

Case Study: School Counseling Program of Distinction Academia María Reina

the program

Academia María Reina, located in San Juan, PR, is a private, Catholic college preparatory school for girls in grades seven through 12. The faculty and staff are dedicated to providing its more than 570 students with rigorous academic coursework and the social and emotional support they need to succeed.

The School Counseling Program at María Reina is part of the Department of Student Services, which is comprised of a Department Coordinator, who is also an assistant principal, three guidance counselors, a college placement advisor, school psychologist, social worker, two deans of discipline, a nurse and a faculty instructor. The guidance counselors form part of a multidisciplinary team that uses a holistic approach for working with students.

The School Counseling Program has been designed to guide students to a positive transition from middle school to high school and then to college; to help them develop effective skills for studying, taking standardized exams, resolving conflicts and developing apt interpersonal relationships; and developing healthy habits for the mind, body and soul during adolescence. The program's aim is to equip students with the skills to achieve success in their personal and professional endeavors.

The activities sponsored by the Department complement the guidance program: Career Day, Prevention Week, college fairs, and college visits. Also, in partnership with the school's Alumnae Office, students in grades 10, 11 and 12 can request to be mentored by one of the school's more than 4,100 alumnae. The mentoring program gives students the opportunity to shadow their mentor in different work and life experiences.

Faculty and staff school-wide report that students are receptive to their counselors, eager to connect with them and pursue opportunities offered by the department.

the process

When the School Counseling program at María Reina was established more than 50 years ago, it had just one full-time counselor.

As enrollment grew and the challenges facing students changed, the school increased the capacity of its counseling program to address the needs of an evolving population, including hiring additional counselors to maintain the ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association.

Program goals and guidance class curriculum are based on standards set forth by the American School Counselor Association, The College Board and the National Association for College Admission Counseling. The curriculum is designed for students to gain knowledge and skills on issues related to their physical and emotional development, learning styles, study skills, test-taking skills, interpersonal and social relationships, conflict resolution, time management, goal-setting, building a resume, careers and related college majors, college admission and related terminology, understanding and calculating their GPA's and identifying standardized tests required for college admission, among other topics.

College Readiness is integrated into the guidance curriculum and it includes topics such as setting goals, career exploration, college admission testing plan, resume writing, college application essay writing, college admission terminology, development of a college list based on match and orientations on the college selection and admission process, financial aid and the transition into college life, among others. The students' receptiveness and eagerness for more information are the motivation for the Department to continue to reinvent the services offered through the School Counseling Program.

Lessons learned

- As the needs of students evolve over time, so too should the knowledge and expertise of counselors, social workers, college advisors and other affiliated staff. The school's administration must ensure that faculty and staff have the time and resources necessary to remain up-to-date on best practices in the field of school counseling.
- Continually promote the services offered by your school counseling program to ensure that students, parents and teachers are clear about what your team does and how to access support. At María Reina, the department uses the school website, email messages, parent orientations, faculty meetings, classroom time and its web-based portal to send messages about events and resources.
- Organize activities for the academic year that will impact all members of the school community as opposed to being limited to students working directly with a counselor. For example, work with the alumni community to launch a mentoring program, provide support for gifted students and students with special needs by offering them clubs and activities, highlight and organize community service activities, career and college fairs, tutoring and awareness and prevention activities.
- Document procedures and protocols for your program and measure success. Share this information with faculty and staff throughout the school to give them a better understanding of the importance and impact of your school counseling program.



Program of distinction benefits

- Like most schools, academic excellence is highly valued at María Reina. Sometimes the pressures facing students being pushed to excel academically are in conflict with values touted by the school counseling program, such as developing strong relationships with friends, pursuing activities outside of school and creating a balance between school and studying and recreational activities. The Program of Distinction has been an important tool for raising awareness of our school counseling program in academic departments, and has given us the confidence to initiate discussions with our colleagues on this issue.
- As the first school in Puerto Rico with two Programs of Distinction, we often reference this honor in our marketing materials and recruitment efforts.
- Earning the Program of Distinction validated the effort and hard work of our staff members who don't often receive public praise for their important contributions.



for more information

For more information about the School Counseling Program of Distinction at Academia María Reina contact:

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To learn more about Middle States Programs of Distinction, visit www.msa-cess.org.



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