THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES THE ROLES OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROFESSIONALS AND HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN PREPARING STUDENTS TO APPLY TO, SELECT, AND ENROLL AT A COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY. FRAMED IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION, PERCEIVED AND REAL BARRIERS THAT HINDER STUDENTS FROM CONSIDERING AND ENROLLING IN COLLEGE, AND STRATEGIES PROVEN TO ALLEVIATE ACCESS ISSUES, THIS ARTICLE DESCRIBES OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE THE COLLEGE-GOING PROCESS FOR YOUTH IN THE UNITED STATES.
emphasis on college access, academic progress, and degree completion (Balfranz et al. 2012; Callan et al. 2006; College Board 2008; Hines, Lemons and Crews 2011; Lee and Rawls 2010; Symonds, Schwartz and Ferguson 2011; Venezia, Kirst and Antonio n.d.). There is a consensus that the pursuit of a college education is a fundamental right in the United States (Mortenson 2012; Tierney 2008). As such, evaluation and action are required to advance this initia-
tive, and at the center are two primary groups of education professionals—high school counselors and college admissions professionals—both striving to support high school students’ pursuit of postsecondary education.

Historically, high schools prepared students for either of two paths: employment or college. That structure has evolved to a more intentional, interrelated college and career readiness approach (Conley 2010). While some educators view college and career readiness as one and the same, others believe them to be distinctly different (Conley and McGaughy 2012). At the core of college readiness is the concept of college knowledge. Typically, college knowledge includes information about the college search process, admission requirements, financial aid processes, and enrollment steps (Burleson, Hallett and Park 2008; Conley and McGaughy 2012). This article synthesizes research, implications, perspectives, and efforts by high school counselors and college admissions professionals to facilitate the education of young Americans in the 21st century.

FROM ELITISM TO ACCESS

Going to college is not synonymous with access to college. Going to college is the intent to go to college whereas access to college is having the opportunity to consider and enroll in college. “Prior to the 1950s, fewer than two of every 10 high school graduates went on to college,” states Kinzie et al. (2004). These authors cite that same time-frame for college access becoming a focus of national public policy in the United States. The introduction of the GI Bill, the establishment of the United Negro College Fund, and the beginning of the community college expansion plan are cited as evidence of the then-emergent focus (Kinzie et al. 2004). Tierney (2008) refers to college access as a national imperative. Dubrow (2008) cites the complexities involved: “The single most perplexing conundrum facing American higher education, particularly since the birth of public colleges, is reconciling the two goals of access and quality…. College admissions professionals and high school counselors alike facilitate students’ transition from high school to college.

“In a number of ways, the college admissions process is one that sorts students into institutions by income and social privilege; as such, it is a system that calcifies disparities between members of different economic and social status” states the University of Southern California (USC) Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice (USC 2011). The allusion is to elitism, which still serves as the template for today’s college admissions model (Stevens 2007). Elitism has existed for decades, if not centuries. St. John, Paulsen, and Carter (2005) cite the 1965 Higher Education Act as striving to equalize educational opportunities in the United States. Yet the effort to equalize has resulted in only limited progress. “Inequalities in college access rates across family income classes and racial/ethnic groups have narrowed only slightly over the past 30 years, and inequalities in college completion rates have narrowed even less,” states Ehrenberg (2008). This speaks to the continued need for growing and expanding college counseling, with a focus on specific populations. In recent years, multiple books have described elitism in college admissions as pervasive. Titles include The Best of the Best: Becoming Elite at an American Boarding School; Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites; No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal: Race and Class in Elite College Admissions and Campus Life; The Power of Privilege: Yale and America’s Elite Colleges; and The Early Admissions Game: Joining the Elite.

College access is a national movement that seeks to reverse the elitism of U.S. higher education. The movement is triggered by a decline in the academic ranking of the U.S. population internationally, by changing demographics in America, and by anticipated labor shortages of highly educated individuals (College Board 2008; Symonds, Schwartz and Ferguson 2011; WICHE 2008). Significant efforts—for example, the establishment of the National College Access Network and similar state networks as well as college access marketing campaigns—are being made to expand opportunity for all youths to pursue a college education. College access received federal attention when Representative Tim Bishop (D-NY) introduced House Resolution 2579, the Pathways to College Act (GovTrack.us 2009). The act would have provided grant funding to support the training of high school counselors; to strengthen college-going cultures; and to expand college preparation programs—primarily at schools with a majority of low-income students (GovTrack.us 2009; NCAC n.d.b). The need for all of these efforts has never been greater: Tierney (2008) states that “less than 10 percent of a school’s population benefit from college preparation programs.” Richardson (2008) refers to the college appli-
cation process as “the portal controlling access to higher education.” After describing what is essentially a gatekeeping process, Richardson (2008) summarizes guidelines drafted by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). Taken together, they describe the expectations of high school counselors and college admission professionals.

EXPECTED COMPETENCIES

Foundation in 1937, NACAC (2012) is a membership organization that provides resources and support to more than 12,000 high school counselors and college admissions professionals. Two NACAC documents—the “Statement on Precollege Guidance and Counseling and the Role of the School Counselor” (1990) and the “Statement on Counselor Competencies” (2000) outline expectations of counselors.

The “Statement on Precollege Guidance and Counseling and the Role of the School Counselor” (NACAC 1990) describes the components of an effective college preparation program and defines the roles of counselors in executing such a program. It emphasizes the need for all students to have access to a “strong precollege guidance and counseling program” early in their academic career (NACAC 1990). This could be considered a precursor to the modern phrase “college-going culture.” The statement also recommends a student-to-counselor ratio ranging between 100:1 (ideal) and 300:1 (maximum). It identifies twelve components of an effective program, from a philosophy to principles of equal opportunity. It also provides a lengthy list of counselor roles. The statement emphasizes early planning, promoting awareness, and direct contact with students and parents throughout the college preparation process.

In 1991, NACAC’s executive board approved two sets of competencies, one for school counselors and one for college admissions counselors; both documents were revised and reapproved in 2000 (NACAC 2000). Nine competencies—applicable to both audiences—pertain to exemplary counseling, effective communication skills, student development, transition support, diversity, ethics, data analysis, advocacy, and precollege guidance. The overarching goal is to “...assist students effectively in realizing their full personal and educational potential” (NACAC 2000). NACAC criticizes school counselor preparation programs for failing to provide training that results in effective college counseling.

THE MULTIPLE ROLES OF COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROFESSIONALS

College admissions professionals have numerous and often disparate responsibilities. They are marketers and gatekeepers as well as counselors.

Marketers

College admissions professionals utilize numerous recruitment techniques as part of their effort to enroll new students (Noel-Levitz 2011). High school visits, college fairs, e-mail, and social networking sites provide opportunities to share information about the particular colleges they represent (Noel-Levitz 2011). Some college admissions professionals are assigned to designated geographic areas to facilitate contact with prospective and admitted students. (Territory management may be considered a form of market segmentation.) Many admissions professionals are given scripts as a means of ensuring that messages are consistent. (Typically, messages are aligned with the college’s branding [Sevier 2000].) As a former admissions counselor said, “On the road, responding to e-mails, and counseling walk-ins, an admissions counselor serves as a clearinghouse of information regarding the admissions process, financial aid, and academic programs” (Mathis 2010).

Kinzie et al. (2004) identify the 1960s as the decade when most colleges stepped up their marketing efforts: “Many four-year colleges and universities expanded their marketing efforts in an attempt to attract more students and achieve enrollment goals.” Henderson (2008) believes admissions marketing to have been the result of targeted recruiting uniting with business practice in the 1980s and 1990s. He specifically cites the emergence of telecounseling and direct mail activities (Henderson 2008). Marketing strategies were further enhanced with the advent of digital marketing techniques such as e-mail, websites, and social networking (Kinzie et al. 2004). Seventy-four (74) percent of admissions directors indicate that “social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) play an important role in our outreach efforts to prospective students” (Green, Jaschik and Lederman 2011). Fierce competition for students also fuels the marketing efforts of college admissions professionals (Kinzie et al. 2004). It is heightened by aspirations...
to increase the quality of the incoming class, by the marketing efforts of competitor colleges, and by demographics—specifically, decreasing numbers of high school graduates in many parts of the United States (WICHE 2008). There is no question that a competitive spirit is at the heart of colleges and universities’ marketing efforts (USC 2011).

**Gatekeepers**

According to Peterson (2008), “Once thought of merely as gatekeepers, admissions officers now need to master a wide variety of knowledge and techniques in order to help form the entering classes at colleges and universities.” Gatekeeping is the act of determining who is offered admission and who is not. Gatekeeping in U.S. higher education had its origins in 1642, when Harvard College established the first known requirements for college admission (Beale 1970). Most college admissions professionals evaluate applicants’ credentials against identified criteria (as, for example, in a formulaic or holistic review). The result is that some students are admitted and some are not, and the ritual that is at the center of higher education access and quality is perpetuated. A meritocratic approach describes quality on the basis of academic factors such as grade point average and test scores (among others); by contrast, a holistic approach considers “non-academic factors, personal characteristics, and individual experiences [as] important and positive for the campus community” (O’Neill 2011).

The gatekeeping role can be paired with the counseling role, as, for example, through on-site admissions when a college admissions professional announces the decision to the applicant in person (Wenzel 2002). The professional who delivers a denial decision can advise as to steps the applicant could take toward admission in the future—typically as a transfer student. The college admissions professional thus could turn a potentially negative situation into a positive one by communicating a different route to the same destination. Unfortunately, students often describe the gatekeeping function as the “admissions game” (Bound, Hershbein and Long 2009; Henderson 2008; Mathis 2010; Sacks 2010; Thacker 2004; Zwick 2007)—one that hinges on chance, skill, and luck rather than on academic and/or holistic factors. College admissions professionals can dispel this myth by utilizing effective communication and counseling.

**Counselors**

As counselors, college admissions professionals help students find the best “fit” and choose the college they will attend. The nacac “Statement on Counselor Competencies” (2000) articulates three expectations:

- “Possess individual and group counseling and communication skills…” (Competency 1);
- “Possess the ability to engage in active listening with students, parents…and formulate relevant responses” (Competency 1); and
- “Demonstrate an ability to counsel students in understanding the full range of educational and career options open to them, including the requirements for achieving success in these pursuits” (Competency 2).

Listening and advising skills are critical to meeting students’ needs in the college search, application, and enrollment process. Hines, Lemons and Crews (2011) state that “personal counseling is a key practice in ensuring college and career readiness.” Mathis (2010) explains that an admissions counselor shares referent information, appraisal information, and relational information, all three of which help the student in the college search process.

**Balancing Multiple Roles**

Balancing these multiple roles can be challenging. According to Kinzie et al. (2004), “At some highly selective institutions, admissions officers’ jobs may depend in part on the quality and diversity of the entering class these officers recruit.” Daun-Barnett and Behrend (2011) state, “They may be the most knowledgeable professionals in terms of navigating the college choice process.” “Admissions officers track the numbers, deploy new technologies and analytic tools, and also draw on their experience and instincts to navigate the shifting terrain of undergraduate recruitment and admissions” (Green, Jaschik and Lederman 2011).

**ROLES OF HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS**

Champions of equity. Voices of the first-generation student. Advocates for admission. These phrases describe some of the significant roles that high school counselors can and should play in preparing students to pursue academic goals beyond high school (Bardwell 2012; Education Trust 2009c; Hines, Lemon and Crews 2011).
Promoting Ethical Behavior

NACAC’s (2010) “Statement of Principles of Good Practice” (SPGP) provides a foundation for the protection of students engaged in the college admissions process. It speaks to the role that high school counselors play in managing all aspects of the college search, to include admission and enrollment. As a code of conduct, the SPGP has evolved in response to marketplace forces and the increasing complexity of the college admission landscape (NACAC 2010). The SPGP (2010) describes a variety of best practices for high school counselors. One is “to provide a program of counseling that introduces a broad range of postsecondary opportunities to students.” This represents an intersection of the marketing and gatekeeping roles played by college admissions professionals. Encouraging a student to consider a wide array of colleges and universities helps the student defend against being wooed by the college with the best marketing efforts. The counselor’s role is to help the student identify where she has the highest likelihood of being successful. Further, by directing a student to consider multiple postsecondary options, a high school counselor helps position the student to receive multiple offers of admission. This is particularly important if the student is considering highly selective schools. (Note that the gatekeeping process is thereby expanded.)

Interpreting Admissions Decisions

High school counselors must help students navigate the gatekeeping process, select the admissions protocol (e.g., rolling admission, early decision, etc.) that best fits their needs, and manage the outcomes of the admission decision (NACAC 2010). These requirements align with competencies 1 and 3 of the “Statement on Counselor Competencies” (NACAC 2000): demonstrate “exemplary counseling and communication skills” and “possess and demonstrate an understanding of the current admission requirements, admission options, and application procedures employed by colleges and universities.”

Evaluative Storytelling

In a comparative book review, Deckman (2011) summarizes what Stevens (2007) introduces as “evaluative storytelling”: “A second way high school counselors influence the admissions process is by assisting admissions office staff in crafting stories about candidates who are on the cusp of admissions.” This is akin to Competency 7 of the “Statement on Counselor Competencies” (NACAC 2000): advocate on behalf of students. High school counselors often submit statements in support of students whose credentials are at the lower end of a college’s published admissions criteria. They also may provide valuable insights about applicants through their submission of secondary school reports (Common Application 2011b).

Overall Counselor Roles

“The school counselor plays a central and indispensable role in the precollege guidance and counseling process” (NACAC 2000). Tierney, Corwin, and Coylar (2005) state that “guidance counselors comprise a critical web of support agents for students thinking about going to college.” Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) emphasize the role of counselors as agents: “Counselors, as institutional agents, use their social ties with students to impose expectations and share resources for students’ educational endeavors.” High school counselors have a certain impact on increasing access to college:

The high school counselor plays a significant role in helping students plan for and enter college. Kinzie et al. (2004) point out that choosing a college is one of the initial noncompulsory decisions youths make, and it is one for which they have little previous experience. High school counselors must support students through this often-overwhelming process.

ARTICULATED PARTNERSHIP

NACAC (1990) emphasizes the vital nature of the relationship between high school counselors and college admissions professionals: “Critical to the success of such a [guidance] support system is the strength of the articulation process between the school counselor and college admissions personnel.” This articulation process includes regular communication, a high level of engagement
throughout the year (inclusive of all college enrollment processes), joint monitoring of student progress, and the exchange of information and data about applicants and enrollees. Tierney (2008) refers to this as an intersegmental partnership. The same goal exists for both the college admissions professional and the high school counselor: “to enable the individual to get into college.”

**COMMON BARRIERS**

To understand the complexity of the college counseling landscape, one must be familiar with the barriers that prevent high school counselors and college admissions professionals from providing adequate counseling and resources.

**Barriers Impacting High School Counselors**

**High Student-to-Counselor Ratio**

A frequently cited barrier to effective college counseling is the extraordinarily high student-to-counselor ratio (Clinedinst, Hurley and Hawkins 2011; Lee et al. 2011; NACAC n.d.a). According to the “2011 State of College Admission” (Clinedinst, Hurley and Hawkins 2011), the national ratio in U.S. public schools was 459:1. Boyer has identified the ideal ratio as 100:1 (Clinedinst, Hurley and Hawkins 2011). If this ideal ratio were to be attained, 386,169 additional counselors would be needed nationwide at an estimated cost of nearly $21 billion (based on the 2010 median school counselor salary of $53,380) (Clinedinst et al. 2011; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). NACAC’s annual survey found evidence that “counselors at schools with lower student-to-counselor ratios spent more time on postsecondary counseling” (Clinedinst et al. 2011). Lee et al. (2011) state that “the student-to-college-counselor ratio describes the access a student may have to an individual who is responsible for providing college counseling.” Being individually responsible for hundreds of students inhibits counselors’ ability to prepare those students for the college admissions process.

**Specialized Populations**

First-generation students, low-income students, immigrant populations, and students from multicultural backgrounds require additional attention and support to facilitate their progress toward a college education (Clark 2008; Lieber 2009; McDonough 2005). Recent analysis indicates that 34.4 percent of students from families earning less than $40,000 annually enroll in college; as this is the highest percentage in at least eighteen years, work remains to be done to increase it further (Mortenson 2012). “Education’s role is to prepare these young people for productive, responsible, and fulfilling lives in our society, economy, democracy, and in families” (Mortenson 2012). Bridgeland and Bruce (2011b) indicate that students from underrepresented backgrounds tend to use external sources (that is, resources outside of school) to prepare for college. This attests to the need for more high school counselors to provide outreach and direct service to students.

Tierney, Corwin, and Coylar (2005) cite a national study in which the authors conclude “that efforts to improve high school counseling and equalizing students’ access to these services would be likely to have a significant impact on improving college access for underserved populations.” The University of Southern California Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice (2011) states:

“One of the greatest challenges now confronting the nation is to foster greater educational participation and degree attainment among those whom colleges and universities have traditionally served less well: lower-income students, first-generation students, and members of under-represented minorities.

“Race and culture play an important role in shaping students’ college-going identities, and this role is related to the historical underrepresentation of many minorities in colleges” (Oakes n.d.). McDonough (2005) states that “college counseling is generally agreed upon as one of the three main needs for improving college access for poor students and students of color...”. It is clear that high school counselors and college admissions professionals need to focus increased attention on these populations through advocacy and one-on-one assistance.

**Competing Responsibilities**

Related to the barrier of high student-to-counselor ratios is that of time. Lee et al. (2011) explain that this “…measure [of time] seeks to raise awareness of the roles and responsibilities of school counselors and, in particular, how often the counselors are engaged in postsecondary admission counseling.” From 2006 until 2009, the percentage of time that counselors devoted to postsecondary admission counseling decreased from 39 to 26 (Lee et al. 2011).
resources provide information about and suggestions for becoming lifelong learners” (College Board 2006). Multiple have a desire to succeed and a drive to attend college, and 2009); and a place “where students appreciate academics, belief in all students’ capacity to go to college” (Lieber 2009). Savitz-Romer, Jager-Hyman, and Coles (2009) refer to the establishment of a college-going culture as structural support. Such support can be particularly important to students whose families do not provide it. Ideally, middle schools as well as high schools are characterized by a college-going culture, thus helping to communicate over the course of several critical years the value of college (Lee and Rawls 2010). As early as middle school, students can develop learning habits for college, be introduced to the steps of the college preparation and admissions process, and participate in field trips to colleges (College Board 2011d). Finally, Conley and McGaughey (2012) recommend extending the college-going culture into the community. Facilitating college enrollment apart from such a culture can be challenging indeed.

Barriers Impacting College Admissions Professionals

Barriers that have an impact on college admissions professionals are not as well-documented or -researched as those that have an impact on high school counselors. Nevertheless, one emerging barrier is worth noting.

Focus On Strategic Enrollment Management

In the first chapter of The College Admission Officer’s Guide, Henderson (2008) provides historical context for the field of college admissions—particularly its morph into the contemporary enrollment management industry. Henderson (2008) cites Hossler and Bean’s (1990) definition of enrollment management as a strategy that unites “student college choice, transition to college, student attrition and retention, and student outcomes” for the purpose of maximizing enrollment and revenue for the college or university. Henderson (2008) advocates for enrollment management, but he also describes “enrollment management’s dark side”: “High school counselors see enrollment management as a nefarious device to uncouple them from the college process.” He describes how online applications have removed high school counselors from the application process. Further, strategic enrollment management can include predictive modeling and financial aid leveraging tactics, a result of which is that the student is considered
more a source of revenue than a person pursuing college. Even NACAC’s “2011 State of College Admission Counseling” includes a section entitled “Enrollment Management Strategies” (Clinedinst et al. 2011).

What Thacker (2004) calls the enrollment management consulting industry exacerbates this barrier: “The rise and influence of the billion-dollar enrollment management consulting industry, which specializes in packaging and branding colleges according to strict bottom-line rationality and strategizing, is raising questions about what values and principles should determine college admission policy.” Meanwhile, Mathis (2010) suggests that a “Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) ambassador” can use research to guide recruitment strategies, engage faculty in the recruitment process, teach students how to use information in the college search process, and share information with prospective students. If it is not carefully monitored and managed, SEM could have a negative impact on the work of college admissions professionals.

Factors, Strategies, and Approaches

Many factors, strategies, and approaches have been proven to assist high school students in preparing for, applying to, gaining access to, and enrolling in college. Three are highlighted here:

**Number of Applications Submitted**

According to Tierney, Corwin, and Coylar (2005), high school counselors help students determine to which colleges they should apply. In October 2011, the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center issued a research brief entitled “Can applying to more colleges increase enrollment rates?” Smith concludes that

*Increasing the number of college applications from one to two can increase a student’s probability of enrolling at a four-year college by 40 percent, and increasing the number of applications from two to three can increase a student’s probability of enrollment by 10 percent.*

Therefore, college admissions professionals and high school counselors should—and are in a position to—encourage students to apply to at least three four-year colleges. A limitation of this study is that it is based only on the submission of Common Applications. Only 456 colleges accept the Common Application (2011a), so the study’s findings may not be generalizable to the vast majority of U.S. colleges and universities.

Bridgeland and Bruce (2011a) identify college application rates as one of the top five measures by which to assess counselor effectiveness. They state that “assistance with the college application process is among the most powerful ways that school counselors can impact college enrollment and attendance rates in secondary schools” (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011b). According to the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA), “The school counselor’s support is critical for helping students submit complete application packages so they have the greatest opportunity for acceptance” (College Board 2011c).

**Building a College-Going Culture**

Tierney, Corwin, and Coylar (2005) state that “a college culture that establishes high academic standards and includes formal and informal communication networks that promote and support college expectations” is one of four high school experiences that has a “tremendous impact on college attendance.” According to Liu (2011a), “Students for whom a college-going culture is ingrained into their high school lives are readily familiar with the norms and values of the admissions process.” Conley (2010) writes that a college-going culture helps provide the cues, procedures, and insights that enable students to prepare for, plan for, and enroll in college.

To facilitate the growth and expansion of college-going cultures, NACAC has added a chapter on such cultures to the third edition of its Fundamentals of College Admission Counseling (NACAC 2012b). This publication is considered the only textbook in existence for graduate students and practicing counselors and has been published for use in college counseling courses on college campuses (Fraser 2011).

In their 2008 report “From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College,” Roderick et al. emphasize the impact of a college-going culture:

*[T]he single most consistent predictor of whether students took steps toward college enrollment was whether their teachers reported that their high school had a strong college climate, that is, they and their colleagues pushed students to go to college, worked to ensure that students would be prepared, and were involved in supporting students in completing their college applications (cited in Sherwin 2012).*
While Sherwin’s (2012) policy brief finds that a program called CollegeMatch netted positive results in helping low-income and first-generation students access college, the results were obtained by using three external advisors, not high school counselors. Nevertheless, the research brief points to a growing trend in the use of external assistance to support college counseling. Another well-known effort similar to CollegeMatch is the National College Advising Corps.

**Participating in a College Application Week**

A more recent proven strategy that high school counselors can implement is participation in a national movement called College Application Week. According to the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) (2011), College Application Week began in North Carolina in 2005 as a pilot College Application Day and was designed to facilitate first-generation students’ application to college. North Carolina’s 2008 event resulted in 80 percent of participants enrolling in college in fall 2009 ([SREB 2011](#)). In fact, four times more applications were submitted that week than in the weeks before and after the event ([Michigan College Access Network](#), pers. comm., Sept. 20, 2011). The impact of encouraging students to apply to college is clear. “Initiatives that provide students with direct assistance in completing applications are likely to stimulate college enrollment,” states [Smith](#) (2011). North Carolina’s College Application Week is a noteworthy example with proven results.

**Michigan’s first College Application Week**

In November 2011, the Michigan College Access Network ([MCAN](#)) launched its first-ever statewide College Application Week. While a select number of high schools (38) participated, the event successfully facilitated the completion of 2,219 college admission applications ([MCAN 2012](#)). Twenty-six (76%) of the volunteers who completed a post-event survey identified themselves as representatives from a college or university ([MCAN 2012](#)). While it cannot be assumed that they all were college admissions professionals, educators can play such a role in this process.

Counselor actions can help increase college access and enrollment. Beyond the efforts described above, many other interventions should be examined and quantified to determine their impact.

**Moving Forward**

Now that roles have been defined and the context of access, maintenance of quality, and proven college counseling strategies have been explored, it is important to consider the preferred roles of high school counselors and college admissions professionals and the prerequisites for fulfilling those responsibilities. Following that, a rationale for formal training is shared.

**Emerging and Evolving Roles**

Currently, two major organizations—the Education Trust and the College Board—are striving to redefine the role of high school counselors.

**National Center for Transforming School Counseling (NCTSC)**

In 2003, The Education Trust, in partnership with the MetLife Foundation, established the National Center for Transforming School Counseling ([NCTSC](#)) (2009a). NCTSC’s mission is to “work to advance the school counseling profession’s central role in ensuring educational equity for all students” ([Education Trust 2009b](#)). NCTSC facilitates leadership, advocacy, counseling, teaming/collaboration, and the use of data ([Education Trust 2009c](#)). Two emerging roles for counselors focus on the use of data and work in support of social justice (advocacy). NOSCA’s 2011 survey of more than 5,000 school counselors provides support for an advocacy role: “Three out of four counselors (74%) rate their unique role...as student advocates who create pathways and support to ensure all students have opportunities to achieve postsecondary goals.” ([Bridgeland and Bruce](#) 2011). NCTSC defines school counseling as “a profession that focuses on the relations and interactions between students and their school environment to reduce the effects of environmental and institutional barriers that impede student academic success” ([Education Trust 2009a](#)). This definition suggests an implicit goal of eliminating as many of the barriers to effective college counseling (particularly those described above) as possible.

**National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA)**

The College Board (the originator of the SAT) launched the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy ([NOSCA](#)) in 2008 “to promote the value of school counsel-
Many authors, researchers, leaders, and educators cite the need for training in college counseling and postsecondary education (Bardwell 2012; Bautsch and Martin 2011; Bridgeland and Bruce 2011a; Daun-Barnett and Behrend 2011; Johnson et al. 2010; Lieber 2009; McDonough 2005; NACAC 2000; O’Connor 2010; Rapp 2012; Savitz-Romer et al. 2009; Savitz-Romer and Bouffard 2012; Tierney et al. 2004). Such training would benefit high school counselors as well as college admissions professionals because of content focused on all aspects of the college admissions and enrollment process. “NACAC believes there is a basic body of knowledge and fundamental skills one must possess to be effective in counseling students as they progress through school (elementary through postsecondary education) and make decisions regarding their postsecondary educational alternatives” (2000). In its “Statement on Counselor Competencies,” NACAC (2000) calls for syllabuses and resources in graduate coursework to facilitate the development of competencies related to college counseling. Government reports also emphasize the need for such training and knowledge: “Students and their families need advice from knowledgeable school staff if they are to successfully navigate the college application processes” state Tierney et al. (2009). As part of the effort to close the access and equity gaps, Lieber (2009) calls for “more exposure to the issues of college access for urban youth in graduate programs.” Bridgeland and Bruce (2011a) call for “mandatory coursework on advising for college readiness, access, and affordability.” O’Connor (2010), a past president of NACAC and current adjunct faculty member for college counseling coursework, spoke about the negative implications of not providing such training: “The long-standing paucity of college admission training will continue to contribute to the equally well-established academic achievement gaps between rich and poor, and white, black and Hispanic, thus pointing to the continued need to focus on access and equity among these populations.” According to O’Connor (2010), fewer than 10 percent of the 466 colleges offering a school counselor preparation program include a college counseling course.

**College Counseling Courses**

Currently, formal training in college admissions exists primarily in two formats: isolated graduate-level, credit-bearing courses and certificate programs. The first known courses were coincidentally launched in July 1991: The School of Education at Long Island University (LIU) launched Education 859 (“Counseling for the College Admissions and Selection Process”), and the University of California–Riverside launched two online courses, “College Counseling Process” and “Admissions Testing and Documents.” The LIU course was the first college counseling course to be required as part of a school counseling preparatory program (McGowan 2011). Among institutions with school counselor programs, at least 42 programs now offer a college counseling course (O’Connor 2010).

**Certificates in College Counseling**

In existence since 1991, certificate programs in college counseling offer a series of courses leading to a credential and training in various aspects of the college admissions process (Gruendyke 2012). In the United States, there are seven such programs located in four states: California, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Minnesota. Specifically, they are offered at Eastern Michigan University, Hamline University, Suffolk University, and the University of California (campuses of Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Riverside, San Diego). High school counselors and college admissions professionals both can benefit from this credit-bearing training.

Typically, these certificates require six courses, often completed online at many of the schools, thus making it
accessible to all types of education professionals nationwide. The coursework focuses on college applications, the admission process, equity and access, financial aid, testing, and ethics.

The impact of this coursework—and of the certificates—is unknown. A worthwhile research opportunity exists to measure the effectiveness of these educational experiences on college access, admissions, and enrollments.

**Certification and Endorsements**

Apart from credit-bearing college coursework, other certificates, credentialing, and endorsements related to college admissions counseling have been developed.

In 1989, NACAC considered the creation of a comprehensive national certificate in college admissions counseling for high school counselors and college admissions professionals. The certificate was never launched, but its merit should be reconsidered, particularly as comparable training efforts have been developed in two related professional fields (i.e., enrollment management and financial aid). The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) (2012) created a national professional credential in financial aid through a newly established entity called NASFAA University. A financial aid professional can earn this credential by completing five training components and passing a test (NASFAA n.d.).

The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) debuted a Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) endorsement in fall 2012. Similar to NASFAA’s financial aid credential, content will derive from a curriculum comprising online coursework, webinars, field visits, and a capstone project (AACRAO n.d.). The credential is intended to increase college admissions and enrollment management professionals’ “readiness to conquer current and future challenges in the field” (AACRAO n.d.).

Also in fall 2012, the University of Southern California’s (USC) Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice launched an online admissions and enrollment management certificate. The Center’s online video features an overview of the topics addressed, including working as change agents; equity issues; opportunities to influence educational attainment; and recruitment, selection, and financial aid processes (University of Southern California 2012).

Taken together, these initiatives demonstrate growth in formal, job-related education and training for the purposes of maintaining the balance of quality and access while increasing college enrollment and degree completion rates.

**CONCLUSION**

Sixty percent by 2025: That is the national goal for the percentage of Americans who will possess a postsecondary education credential (Lumina 2012). Reaching that goal will require a significant commitment to increase college access, to include dedicated time and resources for college preparation and training for professionals who work with students prior to their entry into college. USC (2011) reminds us that “no other nation has aimed to create a higher education system that leads the world in academic strength and the creation of new knowledge, while at the same time making a college education available to anyone seeking to learn regardless of ability to pay.” At the core of college preparation, admission, and enrollment is the intersection of what Furstenberg (2004) calls the “American values of merit and fairness.”

“College-going is a triangulated relationship composed of the student, the admission officer, and the guidance counselor” (Tierney 2008). In supporting students’ preparation for and transition to postsecondary education, college admissions professionals and high school counselors take on multiple roles, challenges, and opportunities. Conley (2005) reminds us that “college preparation is knowledge-intensive.” As such, it requires foundational knowledge that can be delivered through credit-bearing college coursework for those individuals who work in a professional capacity to prepare students for college. Matthay (1995) writes, “Advising for higher education in America is about harnessing our intelligence and good-will in pursuit of a goal that will truly improve all facets of American life: a well-educated citizenry.” The ultimate goal for college admissions professionals and high school counselors is to ensure that students choose and enroll in postsecondary institutions that meet their individual needs. NACAC (1990) would consider this to be sound educational decision making.

Lieber (2009) calls for professionalization of the school counselor function, in part by enhancing the education of those involved in postsecondary planning. Facilitating the
pursuit of a college education is a collaborative effort (Cerverone 2010); “Counselors are uniquely positioned to help reverse these trends, restoring America’s status as first in the world in college attainment” (Bridgeland and Bruce, 2011a). According to McDonough (2005), “Research clearly shows that counselors, when consistently and frequently available and authorized to provide direct services to students and parents, can be a highly effective group of professionals who impact students’ aspirations, achievements, college enrollments, and financial aid knowledge.”

Given the numerous publications and guides for high school counselors and the absence of similar resources for college admissions professionals, it is recommended that documents be developed to clarify ways in which college admissions representatives can work more effectively to increase enrollment. In addition, there exists a major opportunity for NACAC, NCSSCA, and NACSCC to partner to increase the effectiveness of college counseling; together, they can work to eliminate the barriers that prevent more students from pursuing a college education. A joint effort would funnel resources and leverage expertise in a collective, meaningful way.

College access professionals are an emerging group of educators who play a role in the “going to college” process. They provide college counseling in high schools when high school counselors are unavailable. Some are affiliated with the National College Advising Corps, some with college access networks, and some with Michigan’s new College Coaching Corps. Daun-Barnett and Behrend (2011) refer to this group as “pre-college outreach counselors” and describe their role as supplemental to high school counselors in terms of helping students prepare for college. However, given that nearly 400,000 school counselors are needed to attain an ideal counseling ratio, welcoming college access professionals into the process would seem to be one way to fill the gap. Surely an increase from two to multiple agents of change would support an increase in the number of students pursuing a college education.

REFERENCES

AACRAO. See American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.


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**About the Author**

CHRISTOPHER W. TREMBLAY is the incoming Associate Provost for Enrollment Management at Western Michigan University. He most recently served as Assistant Vice Chancellor of Enrollment Management at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He previously served as Director of Admissions at UM-Dearborn and Gannon University. Tremblay earned both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Western Michigan University. He has a post master’s certificate in enrollment management from Capella University, and is a doctoral candidate at UM-Dearborn studying educational leadership with a research focus on college counseling training. He has published articles in College and University, the Journal of College Admission, Journal of College Orientation and Transition, and the Journal of Intergroup Relations. He has presented at 40 association conferences for AACRAO (SEM), the College Board, NACAC, MACAC, PACAC, NISTS, MACRAO and NODA.