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Conversation With Our 2021 Excellence In College Counseling Winners



Maddie Boehnlein Brand Contributor
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We know the crucial and irreplaceable role that school counselors play in getting students to college. We also know that the pandemic has hit the counseling profession hard. That's why we partnered with [Collegewise](#) and Common App to recognize the counseling team at Miami Palmetto Senior High School as our 2021 Excellence in College Counseling winners!

To hear more about this all-star team, I asked a few key players to reflect on their time as counselors. Let me introduce you to Harry Nerenberg, College Advisement Program Counselor; Tierney Hunter, Assistant Principal; Lisa Mallard, Department Head of Student Services; Victoria Dobbs, Principal; and Linda Dwyer, CAP Interventionist. I think you'll find that excellence is an understatement.



The Miami Palmetto Senior High School counseling team accepting their EICC award in January 2021.
MIAMI PALMETTO SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

When you look back at your career, what's your proudest accomplishment?

Harry: Every day is an opportunity for accomplishment. We could not have built such a successful college planning program without the support of dedicated administrators, co-workers, and families. The annual college fair, parent nights, and my “Secret Sauce Program” (an event where seniors share tips about the college application process) are attended by hundreds of families. Memorable days include helping 300 students apply to the local community college in one day or hosting an instant decision day with Florida International University. For the last 39 years, the greatest rewards are the heartfelt thank you notes I receive from former students, but I should be thanking them. Being remembered is the greatest

accomplishment of my career. I only wish I had thanked the inspirational educators in my past.

What does excellence in college counseling mean to you?

Victoria: When I think of “excellence,” I think of a program that assists all students needing guidance with their post-secondary choices. We have students who are interested in attending the local community college, state universities, out-of-state universities, private colleges, and military schools. That means we have to be prepared to assist all of our students with the application process, so we’ve placed a big focus on developing solid relationships with schools. Making that personal connection allows us to better prepare our students. In addition, we also set up workshops for parents to explain financial aid, scholarships, and FAFSA. As long as we are able to connect our students with their next step in life, we have met our own goal of excellence.

What about your job brings you the most joy?

Tierney: For high school students, the ultimate goal is to walk across the stage and receive a diploma. It symbolizes their readiness to take their dreams, goals, and aspirations to the next level whether their choice is college, vocational school, enlisting in the military, or to simply get a job. As a high school assistant principal, to see our students graduate, witnessed by their family and friends, is my reward. Those in attendance may not know the adversities that a student faced to get to that point. For most students, it’s validation that success and excellence is achievable! Being their assistant principal says that I contributed, in some way, to their success and that brings me unspeakable joy!

Why did you choose the school counseling path?

Lisa: As a kid, I remember people stopping my mom in grocery stores, restaurants, and shopping malls to thank her and tell me, “What an amazing

mother you have; she was my school counselor.” As a former student of Palmetto Senior High School, I saw students and parents arrive at my mom’s office in disarray and leave with a sense of relief. She was a superwoman. One person at a time, she changed the world. It was then that I wanted the power to impact the world, too.

Following in her footsteps, I chair the guidance department just like she did. Each day, I never know what will unfold. That’s the amazing part about being a school counselor. I have the ability to change someone’s bad day, reassure a stressed-out parent, and watch children see their goals become realities in part because of my support. I guess you can say being a school counselor is in my blood.

What fuels your passion for helping students?

Linda: Working with students gives me joy. Some moments are really fun, like when a student opens up that confetti-filled acceptance from the school they’ve been dreaming about for their whole life. Other times are challenging, such as working through a heartbreaking rejection from a college or a friend. But most days are spent somewhere in the middle. It is in the mundane that I find true gems. I spend delightful hours talking with students about who they are and want to be. Their resilience, determination, and insight give me hope for the future. Although masks, vaccinations, and social distancing are now part of their daily vocabulary, even a pandemic can’t take away a child’s desire to reach for their dreams. It is truly a joy to be a part of their process. Every day is a gift; how lucky am I?



Maddie Boehnlein

Maddie Boehnlein is the Digital Design and Content Associate at Reach Higher and is a 2019 graduate of the University of Virginia.

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