Using Stakeholders as Career Bridges to Advance Students' Academic Performance:

How Would You Like Your Stake?

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Abstract

The New Mexico Next Step Plan, a postsecondary career transition plan for grades 8 through 12, aims to enhance relationships between all educational stakeholders: students, parents/caregivers, community, and administrators. These stakeholder relationships are intended to close the achievement gap among all students, in particular, ethnic youth. Professional school counselors need to lead this charge. Qualitative feedback from a survey and a compliance audit demonstrate how the school counseling curriculum can utilize stakeholders in career development activities to promote students' academic success.

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In preparation for high school graduation, ethnic youth face factors that either impede or support their completion and postsecondary transitions (Brown & Beckett, 2007). Some of the barriers that impact the 72.6% graduation rate are family income, ethnic minority status, community economic vitality, parental involvement, and school environment (Johnston, 2005; Heyer & Pifel, 2007; Seastrom, Hoffman, Chapman, & Stillwell, 2005; Triozzi, 2005; Valentine, 2005). Methods for professional school counselors to help increase graduation rates for ethnic youth are needed because it is also common for these students to experience developmental complications preventing them from graduating (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). The New Mexico Next Step Plan (NSP) is a postsecondary career transition mandate that attempts to remove educational barriers by emphasizing relationships between students and their stakeholders: parents/caregivers, school officials, and business and community members.

Professional school counselors who acquire the assistance from stakeholders can enhance students' academic and personal/social needs through culturally appropriate career development experiences. Stakeholders can be especially essential for students-of-color due to the fact that their ethnic identities can negatively impact development, school completion, and future outlook (Gushue & Constantine, 2007; Gerler & Herndon, 1993; Johnson & Kottman, 1992). For these reasons, consultation and collaboration between school counselors and other stakeholders are needed to equip students with skills necessary for successful transitions. The purpose of this

investigation was to review archival data from a state audit to answer the question: How were educational stakeholders involved in career planning and implementation? In order to answer the question, themes based on stakeholder involvement were developed. This paper includes an explanation of the New Mexico career plan, career-based activity variables, methods, results, and discussion with recommendations for future stakeholder involvement. Limitations of the study and future research directions are also included.

<div style="text-align:center">Conceptual Career Programming</div>

The New Mexico Next Step Plan (NSP) is a career paradigm that provides opportunities for students to acquire 21st century skills. This legislative mandate was enacted in 2003 in an attempt to more intensely engage students in grades 8-12 in education through a career focus. The spirit of the plan is to create relationships between home and school, encourage schools to develop rigorous curricula while delivering the content in a manner that is relevant for the students, and to encourage student readiness for school transitions. The expected outcome is for all students, with stakeholder involvement, to envision and work towards achieving their future goals while gaining self-awareness. The mandate and eight-page state-suggested form (http://www.ped.state.nm.us/Humanities/NextStepPlan/index.html) comprise an interim plan for grades 8-11 (first seven pages) and a final plan for grade 12 (last page). Both interim and final career plans require students and stakeholders to collaboratively develop academic programs of studies and other opportunities to help students reach their identified goals.

Achieving Projected Goals

The mandate requires plans be completed either at the beginning of the second semester or before the following school year, schools can engage in this process once or multiple times in the school year. Starting in grade 8 and ending in grade 12, students receive advisement from stakeholders annually. By completing the NSP, students are guided toward identifying academic and personal/social goals, course selection, extracurricular activities, continuous supports, and collaboration with systems that contribute to their educational success.

Self-Awareness

Students also learn about themselves by discovering personal likes and dislikes, skills, interests, problem-solving methods and decision-making strategies. After the first year of completing an NSP, students with their collaborative teams review and revise the plans annually by making appropriate modifications as career focus changes and develops from one year to the next. If students' desires change, then modifications to programs of study, extracurricular activities, support systems, and other sections of the NSP are made. At the conclusion of meetings, each plan must be signed by students and team members. In order for seniors to graduate, their final plans must contain the required signatures.

Career-Based Developmental Activity Variables

One of a variety of methods for professional school counselors to enhance effective school transitions for ethnic youth is through career-based activities. Career-based activities should address cultural variables that promote, not hinder, academic development (Gushue & Constantine, 2007). The career-based activities should

address: ethnic identity, acculturation, language, family, illiteracy, school dropout,
gender, socialization, religious and spiritual practices, immigration, and family
socioeconomic levels (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Olguin & Maple, 2008), as well
as, racial identity development and political forces (Flores & Heppner, 2002). Carefully
designed and implemented career activities go hand-in-hand with career planning to
produce viable and more productive outcomes for students, especially those at-risk
(Ball, 2005; Daggett, 2005). All of these culture-oriented variables should be infused in
student activities to help students gain clarity into their future career desires and
increased self-awareness.

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

The purpose of the current investigation was to develop themes that answer how
educational stakeholders were involved in students' career development. The authors
reviewed data used in a state audit to determine stakeholder involvement in schools
responsible for planning and implementing the NSP during the 2004-2005 school year.
A survey administered to school counselors and feedback generated from state audits
were compiled and coded for themes.

Participants

A total of 27 participants (school officials) were involved in this stakeholder
investigation. The racial and ethnic classification of student NSPs from the participating
schools represented: 1.47% African Americans, .74% Asian Americans, 38.05%
Caucasians, 41.77% Latinos, and 17.93% Native Americans. The compliance audit
involved random selection ($N = 228$) of career plans (approximately 28 per school) from
8 of 89 school districts. The audit included 101 (44%) male and 127 (56%) female

plans. Of the total student plans audited, 24 (10%) were 8th grade plans, 76 (34%) were 9th grade, 65 (27%) were 10th grade, 36 (15%) were 11th grade, and 33 (14%) were 12th grade final NSPs. Schools 1 and 2 were located in the same metropolitan school district. School 1 is a traditional 9th-12th grade high school, and school 2 is an alternative middle and high school where enrollment and demographics fluctuate throughout an academic year. Schools 3-8 are all located in rural locations; schools 3-5, located in the general vicinity, participated at the same audit. Schools 6 and 8 were K-12 campuses; and school 7 is a high school composed of 10th-12th grades. Of the schools in this sample, 48.5% students qualified for free or reduced lunch and 17.67% were classified as living in poverty. Sixteen school officials present at the audits provided feedback data after the audits were completed.

School officials who did not volunteer for the audits were mailed the *Survey to State*. This survey was developed for the purpose of finding out how stakeholders were involved at schools not involved in the audit. Of the 222 surveys mailed, 11 of 89 school districts responded in one-month resulting in a 20.18% response rate. Composite demographics for the schools represented in the survey comprised: 65.2% students who received free or reduced lunch, 49.07% female and 50.93% male students, and of these students, 28.15% have been classified as living in poverty.

Procedures

Seventeen schools were individually contacted by phone and email and asked to participate in the state audit, but only eight schools agreed. The compliance audits lasted one-one half months, and school officials present provided data through verbal feedback. While the audits were in progress, those school officials who were not a part

of the audits were mailed the *Survey to State*. After the one-month survey data

collection period, the surveys and feedback generated from the audits were complied

and then coded.

Researcher Bias

The authors are both assistant professors in a counselor education program with

an average of 11.5 years of teaching and serving on doctoral student dissertations.

They also are experienced qualitative methodologists. The primary investigator initially

had experience in qualitative research while in graduate school. Currently, the lead

author has experience in qualitative research through publications and current

qualitative investigations. The lead author was also the primary investigator who

conducted the audits at each school site, and collaboratively developed the Survey to

State.

Analysis

Based on the nature of the current investigation, basic qualitative research was

the analytic method used to code the data (Merriam, 1998); this analysis was ideal for

understanding stakeholder involvement since this was the first implementation year.

The stakeholder categories were established prior to data collection. After the data was

collected, the primary investigator reviewed all the notes generated at the audits and the

surveys, and then the data was separated into their respective categories. Once the

data was categorized, the investigator examined the data for emerging themes. One

theme per category was assigned based on what the respondents reported. The

literature was then reviewed to triangulate the findings. Additional triangulation occurred

when the co-authors convened to discuss the themes, and both agreed with the themes

generated. Since categories answer research questions, the themes generated describe how stakeholders were involved in the NSP.

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

The following results were generated from review of the surveys and compliance audit feedback from the eight public middle and high school officials. Four themes and areas where help from stakeholders is needed to help implement the NSP emerged. The first stakeholder group, "Students," was coded as *Passive Recipients*. The respondents indicated a need for more student involvement in designing and implementing the NSP each school year. The second stakeholder group, "Parents," was coded as *Passive Observers*. Similar to the student group, parents were minimally involved in the planning and implementation process. They were primarily utilized in signing their children's career plans. The third stakeholder group, "Community," was labeled *Developmental* because the participants indicated that they are in the early stages of gaining community stakeholder support. Respondents reported that community stakeholders were underutilized during the entire process. The final stakeholder group, "Administrators," was labeled *Strategic Oversight*. This group was coded as such because administrators allowed their school officials flexibility to attend workshops; minimal funding to implement the NSP was also provided.

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

Research aimed at stakeholders is a universal concern confronting all school officials (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Gehring, 2003; Lim, Wong, & Quah, 2007; Miller, Adist, & Miller, 2005; Robelen, 2003; Smyth & Fasoli, 2007; Trudell, 2007). The following discussion focuses on the stakeholders: students, parents, community, and

administrators. It also delineates the results, and avenues for how stakeholders can be utilized in the career curricula.

   Students. The majority of the survey respondents did not utilize students to help implement career development activities. One school reported that high school seniors assisted underclassmen in the development of their programs of study, a second school had students photocopy career planning materials. Additionally, their feedback supported the survey findings, only one of the eight schools utilized students to assemble career development packets. After reviewing the data in this study, student involvement was coded as *Passive Recipients*, because feedback from the audits and the surveys indicated that students were not typically included in the design or implementation processes of the NSP. This finding is consistent with both Robelen (2003) and Smyth and Fasoli (2007) who reported that students are not utilized in their schools as they should be.

   An official term previously used to describe student participation was 'disengagement.' Disengagement denoted that students were not getting their career needs met at schools, especially the at-risk students (Smyth & Fasoli, 2007). The current authors did not use the term 'disengagement' because it was reported that some students did assist in career planning. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that students, the primary recipients of educational services be proactive in their own career development. For example, they can help coordinate and host career fairs, provide clerical assistance, secure guest speakers, and be trained to recruit parent and community stakeholders. Most importantly, students can also learn how to develop programs of studies, and in turn, assist peers and students in the lower grade-levels.

Parents. The parental stakeholder involvement results from the current investigation were similar to the student results. According to the surveys, only one school utilized parents to assist in the implementation. One school indicated "parents will soon meet for a NSP orientation, but in the meantime parents will continue to only review and sign the plans." The parental group was coded as *Passive Observers*, indicating no involvement beyond simply signing and at times reviewing student plans. To support this finding, Brown and Beckett (2007) reported that socioeconomic levels impacted parental involvement to the extent they were not engaged at schools. The current investigation appears consistent with Brown and Beckett because of similar demographic data (free-reduced lunch and the number of students who live in poverty). A positive effect, according to the literature, was higher parental involvement. Their involvement predicts academic success.

As Brown and Beckett (2007) purported, parents are encouraged to contact their local schools to offer their assistance. They can help with career programming while understanding their children's future desires. Furthermore, they can learn to develop and implement career guidance activities, recruit other parent and community stakeholders, coordinate and host career fairs, secure guest speakers for classroom guidance activities, and receive training to enter student data in computer programs.

Community. The results from the current investigation concerning community stakeholders showed that strategies to involve them are currently in progress. One respondent stated that the school is seeking to establish "partnerships with university and business organizations to create interest in training and jobs." Another reported that local businesses were contacted via US mail in attempt to form a "business advising

group". Other than these two schools, the rest of the surveys indicated no involvement. As for the compliance audits, only one set of school officials reported that community members assisted students by providing work study opportunities. This category was coded as *Developmental*, indicating that some schools are at varying stages to acquire community involvement. Similar to the findings in this research, Dymond, Renzaglia, and Chun (2007) found that only two schools in their sample secured strong relations with community stakeholders.

Community stakeholders, like the parents, are encouraged to contact their neighborhood schools to express interest in volunteering (Lim, Wong, & Quah, 2007). We recommend a more proactive stance, for example, schools should brainstorm a list of stakeholders and personally seek out their assistance. Once stakeholders are secured they can recruit other community/business stakeholders. Additionally, they can assist schools by providing informational interview, apprentice, internship or job shadowing opportunities for students. Coordinating and hosting career fairs and securing guest speakers for classroom guidance are also needed. Not to mention, community stakeholders are needed in school advisory councils (American School Counselor Association [ACSA], 2005) to help design and implement career-based activities. ASCA recommends school principals and counselors to acquire community support.

Administrators. As for school administrator stakeholders in the current investigation, their involvement was coded *Strategic Oversight.* This theme encompassed no involvement to providing funding and staff flexibility to attend NSP workshops. A majority of school representatives who volunteered for the audit verbally

expressed a need to learn how to train teachers and school staff to develop students' 4-year programs of studies. One survey indicated that the principal allocated a small amount of funding to purchase career materials for students. The majority of feedback generated from the audits indicated that they needed portable computers that can be taken from class to class; and the alternative school voiced their need not only for computers, but internet access and phones in each of the classrooms. For the most part, regardless of compliance audit or survey findings, the administrators were perceived as relying on school counselors to have needed materials for planning and implementing the NSP. Heyer and Pifel (2007) provided a promising suggestion so that schools can help students succeed academically: expand stakeholder involvement beyond the school itself. For example, stakeholders might donate a computer. Furthermore, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2005) specifically stated that administrators need to market their academic and school counseling curricula to community stakeholders. Based on the current findings and literature (Lim, Wong, & Quah, 2007), administrators are encouraged to continue supporting school counselors and other school officials with time, funding and technology for career development programming. They must also regularly meet with school counselors to fully grasp what career programming entails. Once career programming is planned and understood, administrators can then market the curricula to other stakeholders.

Recommendations for Increasing Stakeholder Involvement

It is imperative for professional school counselors to establish collaborative teams that can develop and execute culturally sensitive career-related activities that align to the ASCA national model and academic standards while fitting each school's

demographic population. These collaborative efforts must include crosswalking academic and career development standards into one curriculum (ASCA, 2005), and soliciting the support from students and parents can ensure that they are not passive recipients or observers.

A second recommendation for career programming is for school counselors to train teachers and other stakeholders to prepare students' programs of studies that parallel their short and long term career goals. District graduation requirements can be transferred to a template so that all stakeholders can use it as a guide in training and planning. In addition to this training, school counselors must inform their principals as to what career programming entails. School administrators need to learn about programming so that they are equipped to promote the curricula to stakeholders.

Another recommendation for school counselors is to teach stakeholders how they can serve as role-models to enhance students' academic performance. It is important for stakeholders to be ethnically similar to the students they mentor because of the difficulties ethnic minorities face in schools and lack of similar role-models. Ethnic students can have difficulty blending into schools primarily due to their skin tone, physical features and language (Flores & Heppner, 2002). Next, school officials need to continue developing relationships outside the schools so that opportunities for students, parents and schools to connect with one another are available. If student-parent orientations, parent-teacher gatherings, and specifically, career programming held at schools prove ineffective, then using community businesses organizations as designated sites to meet with parents can enhance relationships.

Finally, professional school counselors need to ensure that students-of-color academically succeed in a more rigorous academic curriculum than that to which they historically have been exposed (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Flores & Heppner, 2002; Ford, 1997; Heyer & Pifel, 2007). This will help to close the achievement gap and increase graduation rates. Accordingly, academics must be increasingly relevant to the world of work while creating real-world relationships with stakeholders (ASCA, 2005). Traversing scholastic content to the world in which students live prepares them to transition from grade to grade, school to work, school to school, school to military, or school to family life. If educational institutions and stakeholders are invested in preparing all students to become contributing members in society, then it is necessary to expose them to local community and regional businesses (Heyer & Pifel).

The overarching recommendation is for school counselors to collaborate with all stakeholders and determine how they best fit into the educational environment in order to promote students' career development. This can be initiated by acquiring funds to purchase needed career materials. They should also continuously examine the curricula and determine how stakeholders can positively impact student learning, growth, and academic performance and self-awareness.

Limitations

The primary limitations were the design of the survey, survey response rate, and the unstructured questions used after each audit. As for the surveys, school counselors were not asked to expand on their responses. Another limitation was the manner in which the feedback was generated; both school counselors and principals were present.

Finally, in order to strengthen the trustworthiness of the themes member checks could have been utilized.

Future Research

In a future investigation it is recommended that school counselors and principals be interviewed separately so that more anonymity is preserved, and so that counselors do not fear negative consequences from the school principal because of their responses. The second recommendation is to have some semi-structured questions to ask school officials. Next, redesigning the survey is highly recommended so that the data is rich with content, and so that questions do not remain unanswered. Finally, member checks should be utilized so that the themes are trustworthy.

<div style="text-align:center">Conclusion</div>

The respondents in the current investigation, for the most part relied on school counselors to plan and implement the NSP in their respective schools. Although school officials had one year to plan for the implementation, school counselors were the key stakeholders involved in the planning and implementing phases. It is necessary for students, parents, community and administrator stakeholders to become active participants in the planning and execution of career development activities. Because the spirit of the NSP emphasizes stakeholder relationships, academic rigor and relevance for students, and transition readiness, all stakeholders need to be actively engaged in the entire career development process.

Contributing to the achievement gap and lowered rates of graduation include biases, racism and oppression that continue to affect students and their desires to be or not to be in schools where cultural, individual or institutional barriers exist (Gushue &

Constantine, 2007; Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007; Locke & Kiselica, 1999). Since these barriers can impede academic performance, career-related activities with stakeholder involvement must be developed and implemented with the intent to eliminate educational barriers.

According to the United States Department of Education (USDOE, 2005) 62% of high school graduates immediately transition to postsecondary education or training, yet, when disaggregated, ethnic youth evidenced lowered participation rates. For example, African Americans were at 11.3% and Hispanics at 9.5% (Hawkins & Lautz, 2005). Participation of all stakeholders is vital to education, and is needed to help remedy the disparities that confront students and close the achievement gap to increase graduation rates.

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