

THE ROLE OF COUNSELING

IN INCREASING ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITY IN MISSOURI



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School counselors are crucial actors in postsecondary access. No plan purporting to expand educational opportunity is complete without them. Counselors in Missouri are well aware of the importance of their role, have some concerns about counseling in their state, and also have some suggestions for addressing those concerns. This brief report places the ideas of Missouri school counselors in conversation with the research literature in order to provide a detailed and useful description of the state of counseling in Missouri.

According to research on educational opportunity, one of the many roles of school counselors is to bridge the knowledge gap for potential first-generation college-bound students and their peers, provide support for the children of college graduates and their families, and help students determine the best possible education and career paths to take. Research on counseling has painted counselors as the primary decision-makers for students and families, people who do considerable gate-keeping (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963; Erickson & Shultz, 1982). This negative image has proven to have some longevity, but the fact remains that good, well-trained

counselors are essential to getting students prepared for and into postsecondary schools (McDonough, 1997; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Schneider, 2003; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003).

In this report we first present the challenges that Missouri counselors perceive as most important concerning their role in expanding educational opportunity in the state. These concerns are discussed in the context of available research on the topics. The second part is a reporting of proposed solutions from Missouri counselors. When possible, research is included in this section as well. The conclusion provides a brief summary of how the information in the report addresses the distribution of educational opportunity in the state and goes on to provide a summary table of the challenges and possible solutions.

Perspectives of the counseling field in Missouri were expressed by counselors during a special focus group conducted by the Educational Policy Institute and MOHELA on February 25, 2005 in Jefferson City, Missouri.

CHALLENGES

The challenges to educational opportunity where counseling is concerned can be grouped into four sections: work environment, student and family attitudes and behaviors, K-16 connections, and a weak policy environment. In the section that follows, the views of Missouri counselors are listed and discussed.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

According to data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, the counselor-student ratio in Missouri for 2001-2002 was 1 counselor to 331 students. At the secondary level the ratio was 1 to 315.¹ The American Student Counselors Association (ASCA) recommends a ratio of 1 to 250 for effective counseling (ASCAC, 2005). The counselor-student ratio is a very important statistic for several reasons:

- The work of counselors is both personal and time-intensive. Counselors who are unable to connect with students on an individual level are less likely to be effective. This is not a reflection of their capacity or professionalism but of working conditions (ASCAa);
- When considered in the context of secondary schools, a low counselor-student ratio means that students in the upper grades are able to get more attention as individuals because counselors will have about 60-80 students per grade. Students at lower grades need less specified attention where postsecondary planning and applications are concerned (ASCAb; ASCAc); and
- Having a set policy concerning counselor-student ratios makes it possible for educational systems to work together to maintain a qualified pool. District and school administrators can plan more

effectively and design and implement professional development with more focus.

Another work environment challenge reported by Missouri counselors and supported by the research and ASCA is that counselors are rendered ineffective by requirements and/or pressure to regularly perform non-counseling duties. Such duties interfere with the performance of counseling duties which directly impacts students.

STUDENT AND FAMILY ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS

Missouri counselors are wise to be concerned about low-aspirations and considerable reticence on the part of students and their families. They note that students are incredulous about the potential for employment after high school. Missouri counselors have seen what they perceive as families actively holding students back from postsecondary opportunities. There is also evidence in Missouri that students have unrealistic expectations considering their academic abilities and/or preparation. Overall, counselors seem to feel that students and families lack the desire or personal fortitude to reach for anything beyond their current situations. This is a reasonable interpretation of what they see, but the research on this issue offers an alternative interpretation.

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¹ This statistic masks that fact that some districts only report having a fraction of a counselor. The ASCA does not treat this topic specifically, but it is our position that schools require full-time counselors regardless of the number of students. It may be possible to have less specialization (discussed later), but having a part-time counselor is an indication that needs are manifesting themselves and student needs are being “put on hold.”

Research is very consistent in its finding that the vast majority of parents want what is best for their children. This includes, and is largely guided by, protecting their children from hurt and disappointment. Non-college graduate parents from low-income and working class backgrounds are likely to have had damaging schooling experiences characterized by low expectations and class bias (Connell, 1982). Reticence on the part of parents where planning and preparing for postsecondary education should perhaps be interpreted as “not getting their children’s hopes up” rather than holding their children back. The realities of low-income families support (and arguably seem to require) the kinds of behaviors that counselors see as self-defeating.

Postsecondary education can be thought of as a door to the middle class (Williams and Swail, 2005; Baum & Payea, 2004; Carnevale, 2001; IHEP, 1998). Researchers have found that the potential for social mobility is a difficult family matter (Connell, 1982). On one hand, parents want the best for their children, but they also fear their children becoming distanced from the family because of class divisions. This is very difficult terrain to navigate, but research has been done that suggests it is possible to work with families on this very delicate issue (Bemak & Cornely, 2002).

At the foundation of low aspirations and preparation-aspiration gaps is a lack of good information. It would be naïve to suggest that people with good information will act on it, but having information is a necessary beginning. Part of what feeds the attitudes and behaviors that counselors see and perceive negatively is the result of the knowledge and skills that students and families possess. Counselors have a different set of knowledge and skills and interpret behaviors through that lens.

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A study conducted by the Stanford Bridge Project reinforces the Missouri counselors’ perception that there is gap between what students aspire to do and what steps they are taking (e.g. course-taking patterns and test-taking) (Venezia et al., 2003). The report shows that students and families lack basic information about the schools in their own states and communities, what it takes to get into those schools, and how much it costs. Very many students eliminate postsecondary options early because they and their families overestimate how much schooling costs (Hossler, Schmit, & Bouse, 1991; Kane, 1994).

Student and family attitudes and beliefs are the results of the confluence of a complex set of knowledge and experiences. Counselors can either see these attitudes and beliefs through their own very informed lenses or attempt

to interpret what they see through the eyes of the students and families. Counselors who find a way to connect with families can have very positive influences on the decisions they make about postsecondary preparation and planning (Mau, Hitchcock, & Calvert, 1998).

K-16 CONNECTIONS

Missouri counselors have also identified holes in the state’s educational pathways. What is true in Missouri is also true elsewhere. The course requirements, knowledge, and skills for which students are held accountable in K-12 are not adequately aligned with what is needed to get into or succeed at the postsecondary level. It is also difficult for counselors to make postsecondary schooling real to students who are at a significant distance from any type of postsecondary institution. Missouri counselors expressed concerns that college admission officers are not making enough trips to rural areas because there are not a significant number of applicants or admits to justify the expense and there are not sufficient outreach programs to draw students into the

postsecondary institutions at the regional or state level. Furthermore, Missouri counselors are concerned about the lack of support for career/college counseling in the elementary grades.

The research on counseling and postsecondary access speaks to each of these concerns. The gap between K-12 coursework and postsecondary admission and success is staggering across the country (Conley, 2003). Although there are efforts to align curriculum, some existing policies present barriers. In addition, opponents of alignment suggest that college is not for everyone so putting everyone on the path to college is not a good idea (Rosenbaum, 2001). Regardless, research has shown that the knowledge and skills necessary for postsecondary admission and success also benefit students who decide to go into technical schools or directly into work after high school. There is nothing inherently wrong, according to the research, to making sure that everyone graduates from high school prepared to pursue some form of education beyond high school whether he and she chooses to or not.

The idea that not all students are going to college or should go to college is a controversial one steeped in a history of discrimination and tracking. Some students are not well-suited for postsecondary study, and many have no need of it for what they want to do with their lives. Considering what has already been said about low-income and working class parents, it may be easier to have discussions about the full range of opportunities with these students and families. There are, of course, exceptions. Higher income families—led by degree-holding parents—will have spent years preparing to have formal discussions about college options with counselors and will undoubtedly be less receptive to counselors who suggest that the student could or should consider other

options. This is supported by the finding that high income students who are not prepared for postsecondary work still apply to and enroll in college at rates similar to that of qualified low-income students (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000). This is a serious challenge for counselors that requires they consider that their primary obligation is to the student, which is a basic ethical standard for the profession, and weigh that against the school culture, family issues, and political realities. Indeed, a four-year degree is not for everyone, however, since some level of education beyond high school carries important social and economic value, it is important that we understand how to communicate the value to a family. This is where career counseling becomes very important (Lapan, Tucker, Kim, & Kosciulek, 2003; Mau et al., 1998; Peterson, Long, & Billups, 1999). If a student has a

sense of what he and she wants to do, it is easier to lay out a plan that includes the necessary postsecondary steps than if a student is without a professional goal.

Creating opportunities for potential first-generation students to visit postsecondary institutions is part of elevating expectations.

The work of the admission office is very much that of any marketing and/or recruitment office. Investments will be made where there are the greatest chances for returns. This is a simple economic reality, but there are other options. Outreach programs, though varied in both focus and quality, can serve as excellent ways to familiarize students with what is available in the state. Day and residential programs that allow students at a great distance from postsecondary institutions to visit and meet with students and faculty provide a new set of experiences for students who have no knowledge of such institutions. The research on outreach programs is mixed, but there are some characteristics that are common among good programs (Gándara & Bial, 2001; Swail & Perna, 2002).

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At what point actual preparation for postsecondary study begins is an open discussion. However, it is rather certain that the children of college graduates tend to have developed a predisposition for college by the end of the 8th grade (Don Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). This may be one of the reasons that secondary counseling beginning in the middle school is recently taking on a new fervor and Missouri counselors are reasonable in their desire to start these conversations in the early grades. Age appropriateness is always a concern, but children who have heard about the college experiences of the parents all of their lives are getting some career and college counseling from their parents, albeit non-specific, while in elementary school.

WEAK POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Missouri counselors point out several challenges that are the direct results of weaknesses in policy and implementation. In addition to the counselor-student ratio discussed at the outset, counselors are also concerned with the high-stakes accountability environment skewing both the curriculum focus and the direction of resources to those who will always do well. In addition to the budget problems that force them to do non-counselor tasks, they are still held accountable for their counselor tasks as if those others do not exist. And counselors are disturbed by the distribution of opportunity within the state. High ability students are rewarded for their skills only when they have the good fortune to be in the “right” school district and the “right” schools. This topic of the distribution of opportunity is very complex and is effec-

tively the topic of this report. It will be treated directly in the conclusion.

As the counselor-student ratio and job tasks have already been addressed, this section focuses on other concerns. A full discussion of high-stakes accountability is not warranted here, but there is research about perverse incentives within such systems (Goertz; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). It is the role of the state to monitor state policies and make sure that implementation is producing the right incentives. If it is true that curriculum and instruction are resulting in a widening of the gap between K-12 schooling and postsecondary preparation, then that issue should be investigated. Additionally, holding staff accountable for tasks they are prevented from performing effectively also produces disincentives, possibly the worse of which is leaving the job (Fuhrman & O'Day, 1996). Counselors that are supervised by people who do not understand the complexity of their work could become seriously dissatisfied according to theories of and research on motivation. This very often results in poor performance on the part of the staff person. The negative outcomes of this are inevitably felt by students and the repercussions can be permanent.

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POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Although Missouri counselors had a number of issues to suggest as serious challenges to educational opportunity where counseling is concerned, they had given the issues enough thought to offer possible solutions. Those solutions include: changes in pre-service training for principals, teachers, and counselors; a mandated counselor-student ratio; the opportunity to fulfill the job tasks as outlined in the Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Program; full implementation of the already adopted Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Program; monitoring home-schooled students; and a statewide postsecondary options marketing strategy.

Missouri counselors suggest that pre-service training for other educators regarding the Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Program is lacking. While they understand that each type of educational professional receives training specific to his or her field, they also believe that there is space for training on how different educational professionals work together. The work of counselors is poorly understood both by teachers and principals, which makes the work environment for counselors particularly challenging.

This pre-service training concern is also important for counselors. According to the ASCA, curricula for pre-service counselors are far too diverse. School counselors do not receive extensive college counselor training in these programs. They are more focused on psychological counseling and some vocational type counseling. A review of the school staff of many college preparatory independent schools reveals a more complex counseling structure that all but makes school counselor programs obsolete. Such schools tend to employ three distinct types of counselors: therapeutic counselors (trained in psychology or social work), school psychologists (responsible for

educational testing and learning accommodations), and a college counselor.²

If Missouri schools continue to require school counselors to perform some part of all three roles, which is supported by the ASCA, then counselor-student ratios must, according to counselors, become a part of state law. Having ratios above the 250:1 level recommended by the ASCA means putting the well-being of students at risk. Furthermore, students from underprivileged backgrounds—students experiencing

extreme and working poverty, both urban and rural—require more from their counselors than the average student. This suggests that 250:1 may even be a high number in such situations. Research should be done to determine where the greatest needs for stu-

dents are and what counseling ratios are required to meet those needs. Once the ratios are determined, they have to be made semi-permanent such that increasing them is difficult while lowering them is still possible.

If both pre-service training and counselor-student ratios are dealt with appropriately, counselor job tasks may be more fully implemented. In the absence of those changes, it is still important to address the challenges facing counselors in schools. Table 1 (next page) lists that kinds of inappropriate tasks that are doled out to school counselors across the nation. Missouri counselors are no exception. School leaders appear to be lacking in their understanding of the school counselor role and putting the needs of students to the side in favor of getting administrative work done. “Making the trains run on-time” is not the job of school counselors and continu-

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² This information was gleaned from an informal study conducted by the authors. The research of McDonough (1997, 2000) also supports this description of the counseling structures in independent and high income schools.

ing to put them in that role diminishes the likelihood that they will be able to fulfill their professional roles effectively.

Missouri counselors are interested in the implementation of the program that the state has already adopted. The comprehensive program is supposed to serve as a guide not only to counselors but also to school leaders. It addresses a clear frustration among Missouri counselors that their supervisors are not well enough versed in their roles to offer the kind of leadership and supervision needed.

Having such a program in place would also make school counseling a part of school evaluations in a more consistent way. Missouri counselors are concerned that the state’s school improvement plans underestimate the potential contributions of school counseling programs and fails to include them in evaluations. Counselors are aware that they are asking for greater accountability, but they wisely see this as an opportunity to implement their programs and allow them to concentrate on their professional duties (Elmore, Abelmann, & Fuhrman, 1996).

All of these potential solutions recommended by counselors and largely supported by research will not reach children in home-schooling situations unless the state determines that these students deserve guidance as well. Missouri schools will be held accountable for home-schooled children who enter the schools. While there is no research to support this claim, Missouri counselors feel that such students will be more likely to be at grade level and perform well on state assessments if they have had to be in contact with a school counselor on a regular basis. More research needs to be done to determine if this would prove to be true.

One final suggestion from school counselors is that the state adopt a marketing campaign. Students, families, and communities with little or no exposure to postsecondary education need more information. The state has a full spectrum of postsecondary opportunities and could assist in changing the perspectives of families toward them through a campaign.

Table 1. Appropriate and Inappropriate School Counselor Responsibilities

Inappropriate Non-Counseling Activities	Appropriate Counseling Responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Registering and scheduling all new students ▪ Administering cognitive, aptitude and achievement tests ▪ Signing excuses for students who are tardy or absent ▪ Performing disciplinary actions ▪ Sending home students who are not appropriately dressed ▪ Teaching classes when teachers are absent ▪ Computing grade-point averages ▪ Maintaining student records ▪ Supervising study halls ▪ Clerical record keeping ▪ Assisting with duties in the principal’s office 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Designing individual student academic programs ▪ Interpreting cognitive, aptitude and achievement tests ▪ Counseling students with excessive tardiness or absenteeism ▪ Counseling students with disciplinary problems ▪ Counseling students about appropriate school dress ▪ Collaborating with teachers to present guidance curriculum lessons ▪ Analyzing grade-point averages in relationship to achievement ▪ Interpreting student records ▪ Providing teachers with suggestions for better study hall management ▪ Ensuring student records are maintained in accordance with state and federal regulations ▪ Assisting the school principal with identifying and resolving student issues, needs and problems ▪ Collaborating with teachers to present proactive, prevention-based guidance curriculum lessons

Source: ASCA(c)

CONCLUSION

School counselors have historically been called the “educational decision-makers” and the “gatekeepers” because of the important role they have played in determining who will and will not go on to postsecondary education. The Missouri counselors presented in this report demonstrate that they are interested in changing the distribution of postsecondary opportunity in the state. In fact, counselors actually made the statement that too many students who should be able to take advantage of postsecondary opportunities could not in Missouri.

The challenges listed by the counselors are real not only in Missouri but across the nation. Some of the solutions are in the hands of the counselors themselves, but only if schools, districts, and states structure their work environments so that counselors can do their jobs well. Counselors will be in a much better position to understand and interpret correctly student and family attitudes and behaviors when their work environments give them appropriate mental

space and actual time, when the state has made the K-16 continuum clearer to educators and communities, and when the policy environment supports all of these kinds of changes.

Counselor solutions to the problems reflect a clear understanding of a complex situation. Some of the solutions have research support, some do not, but counselors are aware of this and go on to suggest that more research needs to be done to provide empirical (evidence-based) solutions to the state’s counseling challenges. Regardless, it is clear to Missouri counselors that the solutions are to be found in addressing every aspect of school counseling in the state from pre-service training to the assignment of tasks to the larger policy structures that govern much of education.

The table below revisits the challenges and solutions that counselors discussed and allows readers to examine them in parallel.

Table 2. Challenges and Solutions for School Counseling in Missouri

Challenges	Solutions
Work Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conduct research to determine an appropriate counselor-student ratio. ▪ Provide pre-service training for all educators about counselor roles. ▪ Fully implement the state-approved Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Program model.
Student and Family Attitudes and Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide counselors the time and training (pre-service and in-service) to interpret the attitudes and behaviors appropriately. ▪ Conduct a state marketing campaign to provide information on all postsecondary opportunities in the state, their costs, and available student aid. ▪ Utilize the Missouri Career Management System to provide information on career opportunities in the state and the education linkages to those opportunities.
K-16 Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ K-16 curriculum alignment. ▪ Fully implement the state-approved Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Program model.
Weak Policy Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify the roles that a fully implemented comprehensive guidance program can play in Comprehensive School Improvement Programs. ▪ Make school counseling programs a part of the accountability system. ▪ Provide clear policies (counselor-student ratios, guidance policies) that allow for the full implementation of the Missouri Comprehensive Guidance Program.

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