Career Planning With Students With and Without Disabilities:

A Study of Illinois School Counselors

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Abstract

Career development is an essential role of the school counselor. This study examined the role of school counselors in assisting middle school and high school students with choosing careers. Special attention is given to school counselors working with students with and without disabilities. Results indicated that school counselors spend more counseling time with students without disabilities. Implications for school counseling practice are discussed.

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Vocational education and workforce preparation is an essential role of the professional school counselor. However, as the workplace continues to change, school counseling programs in middle and high schools are often challenged to keep pace with the technological advances and changes within the labor market (Feller, 2003).

Issues related to meeting the career development needs of school students has been highlighted throughout school counseling literature (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Education Trust 1997; Gysbers, 2001; Herr, Cramer & Niles, 2004; Durodoye, Combes, & Bryant, 2004). For instance, in 1997 ASCA created the national standards to address the role of school counseling programs in American educational systems (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). Based on information collected from 2,000 practicing school counselors, these standards were developed to guide professional school counselors as they attempt to implement services that promote the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for school success. From this idea, three domains, academic, career, and personal/social development were identified as the basis for the standards (Dahir, 2001). In regards to career development, school counselors are expected to assist students with acquiring the skills necessary to make career decisions, utilizing strategies to achieve career success and satisfaction and broadening the students' options as a precaution to changes in career opportunities and the job market (Dahir, 2001, Schimdt, 2003).

The *National Standards for School Counseling Programs* provide school counselors with a unified focus. Likewise, *The ASCA National Model* (2003), which is

based on the competencies outlined in *The National Standards for School Counseling Programs*, serves as a framework to guide the development and implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs. The National Model for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs designates career development services as an integral piece of each school's educational mission (Alliman-Brisset, Turner & Skovolt, 2004). Career development services as well as academic and personal/social counseling are implemented by the use of activities such as guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and systems support that are designed and modified to assist in the enrichment of student achievement and success. It is recommended that school counselors spend the majority of their time engaged in these four activities. Activities and responsibilities that are not directly related to program delivery and counseling services should be delegated to other appropriate school personnel. Examples of these activities and responsibilities include master schedule duties, test coordination, detention room monitoring, disciplinary tasks, substituting, and clerical responsibilities (ASCA, 2003).

Research regarding the role and activities of school counselors indicate that school counselors are making progress in their efforts to provide services relevant to the *National Standards for School Counseling Programs*. Using data obtained by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC), Foster, Young, and Hermann (2005) sought to describe the work activities currently performed by school counselors in relation to the *National Standards for School Counseling Programs.* The findings of their study indicated that school counselors were engaged in work activities that promoted academic and personal/social domains such as providing general counseling; facilitating

decision making skills; identifying students' support systems; promoting healthy lifestyle choices; and planning and conducting classroom guidance lessons. Concerning career development, school counselors identified decision making skills, identifying students' support systems; and planning and conducting classroom guidance lessons as activities that were very important and frequently performed.

An important objective for school counselors is to facilitate students' career development through responsive counseling interactions (Lee, 2001). However, students with disabilities from all populations have experienced roadblocks in their career development training. They have often been placed in basic and remedial curricular courses and perceived by school personnel to have very limited career potential. Several educational scholars have attributed this phenomenon to school personnel upholding an ablest conception of knowledge and capability (Reid & Knight, 2006). Others have asserted that since most of society perceives students with impairments to be abnormal, it becomes easier for educational systems to view the career development of students with disabilities from a deficit perspective (Adkison-Bradley, Johnson, Rawls & Plunkett, 2006; Blanchett, 2006; Johnson, 2006).

Over the last three decades, the number of students receiving specialized educational services has consistently increased. Additional reports demonstrate that nearly 13% of secondary students in the United States have an individualized educational plan (Blanchett, 2006).

Although school counseling accrediting bodies and professional organizations have developed and implemented guidelines for addressing the career counseling needs of school children, few studies have investigated the day to day career

counseling activities of school counselors in middle and high school settings. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the role of school counselors in assisting middle school and high school students with choosing careers. Special attention is given to school counselors working with students with and without disabilities. Implications for effective school counseling practice will also be discussed. The primary research questions which guided this study were as follows:

1. What types of career planning activities do school counselors use to assist students with and without disabilities?
2. Is there a difference between the career planning activities of school counselors and the influence of group membership (students with or without disabilities)?

Procedure

Participants

The target population was school counselors working with students in grades 6-12 in Illinois public schools. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) school service record database was used to gather names of potential study participants. The initial population consisted of 2900 participants distributed among 1,342 schools. The participants ranged in age from 22 years to 70 years. Over 90% of the school counselors had a masters degree. Their years of experience ranged from 1 year to over 40 years.

Instrument Development

The research team identified information to be included in the instrument from three sources: (a) specific career counseling and student support strategies implicated in the research literature; (b) counselor competencies outlined by the American School

Counselor Association (ASCA); and (c) information regarding recruiting and retaining female students in IT career and related programs, provided by National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity (NAPE). Using information generated from these sources, an instrument was developed to determine demographic characteristics of respondents and identify the extent to which the target group was aware of and used the strategies. Two forms of the survey instrument both paper and online, were offered to participants.

The instrument consisted of five sections. Section one focused on the participants' work setting and caseload. Sections two through five focused on career assessment activities, career planning activities, recruitment and support for students in nontraditional occupations, and respondent demographic information, respectively. The results presented here were derived primarily from sections 1 and 3 (work setting / caseload and career planning activities). The survey instrument consisted of both menu and open item response modalities. For example, a menu item in section 1 inquired: "Does your caseload consist of *all* the students in your school or a specific group or groups of students? (check only one)." The survey was field-tested with a volunteer group of 10 school counselors in Michigan. Participants in the field test were provided with a $10 gift certificate to a discount store.

Data Collection

Using information from the ISBE annual school directory, researchers identified the principal of each school at which the targeted school counselors worked. A packet of materials was mailed to each principal, including a letter of information which outlined instructions for distributing (and recording distribution of) the surveys to counselors in her/his school. Principals were asked to complete a survey distribution record, where

she/he recorded whether or not the survey(s) were distributed to the individuals specified by the researchers (based on the information received from ISBE); and if not, whether the survey was given to a replacement person (e.g., a new person had assumed the position) or not deliverable (e.g., a position had been eliminated or not filled).

A survey packet for each target counselor was also included in the principals' materials. This packet contained a letter providing information about the study and a request for their participation, instructions for completing the survey by a date three weeks from the initial mailing, survey instrument, and stamped/addressed return envelope. The instructions provided a URL to complete the survey on-line if the respondent so desired. Survey packets were initially mailed in April 2005 with follow up mailings to non-responsive counselors and principals in May and June, respectively. A second complete packet with all materials was mailed in October. Postcards were sent subsequently as a last follow up to non-responding counselors.

Results

Profile of School Counselors

Demographic information was collected on the sample under examination in this study in order to determine individual characteristics and caseload (ratio of students to counselors). The total response rate for the school counselors was 36.5% (n=1,090). The target group had participants who declined participation or returned unusable surveys. With these accounted for, the net response rate was 30.5% (n=884). Forty-four percent (n=658) of the school principals returned their distribution sheets. Geographic distribution of respondents across the state generally aligned with population patterns.

Respondents from Chicago Public Schools, Cook / Lake, and Collar counties each accounted for approximately 20% of the respondents. The northern region accounted for just around 10% and the rest were distributed among central and southern Illinois.

The mean age of respondents was 47.84 years; and respondents were predominantly female (75%). The majority of school counselors identified themselves as White American or Caucasian at 87%. Seventy percent of the respondents reported working in a high school. Of the other respondents, 16 and 14 percent reported working in a middle or elementary school, respectively. In the state of Illinois, elementary school is generally defined as grade levels K through 5. Middle is grades 6 through 8 and high schools are grades 9 through 12.

School counselors in this survey reported an average caseload size of 355 students (*SD* = 223, *Max*=2,600) indicating a rather high variability among schools. Moreover, these school counselors spent about 53.41% of their time working directly with students on their caseload. School counselors who reported working in high schools had a mean caseload size of 328 students with an average of 42 (13.5%) of those being students with disabilities. For middle and elementary school counselors, their mean caseloads were 389 and 462 with an average of 44 (13.9%) and 61 (19.3%) of those students being those with disabilities, respectively. There were some significant differences found regarding caseload size and type of school. There was a significant difference found between high and elementary schools χ^2 (*1*, N=680)=9.24, *p*=.002, as well as between high and middle schools χ^2 (*1*, N=712)=20.18, *p*<.0001. No significant difference was found between middle and elementary schools χ^2 (*1*, N=242)=.76, *p*=.383.

Counseling Activities

Respondents were asked about the frequency of the meetings they had with students with and without disabilities. Table 1 presents meeting frequency data.

Table1

Frequency of counselor meetings with students with and without disability on their caseload

Students	0-2 times	3-4 times	Over 4 times
With Disability	23.88	36.75	39.37
Without Disability	37.75	34.75	27.50

Because of the nested structure of the data, responses were recoded (1 for 0 – 2 times, 2 for 3-4 times, and 3 for >4 times) and a dependent t-test was run to test for differences in meeting frequency between students with and without a disability within a respondent. Results indicated counselors meet significantly more often with students with disabilities (M_{diff} = .24, *SD* = .57) (*t* (744) = 11.25 *p* < .0001). A parallel strategy was applied to compare the percentage of students on the caseload that participated in a career assessment (Table 2) and the frequency of that career assessment.

Table 2

Students who participate in career assessment activity

Students	None	1-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%
With Disability	0.8	4.1	2.9	4.1	88.2
Without Disability	0.7	2.6	2.5	5.1	89.2

	Never	Once	Once, not annually	Annually
With Disability	0.9	17.7	26.6	54.9
Without Disability	0.7	20.3	28.2	50.8

School counselors reported that 87.44% of the students on their caseload participated in some type of career assessment(s) at some time during their secondary education. Moreover, 88% of school counselors reported that more than 76% of their students with disabilities on their caseloads participated in some type of career assessment. This was only slightly lower than students without disabilities, 89%. For students with and without disabilities, about 96% of time they receive their first career assessment during or before the 10th grade.

What types of career planning activities do school counselors use to assist students with and without disabilities?

In this survey, respondents were also queried regarding the proportion of students on their caseload with whom they include or implement career planning activities. Table 3 represents descriptive statistics and a breakdown of group membership (students with or without disabilities and middle and high school students). A series of paired t-tests were conducted to investigate career planning activities of school counselors and influence of group membership and results are outlined in Table 4. The dependent variables were difference scores calculated as proportion of students with disability minus proportion of students without disabilities paired at respondent level. The difference score has a three-point scale (1, 0 and -1) representing more students with disability, equal proportion, and more students without disability, respectively.

Table 3

Proportion of students on counselor caseload with whom they include or implement career planning activities, by kind of school (N=884)

	Middle School (Grades 6 – 8)				**High School (Grades 9 – 12)**			
	With Disability		*Without Disability*		*With Disability*		*Without Disability*	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Administer career assessment(s)								
none	17	20.99	20	22.47	56	13.66	46	9.96
1-25%	5	6.17	4	4.49	35	8.54	34	7.36
26-50%	3	3.70	2	2.25	21	5.12	22	4.76
51-75%	6	7.41	4	4.49	30	7.32	29	6.28
76-100%	50	61.73	59	66.29	268	65.37	331	71.65
n	81		89		410		462	
Provide information regarding results of career assessment(s)								
none	17	21.25	20	22.73	33	7.62	22	4.60
1-25%	4	5.00	5	5.68	38	8.78	40	8.37
26-50%	4	5.00	3	3.41	28	6.47	21	4.39
51-75%	7	8.75	4	4.55	40	9.24	40	8.37
76-100%	48	60.00	56	63.64	294	67.90	355	74.27
n	80		88		433		478	
Assist students to identify career goals								
none	15	17.86	18	19.15	16	3.55	8	1.61
1-25%	14	16.67	19	20.21	27	5.99	27	5.43
26-50%	9	10.71	5	5.32	35	7.76	29	5.84
51-75%	9	10.71	8	8.51	65	14.41	67	13.48
76-100%	37	44.05	44	46.81	308	68.29	366	73.64
n	84		94		451		497	
Provide information about career areas and/or options								
none	11	12.36	12	12.50	8	1.79	1	0.20
1-25%	14	15.73	15	15.63	21	4.69	21	4.24
26-50%	7	7.87	9	9.38	40	8.93	41	8.28
51-75%	8	8.99	5	5.21	57	12.72	52	10.51
76-100%	49	55.06	55	57.29	322	71.88	380	76.77
n	89		96		448		495	
Provide information about career requirements								
none	18	20.93	19	19.59	13	2.88	8	1.62
1-25%	13	15.12	18	18.56	33	7.32	32	6.46
26-50%	5	5.81	7	7.22	40	8.87	38	7.68
51-75%	7	8.14	4	4.12	74	16.41	72	14.55
76-100%	43	50.00	49	50.52	291	64.52	345	69.70
n	86		97		451		495	

Table 3 (continued)

	Middle School (Grades 6 – 8)				High School (Grades 9 – 12)			
	With Disability		*Without Disability*		*With Disability*		*Without Disability*	
	F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Provide assistance to develop or modify an educational program plan aligned with career goals								
none	28	41.79	30	38.96	19	4.42	15	3.18
1-25%	10	14.93	13	16.88	34	7.91	24	5.08
26-50%	7	10.45	8	10.39	37	8.60	23	4.87
51-75%	3	4.48	4	5.19	63	14.65	83	17.58
76-100%	19	28.36	22	28.57	277	64.42	327	69.28
n	67		77		430		472	
Provide information about secondary career and technical education programs								
none	20	27.03	23	27.06	10	2.24	7	1.44
1-25%	17	22.97	19	22.35	36	8.07	27	5.57
26-50%	6	8.11	5	5.88	33	7.40	32	6.60
51-75%	2	2.70	6	7.06	56	12.56	57	11.75
76-100%	29	39.19	32	37.65	311	69.73	362	74.64
n	74		85		446		485	
Provide information about post-secondary career and technical education programs								
none	26	37.14	29	35.37	9	1.99	6	1.22
1-25%	15	21.43	17	20.73	34	7.51	27	5.50
26-50%	5	7.14	5	6.10	29	6.40	24	4.89
51-75%	1	1.43	4	4.88	67	14.79	65	13.24
76-100%	23	32.86	27	32.93	314	69.32	369	75.15
n	70		82		453		491	
Provide information about post-secondary educational institutions (e.g., colleges and universities)								
none	26	37.68	29	35.37	6	1.33	2	0.41
1-25%	16	23.19	21	25.61	19	4.22	8	1.64
26-50%	5	7.25	4	4.88	26	5.78	12	2.45
51-75%	4	5.80	5	6.10	51	11.33	51	10.43
76-100%	18	26.09	23	28.05	348	77.33	416	85.07
n	69		82		422		489	
Teach career and/or employability skills								
none	30	42.86	33	42.31	134	37.02	139	35.46
1-25%	13	18.57	16	20.51	76	20.99	70	17.86
26-50%	3	4.29	3	3.85	20	5.52	28	7.14
51-75%	3	4.29	2	2.56	26	7.18	29	7.40
76-100%	21	30.00	24	30.77	106	29.28	126	32.14
n	70		78		362		392	

Table 4

Results of paired t-tests analyzing differences in counselor practices for students with and without disabilities on their caseload

Activity	**M**	**SD**	***t***	***p***	**n**
Individually meet students (# times)	0.24	0.57	11.25	<.0001	744
Participated in career assessment (% of students)	-0.03	0.27	-2.48	0.0134	572
Freq of participation in career assessment (# times)	0.04	0.27	3.54	0.0004	567
Career Planning Activities					
Administer career assessment(s)	-0.09	0.35	-6.26	<.0001	549
Provide information regarding results of career assessments	-0.10	0.35	-6.84	<.0001	569
Assist students to identify career goals	-0.08	0.37	-5.51	<.0001	587
Provide information about career areas and/or options	-0.08	0.35	-5.57	<.0001	594
Provide information about career requirements	-0.08	0.35	-5.49	<.0001	593
Provide assistance to develop or modify an educational program plan aligned with career goals	-0.08	0.39	-4.93	<.0001	537
Provide information about secondary career and technical education programs	-0.08	0.34	-5.73	<.0001	569
Provide information about post-secondary career and technical education programs	-0.08	0.35	-5.22	<.0001	562
Provide information about post-secondary educational institutions (e.g., colleges and universities)	-0.10	0.35	-6.42	<.0001	557
Teach career and/or employability skills	-0.05	0.31	-3.58	0.0004	469

Note. A negative mean favors students without disability; a positive mean favors students with disability.

Discussion and Implications

The results from this investigation provide a starting point for understanding the career development activities of middle and high school counselors. This investigation revealed that the average caseload for school counselors was 355 to 1. This finding is contrary to recent school counseling literature (ASCA, 2006), which acknowledged that the average student to counselor ratio is 488 to 1. It is important to note, that ASCA recommends a 250 to 1 ratio to allow for considerable individual attention (Alliman-Brisset, Turner & Skovolt, 2004; ASCA, 2003). A closer examination of the data found that the majority (53.41%) of the participants in this study worked directly with students which may indicate that these school counselors are benefiting from a lower student counselor ratio. The data also identified school counselor caseloads for high school (328 to 1), middle school (389 to 1) and elementary school students (462 to 1). These results constitute a new finding in that previous discussions and investigations regarding school counselor caseloads have been based primarily on the total school population. Furthermore, the revelation that there was a significant difference in caseload size between high schools and elementary schools and middle and high schools reflect the prevailing notion that the majority of school counselors are located in secondary school environments (ASCA, 2003). Future research may want to consider the impact large caseloads have on school counselors meeting the career development needs of elementary and middle school students.

Another interesting finding from this investigation was that school counselors met more often with students with disabilities; however students without disabilities participated in more career assessments. One plausible explanation for this discovery is

that school counselors have limited formal training with special needs populations. Milsom and Akos (2003) in their examination of the preparation of school counselors found that less than half completed a disability course and only 26% completed fieldwork that included working with persons with disabilities. As a result, participants in this study may believe that “specialized” counseling interventions with a special needs population means more frequent monitoring of student progress (remediation). Consequently, this perception may have limited their time and ability to focus on more proactive exploratory activities such as career assessment. Unfortunately, the current study did not examine the “content” of these career planning sessions. Clearly this is an area for further investigation.

One of the major purposes of the study was to identify the career planning activities of middle and high school counselors. The finding that high school counselors most frequently cited “provide information about post-secondary career and technical education programs” and “provide information about career areas and/or options” as career planning activities are aligned with the views of school counseling scholars who have identified these particular strategies as important components for career development among high school students. Likewise, the result identifying “administering career assessments” and “providing information regarding results of career assessments(s)” as most frequently used techniques among middle school counselors supports the premise that opportunities to explore education and career options is most appropriate for middle school students (Durodoye, Combes, & Bryant, 2004; Herr, Cramer & Niles, 2004; Schmidt, 2003).

Perhaps the most salient theme that emerged from the query regarding career planning activities was that school counselors spend more counseling time with students without disabilities. This finding echoes those of recent researchers examining the relationship between school counselors and students with disabilities (Milsom, 2006). One explanation for this finding is that school counselors may be harboring negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities. Milsom (2006) asserted that “a school counselor’s bias against students with disabilities could result in a school counselor having low expectations for students with disabilities” (p. 67). Moreover, according to Johnson’s (2006) contextualized humanistic perspective, how we think about clients (humans) is often how we react toward them. It is well documented that school counselors do not feel equipped to work with students with impairments (e.g. Durodoye, Combes, & Bryant, 2004; Milsom, 2006; Studer & Quigney, 2003; Scarborogh & Gilbride, 2006). As a result, Milsom (2006) and Scarborogh & Gilbride (2006) suggested that school counselors should consider professional development activities related to disabilities and collaboration with other helping professionals (e.g., rehabilitation counselors) to address their own bias and develop more meaningful counseling strategies.

Conclusion

The findings from this study will enable the school counseling profession to transcend traditional understandings on assisting students with their career planning. Advantages to this current study was the large sample of school counselors, the wide age range of participants, and that the data highlighted group membership (students with or without disabilities). However, some limitations should also be noted. The

majority of our participants were White American females, therefore precluding specific comments about how school counselors of color or White men might perceive their career planning activities with students. Also, there were clear trade offs to using a survey (to obtain a large sample) in lieu of interviews. We could not ask participants to clarify or give detailed information about their career counseling activities with students. We also could not identify their non-verbal behaviors or certain emotions when answering the survey questions. This additional knowledge might have provided more insight into the association between the career planning activities of school counselors and group membership. Additional research is needed to develop empowering intervention strategies to meet the career development of needs for all students.

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