborah L. Papa
G. Joseph Peters
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Maria J. Ribera
Mary Beth Riley
Mary Lou Schoone
Charmaine S. Torma
Robert S. Webb
Nicholas M. Wolsonowich, Ph.D.
Frederick Zilian, Ph.D.

When discussing the topic of enrollment, CSM consultants often refer to the concept of “justification of the purchase decision.” Simply put, this explains how the program provided demonstrates appropriate value given the tuition charged. There is an undeniable relationship between the high functioning guidance and counseling department in a Catholic high school and this justification which impacts both the recruitment and retention of students. Thus, guidance and counseling programs must be structured to meet contemporary expectations so that they can be effectively marketed for image and enrollment. Contemporary expectations for guidance and counseling services include the provision of academic advising, college and career counseling, as well as personal counseling to address emotional needs while also including topics related to adolescent health and behavior. Guidance counselors are also often involved in student scheduling, academic testing, developing a master schedule, and family and community outreach. Although there is no single, best model for how the full service guidance and counseling department should be organized (i.e., alphabetically, by grade level, etc.), there are certain normative characteristics and functions that should be present.

1. Welcoming, Professional, and Accessible

The guidance department should be located in a convenient location, easily accessible to students and parents. A schedule for counselor availability should include options before, during, and after school, and occasionally during the evening hours as well. The professional setting of the office is enhanced through such methods as:

- A welcoming environment in which both scheduled and drop-in visits are encouraged and accommodated with a well-maintained and student-friendly waiting area;
- Individual counselor offices equipped with doors that have glass inserts to ensure privacy and confidentiality, as well as safety;
- Engaging display boards with relevant information regarding academic, personal, college, and career counseling, and summer opportunities;
- Emphasis on the college preparatory work of the department via use of such methods as displaying college pennants, maps showing the current college location of recent alums, “College of the Week,” and various alumni profiles.

2. Positively Marketed and Received

Electronic and print materials should be available to market the department’s services. Both the website and brochures should emphasize the appropriate credentialing of counselors and/or relationships with outside service providers, counselor memberships in professional organizations at the local, state, and national level, and the breadth of services provided. General school recruitment materials should highlight the full-service guidance and counseling programs in place with emphasis on college counseling. Data and statistics related to college entrance and scholarship awards should be readily available and annually updated as part of the school profile that is sent to colleges. Admissions rates to colleges have become a primary metric and selling point for Catholic high schools; therefore, the connection between this data and the successful guidance and counseling department must not only be publicized, but celebrated. Furthermore, an understanding of satisfaction with the full range of services delivered should be sought from both students and parents on an annual or at least biannual basis via surveys or other means. Analysis of the results of such surveys should inform goal setting for the department and overall strategic planning efforts. Positive testimonials received via such surveys can be used for marketing purposes.

3. Client Focused

Students, and their parents, need to feel that they know, and are comfortable with, their assigned guidance counselor. A combination of one-on-one, small group, and large group meetings are typically utilized to ensure client contact. The following should be considered in designing methods to achieve department goals for meeting frequencies in support of productive relationships between counselor and counselees/families:

- *The College Board 2012: National Survey of School Counselors and Administrators* reports that the average public school counselor caseload is 386.3 students. Private schools are much lower at 196.8 students per counselor. Typically, CSM consultants see Catholic high school counselor caseloads between 225 and 250 students (an excellent marketing point). Given this guideline for caseload, there should be a “guaranteed” frequency for one-on-one meetings between a student and counselor. Ideally this would happen once per quarter, yet setting a goal of once per semester is often more realistic;

- Counselors should utilize an established set of practices to acquire and maintain background and important information on their counselees via use of questionnaires/polls, anecdotal notes, and general record keeping;
- Both small and large group meeting opportunities (i.e., as a grade level, during a class period, etc.) should be a regular component of the guidance and counseling curriculum and should include time for counselors to meet with their caseload by grade level or other grouping;
- Counselors should be engaged in school life and take regular advantage of opportunities to be seen and to be with students, i.e., lunch, extra-curricular events, club and athletic activities, on student retreats, etc.;
- A letter of introduction should be sent from the counselor to parents/guardians that helps to clarify the role of the guidance counselor and to provide information on best methods for communication. Email follow-up to parents/guardians after formal counseling appointments is encouraged as a means for keeping adults aware of the programs and services provided to their students;
- Any and all correspondence with students should be shared or “copied” to parents and the department chair or other designated school administrator;
- At least annual meetings by grade level should be provided for parents for topics such as four-year academic planning, teenagers and substance abuse issues, understanding standardized testing, preparing for the college process, college financial aid options, etc.

4. Technologically Supported and Efficient

Guidance and counseling centers should provide access to computer workstations or other technology tools to provide student and parent access to recommended resources, along with the ability to search and view college information. The number of devices needed will reflect the extent to which student access is already provided. As increasing numbers of Catholic high schools move to one-on-one learning environments, students are more and more likely to have 24/7 access to a technology device. Furthermore, electronic communication versus written or phone communication has become a normative expectation for both students and their parents. Many parents find it most convenient to contact a counselor via email rather than playing “phone tag.” Likewise, students are often best contacted

electronically, including via use of text messaging or microblog sites such as Twitter. The ability to make appointments online is a highly-desired service. Although CSM does not recommend specific products to schools, a simple Internet search will reveal that Hobsons’ *Naviance* has become the leader in providing online college and career readiness solutions, which also acts as a communication portal among counselors, students, and families. It is also commonly expected that submission of student applications and transcripts will be facilitated in a timely manner via a reliable online tool. The rise of such tools for communication, scheduling of appointments, and organization of student files including applications, recommendations, and transcripts has changed the administrative support needs of a guidance and counseling department; therefore, attention should be given to ensuring that support is provided accordingly.

5. Clear Roles, Programs, Policies, and Procedures

Although commonly grouped as one of the school’s academic departments, the guidance and counseling department is often one of the least understood of a Catholic high school’s various programs. The most effective departments ensure that the school community is educated and regularly informed as to the design and benefits of guidance and counseling programs and services. This includes:

- The existence of a written, four-year guidance and counseling curriculum for academic, personal, college, and career counseling that includes attention to social and emotional issues related to adolescent development;
- The regular publication of guidance news and a calendar of events;
- Comprehensive role descriptions for the Director of Guidance and Counseling, all counselors, and department support staff;
- The use of annual goal setting and performance appraisal instruments based on existing role descriptions;
- Clear, well-promulgated, and well-understood procedures, published within the guidance department and student/parent handbooks, with regard to appointments, release from class, schedule development/changes, guidance counselor involvement in disciplinary matters, etc.;
- Regular guidance department meetings that are preceded by agendas and followed up with meeting minutes, both of which are shared with a supervising administrator;



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- The involvement of academic administrators in guidance department meetings and oversight as appropriate;
- The inclusion of guidance counselors on appropriate committees and councils such as admissions, retention, campus ministry, curriculum, and/or academic affairs;
- Annual review and updating of all handbooks, roles, programs, policies, and procedures to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the population they were designed to serve in the most effective manner possible.

6. Well-Coordinated and Well-Respected College Counseling Programs

Private college admissions counselors can charge thousands of dollars to provide families with college counseling services. If a family feels this is necessary on top of tuition paid for a Catholic high school education, their purchase decision has not been justified. Accordingly, expectations for college counseling programs include:

- Initiating the discussion and providing basic information about how to prepare for the college admissions process beginning in Grade 9;
- Standardized test prep within the curriculum and/or via additional workshops or elective classes;
- Use of school and national data (via a tool such as *Naviance*, mentioned above) to predict likelihood of student acceptance at various colleges;
- Provision of events/workshops to enhance student and parent understanding and ability to navigate the college search and application process via such methods as case studies with admissions officers, application “boot camp” programs, college fairs, and multiple college representative visits on campus;
- Support and guidance in the writing of essays and completion of applications;
- Both general and individually targeted information for students and families regarding scholarships and other means for affording a college education;
- Clear communication about the steps in the college application process via school-developed guidebooks or other easily accessible resources that have been culled by the school;
- A personalized approach beginning in the junior year designed to focus on assuring the right fit between a student and college.

Finally, the most valuable resource of any secondary school guidance and counseling program is the guidance counselors themselves. Professionally trained, competent, and caring individuals are the heart and soul of an effective program. Ongoing professional development should be provided via support for attendance at conferences or workshops and for continuing education as necessary. Those guidance counselors who hold college advising duties greatly benefit from the opportunity to visit colleges, develop relationships with admissions offices, and relay firsthand impressions to students and families. For further information on the role of the guidance counselor, please see *Catholic School Management Letter*, March 2000, Vol. XXI, No. 4, “Guidance and Counseling at the Catholic Secondary School.”