

College and Career Readiness: A Primer for School Counselors

Elizabeth Hooper, MA

Kathryn Watkins Van Asselt, PhD

Capella University

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elizabeth Hooper, 10227 E. Vista del Cielo Circle, Hereford, AZ 85615. Contact: [eamhooper@gmail.com](mailto:eamhooper@gmail.com)

### Abstract

School counselors assist students in becoming college and career ready, as early as preschool. While college ready refers to those students who are academically and socially prepared for college life and culture, career ready students are those who possess core academic skills and have the ability to apply those skills to concrete work-related situations. To support college and career readiness in the schools, school counselors provide guidance in foundational skills at the preschool to elementary school levels; focus on academic planning and goal setting at the middle school level; and address lifelong college and employability skills at the high school level. This paper serves as an orientation to the process and addresses ways to: define college and career readiness, examine equity, explore developmental needs, examine legal, ethical and state obligations, and summarize the role of school counselors in college and career readiness. Strategies specified include direct, indirect, and collaborative actions.

*Keywords:* school counselor, college, career, collaboration

### College and Career Readiness: A Primer for School Counselors

School counselors have the significant job of sharing their knowledge about college and career readiness with their teacher colleagues and school administrators. While one might think this to be true primarily at the high school level, Arizona school counselors understand how necessary it is to ensure that teachers and other stakeholders are aware that college and career development begins as early as preschool. This paper serves as a primer for school counselors to: (a) define college and career readiness, (b) consider current trends, (c) explore career developmental needs, (d) examine legal, ethical, and state obligations, and (e) summarize the role of school counselors and teachers in college and career readiness strategies.

#### **College and Career Readiness: Defined**

Curry and Milson (2017) suggested that college ready students are those who possess a comprehensive knowledge and realistic expectation about college. That is, these students have a good idea about what college is all about and what to expect when they enter their chosen higher learning institution. College ready individuals understand the content fundamentals presented by their college faculty, meaning that these students have received some classroom training in their pre-college school years to prepare them for the rigor of university-level academics. Teachers have challenged these students and they have learned certain essential skills, such as, note taking, and learning to engage with teachers and peers. College ready students find they can more easily take away key intellectual points from their college coursework, which ultimately leads to success at the collegiate level (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2014). College ready students are mentally prepared and mature enough for college life and culture.

Career ready students are those who possess core academic skills and have the ability to apply those aptitudes to concrete work-related situations. Core *soft* skills relate to

communication skills, integrity, responsibility, and the aptitude to work cohesively as a team (Spanjaard, Hall, & Stegemann, 2018). Students who are career ready are capable of expressing themselves and their ideas with increasing complexity, sophistication, and polish. They have employability skills, including critical thinking. They are able to examine, reflect upon, link, and inquire about aspects related to the business they serve. Moreover, career readiness means that these young individuals have technical, job-specific skills related to a career field and take on a more self-examining, longer-term perspective of developing a skill set (Minten & Forsyth, 2014).

### **Current Trends in College and Career Readiness**

In the matter of college attendance and degree attainment, the United States needs 22 million new college degree earners to fulfill the needs required by today's employers; however, the country is currently experiencing a shortage of college graduates (Curry & Milson, 2017). This workforce shortage is due to an increase in retirees and an increase in employers who need skilled workers with higher levels of education and training. For example, in addition to the need for more science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) professionals, there is also a national need for more workers with some STEM training (President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, 2012).

While college attendance rates have steadily increased, lower socioeconomic students and minority groups are still underrepresented at the college and university level. There may be several reasons for this underrepresentation, but one likely suggestion is that many of these students do not feel financially equipped to pursue a college education (Carter, 2006). Regarding career and employment outcomes, Curry and Milson (2017) reported those individuals with little college, or less, work in food and personal services, sales, and office support. Moreover, ethnic

minorities have a lower income as compared to their white counterparts, higher unemployment, and often lack the knowledge to convert their high educational attainments into comparable occupational outcomes (Hasmath, 2011).

### **Comprehensive Career Development**

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2012) provides a pathway for impacting student growth in three areas—career, academic, and social/emotional development—in order for students to be successful in life. ASCA stressed that while these areas of development are to be considered separately, they are also intertwined. The ASCA National Model provided a developmental program consisting of strengths-based content including knowledge, skills, and dispositions that contribute to student success and readiness for a career (Gysbers, 2013). In the area of knowledge, students know how to engage in various current and potential life roles, including being a learner and worker. Having "skills" means that students have work readiness behaviors and the interpersonal relationship skills needed to be successful in the workplace. Finally, a student's disposition refers to how well the student understands that life events, planned and unplanned, can affect them over their lifetimes.

The College Board's (2010) eight components of college and career readiness and behaviors is an approach which encourages students to attend college and prepares them for life success. This model builds the student's aspirations and social capital, offers enriching activities, fosters rigorous academic preparation, encourages early college planning, and guides students and families through the college planning process.

Schools also need to consider those students who do not plan to attend college. One idea is to tap into the local business community to encourage on-the-job training for specific students to increase their career choice self-efficacy (Falco, 2017). Under this type of program, upper

level high school students would start their year by deciding what sort of post-high school work they would like to pursue, and school counselors would help students identify what educational skills were needed for that career. Other alternatives to share with students who do not plan to attend college include trade or vocational schools, the military, volunteer opportunities, entry-level jobs, and entrepreneurship (Farrington, 2014).

### **Career Developmental Needs of School-Aged Children**

At the preschool to elementary school levels, school counselors teach foundational skills for the academic rigor and social development necessary for college and career success (College Board, 2012a). This includes guidance lessons geared toward identifying the career clusters to which specific careers belong. For example, following such a lesson, younger students should be able to place pictures of working individuals under the appropriate career cluster headings. Examples of career clusters include health, business, and public safety. Thus, a picture of a nurse assisting a patient would be placed under the health career cluster heading. There are other interventions and opportunities to inform students at this age that their career choices will affect their future lifestyles (Mariani, Berger, Koerner, & Sandlin, 2016).

At the middle school level, the focus may be on teaching the skills required for successful academic planning and goal setting (College Board, 2012b). Guidance lessons could include time management and stress management techniques, including developing coping skills. Learning about oneself through identifying goals will help students begin to think about developing an action plan toward success. Students may also receive lessons on career values; that is, students should be able to list at least five personal values they have related to careers. Examples of career values may include: adventure, autonomy, challenge, and creation.

Finally, the high school classroom is another venue to assess and inspire the career

development needs of today's adolescents (College Board, 2011). Stakeholders provide college and career guidance that supports students' personal goals and interests to ensure their future life options. At this level, guidance lessons could be geared toward helping students develop a thorough understanding of the college admissions and financial aid processes, writing effective scholarship essays, creating a resume, interviewing effectively, and applying for jobs (Curry & Milson, 2017).

### **Legal and Ethical Considerations**

#### **Federal**

Signed into national law by President Barack Obama in 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act requires that all students receive high standards of education to prepare them to succeed in college and careers, ensures that states assess and measure students' progress toward those high standards, helps to support and foster local innovations, increases student access to high-quality preschools, and places high expectations on accountability and actions taken to effect positive change in low-performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). What this means for school counselors is that they need to work with staff and faculty to meet this federal mandate. School counselors can help not only by providing classroom guidance opportunities to students that will prepare them for post-high school life, but also by helping teachers integrate college and career-related exercises into their everyday lesson plans. An example of this is working with a teacher on a social studies project in which students research a career field and then present their findings to younger students at a school career fair.

#### **State and Local**

There are a few areas of consideration at the Arizona state and local levels. The Arizona College and Career Ready Standards (AZCCRS) for Mathematics and English Language Arts

(ELA) requires Arizona to administer high-quality math and ELA assessments aligned to AZCCRS (Arizona State Senate Issue Brief, 2015). Arizona schools must identify College and Career Readiness Indicators as part of their state report card examining graduation and enrollment rates (Arizona Department of Education, 2019a) as well as meet Arizona School Counseling Standards (Arizona Department of Education, 2019b). Further, Title 15 both encourages schools to establish a college and career readiness program for at-risk students and requires schools to report how many students participate in the program (Arizona State Legislature, 2018).

### **Professional Ethics**

The ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2016) provides clear and comprehensive guidance for school counselors and other stakeholders in the matter of career development. Ethically, school counselors are bound to provide career advisement (American Counseling Association, 2014) and advocate for all student's college and career awareness, exploration, and postsecondary planning and decision-making.

School counselors also identify discrepancies or biases in college and career access. This can be accomplished through reviewing school-based reports, which can help pinpoint students with special needs, minority students, and students of lower socioeconomic status to ensure that these students receive information and support related to their college and career development needs. ASCA further mandates that school counselors work to encourage opportunities for all students to expand their work-related mindsets and behaviors. This includes providing guidance lessons and workshops on topics such as resilience, perseverance, and grit. This may also include looking into school-to-work opportunities for students.

### **Role of the School Counselor**

In addition to ethical considerations, the role of the school counselor as it relates to college and career readiness is varied. School counselors not only promote student growth in academic, career, and social/emotional domains, they also design, implement, monitor, and evaluate direct services (College Board, 2011). While direct services include face-to-face interactions between school counselors and students that involve school counseling core curriculum, individual student planning, and responsive services, indirect student services are those services provided on behalf of students that include referrals to outside-of-school resources for additional assistance. Indirect services may also include consulting and collaborating with stakeholders and community organizations. Moreover, school counselors provide students with postsecondary information, assess for academic skill sets, consider personality and interests, deliver guidance lessons and interventions, and facilitate career and college-related activities (Curry & Milson, 2017).

Equally important, school counselors consult with postsecondary school personnel. School counselors develop school-college partnerships regarding resources, curriculum, and planning (Bush, 2017). They are knowledgeable about dual credit agreements between the high school and local colleges and understand academic planning. School counselors visit colleges, universities, and career/technical schools and are fluent with the college admissions process and familiar with local scholarship opportunities. Further, school counselors reach out to college and community representatives and extend invitations to come to the school to meet with students and their families.

### **Strategies for Teachers to Promote College and Career Readiness**

There are several strategies for teachers to promote college and career readiness in their students. A teacher's role is vital in this process, as these professionals are often the first trustworthy source of information for students regardless of their work at the elementary, middle, or high school levels. Therefore, teachers can be proactive and intentional in encouraging students' strengths. Teachers can help students create resumes that highlight their experiences and successes. Resumes may include academic and athletic strengths, for example. Teachers can differentiate learning that allows students to make postsecondary connections. They encourage peer interaction and dialogue in the classroom that is meaningful and relates to college and career choices. Teachers collaborate with school counselors to prepare college and career-ready lessons. Lastly, teachers are knowledgeable regarding graduation requirements and academic planning which could provide additional insights into aiding students' college or career readiness.

### **Supporting Transitions Between Schools**

#### **School Counselor's Role**

On the part of the school counselor, the transition from elementary to middle school may include facilitating a middle school field trip. This may include coordinating with middle school teachers to put together a panel of seasoned middle school students for a question and answer session for incoming middle school students. School counselors can offer informational workshops for parents so that they may work with their children during this important transition process. Similarly, the middle school to high school transition may involve conducting visits to area high schools. School counselors also review graduation and in-state scholarship requirements, as well as career options, with middle school students.

The transition from high school to college or career can be a time consisting of mixed emotions—from excitement to trepidation—for students. School counselors are mindful of this and encourage those students who know what they want while also working with those students through career indecisions.

### **Teacher's Role**

The teacher's role in supporting transitions between schools is essential and appreciated by students and school counselors. In an effort to make the transition between elementary to middle school as seamless as possible, teachers can assist school counselors with the field trip day to the middle school. They can be open to suggestions and recommend students to serve on the panel of middle school students for the Questions and Answers session. To aid in the transition process from middle school to high school, teachers can partner with school counselors to deliver supplemental career and college readiness lessons in the classroom. Finally, teachers can use clubs and activities to recognize students' performances and capabilities as a transition service for high school students entering the college or work domains.

### **Conclusion**

The professional bond between school counselor, teacher, and student is strong. Students seek out these caring adults with their questions because they trust their school counselors and teachers will have the answers. Thus, it is vital to be knowledgeable in college and career readiness objectives and to cultivate such relationships so that no student is left behind. Every student deserves an equal chance at success, whether they pursue a postsecondary college degree or enter the world of work after high school. It is the school counselors and teacher's responsibility, both legally and ethically, to assist students on their chosen path and to give students their best chance at future success. Together, great outcomes can be achieved.



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