

School Counselors Promoting College and Career

Readiness for High School Students

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Abstract

This article describes the pivotal role that school counselors play in preparing and helping students feel prepared and equipped to enter the workforce upon graduation.

This brief commentary addresses the necessity for school counselors to work collaboratively with their students, so they are knowledgeable about college and career exploration. In addition, best practices that provide students with the insight, tools, and resources necessary to succeed in the workforce after graduation are presented.

Keywords: school counselor, college and career readiness, best practices

School Counselors Promoting College and Career Readiness for High School Students

School counselors play an integral role in preparing high school students to pursue their post-secondary goals. The purpose of this paper is to address the instrumental role that school counselors' play in promoting college and career readiness within their schools. School counselors work to help students engage in college and career exploration, enroll in rigorous honors and advanced placement courses, and participate in extracurricular activities, so that all students are seen as competitive candidates when graduating from high school. Demographics have drastically changed, and college enrollment has increased significantly. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (Table 306.10), 11 million students nationwide attended college in 1976; however, in 2013, 20.4 million students nationwide attended college (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016). The amount of Caucasian students attending college increased from 9.1 million to 11.6 million (59.3% of total 2013 enrollment); Black students from 1.0 million to 2.9 million (14.7% of total 2013 enrollment); Hispanic students from 383,800 to 3.1 million (15.8% of total 2013 enrollment); Asian/Pacific Islander students from 197,900 to 1.3 million (6.4% of total 2013 enrollment); and American Indian/Alaska Native students from 76,100 to 162,600 (0.8% of total 2013 enrollment) (Snyder et al., 2016).

Overall, post-secondary attendance has increased due to the career advantages of having a post-secondary degree. Due to the competitive work force in which millions of students are competing for lucrative and stable careers, students must graduate from high school being prepared, equipped, and knowledgeable about the workplace. In

addition, they greatly benefit from having internship or externship experiences that prepare them for their eventual career paths. Most careers today require that candidates obtain post-secondary degrees and possess the necessary technical and *soft skills* for personal and professional success. Students are under an exorbitant amount of stress during their high school years (Dupere et al., 2015). They are expected to perform well academically, participate in extracurricular activities and clubs, complete community service, engage in college exploration, take college entrance exams, and determine the type of college majors that pique their interest, all while attempting to balance their social lives with their schoolwork.

Given that students may have significant amounts of personal and academic responsibilities, school counselors may encourage them to pace themselves, stay on track, and excel academically. Counselors teach necessary life skills, help students determine an appropriate post-secondary plan based upon their strengths and goals, and assist them to implement best practices that improve career readiness after high school graduation.

Role of School Counselor

Research has shown the instrumental role that school counselors play in college exploration, college choice, and career readiness of all students, especially minority and low-income students (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). According to Hines, Lemons, and Crews (2011), school counselors are responsible for the educational journey of all students and are in the unique position to take on leadership roles. One of the most important aspects involves assisting students in appropriate course selection, as these choices impact their overall preparedness and

readiness for post-secondary endeavors. Lack of academic rigor in high school has detrimental effects on post-secondary success, college acceptance, and career satisfaction (Hines et al., 2011). Ninety five percent of high school seniors expect to attain some form of post-secondary education; however, many change majors or take time off at some point in their program of study (Morgan, Greenwaldt, & Gosselin, 2014). School counselors are expected to offer comprehensive, developmental, and empirically-based programs that emphasize the social, emotional, academic, and vocational education for all students (Morgan et al., 2014; ASCA 2003). School counselors can help to foster college opportunity, readiness, and access for students, as they provide academic, social/emotional, and vocational counseling services on a regular basis. School counselors are data-driven practitioners who work with administrators to resolve issues and promote equity among all students; which is a critical element for success (Hines et al., 2011). School counselors can provide classroom and parent workshops that address college exploration, the college admissions process, and career exploration to help students determine the college majors and qualifications that will enable them to pursue their future career.

School counselors can increase college readiness opportunities, as well as help develop a school-wide culture that promotes college readiness (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009). The Center for Educational Partnerships (n.d.) defines a *college-going culture* as “the environment, attitudes, and practices in schools and communities that encourage students and families to obtain the information, tools, and perspective to enhance access to and success in post-secondary education” (para. 1). A school’s college-going culture plays a vital role in preparedness

and attendance rates in post-secondary institutions. McDonough (2005) noted that there are a variety of tasks to develop a college-going culture including:

- imparting college information to students and their families;
- setting student expectations;
- students and their family members;
- implementing a comprehensive school counseling model;
- providing access to college preparation testing and rigorous curricula (e.g., information on sat/act tests, advanced placement courses, etc.);
- forming college partnerships and networking between the high school and post-secondary institute, holding college fairs and inviting representatives;
- giving students and families information and resources;
- requiring educator involvement; and
- emphasizing the importance of family engagement and involvement.

Although school counselors are typically busy with non-counseling related tasks and have high student-counselor ratios (McDonough, 2005), school counselors, administrators, and educators need to work together to ensure that a career and college-going culture is promoted and integrated into their school climate. Students who feel supported, empowered, knowledgeable, and motivated are more likely to attend post-secondary schooling and are more prepared for their future careers (Cruce, Mattern, & Sconing, 2015).

The National Office of School Counselor Advocacy's (NOSCA) stipulates eight components addressing college and career readiness that school counselors are encouraged to implement. Perusse, Poynton, Parzych, & Goodnough (2015) studied the importance of the NOSCA's eight components and characterized them to include:

- developing students' college aspirations and dreams from kindergarten through 12th grade;
- engaging students in planning and enrichment activities, and ensuring that students have the opportunities that enhance leadership and increase school engagement;
- motivating students to enroll in challenging courses;
- encouraging students to engage in college exploration activities so that they make informed decisions when selecting a school or career that enables them to pursue their future aspirations;
- providing students and their families with college information and resources;
- collaborating with students and parents in order to enhance their knowledge about college costs, financial aid, and the admissions process, so that students and their families are aware of scholarship processes, eligibility requirements, and options regarding college payment; and
- making sure that students understand the college application and enrollment process so that they can choose the school or career that is most aligned with their passions and interests.

Furthermore, school counselors are also encouraged to form networks and partnerships with colleges and community organizations so that they can work with schools to enlighten students about their potential options and post-secondary endeavors. School counselors are critical key stakeholders in the college and career readiness process as they understand the importance of building relationships with post-secondary schools and community agencies, as well as the need to collaborate with other educators, family members, and students on helping them to set and achieve their goals (Bryan, Young, Griffin, & Henry, 2015).

In addition, school counselors are encouraged to help students build a strong academic foundation by motivating students to take advanced placement courses. These courses will enable students to obtain college credit and provide exposure to college-level materials, and to develop intellectual and career capacity in terms of creative problem solving, communication skills, technology skills, and critical thinking (Peterson, 2013). School counselors can also help students evaluate their progress for college by meeting with students and discussing their degree of college readiness skills and by using college exploration programs (e.g., Naviance). Further, school counselors can encourage students to visit college campuses in order to get a realistic understanding of what life would be like if they were to attend a specific college or university. School counselors are also encouraged to facilitate workshops addressing Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) processes and college entrance exams so students are familiar with the test format, process, and scoring (Peterson, 2013).

Best Practices for College and Career Readiness

There are several best practices that school counselors can implement related to parents, communities, and school-specific strategies. There are a variety of contexts and stakeholders with whom school counselors can utilize best practices that may assist students in relation to college and career readiness.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement has been shown to enhance academic success, educational outcomes, increased attendance, better peer interaction and behavior, higher graduation rates, as well as improved grade point averages and test scores

among students (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). Parent involvement is critical for student success. Counselors are encouraged to facilitate parent workshops addressing parental involvement, college and career readiness, FAFSA, helping their children to prepare for the transition after high school graduation, and college planning. Counselors can hold individual and group meetings with parents, as doing so fosters open communication, connection, and trust (Bryan, Griffin, & Henry, 2013). School counselors are also encouraged to educate parents about financial aid, academic planning, and emphasize the importance of post-secondary attendance.

Community Outreach

In addition to having meetings with parents and guardians about the college and career readiness process in schools, counselors are also encouraged to hold meetings in other community venues. This is especially helpful for families who may lack transportation or for parents who work multiple jobs and do not have the ability to attend meetings at school (Bryan et al., 2015). Community involvement is significant for college and career readiness in that it allows the schools to build stronger relationships with community agencies and businesses, which is important for student networking and professional growth. School counselors can meet with community organizations or agencies and develop a college and career planning information workshop for parents. These activities educate and enlighten parents about the college and career application process. Students can also benefit from community outreach. They can network with local agencies and businesses and complete community service or internships, which provide them with real life experience completing tasks and jobs that they may be interested in pursuing in the future. Ultimately, completing community service,

internships, or externships enables students to be challenged, versatile, and more competitive candidates upon high school graduation.

College-Going Culture

Creating a college-going culture increases the likelihood that students will apply to college, and it enhances student preparation for their future careers. School counselors can provide teachers with practice PSAT and SAT tests so that students become familiar with the types of questions asked and the format of the tests. Additionally, school counselors can hold college fairs and invite college representatives from a variety of schools to come to the school and talk with students about admissions requirements and qualifications necessary for acceptance. Additionally, counselors can create websites that include helpful links to Naviance, College Board, or College View, which would make it simpler for students and parents to search for colleges, admissions criteria, and career options that pique a student's interest. Given the abundance of schools, these tools may help students narrow their choices and determine which schools and careers are most appropriate for them to pursue. School counselors can also send emails to faculty, parents, and students reminding them about important test dates, test preparation tips, available workshops on financial aid, scholarships, and grants. Moreover, school counselors can plan college days (Bryan et al., 2015) in which teachers and students can wear t-shirts or other apparel from their favorite schools to promote the importance of attending post-secondary institutions. Further, counselors can set up college labs during study halls or lunch periods so that students can discuss options for college and receive waivers for certain standardized tests or applications (Bryan et al., 2015). Creating a college-going culture is dually beneficial for students

and educators as it enhances the morale of the school, improves graduation rates and student performance, and instills higher expectations for both educators and students alike.

Academic Planning for College and Career Readiness

In order to enhance students' degree of college and career readiness, students need to feel prepared, supported, motivated, empowered, and knowledgeable. Assisting students with academic planning and college application processes may include school counselors creating checklists for students to track whether they have completed all the necessary steps and requirements prior to submitting their applications. School counselors can review graduation requirements; inform students of the processes of registering and preparing for placement tests such as the SAT or ACT; help students to understand how to interpret their test scores; assist students in determining which schools provide their desired majors; discuss steps to applying for financial aid, scholarships, and grants; hold college fairs and meeting with recruiters, and assist students in applying to community or technical schools (Bryan et al., 2015). Additionally, school counselors can also facilitate workshops for parents addressing college requirements, completing community service, and financial aid so that they are mindful and aware of the college application process, as well as available resources, as the college application process is a daunting task.

Use of Data

School counselors need to use data to drive their practice to demonstrate the impact of their services on student outcomes. Student and counselor accountability are pivotal for post-secondary student success. Counselors need to look at data to

determine which courses are necessary for students to be college and career ready. Gathering data allows school counselors to be cognizant of equity gaps that exist which are preventing access to or success in rigorous courses (Hines et al., 2011). School counselors can then use the data to address issues and correct problems to make sure struggling students obtain the help that they need in order to thrive academically.

College Application and Admissions

The college application and career exploration process can be overwhelming due to the seemingly endless number of schools and occupations that exist. To decrease students' stress levels, school counselors can inform students of the necessary qualifications and clarify that students submit required documentation such as test scores, recommendation letters, and transcripts. Reviewing these processes with students increases the likelihood that they will complete and submit all necessary documents. School counselors can also be mentors for students who do not think that college is an option due to lack of financial resources or poor academic achievement (Bryan et al., 2015). In order to make the process less stressful and more rewarding, school counselors can motivate, encourage, and enlighten students about the importance of attending college, discuss different post-secondary options (two-year schools or technical schools), and inspire students to realize that all students have an opportunity to pursue post-secondary endeavors. It is critical that counselors encourage students to not allow obstacles deter them from their educational goals and dreams.

College and Career Assessments

School counselors can assist students with college and career assessments. Prior to graduation, students' complete college entrance exams such as the PSAT,

SAT, or ACT. School counselors can hold workshops or counseling sessions for students and their parents about the format of the test, types of questions asked, score interpretation, as well as how they can best prepare for the exams. Additionally, school counselors can administer interest inventories or personality assessments to help students determine the types of careers that pique their interests, the types of majors they would need to pursue in order to obtain that future career, and which careers are most reflective of their personality type, strengths, and inner resources.

College Affordability

Fear of being unable to afford college is one of the greatest impediments for students (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). School counselors are encouraged to facilitate workshops for students and parents on financial aid, educating stakeholders regarding available scholarships and grants, and encouraging students to enhance their GPA (Bryan et al., 2015). School counselors can facilitate workshops that walk parents through the FASFA process step by step, as well as discuss in detail the information that is required on FASFA forms. School counselors need to remind students that if there is a will, there is a way, and to not allow the cost of college to prevent them from applying and attending.

Building Family and Community Partnerships

Family support and involvement plays an imperative role as students pursue post-secondary endeavors. Building open, trusting, and communicative relationships with students and their parents, discussing post-secondary options, assisting parents with the financial aid process, and offering additional resources to parents makes a profound impact in their participation and involvement. School counselors can facilitate

workshops on career readiness, college exploration, financial aid, and college essay writing. Parents who feel more capable, competent, and knowledgeable about the process, also demonstrate more support and involvement (Bryan et al., 2013).

Additionally, partnering with community agencies is also important so that community agencies and admissions counselors can collaborate with students to help them gauge the admissions process, talk to them about individual financial aid and scholarship opportunities, conduct mock interviews with students, and discuss admission and or job requirements. This information is valuable to students and provides them with additional insight so that they can make the best decisions possible.

Participation in College and Career Clubs

Career and college clubs have been found to be effective in reducing dropout rates and increasing post-secondary attendance. College and career clubs support early engagement and student-driven learning and teaches students about the importance of ambition, interpersonal skill building, and leadership (Cruce et al., 2015). School counselors can implement college and career clubs at their schools and work with other educators (teachers, administrators, coaches) on helping to increase student awareness about college, careers, and overall success. Counselors can facilitate clubs and talk to students about the importance of higher education, career options, financial literacy, transitioning from high school to college, and college life. A strong relationship has been found between providing mentorship for college and career success and college enrollment (Cruce et al., 2015). Therefore, it is advantageous for counselors to collaborate with other stakeholders within their school setting who can provide mentorship, expertise, and guidance for students addressing the positive impact that

post-secondary opportunities offer students both personally and professionally.

Students who feel supported, challenged, prepared, and ready are more likely to pursue post-secondary options and achieve their goals.

Building Soft Skills

In addition to helping students build their hard skills and technical skills including literacy, writing skills, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) proficiency, standardized test taking performance, school attendance, and course rigor, school counselors can also work closely with students on helping them to develop their soft skills, as these skills may be key predictors for post-secondary success (Hanover Research, 2014). Soft skills include one's social emotional development (how they relate to themselves and others), critical thinking skills, and intrapersonal skills such as self-regulation (emotion regulation and impulse control), communication, optimism, efficiency, motivation, collaboration, leadership, accountability, conflict resolution, assertiveness, cultural competency, and stress/time management.

According to Hanover Research (2014), students must be college and career ready in order to be productive and successful citizens in today's global economy and attention needs to be paid to student engagement, social, and academic behaviors. School counselors should promote that students possess content knowledge, cognitive strategies, learning skills, as well as transition knowledge and skills (Hanover Research, 2014). In addition to promoting student academic success, school counselors can help students develop their communication, problem solving, teamwork, leadership, creativity, awareness, responsibility, and self-management skills. These skills and assets are necessary for growth and success upon graduation. School counselors can

encourage teachers to incorporate soft skills into their daily curricula so that they are reiterated every day. Future employers seek employees who are flexible, have growth potential, are creative, are open to feedback, and are culturally sensitive. Thus, school counselors need to work with students individually and in small groups in order to help them to enhance their social and emotional development, which dire for their involvement and post-secondary achievements.

Summary

School counselors play an influential role in helping students gain the knowledge, insight, awareness, college and career readiness, and the confidence needed to achieve personal and professional success after graduation. School counselors must work with students, parents, and other key stakeholders to see that students can navigate their own career exploration and complete the college application process. They must understand the admissions process and be made aware of available grants and scholarships. In addition, they should be informed of the importance of community service, academic engagement, involvement in extracurricular activities, and exceptional school attendance. School counselors are encouraged to help students develop their technical and soft skills and see them as critical elements and key predictors for their future success.

In today's global economy it is not just what students know, but how they interact with, work with, and support others. Their success may be tied to their emotional regulation, leadership, innovation, work ethic, and passion. These skills need to be instilled early on and be stimulated over time. School counselors are encouraged to foster strong relationships with parents because as doing so has been shown to elicit

positive outcomes related to college enrollment and career readiness (Gilfillan, 2018). Further, it is of utmost importance for school counselors to work with stakeholders and community agencies on creating a college-going culture and career ready environment that envelops and emphasizes student engagement, connectivity, hope, optimism, peak performance, and a strengths-based philosophy. Students' who can recognize that their work inside school relates to and has a direct impact on their future college and career goals are more likely to apply themselves, thrive, and succeed. School counselors can empower, inspire, and show students that nothing rewarding in life is achieved without hard work, sacrifice, dedication, commitment, resilience, and perseverance. School counselors need to help students identify, develop, and build upon their strengths and goals in order to achieve greatness. School counselors have the capacity to educate and provide information and resources related to the college and career readiness journey so that students feel self-assured and can overcome the challenges they may face throughout the arduous process. One of the most important aspects of college and career readiness is for school counselors to help students recognize their abilities, capitalize on their inner resources, and believe in the power of their dreams.

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