

A Review of Rural and Urban School Counseling: Exploring Implications for Successful Post-Secondary Student Outcomes

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Professional School Counselors (PSCs) are critical in students' career development. However, their ability to be successful is influenced by the location in which PSCs work. The purpose of this review was to explore the unique barriers of rural and urban school counseling and how these barriers may affect PSCs' ability to provide career counseling. Additional research is necessary in this area, as well as advocacy to prepare students for the 21st century workforce.

Keywords: rural school counseling, urban school counseling, barriers, post-secondary counseling, 21st century workforce, advocacy

Professional school counselors (PSCs) play an important role in preparing students for post-secondary transitions by guiding them in their academic, career, and personal/social development (Carlson & Knittel, 2013; Collins, 2014; Feller, 2003; Gysbers, 2013; Lapan, Kim, & Kosciulek, 2003; Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000). Developing the career readiness of students requires an array of interrelated tasks that typically include the challenging processes of self-awareness and sparking an interest in a career or future path. In order to meet these lofty goals, PSCs must have appropriate training, available resources, individual guidance, and a manageable caseload. These options may not be available given the barriers that exist in school systems, which are often related to whether the school is located in a rural or urban setting (Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005; Imig, 2014; Morgan, Greenwaldt, & Gosselin, 2014; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Sutton & Pearson, 2002; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). This examination presents two critical issues: (a) the overall role of the school counselor in preparing students for college and careers, especially given the changing needs of a 21st Century workforce, and (b) how the setting (i.e. rural versus urban school district) influences the counselor's ability to successfully do so. In order to further explore these two issues, this examination includes an overview of the school counselor's role in post-secondary planning, prevalent characteristics of rural and urban school counseling settings, and recommendations for

how school counselors can overcome the barriers to successful post-secondary counseling. This review also explores career counseling and the changing workforce, specifically the need for post-secondary counseling in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) careers.

The School Counselor's Role in Post-Secondary Planning

PSCs are tasked with a variety of responsibilities; this analysis focuses specifically on post-graduation transition issues. In order to familiarize students with options and build effective counseling relationships with students, the PSC engages in multiple activities to further the process of post-secondary transition. For example, identifying student interests, encouraging students to ask questions, initiating career days and college fairs, creating a career curriculum, and remaining current on research and available resources are just a few of the tasks that PSCs complete in order to make sure students are ready and able to compete in the 21st century workplace (Feller, 2003; Gysbers, 2013). The importance of the role that PSCs play in Feller (2003) states that today's workforce is "expected to be more competent in communication, math, computer technology, self-management, problem-solving, and decision-making skills" (p. 263-264).

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Helping students to identify their skills and interests is just one step in the post-secondary process. Assisting students in successfully planning for their future after graduation can be overwhelming for many school counselors, especially given the number of other counseling and non-counseling related responsibilities that are asked of school counselors (Morgan et al., 2014; Wahl & Blackhurst, 2000). Influencing post-secondary student outcomes, such as their attending a two or four year college, enlisting in the military, attending a technical program, or entering the workforce, cannot be understated. Lapan et al. (2003) argue, “the transition from high school has been understood as one of the most difficult developmental challenges confronting adolescents” (p. 329). Dellana and Snyder’s (2004) study also highlights the significant impact that PSCs can have on students’ post-secondary attitudes. They surveyed more than 400 high school students and found that a robust, positive correlation exists between the quality of counseling that students receive and those students’ future outlooks (Dellana & Snyder, 2004).

Eccles, Vida, and Barber (2004) found that early college planning was an important predictor of high school course enrollment, academic performance, and successful full-time college attendance. In addition, providing students with college and career counseling services, such as individual or group counseling, career fairs or parent programs, and career assessments, appear to have a positive impact in reducing the total number of disciplinary incidents in Connecticut schools (Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012). Although research strongly suggests the importance of school counseling services, Young (2004) estimates the national average ratio of students to school counselors is 479 students for every one school counselor. Additionally, large PSC caseloads have been found to be a pivotal reason for deficient college counseling services being provided to high school students in the United States (Public Agenda, 2010).

The literature surrounding counselor preparation begs two important questions. First, are school counselors able to prepare students for the difficult process of decision-making regarding their careers? Second, are school counselors confident in their ability to instill career readiness? In a qualitative research study conducted by Morgan et al. (2014), nine secondary counselors from diverse backgrounds, settings, and years of experience were interviewed and asked to discuss their feelings of preparedness and perception when counseling students regarding career-related issues. Each qualitative interview consisted of nine questions that included topics such as: experiences in counselor training programs, models of delivery for career development, training, and feelings of competence. From the results, counselors who were

interviewed did not feel that they were well prepared to successfully counsel students regarding career concerns (Morgan et al., 2014). Four themes emerged from the interviews related to this sense of being unprepared, including: (1) feeling incompetent, (2) not developing sufficient practical experience with career counseling in their graduate training programs, (3) the importance of having colleague networks, and (4) feeling the need for more training specific to career counseling (Morgan et al., 2014). The results of this study suggest that given the host of other responsibilities they must address, PSCs feel that they are not able to effectively prepare students for post-secondary decision-making.

While factors such as confidence and training may increase a counselor’s effectiveness, (Morgan et al., 2014), there are also many external factors that have the potential to limit counselors’ abilities. Some of these external factors include financial barriers, scarce resources, community and familial influences, low student aspirations, large caseloads, and limited connection to colleagues with whom to collaborate. Research has shown that these challenges vary when rural and urban school districts are compared (Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005; Imig, 2014; Morgan et al., 2014; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Sutton & Pearson, 2002; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). The following describes research findings related specifically to both rural and urban school counseling.

Rural School Counseling

While all PSCs play important roles in the development of their students, the literature identifies specific factors that are related to the experience of school counselors in rural school settings. Feelings of isolation, lack of resources and funding, parental and community influences, and uncertain separation between work and private lives are a few of the challenges facing rural school counselors. In turn, these negative factors may adversely impact the PSC’s ability to prepare students for post-secondary planning (Morrisette, 2000; Sutton & Pearson, 2002; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). One characteristic of the rural school counseling experience that appears often in the research is the feeling of isolation (Morrisette, 2000; Sutton & Pearson, 2002).

In a qualitative study conducted by Sutton and Pearson (2002), 19 rural school counselors were interviewed, both individually and in a focus group format. The goal of the study was to assess the overall role and experience of the rural school counselor. Two identifiable themes emerged from this study. First, school counselors in rural settings often feel isolated, particularly if they are young, unmarried PSCs. The second theme that emerged from the study was PSCs

feeling of being overwhelmed as a result of multiple responsibilities and large caseloads. The latter theme was linked to the notion that the PSC might be the only counselor at the school or in the area. “A large, resource-rich school may be able to designate one counselor specifically to coordinate college application or work with special needs students. In the small, understaffed school the realities of limited resources demand that the counselor, or few counselors, take responsibility for the total range of student needs” (Sutton & Pearson, 2002, p. 271).

The rural school counselor is left to balance many demands, such as consulting and collaborating with teachers and parents, creating school counseling curricula, responding to crisis situations, and providing mental health counseling in the community (Morrissette, 2000; Sutton & Pearson, 2002; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). After meeting these varied demands, PSCs have little or no time to focus on students’ individual interests and career aspirations. Morrissette (2000) conducted a phenomenological study that included seven rural school counselors from the northwestern United States. This study also identified isolation as a central theme of the lived experience of rural PSCs. Being the only counselor in a school leaves the PSC with few opportunities to consult and collaborate with colleagues. Additionally, participants in this study were serving in many different roles because they may have been the only counselor in a school or district, and many of these districts experienced a scarcity of available community resources (Morrissette, 2000). While PSCs in rural communities may feel isolated professionally, they conversely feel as though they lack privacy due to the close-knit communities in which they live (Morrissette, 2000). This often leaves school counselors with complications in drawing professional boundaries and maintaining work-life balance (Morrissette, 2000; Sutton & Pearson, 2002).

Feelings of isolation and boundary confusion are also related to college and career decisions made by students who are attending rural schools. For example, growing up and living in an isolated community often limits students’ exposure to the vast world of work and the array of post-graduation opportunities that are available (Lapan et al., 2003; Sutton & Pearson, 2002). In their study, Lapan et al. (2003) sought to evaluate School-to-Work Opportunities Act curriculum strategies, where stakeholder support and students’ satisfaction were examined. This study surveyed 884 students in grades eight through twelve and incorporated an instrument that included questions on parents’ educational attainment, students’ grades and interests, career development, work-based learning, job shadowing, and student satisfaction. A key finding of this study was that a significant relationship exists

between students’ career development and support of school stakeholders, including school counselors. Specifically, students felt more satisfied with their educations and felt prepared for post-secondary transitions (Lapan et al., 2003).

The research conducted by Lapan, et al. (2003) indicates that support from school counselors, teachers, and parents plays a significant role in educating students about existing careers as well as matching students’ interests with their abilities, which is another factor associated with students’ satisfaction in post-secondary decision-making. However, the role that familial influence plays should not be minimized. Carlson and Knittel (2013) explain that high school students often report that family plays a significant role when identifying career interests. Similarly, Sutton and Pearson (2002) found, through interviews with rural school counselors, that students often lack knowledge about careers and educational opportunities that exist outside of what is expected or normed in their communities. Students living in rural communities are also more likely to stay close to family, remain in close proximity to their hometowns, and are often encouraged by their parents to stay home and avoid opportunities that would require them to move away (Sutton & Pearson, 2002). Lapan, et al. (2003) found that rural adolescents tend to have lower expectations regarding college attendance and more often enter the workforce immediately after graduation.

While beginning a career immediately upon graduation from high school is often viable and desirable, it is imperative that these decisions are not made because students are unaware of the alternatives. The role of the PSC is to ensure that students do not enter the workforce immediately upon graduation from high school merely because they were not aware of other options, felt intimidated by the thought of applying for college loans, or simply had no one to talk to about their career aspirations. However, the data regarding college attendance and students in rural schools are clear. For example, Griffin, Hutchins, and Meece (2011) found that rural youth are less likely to have access to guidance services and are therefore less likely to engage in post-secondary preparation activities such as college campus visits and career exploration (Provasnik et al., 2007).

These findings highlight the crucial role that the PSC plays in the life of a student. In light of such studies regarding the rural school counselor, the question can be raised, are rural school counselors being set up for failure? Worzbyt and Zook (1992) write, “Staggering workloads, low salaries, meager resources, shortage of staff development opportunities, a high rate of administrative turnover, and difficulties attracting needed personnel are just some of the factors that plague small rural schools” (p. 344). These are the

very factors that make it difficult, if not impossible, for school counselors to provide thorough, effective, and comprehensive post-secondary counseling and career preparation in rural schools.

These findings provide a framework for understanding the factors that influence rural PSCs experiences with post-secondary counseling and preparing students for the decision-making process that inherently comes with graduation. While the experience of the rural school counselor is certainly challenging, unique characteristics of the urban school counseling experience have also been identified in the literature.

Urban School Counseling

Urban school counselors are not without their own challenges. One key finding from the literature examines college attendance and socio-economic status in urban districts. Savitz-Romer (2012) found that families with higher incomes have children who are more likely to attend college. The literature suggests this opportunity gap is of particular concern to urban students, who are more than two times as likely to attend high-poverty schools and attend schools that often graduate less than half of their students (Hill, 2012; Lee, 2005). Research also shows that the high-poverty schools often found in urban areas are marked by limited resources, low post-secondary aspirations from students, and high drop-out rates, making the post-secondary counseling process challenging at best (Lee, 2005; Savitz-Romer, 2012). PSCs in these schools also face school and community violence, high rates of teacher and administrative turnover, absenteeism, diverse family concerns, and a lack of parental involvement (Green, Conley, & Barnett, 2005; Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005; Lee, 2005). These challenges are exacerbated by the need to address social and emotional crises, state-testing responsibilities, and curriculum lesson planning.

Savitz-Romer (2012) conducted a qualitative study that investigated the particular challenges facing urban school counselors. Eleven female participants were included in this study and each school counselor possessed at least three years of experience and worked in a school where at least 60% of the student population were eligible for free or reduced lunch. A number of themes emerged from this study including: low student expectations, lack of student motivation, lack of time due to students having children of their own, issues of homelessness, and immigration matters. Other familial factors that prevented students from considering post-secondary education included a lack of understanding about college and its various processes, a lack of experience in attending college, not being able to afford tuition, and the necessity of having children earn

income for the family (Savitz-Romer, 2012). The participants reported that this lack of familial support led to the PSC playing a significant and influential role in a student's decision to attend college. However, the school counselors also reported that they were concerned that their excessive involvement may have discouraged students' independence and growth. The counselors also indicated that it would have been beneficial if their graduate programs had focused on urban school counseling and the specific characteristics and challenges that exist in these settings (Savitz-Romer, 2012).

Holcomb-McCoy and Mitchell (2005) conducted a study that focused on the role of the urban school counselor and the identification of the most prevalent issues that exist in urban schools. One hundred and two surveys were completed by urban school counselors, and the three most common tasks these PSCs engaged in were: (1) group and individual counseling, (2) consulting with teachers and parents, and (3) completing administrative work. In this study, the average PSC caseload was 362 students, with as many as 1,800 students per counselor. This study further highlights the challenges of urban school counseling, which may inhibit urban school counselors from providing effective career counseling to students.

Overcoming the Barriers to Successful Post-Secondary Counseling

As reviewed here, the literature describes the different challenges facing school counselors who work in rural and urban locations. However, despite the differences, some common trials face PSCs regardless of their geographic location. One challenge that affects both rural and urban school counselors is working in high-poverty schools with limited resources (Green et al., 2005; Hines, 2002; Lee, 2005). For example, research indicates that low-income students are less interested in school and are twice as likely to have mental health issues (e.g. anxiety, depression, and behavioral concerns) than are their middle-class peers (Amatea & West-Olatungi, 2007). Others studies have also found a direct relationship between economic hardship and mental health concerns for children and adolescents (Rodriguez, Nichols, Javadani, Emerson, & Donenberg, 2015). Such barriers only serve to exacerbate the difficulties school counselors have when providing students with career counseling and planning. The goal surrounding post-secondary counseling, regardless of setting, is to make sure students are aware of their options.

The literature does suggest a number of interventions that can help PSCs to be change-agents

for their students. Advocacy, leadership, collaboration, and consultation have been highlighted as instrumental in overcoming the inherent challenges previously mentioned for professional school counselors (Amatea & West-Olatungi, 2007; Eschenauer & Chen-Hayes, 2005; Lee, 2005; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). Worzbyt and Zook (1992) suggest that taking a leadership posture is one way PSCs can be more successful. As Worzbyt and Zook (1992) describe, "The leadership challenge is about how leaders can get extraordinary things done in organizations by capitalizing on the opportunities available to them" (p. 345). Successfully working with available resources, even when they are lacking, is particularly salient for school counselors. Many of these counselors are facing financial and time constraints for providing all students with successful post-secondary counseling services. Assuming a leadership role might include activities such as risk taking, being creative, inspiring others to be excited about the future, collaborating with stakeholders, supporting others, and recognizing the skills and abilities of colleagues (Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). In addition to being an advocate and leader, Lee (2005) argues that school counselors also have a responsibility to be culturally competent and understanding of the diverse population of students with whom they work.

By being leaders and advocates, especially in high-poverty locations, school counselors can help to promote better communication and collaboration with all stakeholders, including families, community leaders, school board members, and political affiliates. School counselors can also positively influence student success and achievement by challenging the homeostatic systems in which schools operate, systems that often struggle to close achievement and opportunity gaps (Amatea & West-Olatungi, 2007). School counselors are encouraged to be leaders, advocates, and collaborators, which are lofty goals; however, their role helps to ensure that student needs are being met, including those related to career development.

Career Counseling and the Changing Workforce

In addition to the many challenges already described, the world of work is constantly changing and school counselors need to stay abreast of these changes in order to provide quality counseling services to their students. While the 21st century workforce continues to change, so too do the career skills required of today's workforce, skills that will be quite different than what was expected of graduates in the past. Many of these shifts in career readiness and necessary skills are related to growth in fields related to STEM (Berube, 2014; Carlson & Knittel, 2013). As technology develops at its

breakneck pace, it is imperative that PSCs are aware of the rapidly changing world of work and the skills required in this burgeoning career field (Carlson & Knittel, 2013; Schmidt, Hardinge, & Rokutani, 2012).

The research suggests that school counselors can be of great assistance in preparing students for STEM careers (Carlson & Knittel, 2013; Schmidt et al., 2012). Some STEM-related interventions available to PSCs include administering assessments, staying current on STEM-related careers, matching students' interests to available courses and careers, and talking to students individually about their interests, skills, and goals (Carlson & Knittel, 2013; Schmidt et al., 2012). While these sound like basic counseling interventions, successful outcomes may not be easy when multiple barriers exist, such as low funding, limited resources, large caseloads, low student aspirations, and limited external support.

A critical element in the development of students who are prepared for STEM-related careers is the availability of advanced coursework (Carlson & Knittel, 2013; Schmidt et al., 2012). Carlson and Knittel (2013) state, "academic coursework in high school lays the foundation for future success in STEM-rich careers. Engagement in a comprehensive and rigorous academic program increases student academic esteem and skills that lead to future success in a competitive, global workplace" (p. 117). The gender-related biases often found in STEM-related careers make the availability of advanced coursework for female students even more important (Berube, 2014; Carlson & Knittel, 2013). The ability for success in advanced coursework may not always be possible however, especially in cash-strapped schools with limited resources.

Providing students with information on STEM fields is becoming an important aspect of career counseling. Schmidt et al. (2012) write, "It has become increasingly apparent that school counselors need to increase their awareness of 21st-century career opportunities, particularly STEM-relevant information" (p. 27). However, just as PSCs face challenges in providing post-secondary counseling, the current research on STEM counseling illustrates many of the same difficulties. These challenges include lack of time, lack of training on STEM careers in graduate programs, parental influences, and large caseloads (Schmidt et al., 2012). These negative factors are only intensified when a school cannot afford to offer AP courses, or there simply is not sufficient interest in STEM-related coursework to justify the resources required.

The importance of advocacy and stakeholder collaboration is no less important when working with students who may be interested in STEM-related careers. School counselors are encouraged to share STEM information with parents, which is particularly significant given the vital role parents play in their

children's post-secondary interests (Carlson & Knittel, 2013; Schmidt et al., 2012). Carlson and Knittel (2013) discuss the critically important role PSCs play when talking to students about STEM-careers, not just college bound students. This is imperative when working with minority students, who are less likely to pursue STEM careers, and rural students who are more likely to enter the workforce right after high school (Berube, 2014; Lapan et al., 2003; Schidmt et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Berube (2014) writes, "...although the problems with urban inner-city schools are more well-known, surprisingly, rural schools have many of the same problems" (p. 19). The literature supports this statement, and further demonstrates that while research has been done on the positive and negative characteristics of being a school counselor in rural or urban settings, additional research is necessary. For example, qualitative analyses regarding the availability of resources would be helpful for better understanding the challenges rural and urban PSCs face. Also, little research currently exists that can be used to directly compare the role that school location plays in the ability for PSCs to counsel students on career-related issues. Future investigation is needed comparing rural and urban school counselors' experiences in career counseling, as well as their ability to successfully prepare students for post-secondary transitions. The literature also suggests the need to better understand how Counselor Education programs are preparing future PSCs in career counseling, specifically related to differences in rural and urban settings. As the research indicates, these specific limitations for both rural and urban schools inhibit the counselor's ability to successfully implement appropriate career planning and preparation interventions, including preparation for flourishing STEM careers. Further study is also needed to determine if Counselor Educators are preparing future counselors for these challenges.

The job of a professional school counselor is not an easy one. With the many responsibilities PSCs have and the varied roles they play, simply making it through the day is often considered a success. However, our students deserve more, especially when it comes to career counseling and guidance. Preparing for a career is the cornerstone of professional school counseling, yet has fallen to the wayside in many of our schools. As we examine the literature related to the challenges PSCs face in providing career counseling, there is little need to wonder why. However, students are in desperate need of assistance when planning their futures, and our society can only benefit from a well-prepared workforce where employees are pursuing meaningful

careers. This is even more vital as the needs of the 21st century workforce continue to evolve. As evidenced here, those needs differ depending on whether a student happens to attend a rural school or an urban one, and as a profession, we need to be more aware of these differences and how to best address them.

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