

ARE SCHOOL COUNSELORS IMPACTING UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS' THINKING ABOUT POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION?

A NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE STUDY

Using the HSL:09 data set and social capital theory as a framework, the authors examined which student and school characteristics predicted students' identification of their school counselor as the person who had the most influence in their thinking about postsecondary education (N = 3,239,560). Results indicated that African American, first-generation, and private school students were more likely to name their counselor as having had the greatest influence. The article discusses future research and implications for policy, practice and training.

From President Obama's challenge that every American pursue at least one year of vocational or college training by 2020 to the more recent Reach Higher initiative (The White House, 2014), there has been a national push to enhance the college and career readiness of high school students.

This momentum, spurred on by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the Education Trust, puts school counselors at the forefront of this conversation (ASCA, 2012a, 2012b; Hines, Lemons, & Crews, 2011). Moreover, as highlighted in research, school counselors play a critical role in assisting students with college and career readiness and postsecondary planning (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009; Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; McDonough, 2005).

Some groups of students are still underrepresented in college enrollment, including first-generation, low-income, African American, and Hispanic students (Kena et al., 2015; McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012; Pham & Keenan, 2011; Weinstein & Savitz-Romer, 2009). As of 2013, students from high-income families enrolled in college at a 31% higher rate than students from low-income families (Kena et al., 2015). Moreover, while 62% of undergraduates enrolled in public four-year institutions in 2013 were White, only 12% and 15% were African American and Hispanic, respectively (Kena et al., 2015). According to the National Center for Educa-

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tion Statistics (NCES), first-generation students are more likely to be African American or Hispanic and come from low-income families (Chen, 2005). These gaps may aid the perpetuation of societal inequalities, as those with at least a bachelor's degree are slated to earn 66% more income in their lifetime compared to those with only a high school degree (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010).

Scholars often use social capital theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001) to contextualize disparities in educational attainment among underrepresented groups. In a broad sense, Coleman (1988) described a facet of social capital as an informational channel, or “the potential for information that inheres in social relations” (p. 104). Therefore, students belonging to groups that are underrepresented in higher education may have differential access to the social capital related to the pursuit of postsecondary education within their social networks. Fortunately, an understanding of social capital theory also contextualizes ways in which school counselors can advocate for underrepresented students and work to close this college access gap (Bryan et al., 2011; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; McDonough, 2005; McKillip et al., 2012).

SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY AND THE ROLE OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS

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postsecondary counseling than public school counselors (Clinedinst, 2015).

Bryan and colleagues (2009) assessed how student and school-level factors predicted the likelihood of a student meeting with their school counselor for college information. They found that African American and female students were more likely to see their counselor about college while students from larger schools with fewer counselors and schools with higher populations of students on free and reduced lunch were less likely to do so.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF WEIGHTED SAMPLE INCLUDED IN LOGISTIC REGRESSION ANALYSIS

	(N = 20,634) %/M SE	(N = 20,000) %/M SE	(N = 20,225) %/M SE
Student race			
Asian/Pacific Islander	4.10	5.65	4.14
African American	11.93	21.22	12.19
Hispanic	20.74	19.84	20.71
More than one race	7.30	12.12	7.43
White	55.94	41.17	55.52
Student gender			
Male	50.54	45.00	50.39
Female	49.46	55.00	49.61
Student first-generation status			
Not first generation	38.44	19.81	37.91
First generation	61.56	80.19	62.09
School locale			
Suburban	27.88	30.67	27.96
City	29.24	35.49	29.42
Town	12.76	11.07	12.71
Rural	30.11	22.77	29.90
School type			
Public	93.00	91.25	92.95
Private	7.00	8.75	7.05
% of time college counseling			
10% or less	16.42	15.24	16.39
11-20%	38.14	42.27	38.25
21-50%	39.28	35.21	39.16
More than 50%	6.17	7.28	

20,634 schools and 20,225 schools, depending on the analysis and resultant missing data.

Variables

The au-

thors derived the dependent variable in this research study from a survey item in which students were asked to identify the person that had the most influence in their thinking about postsecondary education among 12

categories (e.g., high school counselor, family, friends, etc.). See Table 2 for percentage breakdown of the responses. For the current study, the authors dichotomized the variable to denote that a student either picked the school

their multicultural competencies. Part of this is the recognition both of the lived experiences of African American students and other students of color and of the challenges faced by low-income students and how systemic barriers may impede access to postsecondary opportunities. Moreover, ASCA (2012a) charges school counselors to advocate against school policies that may put underrepresented students at a disadvantage, such as any gatekeeping policies or practices that disproportionately track particular students to a more rigorous college-ready curriculum while excluding other students.

Although school counselors' outreach to underrepresented students is essential, the descriptive statistics of

the current study support the idea that this advocacy should also be extended to students' families. Parents play such a crucial role in postsecondary decisions (MacAllum et al., 2007) and the ASCA Ethical Standards (2010) calls for counselors to build strong, collaborative relationships with families and caregivers in support of the students they serve. Therefore, including parents in conversations about postsecondary education is essential as a means to both respect their involvement and provide further encouragement, information, and support to underrepresented students through their parents/caregivers. By doing so, school counselors can create a school-family partnership to further support

school counselor also may have had on the student, nor does it identify the specific practices that led the student to be so strongly influenced by their counselor.

These limitations point to opportunities for future research. First, researchers should specifically examine the perceived effects of school counselors' impact from the students' perspective through numerous multifaceted questions. These questions should encompass not only influence, but quality of the interaction, interventions utilized, and the means through which the school counselors supplemented students' access to social capital regarding postsecondary education.

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