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October 9, 2002

Bits and Bytes of Guidance

By **Andrew Trotter**

Jacksonville, Fla.

A lanky teenager with braided hair and baggy jeans leans forward in a chair in Bob Turba's office. Quinton Smith, 17, on a rare visit to his guidance counselor, needs a quick study on getting into college. Gazing back at him with blue eyes set in a sun-weathered face, Turba, 55, the head counselor at the public Stanton College Preparatory Academy here, is doing his own quick study: What colleges would fit this young man? Which could he realistically get into? And will he have the financial resources to pay for college?

With hundreds of students to advise, counselors are turning to technology to help them make better decisions.

To shine a light on those questions, Turba clicks in to a computer database that has boiled down Smith's school record to its essence for both to see. At a glance, it shows the teenager's test scores, weighted and unweighted grade point averages, and class rank. It also shows his schedule, sports and activities the teenager has participated in, and what major he has indicated he wants to pursue in college and where.

"You've got good numbers, good stuff," Turba assures him.

Then Turba opens a special Web site on college scholarships and points at the computer screen, which shows that Smith would be eligible for some significant aid, possibly \$12,000 a year, if he attends the University of South Carolina.

Turba, whom Stanton students regard as hip because he wears

Correction:

The story below gives an incorrect name for the school. It is Stanton College Preparatory School. In addition, the National Technology Institute for School Counselors is an independent, nonprofit group and is not associated with the University of Pennsylvania.

Related stories:

["Statements to School Counselor Not Protected, Mich. Court Rules,"](#) Feb. 27, 2002.

["Iowa's High Court Holds Counselors Liable,"](#) May 2, 2001.

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[the Schools Have a Role in Counseling Girls?](#), March 7, 2001.

silver earrings and sports hand tattoos, must be prepared to dish out good advice to 450 students—a load greater than the American School Counselors Association's recommended maximum ratio of one counselor per 250 students.

["Court Allows Firing of Catholic-School Counselor to Stand,"](#) Jan. 17, 2001.

It's impossible to know many of those young people well, Turba admits. To bridge the gap, he falls back on three decades of counseling experience. But he also depends, to a great degree, on technology—a tool that is becoming increasingly important to Turba's profession, but one that experts say most counselors tend not to be adept at using. Robert T. Turba is an old hand at computer databases. He has set up a "cyberguidance" Web site, offering online forms for students to use to request transcripts to be sent to colleges and search tools for finding scholarships and financial aid. He started an Internet "e-group," an online discussion forum for Stanton's 12th graders, who use it to discuss college admission and other school matters.

["Counseling: The Missing Link,"](#) Commentary, Oct. 18, 2000.

["Colleges Going High-Tech to Recruit Students,"](#) June 14, 2000.

Experts say those kinds of tools, and the efficiencies they provide, have become vital as counselors have been forced to take on greater numbers of students and analyze increasing amounts of data. That need is expected to grow with the passage of the federal "No Child Left Behind Act" of 2001, which requires schools to collect and analyze even more data.

["Prevention: Los Angeles Reaches Out to Students With Systemwide Approach,"](#) April 19, 2000.

"Technology can help school counselors who are having to save time, counsel more students, and provide more types of services," says Susan Eichenholtz, a counselor at East Meadow High School in East Meadow, N.Y., who conducted a national survey of secondary school counselors last year for her doctoral dissertation.

["Companies Taking on Role of Guidance Counselors,"](#) Dec. 15, 1999.

She surveyed 1,400 counselors, of whom 420 responded. Although nearly all reported that they were using computers, more than 12 percent did not have access to computers in their offices.

["Technology and the School Counselor,"](#) Commentary, Oct. 28, 1998.

The most worrisome finding was that counselors who had the largest caseloads of students—between 600 and 900—were the least likely to be using technology.

Others who know the situation say that is a problem.

"Counselors are the last school professionals to gain the benefit of technology," says Kenneth E. Hartman, the director of the National Technology Institute for School Counselors, based at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Hartman, who has been organizing counselor training for years to change that reality, says part of the blame rests on high school principals. Principals tend to pile more tasks on to counselors, he says, but do not give them the technologies and training that might ease the burden.

But he says counselors are to blame, too. "They often don't seek [technology]," Hartman says, "or they actively resist it."

Unfortunately, such reluctance presents all kinds of missed opportunities, observers say, as schools try to raise student achievement and college-attendance rates, while attempting to base decisions on greater quantities of data. And counselors such as Turba, more than any other school professionals, are potentially in a position to analyze and use many streams of data such as academic records, test scores, student surveys, and state and national comparisons.

If counselors do not embrace Web tools and e-mail, some in the field say, they risk slipping out of touch not only with teenagers, but also with colleges and universities.

Located in a distressed neighborhood of Jacksonville, Stanton College Preparatory Academy enrolls 1,500 students from around Duval County. The school is obsessively focused on getting students into college—an ambition vindicated by admission rates that are exceptionally high for an urban public high school: Ninety percent of its graduates enter four-year institutions within one year of graduation.

Though admission to the magnet school is open— as long as 8th grade applicants have taken or are taking Algebra 1—its program of advanced, honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate courses forms a gauntlet that students tend to avoid if they are not well- prepared and motivated.

Stanton's student population has a low poverty level: Just 10 percent of the students are eligible for subsidized school lunches. Still, most students need financial aid or scholarships to attend college, Turba says.

Turba, a wiry man who often looks amused and worried at the same time, is charged with helping 450 juniors and seniors whose last names begin with Q through Z.

A counselor for 33 years, he was an early computer user, and he's been fiddling with databases since 1977. He first saw the power of data analysis as the coach of a girl's track team at a high school in New York, where he was also a counselor. Not long after, he began using databases for academic purposes.

"I realized quickly I could keep track of kids' college choices— where they were applying, the kinds of decisions they made, where they were going to college," he says.

In 1995, when many counselors weren't even sure what the World Wide Web was, Turba created his own Web site to show students how to apply to college. He modeled it after early Web sites developed by colleges and the College Board.

Over time, he has expanded his site—now at cyberguidance.net—into a compendium of information, online forms, and tools, such as automated calculators for students to use to estimate the cost of a college and likely levels of financial aid. With one online calculator, students can get a quick tally of the in-state tuition aid they might receive under the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program, which is based on a student's grade point average.

In fact, because colleges are relying more and more on technology in the admissions process—such as taking applications online—high school counselors are in the position of having to adjust to those changes.

If they do not embrace Web tools and e-mail, some in the field say, school counselors risk slipping out of touch not only with teenagers, but also with colleges and universities.

Last month, for instance, most of the 16 college representatives who stopped by Stanton to make their pitches to prospective students, in a conference room festooned with felt college pennants, scooped up the teenagers' e-mail addresses to continue the dialogues. Yet in some Duval County schools, counselors still don't have their own computers or Internet connections, says Janice Waters, Stanton's counselor for students with last names beginning with A through G.

To make matters more difficult, student data from the district comes in any of six different printed reports—each arriving at a different time, sometimes incomplete, Waters says. And some counselors without easy access to current technology must page through inch-thick "cumulative" folders on students to see what they need.

On the other hand, Turba's online database combines information culled from the district's student-information system, students' cumulative paper folders, and other sources, including surveys he circulates at Stanton. He also adds students' PSAT performance records, which he purchases annually from the College Board.

Counselors are also employing other technologies. For instance, databases now exist that allow color digital photographs of students to be part of their online files. That helps counselors fit a name to a face—a way to bring more humanity to their contacts, especially when they are responsible for counseling hundreds of students.

Turba is also exploring the use of video-conferencing equipment that the school will install this year that could allow students to "tour" far-flung colleges and universities and interview admissions officers and undergraduates—an experiment that at

least one other high school in the nation has tried.

Still, Turba emphasizes that technology cannot solve many of the complex personal problems that students bring into his office. On a recent afternoon, Turba is talking up the importance of using databases and Web sites to ease students' transition to college when his phone beeps. He answers it, and his face grows serious as he listens, then talks in a low voice to the student on the line.

After hanging up the phone, Turba explains that a couple of days earlier, the teenager came to his office to talk about a complicated family situation. "There ain't no computer data program that's going to help [that teenager] right now," Turba says.

The hours he initially spent on that situation were followed by more time on the phone with the student and a social worker. Such problems immediately take priority, and he pushes back meetings with other students and their parents.

But technology helps Turba juggle his time demands. Soon after he learned of the student's family difficulties, one of Stanton's assistant principals asked him to generate a list of all 9th and 10th graders who had scored below a 3 on the reading and math portions of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, the state's academic assessment. Thanks to his database, called eGo, for Electronic Guidance Office, Turba generated and printed out the data table in a few minutes—by using a computer mouse to drag statistical fields into a report file. Without that tool, the assignment would have taken two hours, he says.

Turba likes to point out that there are also unintended benefits when counselors use technology.

Recently, his e-group for Stanton seniors—set up primarily to discuss college-related topics—helped locate a girl whose parents had reported her missing. One of her friends sent a message to the e-group explaining that she hadn't come home one night after a school dance, and the friend asked for any news of her whereabouts. Before long, a student replied that the girl was sleeping over at a friend's house. Turba relayed that information to the girl's parents.

'I realized that kids are more into technology than most adults, and I was connecting with them at even another level.'

Bob Turba,
Counselor

"Going into counseling as a 'people' person, oftentimes I got concerned that I might get taken away from the students if I got involved in technology," he says. "But I began to realize

how computers, databases, and the Internet—toys I love to play with—could really help students on their way.

"And then I realized that kids are more into technology than most adults, and I was connecting with them at even another level."

Coverage of technology is supported in part by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Counselor Bob Turba has created his own [Cyber Guidance Office](#) with resources for [students and parents](#) as well as [guidance professionals](#). Review Mr. Turba's [Counselors Need to Learn Technology!](#) resource (scroll down).

The [American School Counselor Association](#) has created a [National Model for School Counseling Programs](#). The model contains "all the ins and outs of developing a data-driven, results-based comprehensive school counseling program." (The publication is available in multiple formats.)

The [National Technology Institute for School Counselors](#) posts [information](#) and [resources](#) for school counselors. NTI director Kenneth Hartman states that "Counselors are the last school professionals to gain the benefit of technology."

Read the academic paper, "[How School Counselors Could Benefit from E-Government Solutions: The Case of Paperwork](#)," posted by the the [Indiana School Counselor Association](#). "If technology were available to automate and streamline these processes, more time could be spent meeting the special needs of all students through face-to-face interventions in the classroom."

PHOTOS: Bob Turba, a counselor at Stanton College Preparatory Academy, a public magnet school in Florida, often uses computers to analyze data for the 450 students he serves.

Turba meets with Ronald Smith, 17, a senior, and the boy's mother, Julie Wiechmann, to talk about colleges. About 90 percent of the magnet school's graduates are accepted into four-year colleges.

Digital decisions: Turba, the school's head of guidance, uses his laptop computer as he consults with Stanton guidance counselors Grace Galvin, center, and Janice Waters.

Turba's counseling Web site, at [cyberguidance.net](#), is a compendium of college-related information, online forms, and Internet search tools. He encourages his students to use the site to seek out the best colleges for their individual needs.
—Will Dickey
