

## High School Counselors' Influence

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### **Abstract**

*Many college freshmen feel they are inadequately prepared to enter college due to a lack of guidance from their high school counselors. This study investigated comparative attitudes about the influence of school counselors on students by surveying 60 male and female freshmen at a Midwestern university. It was hypothesized that more males than females would feel that they were not adequately prepared for college by their high school counselor. Results supported the hypothesis that more male than female students felt they were not adequately prepared for college by their high school counselor. Implications for practitioners and future researchers are that there is a strong need to inform schools, counselors, and parents that school counselors need to take part in professional development that will better prepare students to enter college.*

### **Introduction**

Less than half of students entering college actually obtain a degree, and only about one-third of college freshmen re-enroll for a second year (Hoyt, 2001). These statistics create a growing concern considering the commitment of resources, time, and energy that students, parents, faculty, and staff devote so students can attend college and earn a degree. In addition, students experience psychological costs including frustration, failure, and lowered self-esteem (Alexitch, 1999; Leon & McNeill, 1986; Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996). Many college freshmen feel they are inadequately prepared to enter college due to a lack of guidance from their high school counselors. The more prepared students are for college the more likely they are to graduate (Mau, Hitchcock, & Calvert, 1998; Pyne, Bernes, Magnusson, & Poulsen, 2002; Alexitch, Kobussen, & Stookey, 2004; Bardick, Bernes, Magnusson, & Witko, 2005). School Counselors are certified/licensed professionals who deliver comprehensive school counseling programs encouraging students' academic, career, and personal/social development; helping all students in maximizing student achievement (American School Counselor Association, n.d.). We examined literature and surveyed the comparative attitudes of college freshmen students regarding high school college preparation from their school counselors.

### **Literature Review**

The current, relevant issue is whether or not college freshmen are prepared for college by their high school counselors. A lack of college preparation results in students spending more time and money than necessary to complete their college education. In research reviewed on this topic examined what high school students perceive to be the expectations of their counselors and other influential persons. The expectations of the students regarding the types of preparation for college they receive are also important to consider. Several studies suggest that students are not being provided with the expectations for post secondary education, which students find necessary. It is also important to involve the students' parents in the process of preparation. This

can help parents understand how they can help their child as well as what resources are available (Mau et al., 1998; Pyne et al., 2002; Alexitch et al., 2004; Bardick et al., 2005).

Mau et al. (1998) found that one of the most important tasks in school counseling is to facilitate students' educational and vocational development. This study examined high school students' postsecondary plans and what they perceive to be the expectations of the counselors and other influential persons'. The results of the study found that over 50% of 10th grade students thought their counselors expected them to go to college; by 12th grade that percentage had increased.

Pyne et al. (2002) found that including students in career needs assessment creates a more effective career program design. Most students discuss their career plans with their parents instead of school counselors. The study involved students in grades 7-12 who participated in the Comprehensive Career Needs Survey. This tool consisted of questions evaluating career education and support needs within each participating school. Results of the study indicated that implementing earlier instruction would enable students to progress to more advanced career exploration in the older grades, which might involve greater career development.

Alexitch et al. (2004) determined that students may not have the opportunity to receive guidance specific to their needs, abilities, and interest. The study found that for students intending to go to college, school counselors provided information concerning funding, application procedures, institutional options, and what students needed to fulfill their goals. These counselors also provided encouragement and knowledge of the academic demands of college to all students who were unsure of attending post-secondary education. Ironically, students who had full intentions of attending college did not receive any academic expectations from their school counselors. The study noted that teachers provided students with more details about institutional and program options than did school counselors. Less than half the students in the study had actually met with their school counselor.

Bardick et al. (2005) examined parents' perceptions of available career planning programs, services, or resources by having parents assess the career needs of junior high and senior high students. Surveys were completed by 765 junior high parents and 337 senior high parents and consisted of 4 questions: 1. How prepared is your child for their next career step?; 2. What role do you think you have to play in helping your child?; 3. What would help you better fill that role?; and 4. What gaps in services, programs, or resources would help your child? The majority of the parents felt that their child was somewhat or not at all prepared for career planning.

Based on the literature, career preparation programs are more effective when students actually take part in developing programs. In addition, the type of college preparatory information school counselors provides their students with is crucial to students' decisions in whether or not to further their education. Students are aware that counselors expect them to continue their education; however, there is a gap between their aspirations for college and their enrollment in college prep classes. It was also found that by involving parents the relationship between home and school is strengthened through communication, which can help students be better prepared for their future careers. The current study is designed to help fill the gap by understanding how influential students' feel their school counselors were in preparing them for college. By understanding how students are prepared by their school counselors schools can develop new ways to improve current career preparation programs.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory used in this study is the Social Learning Theory, developed by psychologists Julian Rotter and Albert Bandura (Strong, DeVault, & Cohen, 2005). This theory emphasizes the

role of cognition in learning; human develop through interactions within culture, society, and the family. This theory would predict that the influence of peers, teachers, and parents affects a student's attitude toward what they believe their school counselors are capable of regarding college preparation. It is hypothesized that students' relationships with their school counselors affect preparation for their college career and their ability to graduate.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the research question: "What are traditional college freshmen male and female comparative attitudes regarding how influential high school counselors were in preparing them for college?" It is our hope that the results from this study will be used by professional researchers and school counselors to improve college preparation programs for students. We also believe it is important for high school students to enter college knowing what to expect academically, financially, socially, emotionally, etc. so they will be more prepared to complete their education in a reasonable amount of time.

### **Methods**

#### *Participants*

The site of this study was at a Midwestern university. Participants included 60 freshmen students in a *Strategies for Academic Success* class; 20 were male and 40 were female. Of the 20 males, 14 were 18 years of age and six were 19 years of age. Of the 40 females, 29 were 18 years of age and 11 were 19 years of age.

#### *Research Design*

The survey design type used in this study is best described as a cross-sectional design in that it was used to capture attitudes, from a cross section of the population at one point in time. The data collection method was self-administered questionnaires. The rationale for using this method was convenience, low cost, and the quick return of data, which was necessary due to the fast pace of our research course. The population was the university student population; our sample was male and female students in three different sections of a *Strategies for Academic Success* class. The study used a non-random purposive sample design since the study needed information from freshmen students, which the classes we surveyed were comprised of. We used nonrandom sampling in order to fulfill our sample quota in a short period of time and to ensure we would collect data from the age group desired. To ensure the ethical protection of human subjects we completed the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training; our study was approved by the IRB.

#### *Data Collection Instrument*

In order to address the attitudes of university freshmen students regarding the influence of their school counselor, a survey was designed. The survey included a cover letter with an implied consent which included a description of the study, definitions of any terms not commonly known, risks and benefits, time commitment, confidentiality, voluntary participation, contact information of the research team and the supervisor, and instructions for completing the survey.

The survey consisted of two demographic questions, gender and age. We chose gender to compare groups and analyze the data. Participants were then given six closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the respondents' attitudes ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Questions were formed by the

literature and theory regarding what factors related to the college freshmen's attitudes on high school counselor's influence on students' decisions about college.

The survey instrument has both face validity and content validity. The questions and concepts addressed in the survey are literature-inspired; it was determined that they clearly connected to the larger problem of lack of college preparation by school counselors. They also addressed a broad range of student's attitudes towards their school counselors. The survey was not piloted due to time constraints.

### *Procedure*

To collect the data for this study, the researchers approached students in classrooms on October 31, 2006. The purposive sampling design led to the surveying of classes that were made up of predominately freshmen students. Two professors were contacted prior to surveying students. Professors were emailed a copy of the survey to review before distribution to their classes. Upon entering classrooms, students were asked if they would be willing to fill the survey. After distributing surveys the researchers went over the implied consent with the students and encouraged them to keep the first two pages for their records. The researchers and professor remained in the hallway while surveys were being completed to get the most accurate information possible while maintaining confidentiality and eliminating any pressure that might be felt. A volunteer brought returned the surveys after all surveys were completed. We over sampled to ensure the target sample number in case of missing data. When the surveys were collected, they were kept in a locked office until data analysis.

### *Data Analysis Plan*

The data was first "cleaned" and checked for any missing data. The "cleaned" surveys were then "coded" using acronyms for each variable. The first two questions on the survey were demographic age and gender. The only independent variable was gender (*GEN*). Each survey statement was a dependent variable and given an acronym name: To determine if the participants' high school counselors played the largest role in their preparation for college as compared to the students' parents, peers, and teachers (*SLR*), if the participants' high school counselors adequately prepared me to attend college (*SAP*), if the participants' high school counselors influenced their choice of major (*SIM*), if high school resources offered by students' counselors highly influenced their decision in choosing a major (*SRI*), if participants' high school counselors' took into consideration students' values and goals regarding their potential college careers (*SVG*), and if participants' high school counselors spent enough individual time with them addressing their college concerns (*SIT*). To analyze the data, the data-analyzing computer program the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used. The individual was used as the level of analysis. Given that groups were compared groups based on gender, the data analysis included: Frequencies, cross-tabulations, and a reliability analysis: Chronbach's Alpha.

### **Results**

The first analysis conducted was a frequency distribution analysis, which indicated that there was no data missing from the surveys. The Chronbach's Alpha measure of reliability was 0.904. This value indicates that the survey items were a reliable measure of our major concept. The qualitative data, comments, from the survey are reported in the discussion section.

Table 1

*Cross Tabulations*

SLR						
GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	35.0%	35.0%	20.0%	10.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Female	22.5%	35.0%	17.5%	20.0%	5.0%	100.0%

SAP						
GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	20.0%	35.0%	15.0%	30.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Female	15.0%	17.5%	25.0%	27.5%	15.0%	100.0%

SIM						
GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	50.0%	35.0%	5.0%	5.0%	5.0%	100.0%
Female	35.0%	27.5%	17.5%	15.0%	5.0%	100.0%

SRI						
GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	35.0%	25.0%	30.0%	10.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Female	30.0%	17.5%	27.5%	20.0%	5.0%	100.0%

SVG						
GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	30.0%	15.0%	20.0%	25.0%	10.0%	100.0%
Female	15.0%	22.5%	12.5%	25.0%	25.0%	100.0%

SIT						
GEN	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
Male	30.0%	10.0%	15.0%	40.0%	5.0%	100.0%
Female	17.5%	20.0%	10.0%	25.0%	27.5%	100.0%

*Note.* (SLR)= My high school counselor played the largest role in my preparation for college versus my parents, peers, and teachers; (SAP)= My high school counselor adequately prepared me to attend college; (SIM)= My high school counselor influenced my choice of major; (SRI)= The high school resources offered by my counselor highly influenced my decision in choosing a major; (SVG)= My high school counselor took into consideration my values and goals regarding my potential college career; (SIT)= My high school counselor spent enough individual time with me addressing my college concerns.

**Discussion**

Overall, results supported the hypothesis that more male than females students felt they were not adequately prepared for college by their high school counselor. Findings suggest that more females than males felt that their school counselors played the largest role in their preparation for college versus parents, peers, and/or teachers. However, similarly to Pyne et al. (2002), findings

show that most students felt their parents, peers, and teachers played the largest role in college preparation, instead of the school counselor. Even though more male than female students disagreed that their school counselor adequately prepared them for college, both males and females did not feel prepared for college by their school counselors. Those students who had full intentions of attending college did not receive any academic expectations from their school counselors, which is supported by Alexitch et al. (2004).

Participants did not feel their school counselors influenced their choice of major or provided them with the necessary resources. Findings indicate that more female than male students felt that their values and goals regarding their potential careers were taken into consideration by their school counselor. This also supports the hypothesis that males would feel less prepared for college by their counselors. According to a study by Bardick et al. (2005), the majority of parents found that their child was somewhat or not at all prepared for career planning. Findings support how more females than males felt their school counselor spent enough individual time with them addressing their college concerns, which leads to students feeling unprepared for career planning. Overall, both males and females were unsure that their school counselors spent enough individual time with them addressing their concerns. However, Alexitch et al. determined that students may not have the opportunity to receive guidance specific to their needs, abilities, and interests.

The findings that were not supported by the literature were supported by the Social Learning Theory (Strong, 2005). Findings support the findings that parents, peers, and teachers of students play a more influential role, than school counselors, in the student's choice of major. More males than females disagreed that their school counselor influenced their choice of major; however, this finding shows that overall both males and females disagreed. The Social Learning Theory may explain this by giving males the impression that it is socially unacceptable for them to approach others for any form of help. This theory supports that fewer male than female students felt their school counselors influenced their choice of major and were not provided with adequate resources to choose a major. The results show that males disagreed that the resources offered to them highly influenced their choice of major. Again, these findings may be explained by the Social Learning Theory. This theory relates to our findings since students were found to develop through interactions with their family, with parents having more of an influence on the development of their children's values and goals. As a result, school counselors play a lesser role when considering a student's potential career. Which our findings support are overall due to males disagreeing that their values and goals were considered, however that could be due to lack of time spent one-on-one with the school counselor. The findings in this study state that both males and females agreed they had spent enough individual time with their counselor; however, there is the possibility that they were discussing several other concerns that may not have been relevant to college. Our research clearly supports that there is a need for a stronger bond between students and their counselors to help in the process of furthering their education. Overall, the Social Learning Theory supports the social trend that females are more prepared than males to enter college due to their experiences with their guidance counselors.

Qualitative information was obtained in the surveys additional comment section. The majority of females had already declared a major while only a few had either changed their major or were undecided. Some females stated they never saw their counselor, and that their peers were not helped either. Some females stated their counselors influenced where they went to college and some said that their counselors made their decisions for them. A few suggestions made by females were that their school counselors needed to be more time efficient, pay less attention to troubled students, spend more individual time with them focusing on the topic at

hand, and provide them with appropriate schedules making sure to cover all curricula. Some positive remarks were made by females about their counselors regarding their friendliness and exposure to their desired field of study.

The majority of males had already declared a major while only a few had either changed their major or were undecided. Some males had stated that their counselor did not even know their name while others did not feel the need to even meet with their counselors. Some males stated that their school counselors encouraged them to attend tech school versus a university to save time and money. It was also mentioned that it was difficult to establish a relationship with a new counselor after their old counselor had been let go.

### *Limitations*

There was an uneven sample of males and females due to not being aware of the class populations, which can lead to biased results. Another limitation is the lack of random sampling, which was due to time constraints and number of available participants.

### *Implications for Practitioners*

The results showed that there is a need to inform schools, counselors, and parents that males are less apt to approach their school counselors to ask for assistance in furthering their education. Improvements can be made by requiring students to take a semester-long course in their last two years of high school that explores potential careers. It could also be a good idea to survey males to find out what they think would help them to be able to approach their school counselor. Schools should also require their counselors to meet with each student once each semester to address future career plans. In doing this, both males and females would have an equal opportunity to discuss their values and goals surrounding their career choices. There should also be additional training for school counselors, which would aid their ability to better prepare their students. The combination of these three goals will benefit males and females by giving them more opportunities to discuss career concerns with their school counselors.

### *Implications for Future Research*

It is recommended that the next step of research would be to use a more diverse sample in different age groups with an even number of males and females. We feel this approach would lead to more accurate results. Another possibility that may lead to more accurate results could be to survey a larger and randomized sample to generalize to a larger population.

### **Conclusion**

Students feel their parents, peers, and teachers play the largest role in their college preparation instead of their school counselor. There are students that do not even receive any academic expectations from their counselors regarding college. There is a need for a stronger bond between students and their counselors to help in the process of furthering their education.

As a result of this study, it is hoped that males will feel more comfortable approaching their school counselors to discuss their future career plans. Also we would like people to recognize that school counselors are not adequately preparing students to further their education after high school in today's society. It is encouraged that action be taken to better prepare school counselors to address the needs of their students.

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