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By [Andrew Trotter](#)

It's late September, the height of college application season, which is why Quinton Smith, a lanky teenager with braided hair and baggy jeans, is sitting in a chair in Robert Turba's office. The 17-year-old rarely visits his guidance counselor, but the clock is ticking; he needs a quick study on getting into college.

Gazing back at Quinton with blue eyes set in a sun-weathered face, Turba is doing some research of his own: What colleges would fit this young man? Which could he realistically get into? And will he have the financial resources to pay for them?

To help answer these questions, Turba, age 55, clicks into a computer database that has boiled down to its essentials Quinton's record at Stanton College Preparatory School in Jacksonville, Florida. At a glance, it reveals the teenager's test scores, weighted and unweighted grade-point averages, and class rank. It also shows his schedule, the sports and activities the teenager has participated in, and the major he's indicated he wants to pursue in college.

"You've got good numbers, good stuff," Turba, the public school's head counselor, assures him. Then he opens a special Web site on college scholarships and points at the computer screen, which shows that Quinton would be eligible for significant aid, possibly \$12,000 a year, if he attends the University of South Carolina.

Turba—whom colleagues call Bob, and whom students regard as hip because he wears silver earrings and sports hand tattoos—handles 450 students (whose last names begin with letters Q through Z). That's a load almost twice the maximum amount recommended by the American School Counselors Association. It's impossible to know so many young people well, but Turba has three decades of

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School guidance
counselors are
desperate for
useful data. Bob
Turba knows
where to get it and
how to use it.

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counseling experience to fall back on. He also depends, to a great degree, on technology—a tool that is becoming increasingly important in his profession, but one that experts say most counselors are not adept at using.

Turba, however, is an old hand at computer databases. He has set up a "cyberguidance" Web site, which offers online forms requesting that transcripts be sent to colleges and search tools for finding scholarships and financial aid. He also established an Internet "e-group," an online discussion forum for Stanton's seniors, who use it to discuss college admissions and other school matters.

Experts say these kinds of tools, and the efficiency they provide, are vital now that 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 make sense of more statistics than ever before.

"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, New York, who conducted a national survey of secondary school counselors in 2001 for her doctoral dissertation. She contacted 1,400 counselors, of whom 420 responded. Although nearly all reported that they use computers, more than 12 percent did not have access to PCs in their offices. The most worrisome finding was that counselors with the largest caseloads—between 600 and 900 students—were the least likely to use technology.

"Counselors are the last school professionals to gain the benefit of technology," says Kenneth Hartman, director of the National Technology Institute for School Counselors in Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Hartman, who for years has organized counselor training to change that reality, says part of the blame rests on high school administrators. Principals tend to pile tasks on counselors, he says, but they don't provide the equipment and training that might help ease the burden. But counselors are responsible, too. "They often don't seek [technology]," Hartman explains, "or they actively resist it."

And now is not a good time to resist. With high schools trying to raise student achievement and college attendance rates, counselors—more than any other school professional—are in a position to make valuable use of crucial data.

Bob Turba, for one, needs no convincing. Located in one of

Jacksonville's distressed neighborhoods, Stanton enrolls 1,500 students from across 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 completed or are taking Algebra 1—its program of honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate courses forms a gantlet that students tend to avoid if they are not well-prepared and motivated. Stanton's 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, according to Turba.

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Susan Eichenholtz,
Counselor,
East Meadow High
School

A tall, wiry man with a push-broom mustache and a thatch of gray hair that's thinning on top, Turba often looks simultaneously amused and worried—perhaps not surprising, considering his responsibility for the educational futures of so many young people. But he's been a counselor for 33 years now, and he was an early computer user who's been fiddling with databases since 1977. At the time, he was coaching a girls' track team at a high school in New York City where he was also a counselor. He started putting his runners' meet times in a database to record their progress and knew, almost

immediately, that he could do the same for other aspects of his students' performance.

"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 recalls.

In 1995, when many guidance counselors didn't even know what the Internet was, Turba created a Web site that showed students how to apply to college. He modeled it after early sites developed by colleges and the College Board. Over time, he's expanded the site—now at www.cyberguidance.net—into a compendium of information, online forms, and tools, such as automated calculators that help estimate the cost of higher education and likely levels of financial aid. With one calculator, students can quickly tally the in-state tuition assistance they might receive under the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program, which focuses on GPAs.

Colleges, in fact, are relying more and more on technology during the admissions process; many accept applications online. So if guidance counselors fail to embrace Web tools and e-mail, some in the field say, they risk losing touch not only with teenagers, but also with the institutions they're supposed to promote.

This past fall, for example, many of the college representatives stopping by Stanton to make pitches to prospective students—in a conference room festooned with felt pennants—scooped up email addresses as a way to continue 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 A-through G- name kids. To make matters worse, the district's data on students are distributed in six reports—each arriving at a different time, some of them incomplete, according to Waters. As a result, those counselors who don't have access to updated technology must page through inch-thick "cumulative" folders to see what they need.

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

Counselors across the country are employing other technologies. For instance, databases now exist that allow digital color photographs of students to be part of their online files. That helps counselors, especially those responsible for hundreds of students, fit a name to a face and thus bring some humanity to their contacts.

Turba is also exploring the use of videoconferencing equipment that the school will install later this year. If it works out, students will be able 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 already tried.

As tech-savvy as he is, Turba knows that computers cannot solve the complex personal problems students bring to his office. This afternoon, for example, as he talks up the importance of using databases and Web sites to ease the transition from high school to college, his phone rings. He answers, and his expression quickly turns serious. Soon, he's talking in a low voice to the student on the other end of the line.

After hanging up, Turba explains that a couple of days ago, the teenage caller visited his office to talk about a complicated family situation. Since then, there have been a number of phone discussions, one or two involving a social worker. But the problem still has not been resolved. "There ain't no computer data program that's going to help [that teenager] right now," Turba adds.

But technology does help the guidance counselor juggle his schedule. Recently, one of Stanton's assistant principals asked Turba to generate a list of 9th and 10th graders who'd scored below a 3 out of 5 on the reading and math portions of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. Thanks to his database, called eGo for "Electronic Guidance Office," Turba was able to print out the data 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.

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 who'd been reported missing. One of her friends, who sent a message to the e-group explaining that the girl had not gone home after a school dance, asked for news of her whereabouts. Before long, a forum member replied that the teenager was sleeping at another friend's house. Turba relayed that information to the girl's parents.

For the longtime guidance counselor, this incident was just another in a series that's convinced him of the compatibility between computers and his profession. "Going into counseling as a 'people person,' often times I got concerned that I might get taken away from the students if I got involved in technology," Turba 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."

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on the Web

Counselor Bob Turba has created his own [Cyber Guidance Office](#) with resources for

If guidance counselors fail to embrace Web tools and e-mail, some in the field say, they risk losing touch not only with teenagers, but also with the institutions they're supposed to promote.

[students and parents](#) as well as [guidance professionals](#).

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

Read the report, "[How School Counselors Could Benefit from E-Government Solutions: The Case of Paperwork](#)," by Russell A. Sabella. Mr. Sabella states that "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." Posted by the [Indiana School Counselor Association](#).

PHOTOS: Turba, who counsels 450 students, has set up a college admissions Web site and an Internet chat group for high schoolers.

Being computer-savvy has helped Turba connect with his teenage charges.

—Will Dickey

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