

# A Study of “Career Pathways” Policy with Implications for School Leaders

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*This explanatory mixed-methods study began with a quantitative survey to investigate counselor beliefs and implementation behaviors related to providing college and career planning services to high school students. Survey results informed the development and implementation of interview protocol designed to provide deeper insight into counselors’ decision-making and implementation fidelity. Findings revealed that while counselors place substantial value in state and district policies, and believe their implementation decisions connect student interests and postsecondary goals to appropriate high school programs of study, they spend more time assisting students of higher socioeconomic status with college planning, resulting in less time for supporting students more likely to need their specialized assistance. Implications for educational leaders are discussed.*

High school seniors confront ever-increasing competition for both jobs and college acceptance after graduation. Students, therefore, depend more than ever on a college and career focused high school program to develop the necessary skills to successfully compete in the job market and/or complete a postsecondary degree. Responding to these needs, many states have taken up the call to incorporate college and career readiness skills into the high school curriculum for all students under the Career and Technical Education (CTE) umbrella.

To better understand how to best meet the above challenges, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) commissioned the College and Career Readiness Initiative (CCRI) to further refine their CTE focus (VDOE, 2010). Characteristics of “ready” students included: taking Algebra II and Chemistry; scoring Advanced Proficient on the math and reading Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) assessments; earning an advanced diploma; participating in Advanced Placement (AP) and dual enrollment (DE) courses; participating in the Virginia Early

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Scholars Program (earning college credit via AP or DE experiences); and earning "college ready" scores on the SAT or ACT (VDOE, 2010). The above characteristics currently drive the VDOE college and career readiness initiatives. An important component to seeing these goals to fruition is the use and development of an Academic and Career Plan (ACP) for each student.

The success of the ACP initiative depends, in large part, on how well the counselors implement the policy on a daily basis. Understanding counselors' knowledge and attitudes about the policy and discovering their actions as "street level" policy makers (Goldstein, 2008; Mansfield, 2013, b) sheds light on the plan's ability to prepare students for postsecondary options. It is conceivable that if counselors do not adequately understand the ACP, or have the necessary skills or support systems to adequately implement the policy, then the resulting plan may be haphazard or fail to accurately capture student interest. Also important is how student factors might impact the implementation of the ACP plans. While Virginia policy acknowledges the importance of using the ACP to reach "at risk" students, Mickelson and Everett (2008) found, while studying similar plans in North Carolina, that at risk students continued to experience segregation and reduced access to college preparatory and career training opportunities during high school. The focus of this study (Ormsmith, 2014) was to understand the connection between the meaning making of school counselors vis-à-vis the ACP, the role student demographics may or may not play in policy meaning-making, and the resulting implementation of student plans. Thus, the study addressed the following questions:

1. What is the nature of school counselors' understanding of and attitudes toward the Virginia "Career Pathways" policies generally and the Academic and Career Plan (ACP) specifically?
2. What is the nature of school counselors' ACP implementation practices?
3. How do student demographics influence counselors' interpretation and implementation of the Academic and Career Plan?
4. How do counselor ACP implementation practices coalesce or diverge from policy intent?
5. What relationship(s) exist(s) between policy intent, counselors' knowledge and attitudes, and counselor implementation?

The study was conducted in Coal County<sup>1</sup>, a large suburban school district located in central Virginia. The district has a student body of nearly 60,000 students; supports 38 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, and 12 high schools; has a student population of 55% White, 26% Black, and 11% Hispanic, with 30% of the student body classified as economically disadvantaged (VDOE, 2012). A closer look at the data reveals that while the district poverty rates are comparable to both the national and Virginia rates, Black and Hispanic students in Coal County middle and high schools have a much higher percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged (Table 1). Like Virginia, the Coal County district met the federal student performance standards (Annual Measurable Objectives [AMO]) and the district results are consistent with the state results for the current school year for all indicators. The lone exception is that while the state did not meet AMO for Black student graduation rates, Coal County did not meet the graduation rates for Hispanic students (VDOE, 2012). During the 2011-2012 school year, 94% of Coal County students graduated with an Advanced or Standard diploma, slightly exceeding the Virginia average of 92% (VDOE, 2012). For graduation year

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<sup>1</sup> All names of people and places at the local level are pseudonyms.

2012, 64% of Coal County graduates enrolled in an institution of higher education (IHE) with 44% of those choosing a four-year school and the remaining 20% selecting a two-year school (VDOE, 2012a). The national average in 2011 for total IHE enrollment is 68%, with 42% in four-year schools and 26% in two-year schools (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Finally, Coal County's student to school counselor ratio is 258 to 1 (VDOE, 2012b) and is just above the level recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) of 250 to 1 (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012).

Table 1.

*Percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged*

Race	US*	VA	Coal County		
			All	Middle School	High School
White	9.8	12.6	8.4	16.3	9.9
Black	27.6	15.0	12.1	49.9	33.3
Hispanic	25.3	7.4	7.1	67.2	49.4

Note: \* US data from Snyder & Dillow (2012). State and District data from Virginia Department of Education (2013) fall membership reports.

## Literature Review

Many students begin preparing for college as early as the seventh or eighth grade when they begin to select courses aligned with their postsecondary goals (Conley, 2010; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Students' experiences in secondary school, through coursework and exposure to the college culture, play a role in preparing them for college and help them to link what they do in school with future expectations (Hill, 2008). However, the focus by public educators on standardized test scores has led many students and parents to believe that achieving a passing score on state created standardized tests represents college and career readiness (Conley 2010; Radunzel & Nobel, 2012). The reality is that state tests often represent a basic content knowledge that is not directly related to postsecondary readiness (NCPPE, 2010; Radunzel & Nobel, 2012). Rather, preparing for college or employment in contemporary America means that high school graduates possess skills and abilities such as self-motivation, goal orientation, and independent learning (Lombardi, Seburn, & Conley, 2011).

Thus, most states have adopted the Common Core State Standards in an effort to align state education standards with postsecondary expectations (Meeder & Suddreth, 2012). As part of the CCSS initiative, and to more accurately assess student progress towards college or career readiness, states are collaborating with the CCSS Initiative to create new state assessments that are a more reliable indicator of college and career readiness (Meeder & Suddreth, 2012). Since many high school students do not take college entrance tests such as the SAT or the ACT (Radunzel & Nobel, 2012), the newly designed CCSS assessments are a tool to help these students align their high school programs with their postsecondary goals. These redefined standards and accompanying state assessments are a critical tool that students need to accurately monitor their postsecondary preparedness and make well-informed decisions about their career path options. In addition to rigorous coursework, exposure to secondary education, and improved

state assessments, students also need a detailed plan to focus their high school experiences toward a specific career pathway (Solberg, Phelps, Haakenson, Durham, & Timmons, 2012). As of 2012, twenty-three states have passed legislation requiring students to develop postsecondary plans (Famularo, 2012).

Research evaluating the effectiveness of these types of college and career readiness plans is limited. However, Budge, Solberg, Phelps, Haakenson, and Durham (2010) conducted 53 focus groups in four states with parents, students, and teachers to determine if preparing the learning plan was useful. All stakeholders reported the plans as "highly valuable" and indicated that they helped students select more rigorous coursework, improved collaboration between stakeholders, provided access to career exploration activities, shed light on postsecondary opportunities, and improved student academic and career motivation (Budge, et al., 2010). Developing focused plans connects students to support personnel such as counselors and facilitates goal setting and realization while strengthening students' abilities to navigate the secondary to post-secondary pipeline (Solberg et al., 2012).

### **School Counselors and Postsecondary Readiness**

As suggested above, school counselors are a significant component to preparing students for postsecondary pathways. Counselors must be adequately equipped to deliver college and career planning services through their professional training experience in order to successfully organize and design effective programs that combine both individual delivery methods and group activities (CACREP, 2009; ASCA, 2012). During individual encounters, counselors help students develop individual learning plans and manage transitions from elementary to middle, middle to high, or secondary school to college or career (ASCA, 2012). Meanwhile, school-wide college and career events might include career fairs, business tours, college fairs, and field trips to campuses (ASCA, 2012). School counseling programs that coordinate the involvement of peer and family groups during college and career planning show a positive impact on student postsecondary choices and allow students to make the most of high school curriculum opportunities (Savitz-Romer, 2012; Hill, 2008).

Increasing the number of encounters students have with a school counselor has a positive effect on a student's application rate to college and career programs (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). Moreover, students who begin career planning with school counselors relatively early (middle school or early high school) are more likely to select a program of study linked to a career pathway as well as be better prepared for postsecondary challenges (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011).

### **Challenges to Plan Implementation**

Not surprisingly, student access to school counselors during course planning is important because counselors are one of the main conduits of information related to postsecondary enrollment options and planning (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). However, counselors routinely perform other duties such as crisis counseling, disciplinary action, and testing administration (ASCA, 2012; Bryan et al., 2011). Most counselors spend just 23% of their time helping students plan college or career activities (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011). Despite the increasing demand by students for time with counselors exclusively directed towards college planning, counselors must find a way to deliver

appropriate planning services or face the prospect that students will leave high school unprepared for the postsecondary world (Johnson, 2008; Perna et al., 2008; Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, & Swan, 2011).

Additional challenges associated with implementing college readiness plans include organizational constraints such as a high counselor-student ratio (ASCA, 2012a) and lack of funding and other administrative supports (Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012; Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Stevenson, 2012; Hill, 2008; Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley, & Pierce, 2012; Lapan, Whitcomb, Aleman, 2012). Considerations also include factors outside the organizational structure such as counselors' feelings of self-efficacy (Savitz-Romer, 2012) and educators' perceptions of students and their families according to race/ethnicity, class/socioeconomic status, and gender (ASCA, 2012; College Board, 2012; Craver & Phillipson, 2011; Jean-Marie & Mansfield, 2013; Kinsler, 2011; Mansfield, 2011; Mansfield, 2013, a; Mickelson, 2009; Sullivan, Klingbeil, & Van Norman, 2013) that influence programmatic access, disciplinary procedures, and academic achievement.

In many secondary schools, college-educated parents from higher SES groups tend to be the primary source of information for students concerning college and career information instead of counselors (Mckillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012). But for lower SES students whose families may not have college and career information options, school counselors are the primary source of information about postsecondary options (Mckillip et al., 2012). Counselors, therefore, bear a heavy responsibility to provide information to all students equitably and to reach out to students who may not have access to information from other sources (Mckillip et al., 2012). For students who are not in the top of their academic classes and for those students who lack high (i.e., college attendance or beyond) postsecondary goals, counselors will have to seek out the students to deliver information because the students are less likely to come looking for a counselor's assistance (Mckillip et al., 2012). Developing an equity viewpoint of student services to address the disparity in access means that counselors need to have "an orientation toward doing the right thing by students, which does not mean treating students equally regardless of their different needs" (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007 as cited by Mckillip et al., 2012, p. 7). Using an equity framework also means that counselors should spend less time with students that have the most access to postsecondary information and spend more time helping students who lack the social supports to make well developed postsecondary decisions (Mckillip et al., 2012). By using an equity viewpoint to deliver services, school counselors help close the readiness gap by providing additional individual services to students who require structural supports to achieve positive postsecondary outcomes.

## **Methodology**

For the purposes of this study, an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006) was employed; meaning, data from the first phase was used to develop the protocol for the second phase. Moreover, data collected during the second phase was used to interpret data collected during the first phase. In the case of this project, a quantitative online survey was used first, followed by qualitative interviews. Before explaining these phases in greater detail, an explanation of the theoretical framework that undergirded the study is given.

## Theoretical Framework

Over the past three decades, policy scholars have developed the idea that policy implementation is an interpretive act (Lipsky, 1980; Mansfield, 2013,b; Yanow, 2000). The daily action of teachers represents educational policy interpretation at the local level (Goldstein, 2008; Lipsky 1980; Spencer 2000; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002) because how teachers behave in the classroom and how they do or do not follow policy mandates represents a form of de facto policy making and interpretation through their implementation (or lack thereof) of a policy (Spillane, et al., 2002). The idea of “street-level” policy making by teachers can be extended to secondary counselors because counselors are the people directly linked to policy implementation through the creation of individual student programs of study.

It is important to note that the design and implementation of education policy is hardly a repeatable process that varies according to particular variables and only within a certain degree of error. Instead, policy formulation and implementation is a complex intersection of facets that are interconnected and dependent upon each other (Mansfield, 2013, b). Friedrich (1940) set the stage for this line of inquiry more than 70 years ago when he noted, "Public policy, to put it flatly, is a continuous process, the formulation of which is inseparable from its execution. Public policy is being formed as it is being executed, and it is likewise being executed as it is being formed" (p. 6). This interconnection means that while state legislatures may have particular ideals and goals in mind for a policy, the policy actors (i.e., counselors, teachers, and administrators) create their own implementation ideals and goals when confronted with policy mandates (Lipsky, 1980; Mansfield, 2013, b; Spillane et al., 2002; Yanow, 2000). Therefore, evaluating policy implementation from the local policy actor perspective can provide a deeper understanding of how the intended policy design manifests at the "street-level."

To investigate the local point of view this study relied on the sensemaking lens prevalent in contemporary policy implementation research. Datnow & Park (2009) explained that the sensemaking theories have their earliest origins in the "mutual adaptation" perspective where policy outcomes ultimately depend on local people who actively construct their environment by interacting with others and use their beliefs and experiences to direct future actions. So, as counselors provide college and career planning services in a comprehensive program, they are engaging in sensemaking within a complex setting that shapes policy implementation in accordance with their personal understandings and beliefs. The complex nature of these interactions necessitates research methods capable of providing deeper understanding and a richer description of the multiple facets related to the implementation environment (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Therefore, this mixed methods study first used quantitative survey data to capture counselor implementation actions, beliefs, and interpretations concerning the policy and then used qualitative interviews to develop a richer understanding of the counselor's sensemaking processes.

### Phase One: Quantitative Survey

A web-based survey was designed to reach all middle and high school counselors in Coal County. First, it was necessary to identify several "measurable objectives" (Sue & Ritter, 2012):

1. Describe counselor implementation actions related to the ACP policy (*Objective 1*);
2. Assess counselor knowledge about the ACP policy and its intent (*Objective 2*);

3. Ascertain counselor beliefs about the value of the ACP to student academic and career planning (*Objective 3*);
4. Examine counselor beliefs about race and postsecondary options relating to equity and access issues (*Objective 4*); and
5. Identify how student race and socioeconomic factors contribute to counselor implementation practices (*Objective 5*).

To improve the power of the instrument, responses to questions in the survey include multiple choice, true-false responses, open-ended responses, and Likert-type five-point scale interval responses (Mitchell & Jolley, 2010; Sue & Ritter, 2012). In addition, since the survey questions had not been previously used, an indication of their validity was necessary (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2012; Mertens, 2010; Mitchell & Jolley, 2010). Therefore, the first draft survey questions were presented to a class of graduate students enrolled in the School Counseling degree program at the Virginia Commonwealth University. The students were presented with the proposed questions in paper form and asked to answer the questions, if they could, and to provide comments regarding the wording and clarity of each question. The students provided written feedback indicating questions they felt were confusing or unclear and suggested corrections. The student comments were compiled and modifications were made.

**Sample.** The participants of this study represented a non-probability convenience sample of the 113 middle school and high school counselors in Coal County who self-selected participation in the survey by responding to the invitation email (Sue & Ritter, 2012). The majority of the 41 respondents to the survey were White (83%) and female (92%). Most participants also reported no classroom teaching experience (64%). Of those who did have teaching experience, 50% were in the classroom for fewer than five years. The majority of counselors also responded that they had been school counselors for fewer than ten years (53%) and that they graduated from a school counseling degree program accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (73%).

### **Phase Two: Qualitative Interviews**

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with a subsample of five counselors who indicated their willingness to participate in interviews during the survey phase. The semi-structured format provided direction for the line of inquiry while also allowing the researcher and counselors an opportunity to explore additional topics in a conversational atmosphere (Cresswell, 2013; Mertens, 2010). So, the use of a semi-structured interview format gave participants a chance to examine and explain their interpretation and implementation behaviors vis-à-vis the ACP policy. The interview questions were organized to reflect data collected during the phase one survey.

As with the survey questions, the interview questions were previously unused and were therefore presented to a second panel of graduate students for suggestions and feedback. For example, the original version of Question 3 under Objective 3 read: "How important do you think the ACP is to students?" The intent of this question was to access feedback counselors may have received from students about the planning process. A consensus developed among the graduate students that the stated intent was not clear from the question. After a short discussion with the class, the question was changed to: "Would you please describe a time when a student gave you his/her thoughts about how important the college and career planning sessions (and the

ACP form) were to their postsecondary preparation?" The change improved the question by clarifying that the response should include a personal story the counselor remembered about a student. Also, the rephrased question helped the counselor to frame a response in terms of what the student said rather than by how the counselor perceived student thoughts about the planning process.

The face-to-face interviews were scheduled by appointment and conducted in the school counselor's office. To foster a candid discussion, counselors were encouraged to answer questions in whatever manner seemed appropriate to them and to discuss any topic they thought was relevant. The counselors were also reassured that there were no "right or wrong" answers and that the researcher was not there to be critical of their responses but only to collect their thoughts on the subject. The interviews were electronically recorded. Each interview audio file was transcribed by a professional third party service and then compared to the audio recording by the researcher for accuracy. After the transcripts were verified, the participant's transcript was emailed to each counselor along with a request to review the document for accuracy (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011; Mertens, 2010). The researcher also contacted the counselors by phone to confirm transcript accuracy.

**Sample.** The counselors eligible to participate in phase two were counselors who, during the phase one survey, indicated they would be willing to conduct an interview on the survey topics. From this new population, the selection of counselors was a purposeful sample that represented a maximal variation approach where participants are selected to represent distinct variations within the group (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2012). Because socioeconomic status is often linked to race and ethnicity (NCES, 2013), an examination of the student populations allowed for the schools to be categorized by socioeconomic status. Table 2 shows the student body characteristics for both race and socioeconomics groups (i.e., economically disadvantaged) for each high school in Coal County.

Table 2.  
*Coal County Schools by Minority and Socioeconomic Status*

School	Students		
	Total	Minority	Economically Disadvantaged
A	2062	26%	16%
B	1679	54%	33%
C	1890	41%	20%
D	1407	38%	20%
E	1927	37%	20%
F	1476	14%	6%
G	317	68%	60%
H	1798	31%	15%
I	1646	86%	47%
J	2120	15%	5%
K	2322	35%	20%

Note: Minority includes Black and Hispanic students.  
Data from VDOE (2013) fall membership report.

To capture maximal variation for the phase two interviews, meetings were requested from counselors serving in the following locations: one high SES high school (School F), one middle

SES high school (School H), one low SES high school (School I). Since middle school counselors were part of the survey sample, meetings with middle school counselors were scheduled as well. Two middle school counselors were selected based on which high school the study body “feeds” into. Since High School F and High School I represented the extremes of both minority population and socioeconomic groups, responses from counselors at these locations provided an opportunity for exploring how contrasting student demographics might influence counselor behaviors and attitudes. Table 3 provides an overview of the counselors who volunteered for the interview phase of this study. The demographics of counselors interviewed for phase two had similar characteristics to the phase one participants.

Table 3.  
*Interview Participants School Assignment and Demographic Identifiers*

Participant	School SES Group	Age	Identifier			
			Years of Counseling Experience	First Time Counselor	Previous Teaching Experience	CACREP Degree Program
Ms. A	Low*	30 – 39	11 – 15	Yes	No	Not Sure
Ms. B	High	20 – 29	0 – 5	Yes	No	Yes
Ms. C	Low	30 – 39	0 – 5	Yes	No	Yes
Ms. D	Middle	50 – 59	11 – 15	Yes	Yes	No
Ms. E	High*	50 – 59	16 – 20	No	Yes	Yes

\* Indicates a middle school location.

## Findings

The quantitative results are presented first followed by the counselor interview responses. In the interest of space, only a summary of findings affiliated with Objective 5 are shared. Please, see Ormsmith (2014) for a complete report of the findings.

### Survey Findings

**Objective 5: Identify how student race and socioeconomic factors contribute to counselor implementation practices.** Data for Objective 5 were coded so that responses indicate which type of student receives the most counselor time or effort during the planning process. Questions Q23, Q30, and Q9 were used to create an *Equity Implementation Rating* based on the group counselors selected as requiring the most time to complete an ACP plan. Counselor responses to questions Q23 and Q30 that identified any of the Low SES responses were coded as a 1.0 while selecting any of the High SES choices resulted in a 0.0. Question Q9 coding was reversed so that a High SES selection was coded as a 1.0 because the question asked counselors to indicate which groups require the *least* amount of effort. Therefore, selecting any of the High SES groups indicated implementation time distribution consistent with the Low SES responses for questions Q23 and Q30. Combining responses from these three question produces and *Equity Implementation Rating* where a 3.0 indicates that counselors consistently spend more

time supporting Low SES students and at risk students during course planning sessions while scores close to 0.0 indicate no change in counselor behavior based on student status.

The remaining questions for Objective 5 were coded so that selecting the responses "Strongly Agree" or "Always" were scored as 5.0 while the other end of the scale ("Strongly Disagree" or "Never") were scored as a 1.0. In this way, a mean result for a question of 4.0 or above indicates counselor agreement with the statement. For the both the "Agree/Disagree" scale the "Always/Never" scales a selection of 3.0 is the neutral response and cannot be used to accurately determine agreement or disagreement with the statement.

The first set of results for Objective 5 are shown in Table 4 as percentages of responses for each item along with a mean score for each question. Responses to question Q5 indicate most (61%) counselors do not think that lower SES students are less interested in postsecondary options. Thirty-seven percent of counselors report spending more time with lower SES students who are less knowledgeable about postsecondary options and almost as many (34%) report that less knowledge is not a reason for spending more time with students. When asked about the difficulty of obtaining parent signatures, 46% of counselors say that it is hard to acquire them from lower SES parents but a majority of counselors (53%) report not having a hard time obtaining signatures from higher SES parents. Finally, most counselors (67%) do not feel that higher SES students gain more from counselor time than lower SES students.

Table 4.  
*Student Demographic Factors and Counselor Implementation Practices*

ID	Question	Percent of Responses					Mean
		1	2	3	4	5	
Q5	"Compared to a higher socioeconomic student, I spend more time completing an Academic and Career Plan for a low socioeconomic student because they are less interested in postsecondary options."	.17	.44	.32	.07	.00	2.29
Q34	"Compared to a higher socioeconomic student, I spend more time completing an Academic and Career Plan for a low socioeconomic student because they are less knowledgeable about postsecondary options."	.02	.34	.27	.37	.00	2.98
Q6	Do you find yourself spending extra time with at-risk (i.e., lower socioeconomic status, minorities, etc.) students during counseling sessions in order to discuss the benefits of planning for postsecondary options?	.02	.15	.49	.27	.07	3.22

Q8	"Students in higher socioeconomic groups benefit more from my time with them discussing an Academic and Career Plan than lower socioeconomic students."	.29	.37	.27	.05	.02	2.15
Q11	"I have a hard time obtaining parent/guardian signatures on Academic and Career plans from students in lower socioeconomic groups."	.02	.10	.41	.34	.12	3.44
Q32	"I have a hard time obtaining parent/guardian signatures on Academic and Career plans from students in higher socioeconomic groups."	.05	.48	.43	.05	.00	2.48

The second set of results for Objective 5 are shown in Table 5 as percentages of responses for each item. When asked to compare time spent with students versus race indicators, counselors reported that they spend more time creating ACP plans for Low SES Hispanic students (42%) followed by Low SES Black students (29%). When considering time spent versus SES status and gender, counselors selected Low SES Males (46%) as the group requiring additional effort followed by Low SES Females (32%). Lastly, most counselors (68%) report spending the least amount of time helping High SES White students develop and complete an ACP.

Table 5.  
*Student Socioeconomic Factors and Counselor Implementation Practices*

ID	Question	Choices	%
Q23	From the selections below, which race/ethnicity of students require the most effort (i.e., time or resources) to complete an Academic and Career Plan.	Low SES White	.16
		Low SES Black	.29
		Low SES Hispanic	.42
		High SES White	.00
		High SES Black	.13
		High SES Hispanic	.00
Q30	"I spend most of my time with the following type of student:" (Note: SES means socioeconomic status.)	Low SES Males	.46
		Low SES Females	.32
		High SES Males	.03
		High SES Females	.19
Q9	From the selections below, indicate which students require the least effort (i.e., time or resources) to complete an Academic and Career Plan. (Note: SES means socioeconomic status.)	Low SES White	.11
		Low SES Black	.08
		Low SES Hispanic	.03
		High SES White	.68
		High SES Black	.11
		High SES Hispanic	.00

An overall *Equity Implementation Rating* for Objective 5 was created by combining counselor responses to the questions in Table 5 to find an individual *Equity Implementation Rating* from 1.0 to 3.0 (See Figure 1). A counselor mean above 2.0 would indicate that counselors agree with the equity framework concepts and do, in practice, spend more time with at risk students when providing counseling services during course planning. The frequency distribution of counselor means shows an overall equity implementation mean of 2.10 with 17 participants (41%) having a mean of 3.0. The majority of counselors (71%) have an equity implementation mean above 2.0 while the remaining 30% of participants have a mean below 1.0.

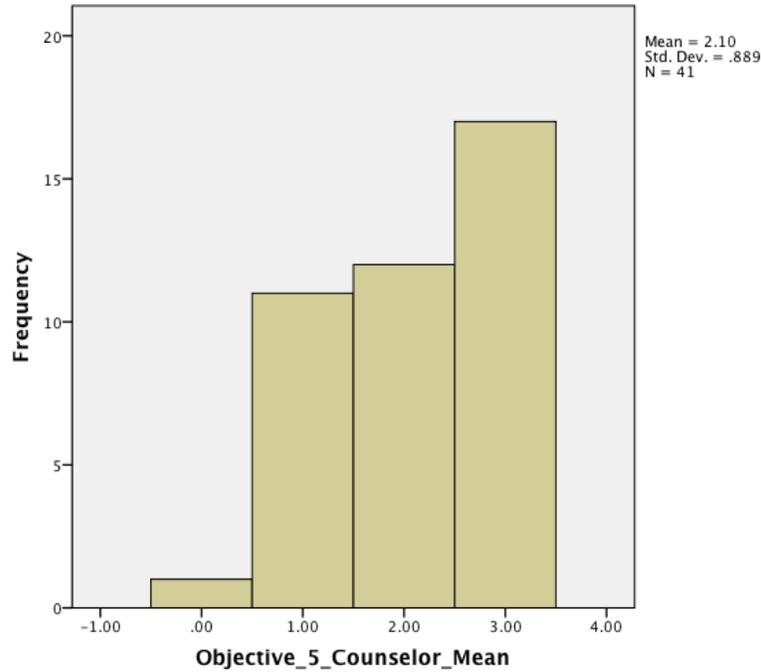


Figure 1.

### Counselor Equity Implementation Rating

### Preliminary Analysis Used to Inform Phase Two Interviews

The explanatory design indicates that the results from phase one are used to inform data collection in phase two. Subsequently, results from phase one were analyzed and interview questions were developed to explain and supplement the survey results. Each objective from the survey yielded results where the interviews could provide important contexts and additional explanations about counselor behaviors and beliefs. Therefore, the topics identified in this section became the areas of interest for the phase two interviews.

For Objective 5, implementation practices regarding spending extra time with particular groups of students indicated mixed results and many of the questions had means near 3.0 (the neutral response). Counselors were asked to provide examples of interactions they have had with at risk students when helping them complete an ACP to illuminate what activities counselors do engage in with at risk students.

## Interview Findings

Since interviews followed the survey both in content and timing, the results are presented according to survey objectives to support the ultimate goal of answering the research questions. For each of the five objectives, the transcripts were coded by evaluating counselor responses for idea threads presented during the interview. In the original study (Ormsmith, 2014), direct quotations were often lengthy. This was an intentional choice by the researcher to maintain the context of the responses and highlight the thoughtful nature of the counselors' responses by including the rich stories they presented about their profession. However, due to space constraints, in addition to only sharing responses affiliated with Objective 5, quotations have been cut substantially. Please, see Ormsmith (2014) for more complete responses.

**Objective 5: Identify how student race and socioeconomic factors contribute to counselor implementation practices.** Several themes emerged while speaking with counselors concerning the intersection of their implementation practices and race and class. In the interest of space, two of these themes are briefly shared: 1) The desire to provide extra time to at risk students and, 2) A lack of substantive administrative support to do so.

*Providing extra time to at risk students.* Each counselor, except for Ms. C at the low SES school, indicated that they felt at risk students definitely deserve additional support from the counseling department but often do not receive it due to organizational constraints. Ms. A and Ms. B indicated that they wanted to treat all of their students "equally" but also said that at risk students should receive additional resources. Throughout conversations, counselors indicated their goal is to spend the same amount of time with everyone and to make sure that at risk students receive, at a minimum, the same services as the higher SES students. However, the counselors admitted that the reality of the situation is that they have very high case loads and tend to spend more time communicating with higher SES parents than with lower SES parents.

Ms. A shared:

I do think as a whole we try our hardest to be equal. And again unfortunately the whole time factor with how many students that we have to see. I think it's just difficult as a whole...sometimes kids do fall through the cracks and don't get as much attention. I think it's more the middle and upper income families that are going to be more prone to be involved...they're going to follow through...I think they [lower SES students] should get extra help. We don't want them to fall into the same situation over and over.

Ms. B agreed that she intends to provide equal, or even more, services to low SES students but finds herself dealing instead with higher SES families more often:

I do think that they're [lower SES students] deserving of my time. I would like to be an equal opportunity counselor, but, ... The squeaky wheel gets the grease. We have a lot of parents who will call and [are] vocal if their kids are not getting what the parent deems is "their needs being met" (air quotes)... Socioeconomically they are in a high SES.

Ms. D explained that first-generation college students seem to need more time:

It doesn't have anything to do with the economics as much as the fact that the parents don't have the background to know... So they need more time in just the vocabulary of the whole postsecondary education...they definitely need more time... I have had students...who actually need help in filling out the application...

Ms. C was the only one to say that lower SES student's perhaps do not deserve more of her time: "I don't know if I guess overtly think that you should get more of my time." However, like Ms. D, Ms. C does spend time with lower SES students providing support with the logistics of navigating the postsecondary application process. Ms. C explained the support she provides:

I think that sometimes they [lower SES students] do get more of my time because we may have to sit together and fill out a form or we may have to brainstorm ways how to make, you know, things possible that I don't have to make possible for other students...Just this morning, I had to sit down with one of my seniors because she's using a college application waiver and we're trying to figure out how to submit her application online without inputting credit card numbers. So it's not that she's necessarily demanding more of my time, it's just kind of how it plays out.

These examples show that while the counselors agree, in principle, that lower SES students should receive additional support they do not receive that support because higher SES parents are more vocal and receive more attention. They also described that what support they are able to offer takes the form of assisting students through the postsecondary bureaucracy by helping complete applications or understand the processes.

*Administrative support ... in theory.* Counselors were asked to comment on whether or not they felt the building administrators supported the idea of providing additional support to lower SES students. The reply was that, in theory, the administration would tell them that it is a good idea but in practice, concrete support does not materialize. Ms. D explained it this way:

I think they support it, but unless you show it with more people helping... more individuals providing service. So what? I mean you can verbalize, "Yes, you're right, they do need..." But, unless it translates into another warm body, it doesn't matter.

Ms. E felt the same way, but added that she would be told it is her responsibility: "I think they would support it, but I think that they would give it to me to figure out how to make it so. And the reality of making it so would be a real struggle." The counselors describe administrators who may be sympathetic to their needs but are unable to provide practical solutions to provide lower SES students with additional counseling personnel. Whether it is the lack of additional personnel or a principal's focus on classroom time, counselors feel that the additional support from administrators is not coming any time soon.

### **Discussion and Implications for Educational Leaders**

While results revealed Coal County counselors provide college and career planning services in accordance to the letter, and spirit, of the ACP policy, findings also indicated counselors would like to do more for lower SES students but that they usually cannot find the time to do so. Counselors describe devoting a significant amount of time responding to the "squeaky wheel"

parents in the community at the expense of the lower SES students. But counselors had a suggestion for how to fix this problem: more counselors. To serve the lower SES groups and provide the additional services necessary to produce successful postsecondary outcomes, additional counseling personnel are needed to reduce the student to counselor ratio. While the division has a ratio close to the ASCA recommended level, counselors still report not having the time to help lower SES students on a consistent basis. And this issue is not restricted to lower SES schools – *every* counselor interviewed conveyed the same need for more counselors to adequately and equitably reach all students. Assisting lower SES students navigate the postsecondary world takes time and attention and no amount of technology or procedures can replace the human resources needed to make sure each student receives the best possible support.

While human contact is of greatest concern to the counselors interviewed, they did identify other division-wide organizational changes essential and easier to achieve. For example, counselors emphasized that an electronic version of the ACP would enable information to be readily available via computer instead of a paper form restricted to the counselor's office. In addition, counselors recommended the development of alternative options regarding course selection for students who change their minds or fail courses. Moreover, counselors thought it would be beneficial to have financial aid experts available in the schools at all times to assist with providing options for lower SES students. These additional personnel might be volunteers or representatives of higher education or government officials who would be available to help parents and students understand the financial aspects of college and career planning.

Since the counselors in Coal County struggle with providing adequate services to all students when the higher SES groups monopolize a large portion of counselor time, it is important administrators consider using additional tools that might stabilize a consistent focus on this target population. For example, to help balance counselor resources, a time log of parent contact might be helpful in determining if all of the counselors are interacting with mainly higher SES parents. Additionally, administrative procedures might be developed and adopted that would provide follow up with students whose grades indicate they are at risk for leaving school or not graduating on time. Making contact with students earning less than a C-minus in coursework a priority will help counselors intervene before student course options are reduced by repeated courses. Along those lines, administrators might reconsider the classroom-counselor divide in terms of time and space by allowing counselors more opportunities to visit students in the classroom. This extra time would be used to check in on students, provide updates regarding events and deadlines, and afford students an opportunity to schedule meetings with counselors. Finally, counselors should set aside time each day to initiate contact with lower SES parents. Counselors reported during the interviews that lower SES parents were not likely to initiate contact but were very responsive once the counselor called. Because lower SES parents are not coming to the counselors, counselors need to be the originators of contact rather than simply reacting to the "squeaky wheels" that come through the door. Principals could support this goal by making it a point of accountability.

While the current study was limited to one suburban school district, the results may warrant recommendations to school leaders beyond this district. To make implementation fidelity a reality for all students, there are immediate steps as well as short- and long-term processes that educational leaders can implement. While counselors are responsible for most aspects of implementing the Academic and Career plans, the role of building principals is just as important to providing quality counseling services to all students. First, administrators should meet

frequently with the counselors to review school policies and procedures. For instance, the manner in which counselors interact with the students and parents should be standardized within the building so that each student is given a fair share of counselor time. Second, career planning is a coordinated effort between students, parents, counselors, administrators, and *teachers*. Administrators should meet with teachers routinely about their role in helping students focus on career planning. Not surprisingly, students spend most of their time during the day with teachers. To capitalize on this time, principals need to make sure the teachers are equipped to provide on-the-spot counseling to students. For example, organizing meetings between faculty and counselors to discuss the options, processes, and requirements of the course planning process will provide teachers with information critical to helping students make decisions and capitalize on questions asked in class. Instead of responding to student questions by saying, "I don't know, go ask your counselor;" teachers will be able to describe the process in detail and offer guidance based on student interests. Finally, administrators should take it upon themselves to actively promote career planning to parents during school events. Most administrators spend a lot of time at athletic events and school functions where meetings with parents occur regularly. Integrating questions such as, "Have you talked with your child about what they want to do after high school?" is an opportunity for administrators to reinforce that public education is important to students because it connects what they like to do with careers after graduation.

Division level administrators (such as superintendents, directors, content specialists, and instructional supervisors) are also an important part of this process. In smaller systems, a division level administrator is often responsible for aligning the career planning focus from elementary school to high school. Leaders in larger divisions have the additional task of ensuring implementation consistency between schools at each level across the entire division. These leaders participate in the process by staying up-to-date on current counseling programs and practices, by researching new career options, by coordinating state and federal regulations, by attending conferences, and by seeking new opportunities for students to interact with higher education institutions and businesses. Division leaders should actively seek out local businesses as partners for college and career planning because students benefit from seeing what they will encounter after school (Conley, 2005; Hill, 2008). Finally, division leaders can support counselors by working to promote college and career readiness awareness by involving local businesses in the school system through school site visits, guest speakers, and financial support for programs linking public education to postsecondary career options.

At the state and national level, educational leaders can promote implementation fidelity by maintaining a focus on the importance of career counseling and by providing resources for school divisions. An example of this effort is an amendment to the *Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act* introduced by Senator Tim Kaine in July, 2014. Senator Kaine introduced the *Educating Tomorrow's Workforce Act of 2014*, in part, to "Improv(e) links between high school and postsecondary education to help ease attainment of an industry recognized credential, license, apprenticeship, or postsecondary certificate to obtain a job in a high-demand career field" and to "Promot(e) partnerships between local businesses, regional industries and other community stakeholders to create pathways for students to internships, service learning experiences, or apprenticeships as they transition into the workforce or postsecondary education" (Kaine, 2014). The increased national focus on connecting public education to well paying jobs by leaders like Senator Kaine will lead to increased interest among parents and students in postsecondary opportunities outside of the traditional college route. This,

in turn, should lead to more students proactively discussing career opportunities with counselors, teachers, and administrators.

### **Conclusions and Future Research**

As the above discussion suggests, improving the implementation fidelity of career pathways policy for lower socioeconomic status students is impossible without the commitment and dedication of educational leaders. The lessons learned from this study in one school district are important for helping administrators understand what counselors think about this ACP policy specifically, and their role in the schools generally. According to the counselors in Coal County, the Academic and Career Plan policy is an effective postsecondary planning tool that supports their efforts to create programs of study that are both interesting and relevant to students. Counselors in this district are knowledgeable about the process and support the policymakers' intent by maintaining implementation practices consistent with the goals of the policy.

Future research should focus on repeating both the survey and the interview process in districts with varied socioeconomic demographics and student populations. Comparing results from these studies would clarify if the problem of higher SES parents obtaining additional counselor time at the expense of lower SES students is unique to this division or if it is an issue with larger scope. The counselors in Coal County exceed the minimum requirements of the ACP by virtue of division expectations and local procedures so exploring these topics within divisions with limited resources would provide additional insight into the challenges and benefits of the policy; specifically, determining if counselors in divisions who do not meet with students every year express the same benefits and connections that the Coal County counselors identified. Additional work should also be done to further identify issues of the students' race/ethnicity and gender. In this particular case, students' gender and race were not discussed along the same lines as socioeconomic status. It is unclear whether there are: no differences between students' experiences based on race/ethnicity and gender; counselors in Coal County purposefully take a "color blind" and "gender blind" stance, or; problems exist but are not recognized due to ignorance. Finally, the overwhelming majority of participants in this survey were white women. It would be interesting to compare this study with a case where counseling services are provided by men as well as by counselors of color.

There are a couple of questions remaining that would also benefit from further study. First, the counselors responded on the survey (Objective 5) that they spend more time helping lower SES students during counseling sessions. However, during the interviews counselors described a different situation where higher SES students and parents receive additional time at the expense of the lower SES population. The reason for this disconnect was not discovered during the present study. Perhaps during the survey counselor responses indicated that it takes more time to complete the actual ACP form for lower SES students whereas during the interviews counselors were thinking about how much time is spent with lower SES students throughout the day. Understanding this discrepancy could provide additional insight into how to promote and maintain an equity framework within the counseling offices. And second, the conversations with counselors seemed to describe a preconceived belief that postsecondary preparation entails making students ready to attend a traditional college instead of an emphasis on all postsecondary choices. Further study is needed to understand this apparent counselor bias towards students not interested in attending college. For example, learning how a perceived district culture relating to a "college ready" student body may influence school counselors'

decisions could illuminate why conversations between counselors and lower SES students tend to focus on finding ways to pay for college instead of exploring other possibilities.

While the ACP policy appears to be an effective postsecondary planning tool, counselors still struggle to find ways to accommodate the needs of lower SES students and their families. While the solution, in the counselors' opinion, is to provide more personnel, securing the funds for the additional counselors is a major policy constraint. Without a concerted effort on the part of parents, educators, counselors, and division leaders, the cycle of privilege will continue and higher SES students will receive additional benefits from the ACP policy at the expense of lower SES populations. Consequently, the importance of school counselors and educational leaders working for social justice as a complementary leadership team cannot be overstated (Walker, 2006).

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