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Career and College Prepardness and Stress Among High School Seniors

Melissa Gilyardi

State University of New York College at Brockport

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Abstract

A study of career and college preparedness and stress among high school seniors was done by a counselor education graduate student. A survey was given to 100 high school students, at least 18 years of age, at a high school in upstate New York. The results were collected and discussed. Some major areas of concerns among the high school seniors from the data collected were choosing a college, choosing a major, moving away from home, and getting into the college of their choice.

Career and College Preparedness and Stress among High School Seniors

One's senior year of high school can prove to be very stressful on many different levels. There can be several concerns and specific decisions graduating seniors must make such as choosing a college or career, whether or not to go start at a two-year or four-year school, the stresses of leaving home for the first time, and adjusting to new ways of learning in the college environment. One of the biggest causes of stress is deciding on a career or college after graduation. There is so much pressure for students at the mere age of eighteen to make decisions that will affect their lives in the long run. The question that we need to ask is, "How prepared are high school seniors to make this decision?"   The purpose of this study is to investigate career and college preparedness and stress among high school seniors.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of the literature review was to discuss the major areas of concern and stress among young adults entering the college and career world. Major headings of interest included are making the *college and career decision, the community college route, the stresses of leaving home, the growing cost of college, and a whole new way of learning.*

Making the college and career decision

It has been estimated that approximately 70 percent of high school students in the United States will attend some sort of college after high school (The Education Trust, 1999). The increasing emphasis of a college education in today's work force is continuously growing. Not only do many employers require a four-year degree, but an increasing amount also require an advanced degree (Feemster, 2005). This is an

especially prevalent expectation in the business, education, and medical professions (Feemster, 2005). Therefore, in reality, the majority of students graduating high school are facing another four years or more of additional schooling before even starting their careers.

The process of making an effective career decision can be a stressful event in anyone's life, let alone someone still in their teenage years (Mower-Propiel, 1993). Several factors contribute to the individual's ability to successfully manage this stressful life event; some factors are related to the actual skills needed to make and effective decision, and others are related to the individual's psychological resources. One major consideration among high school seniors is how exposed they have been to the career world and the opportunities they have been given throughout their high school career. A recent national study suggested that although arriving undergraduates are highly motivated to complete their degrees, many of them bring with them serious doubts about their academic adequacy and preparation (Noel-Levitz, 2006). Helping a college bound student is critical to their first year of college. There is a 62 percent drop-out rate for freshmen who don't declare a course of study compared to a 38 percent dropout rate for freshmen who do (Clagett, 1982; Willner, 1982). Without a major or some sort of career direction, first year students have difficulty identifying with the curriculum, courses have little personal relevance, and students become disengaged (Mower-Propeil, 1993).

Many students are feeling forced to make a career decision as early as the beginning of their junior year of high school by their parents, teachers, counselors, school administrators, and peers (Strom & Strom, 2005). In these cases, how many students are actually leaving high school with the necessary life skills to survive "the real world" and

make a decent living? Unfortunately, not enough of these skills are being learned in high schools across the United States.

The community college route

Across the nation, economic and demographic forces are leading more students to community colleges (Cavanagh, 2004). All too often, attending a local community college is discouraged and not considered as prestigious as attending a four-year college or university from the start. In reality, attending a local college would most likely be the most beneficial for the many students who are unsure of what major to pursue and who do not feel quite prepared to leave home.

Over the years, the number of community college students has grown considerably with over 8 million students attending in the United States (Cavanagh, 2004). This number is predicted to grow even more as the number of high school graduates increases in the years ahead (Cavanagh, 2004). Due to the increasing numbers of college enrollment brings the increasing amount of competition of earning a spot at four-year institutions. This fact has led many students to begin their college careers at community colleges to raise their GPA's in order to get into the four-year colleges or universities of their choice (Cavanagh, 2004). The substantial growth of students attending community colleges is also due to the reduction of jobs that do not require a college education. Today, most professions require at least some post secondary schooling (Feemester, 2005).

The salary gap between college graduates compared to non-college graduates is also a major factor for many students starting off at community colleges (Feemster, 2005). It was computed in 2003 that the average full-time worker in the United States

with a four-year degree earned 60 percent more than the average person with only a high

school diploma (Feemster, 2005). Although college has become more important in

today's work force it has also become less affordable for the average American. This has

led many graduates to start of at a community college due to the lower costs alone

(Feemester, 2005).

The stresses of leaving home

It is not only getting into college or choosing a career that puts stress on the

student, but the actual anticipation of attending the school. For most students, attending

college will be their first major experience away from home. Unfortunately, the majority

of these students don't realize how ill prepared they are for college until they actually get

there. Transitions in life, such as moving away to college, create valuable opportunities

for growth and change, yet it also has a potential for heightening self-doubt and

disappointment and may even lead to self-defeating habits (Weiss, 1990). It has been

argued that the first year of college is the most difficult period of adjustment a young

adult faces (Giddan, 1988). For instance, moving from a childhood home and from one's

family unit may trigger a feeling of homesickness (Fisher, 1989). Fisher and Hood (1987)

defined homesickness as a "complex cognitive-motivational-emotional state concerned

with grieving for, yearning for, and being preoccupied with thoughts of home" (p. 426).

Some symptoms of homesickness include strong preoccupations with thoughts of home, a

perceived need to go home, and a sense of grief or yearning for home (Fisher, 1988).

Depression, anxiety, poor academic performance, and various somatic changes have all

been found to be associated with homesickness (Fisher & Hood, 1987).

Many students who seem to have a painful transition from high school to college also reported disappointment in the domain of social interactions and friendships (Langston & Cantor, 1989). In addition, various mental health issues such as anxiety and depression are common in college students (Arthur, 1998). One such issue is friendsickness, defined as "a pressing relational challenge for new college students that is induced by moving away from an established network of friends" (Paul & Brier, 2001). For many, the freshman year is the first time since early childhood where they have to establish totally new friendships and relationships. Research has documented the importance of establishing new friendships in the college adjustment process (Hays & Oxley, 1986; Shaver, Furman, & Buhrmester, 1985). Having peer relations are extremely important for support, confirmation of one's identity, socialization opportunities, and several other dimensions of college adjustment (Hirsh, 1980). One of the first relationships a new student may form is with their new dorm roommates. Unfortunately, this new relationship may no always be a positive one. Most students entering college had always had their own bedrooms and the loss of privacy and having to share space with another can put strain on new roommate relationships (Strom & Strom, 2005).

Grief is another way of describing distress associated with such relationship changes. To some, entering college symbolizes the "death of childhood" (Medalie, 1981). The loss of frequent contact and socialization with a familiar group of friends, compounded with the uncertainty of a new and unfamiliar college environment can bring on a feeling of loss that may trigger grief and mourning (Paul & Brier, 2001). Although most relate the feeling of grief with loss through death, losses incurred through moving or change in residence can also benefit from the theory and research on grief (Alapack &

Alapack, 1984; Fisher, 1989; LaGrand, 1985; Poritt & Taylor, 1981; Weiss, 1990;

Weissman & Paykel, 1973). It is also suggested the feeling of loss and grief are often so

intense that little or no energy is invested in forming new relationships (Van Rooijen,

1986; Weiss, 1990). This fact may put students on high risk for college maladjustment,

given previous research that suggests the more people in one's social group, the better the

college adjustment (Berman & Sperling, 1991). College freshman who remain

preoccupied with their high school social circles may have extreme difficulties

integrating their continuing attachment with the new relationships they are trying to form

(1991). Such distress can last for several months, during which this time the student is

trying to maintain their high school friendships as they were before college (Paul &

Brier). Although a few precollege relationships will be maintained after graduation, the

precollege relationship will never be the same (Paul & Brier, 2001).

One of the central symptoms of friendsickeness is the "decreased sense of

competence as a friend" (Paul & Brier, 2001). Students who are friendsick demonstrate

insecurities in the ability to make close, trustworthy friends. Unfortunately, many high

school students are severely unprepared for the socialization aspect of college and often

expect friend making to be uncomplicated and automatic (Paul & Brier, 2001).

Unfortunately, there are very few high school programs that touch upon these issues.

A whole new way of learning

Each year, thousands of high school graduates are launched into their new

academic careers. Some enter their chosen institution well-prepared for the new academic

challenges ahead of them, yet others find themselves severely under prepared (Kidwell,

2005). College is not high school and one cannot just "coast through" (Kidwell, 2005).

Often in America's high schools, teachers will pursue and reprimand students for work not turned in or lacking in quality. College can be a very different atmosphere. Many professors will simply give you a failing grade. No second chances, no re-do's, like they may have been given in high school. It has been argued that a college student has to take responsibility for his or her own education (2005). One college student states in an article by Rauf, Mosser, and O'Hagan (2004):

It's a whole new ballgame—you can be whoever you want to be. It's a clean slate, for better or worse. There's a lot more downtime in college that in high school. In high school you're there from 7:30 to 3:30. In college, you may have a class from 9am to 11am. And then another class from 6pm to 8pm. You have to fill that time in between and stay focused.

Among the numerous changes a new college student will go through is the change in perception of learning (Erickson & Strommer, 1991). Many students have to adopt a total new way of learning. "No longer the passive recipient of the knowledge bequeathed by the teacher, the student has now become an active participant in constructing knowledge" (2005). In 2003, a public opinion survey of 1,000 Americans was given and more than half agreed that better coordination is needed in public high schools to help students go from high school to college and succeed once they are there (Lake, Snell, Perry, & Associates, 2003). Students who are underprepared to start college are more likely to take remedial classes, which increases cost for students, institutions, and states. Approximately 40 percent of students enrolled in four-year colleges or universities take at least one remedial math or reading course; 63 percent of community college student enroll in a remedial class (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). On average, states tend

to spend $100,000 for every student's education and only 18 percent of students graduate from college on time (National Center for Public Policy, 2004).

The growing cost of college

Another major stress among seniors heading off to college is the growing cost of attending secondary institutions. It was estimated that between the years of 1980 and 1998, tuition of universities and college rose by 125 percent while family income grew only by 1 percent (Quirke & Davies, 2002). The average senior in college graduated with more that $19,000 in debt in 2005 (Block, 2006). A growing number of college graduates owe more that $100,000 in student loans by the time they graduate (2006). The main concern that rises from these numbers is that the rise in unmanageable debt will prohibit many graduates from pursuing careers with moderate salaries (2006). There has been also the issue of shrinking federal aid. Although college costs have risen by more than 50 percent since 1990, federal aid has not (2006).

It has been estimated that 40 percent will leave college without getting a degree (Porter, 1990) with 75 percent of these students leaving within their first two years of college (Tinto, 1987). There can be many implications of leaving college without a degree. The decision to leave college early can cost a student greatly. Ultimately, they have to pay for an education they received without reaping the benefits of a degree. This leaves him or her in a position to earn much less over a lifetime or working (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1989).

Another area students and educators need to address in not only the student loan debt, but the credit card debt than can be racked up over their college years. Each fall, young college students fall prey aggressive credit card marketing (Chu, 2006). For many

students, this is the first time they can establish credit in their name and in a matter of

months can fall deep in debt, charging pizza, beer, clothes, and school supplies (Chu,

2006). In 1997, Mitzi Pool, a University of Central Oklahoma freshman was found

hanging in her dorm room with a pile of unpaid credit card bills splayed under her (Chu,

2006). Often, many students don't know what they are getting into when they receive

their first credit card in the mail. They don't understand the concepts of interest rates and

the hefty penalties for not paying their bills on time. Recent studies have shown that the

average college senior carries about $2,864 in credit card debt when they graduate (Chu,

2006). Unfortunately, this is another major concern that is not addressed enough when

with high school seniors when they head off to their first year of college.

Overall, the major purpose of this study and the survey given, was to find out

what seniors are stressed about and how prepared they are feeling about leaving high

school.

Method

Instrumentation and materials

The instrument used in this quantitative study was a short, seven question survey

labeled *Career and College Survey for High School Seniors.* The questions consisted of

multiple choice, true/false, and short answers. The questions on this survey consisted of

gender, plans after graduation, stressors in deciding, readiness, decision making, and

factors that the school helped or lacked in the process (see appendix A).

Setting

The setting for this survey was in a middle upper class suburban school in western

New York. The population of the town is approximately 40,000. The school district

consists of about 9,000 students from grades K-12. There are approximately 1,200 students in the high school building used in this study. Although there are students from various racial and religious backgrounds, the majority of the student body is Caucasian and Christian. The school provides many clubs, sport teams, and educational opportunities. Overall, this school district seemed to be a safe environment without the need for metal detectors at the door and without a large amount of security that might be seen in an inner city school.

Procedure

The students participating in the survey were asked individually to complete the questions on a voluntary basis. The students completed the survey during their study halls or free periods during normal school hours. All responses were in written form and they were given the right to refuse to answer any question.

Participants

The sample for this survey was 100 high school students, at least 18 years old, at a suburban high school in western New York. The survey was offered to both males and females. The population consisted of students of multiple backgrounds and racial identities. Race and ethnicity was not a major area of focus in this study, but due to the fact that most of the student body was Caucasian, the majority of the students observed participating in the survey were Caucasian. The social class and ethnic backgrounds were not considered in this survey.

Data Analysis

The survey was given to approximately 100 students. Once all the surveys for the study were collected each survey was broken down by question and analyzed by the

primary researcher which was then documented on a separate chart in order to ensure accurate results. Please see appendix A for each specific question.

Question 1 asked was an optional multiple choice question on gender. The circled answer was recorded by means of tallying by the researcher. There were a greater amount of females then males in the senior class, therefore it was expected that more females completed the survey.

Question 2 was a multiple choice question regarding the type of institution the student planned on attending after high school. It was discussed in the literature review that the majority of high school students plan on attending college after graduation therefore the researcher expected the answers to coincide with the literature.

Question 3 asked students to list three things most stressful when deciding on a career and college. Stressors listed in the literature discussed such stressors as leaving home, choosing a major, and college cost. The researcher expected these to be top answers in the results of the survey.

Question 4 was a true/false question asking readiness for a college or career. There was various data found on this subject in the literature and the researcher expected the answers to this question to vary.

Question 5 was a true/false question asking if the student felt forced or rushed in making a career or college decision. Most of the information found in the literature review was that students often felt rushed and forced to make a decision, therefore the researcher expected the majority of the answers given would coincide with the literature.

Question 6 and question 7 were short answer opinion questions asking the student to list two things that the school could have done and did do that helped them in their

decision process. These questions were aimed to help formulate the needs of the students that were specific to that school district and were not discussed in the literature. The researcher was unsure what the outcome would be to this question.

The research was studied and analyzed to figure out any existing themes by each individual question. Once the data was calculated, it was documented and discussed in the results and discussion section. The surveys were destroyed by means of shredding after all data was gathered.

<div align="center">Results</div>

The following information was collected and calculated from each of the questions given on the survey featured in appendix A.

1.Gender

It was calculated that approximately out of the 100 students who completed the survey, 40 percent were male and 60 percent were female.

2. When I graduate, I plan on attending:

A. Two-year college

B. Four-year college

C. I don't plan on attending college

D. Not Sure

E. Other

It was calculated that out of the hundred students who completed the survey, approximately 75 percent of students planned on attending a 4-year college, and 14 percent planned on attending a 2-year college, 7 percent were not sure, and 3 percent did not plan on attending college.

3. Please list three things that are the most stressful for you in deciding on a college and a career after high school:

The main stressors listed for this question among the students were not knowing what major or career was right for them, whether to go to a local college or a college away from home, the cost of college, pressures from parents and teachers, the college application process, SAT scores, finding the right college for them, being away from home, getting accepted to the college of their choice.

4. I believe as if I am ready to go to college and/or start a career. True/False

The calculated results of this question were that 82 percent of the students answered *true,* they felt that they were ready to go to college and/or start a career and 18 percent of students answered *false*, they did not feel as if they were ready to go to college or start a career.

5. I often feel as if I am being rushed or forced to decide on a career or college.
True/False

The results of this item were that 60 percent of the students answered *true* and 40 percent answered *false.*

6. Please list two things you wish the high school would provide to you to help you during your decision. Examples-groups, workshops, college visits, counselor presentations.

The most common answers to this question consisted of wanting more college presentations, more one on one time with counselors, people to help them with college deadlines and the application process, more college visits, meetings with students who attend college now, more career workshops, and group sessions for students attending the same college.

7. Please list two things the high school provided for you that has helped you with your college and career decision. Examples-groups, workshops, college visits, counselor presentations.

The most common answers to this question consisted of them liking the college visits at the high school, various college fairs, when they had the chance to meet one on one with counselors, and counselor and college presentations.

Discussion

One's senior year of high school can be filled with various stressors and a string of life changing decisions. This study was carried out to pinpoint the major stressors and concerns of a small group of seniors at a suburban high school in western New York.

Discussion of Survey Results

It was calculated in question one of that there was a 60/40 ratio of females to males who completed the survey. This was not surprising in that there are slightly more females enrolled in the senior class at this high school than males.

In the analysis of question two of the survey, it was estimated that 90 percent of the students plan on attending some sort of post secondary institution. This is about 20 percent higher than the national average of 70 percent discussed in the literature review (The Education Trust, 1999). Although this number seems extremely high compared to the national average, this number is to be expected considering the high school is a suburban school with the majority of the enrolled students coming from middle to upper class families. We also have to take into consideration that the survey only reached about one-third of enrolled seniors. One of most surprising results of this survey was that out of the 100 participants, not one person mentioned enrolling in any of the military services.

This may be because of the unstable nature of our current government and the ongoing conflict in the Middle East.

Question 3 on the survey discussed the major stressors of deciding on a college and a career. Among the most repetitive answers to this question were knowing what major was right for them, whether or not to stay close to home or going away to college, college costs, pressures from parent and teachers, the college application process, SAT scores, choosing a college, being away from home, and getting accepted to their top choice school. Overall, there were no red flags or concerns with how this question was answered. The most overwhelming answer to this question was being unable to decide on a college major, which was making it difficult to decide on the right school for them. This should be on one of the major areas concerning counselors and other educators for it was stated in the literature review that there was a 62 percent dropout rate for freshmen who did not declare a major their first year in college compared to 38 percent of those who did (Clagett, 1982; Willner, 1982).

The results of question four suggested that 18 percent of the survey population felt they were not ready for college or to start a career. This may be reason for alarm among educators for if we extend the results of this survey to the whole senior class, approximately one quarter of the senior class feels ill prepared about leaving high school.

The results to question 5 indicated that 60 percent of the given population feels rushed in the career and college process. This is also a major concern educators must address. As stated in the literature review, only 46 percent of the students entering college nationwide graduate with a degree (ACT, Inc, 2005). High School educators must take a

look at this statistic and decide how much of a part they play in this number and address and follow through with remedies to increase this number.

The results of question 6 discuss the things students wish their high would provide to them during the career and college decision. The main answers provided were more one on one time with counselors, more college presentations, more college visits, help with college applications and deadlines, and more career workshops. The most overwhelming response was more one on one time with school counselors. At this suburban high school, each counselor has about 300 students on their caseload. Administrators must take a look at this number and determine whether or not this is adequate, especially for juniors and seniors in the middle of making the college and career decision who need more time with their counselors. Often, high schools may be supplying a severe disservice to their students by limiting the amount of counselors in their buildings. It was stated in the literature review that the first year of college can be the most difficult period of adjustment a young adult faces (Giddan, 1988). Students not only need to be counseled on the college and career process, but counseled about their feeling and apprehensions about leaving school and starting a new phase of their life.

On the last question of the survey the students supplied the things that their school supplied to aid them in their college and career search. Among the answers given were various college visits, presentations given by counselors, college fairs, and the one on one time, although limited, that they were able to spend with their counselors. It is helpful for counselors, administrators, and other educators to understand how well received these provisions were by their students during the college and career process and how beneficial it would be to provide more of these services in the future.

Limitations of the survey

One of the main limitations of this survey was that it was given to a relatively small part of the senior population. In a future study, it may be more beneficial to extend this survey to a greater population that may include high school sophomores and junior to increase the needs of student under a broader spectrum. Ultimately, it may beneficial to reach student before their senior year to ensure more opportunities and alternatives before they are crunched in time to make decisions about their future. Another limitation was the vagueness of the questions and the subject matter. If given again in the future, a suggestion would be to inquire more about specific data such as rating their stress levels on a scale and asking more specific question about their feelings on a variety of subjects such as leaving home, making new friends, and academics. Including these scales can help counselors approximate the level of stress and reach a broader range of feelings among students. Adding these scales and including different grade levels could also gauge the intensity of their feelings and help counselors and administrators implement grade specific programs to help students cope with these feelings.

Suggestions for helping graduating high school seniors

In analyzing the results of this study, a variety of suggestions can be made to help the educational institution aide high school students in their college and career search. One suggestion may be mandating high school students complete a semester or half semester class geared to the path they are choosing to take whether it is college, trade school, the military, or entering the work force. These classes should offer the opportunities to speak with individuals who have chosen this given path and what their experiences have been. There should be full discussions on what to expect in this chosen

path. The student should be expected to visit prospective colleges, work environments, and military branches. In these classes, students should be give ample opportunities to ask questions and be provided counseling by the instructor and other sources in the community.

Another option is that all students during their senior year choose a mentor in the field they may be interested or choosing to go in. The student should meet with their mentor at least once a month to discuss their progress and ongoing concerns. Each visit must be documented and there should be a timeline of events. The mentor can be a teacher, counselor, or some adult from the community of their choice. The mentor should be knowledgeable about the student's career or college choice and be available as needed by the student. At this high school, a student chooses a mentor to guide them through their senior project. It may be worth the school district's time to take a look at how helpful it is for a senior to be investing their time in this project by providing a survey at the end of year, not only for the students to complete but also for parents and guardians. Ultimately, parents and guardians can provide first hand information about the stress levels of their teens and how beneficial or detrimental it was to their high school experience. There may be better ways for them use their time, as suggested in the above paragraphs, that may benefit them more in their future endeavors.

Another suggestion for the district is to look at hiring more counselors or student advisors to help students make the big decision of going to college, joining the military, or entering the workforce. One of the main areas of concerns for student that were documented in the given survey was not enough one on one time with their counselors. Counselors are stretched way to thin with caseloads of more than 300 students and this

counselor to student ratio can be much greater across high schools in the United States, especially in urban populations. Ultimately, it is a school's goal to provide a sound education and prepare students to the enter world as active members of society. Often an educational institution provides the sound education, but lacks to provide the necessary life skills needed for students to successfully use the education they have been supplied with.

Implications for counselors

Although the counselors' time is spread very thin among students, it seems these counselors have gone above and beyond the call of duty in this district. They have a separate career and college center in the school where students can go research different schools, careers, and military branches. They also offer a yearly seminar for each grade level where they go into classrooms and discuss graduation requirements and the career and college search with the students. The district also provides a website where the students have access to career inventories and information on almost any career and college in the world. This website can even be accessed from a student's home computer. Along with these services, the counselors also mail out a monthly newsletter and have daily announcements about college and military visits and scholarship information. Continuing to provide this information and services will be a great benefit to future graduates.

One suggestion for counselors is to continuously advocate to the administration in the district the need for more counselors and counselor assistants by attending district and school board meetings. The district recently had several administrative changes including

a new superintendent and it may prove to be beneficial to get the new administrators on the counselor bandwagon as early as possible.

Conclusions

       The end of high school and deciding on a college and career can prove to be very stressful to a young adult often leaving them feeling less than prepared in the decisions they are forced to make. The goal of this study was to provide counselors and educators with information about the main concerns of their graduating seniors and what they can do as an educational team to provide better services for these students. Graduating high school can be a whirlwind of change, leaving home, becoming an independent person, being responsible for your time, living arrangements, social life, money, and much, much more. The world high school students are entering today is vastly different from the one their parents faced years before. In this study we have found that many students are feeling ill-prepared about leaving the doors of their high school institution for the last time. It is important that we as educators, provide as much assistance and opportunity possible to ensure the success of our graduating youth.

Appendix A

Career and College Survey for High School Seniors

1. Gender   M   F   (optional)

2. When I graduate, I plan on attending:
    A. Two-year college
    B. Four-year college
    C. I don't plan on attending college
    D. Not Sure
    E. Other_____

3. Please list three things that are the most stressful for you in deciding on a
    college and a career after high school:
    1.

    2.

    3.

4. I believe as if I am ready to go to college and/or start a career.   T   F

5. I often feel as if I am being rushed or forced to decide on a career or college. T F

6. Please list two things you wish the high school would provide to you to
    help you during your decision. Examples-groups, workshops, college visits,
    counselor presentations ect.

    1.

    2.

7. Please list two things the high school provided for you that has helped you with
    your college and career decision. Examples-groups, workshops, college visits,
    counselor presentations, etc.

    1.

    2.

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