

## College Begins Here: A Framework for Culture Change in High Schools

Creating and sustaining a strong college-going culture is one of the most powerful ways a school can expand opportunities for students—especially those from historically underserved backgrounds. A positive college-going culture fosters high expectations, equitable access to information, and a belief among students, families, and staff that postsecondary success is both possible and expected.

This action plan is designed to help school counselors lead the charge in evaluating and transforming their school's culture using a research-based framework. Whether your school is just beginning this journey or looking to deepen its impact, this step-by-step plan will guide you from assessment to implementation to sustainability. By intentionally shaping the environment, expectations, and support, counselors can help ensure that every student confidently graduates with a clear plan for their future.

### **Phase 1: Assessment and Vision Building**

Timeline: 1–2 months

#### **Conduct a Culture Audit**

- ▶ Use the **College-Going Culture Rubric** to assess your school's current state.
- ▶ Collect data from multiple sources:
  - Surveys or interviews with students, families, and staff
  - Postsecondary outcome data (FAFSA completion, college applications, enrollment, persistence)
  - Audits of classroom messaging and school-wide events

#### **Identify Your Culture Type**

- ▶ Tally rubric scores to determine which of the eight cultures best describes your school.
- ▶ Note variations by grade level, demographic group, or staff perspective.

#### **Build a Shared Vision**

- ▶ Facilitate a staff meeting or team discussion: "What do we want our college-going culture to look like?"
- ▶ Use exemplary culture types to set aspirations.
- ▶ Identify your school's unique values, community assets, and challenges.



## **Phase 2: Planning and Stakeholder Engagement**

Timeline: 2–3 months

### **Set Goals and Priorities**

- ▶ Select 2–3 focus areas aligned with **checklist** categories:
  - Assess and Reflect
  - Build a Shared Vision
  - Strengthen Systems and Structures
  - Expand Access and Personalization
  - Engage and Empower Families
  - Promote Equity and Close Gaps

### **Build a College Access Team**

- ▶ Include administrators, teachers, counselors, support staff, and students.
- ▶ Define roles (e.g., FAFSA Champion, Career Pathways Lead, Family Liaison).

### **Gather Input from Families and Students**

- ▶ Host a town hall, parent night, or focus groups.
- ▶ Ask: What support or information would make college feel more real and reachable?

### **Foster Relationships with Colleges**

- ▶ Identify and connect with your school’s admissions representatives.
- ▶ Educate them on your school and students.
- ▶ Create a school profile.



## **Phase 3: Implementation and Integration**

Timeline: 3–6 months

### **Launch School-wide Messaging**

- ▶ Create visible and verbal cues that promote college/career readiness:
  - Bulletin boards, door signs, staff college gear days
  - Daily announcements featuring college tips or alumni spotlights

### **Create Grade-Level Milestones**

- ▶ Design a scope and sequence for college/career readiness:
  - 9th grade: Career inventories and high school planning
  - 10th grade: College visits and goal setting
  - 11th grade: Test prep, FAFSA night, application timelines
  - 12th grade: Applications, scholarships, transition support

### **Expand Access to Advising**

- ▶ Increase the frequency and reach of advising activities.
- ▶ Use group advising, advisory lessons, peer mentors, or external partners.

### **Elevate Equity Practices**

- ▶ Disaggregate your data: Who's not participating? Who's not succeeding?
- ▶ Prioritize targeted outreach and culturally responsive advising.



## **Phase 4: Reflection and Iteration**

Timeline: 1–2 months

### **Review Progress**

- ▶ Reassess your culture using the **rubric** every semester.
- ▶ Collect qualitative feedback: What's shifted? What's still missing?

### **Celebrate Wins**

- ▶ Share successes publicly—FAFSA completion rates, scholarship winners, first-gen college acceptances.
- ▶ Acknowledge both big achievements and behind-the-scenes progress.

### **Adjust and Sustain**

- ▶ Revise the plan annually with new goals based on rubric results.
- ▶ Institutionalize successful practices into your school calendar and policies.