

IMPROVING COLLEGE ACCESS:

A REVIEW OF RESEARCH ON THE ROLE OF HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS

High school counselors potentially hold a key position to help increase the number of U.S. students receiving post-secondary degrees, particularly to address inequalities that prevent certain students from successfully transitioning to college. Using the model of student success (Perna & Thomas, 2008), this study reviewed the literature to understand how various contexts (social, school, family, student) shape high school counselor interactions with students as they work to improve post-secondary outcomes of college access and enrollment.

any educational policy makers are calling for an increase in the number of United States students receiving post-secondary education and earning college degrees (Matthews, 2010; Obama, 2009). More jobs than ever before require education beyond

high school and estimates suggest that if changes are not made, the U.S. in 2018 will have more available jobs requiring a college degree than qualified people to fill them (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). As the need for college-educated workers grows, the connection between higher education and high wages remains strong (Aud et al., 2010; Danziger & Ratners, 2010). Current economic concerns put the wage gap and need for highly educated workers in stark relief (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2009).

Regrettably, many high school students do not move successfully from college aspirations, to access, to persistence in college, and, finally, to a degree (Aud et al., 2010). The issue is not a lack of desire on the part of young adults. Most high school students seek postsecondary education; 92% of U.S. high school seniors in 2004 planned to continue their education after high school (Chen, Wu, & Tasoff, 2010). However, in 2009, just 31% of 25- to 29-year-olds had completed a bachelor's degree or higher (Aud et al., 2010).

There is a particular need to find ways to support traditionally under-represented students in their prepara-

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tion for and pursuit of post-secondary degrees (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). This includes low-income students, first generation college-bound students, and students from Black, Latino/a, and American Indian backgrounds. The lower likelihood of college degrees for these groups is particularly pressing among the current U.S. student population that is increasing in racial and ethnic diversity each year (Aud et al., 2010).

The emphasis on increasing the edu-

within these contexts: (a) broad social, (b) school, (c) familial, and (d) student internal. The four sections of this research review are organized around these contexts, with a focus on the school counselor-student interactions in high school to improve post-secondary outcomes of college preparation and enrollment. Each section highlights what the research suggests about the role of school counselors within this context and notes potential areas for future research. In addition

school to college transition (see, e.g., applications of Brofenbrenner's ecological theory of student development [Schultheiss, 2005] or Glen Elder's life-course perspective [Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2011]). However, the Perna and Thomas model was developed based on a comprehensive, interdisciplinary review of the research on student success in college readiness, enrollment, achievement, and post-college attainment. Thus, its application to the role of the high school counselor in helping students prepare for college is particularly relevant for the time period of the high school to college transition. Other applications are more expansive in their views of the trajectory of student development. The approach addressed here is also particularly useful as a way to develop a long-term research agenda on the high school counselor's role in the college preparation of students.

Based on the Perna and Thomas conceptual model, the authors propose a framework for research that considers the multiple layers of context within which school counselors interact with students to assist in college readiness and enrollment. Each of the four layers previously mentioned influences the college-preparatory process of the student, including the students' own attitudes and behaviors, leading a student towards or away from college readiness and access. The interactions between a school counselor and student reach across the school context and student internal contexts, and are only a piece of the college preparatory process of the student.

AS THE NEED FOR COLLEGE-EDUCATED WORKERS GROWS, THE CONNECTION BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION AND HIGH WAGES REMAINS STRONG.

cational attainment of U.S. students has heightened the need for research on factors that contribute to both college admission and college completion. High school counselors can contribute substantially to reaching the goal of increased college enrollment and persistence. Counselors are school-based representatives who work to deliver programs and services to support all students via "individual planning" in the school (ASCA, n.d.). They are also in a position to address inequalities that prevent certain students from successfully transitioning through high school and into college (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). A surprising finding was that researchers studying the transition from high school to college often overlook the role of school counselors (Adelman, 1999, 2006) even when school counselors are their targeted audience (Trusty, 2004).

For this literature review, the authors provide a summary of the current research on college preparation in high school and the role of school counselors. Further developing past reviews (McDonough, 2005), the article begins with a conceptual model based on the work of Perna and Thomas (2008) to establish the need for a contextual understanding of the work of high school counselors. The conceptual framework is situated

to providing researchers with suggestions regarding areas in need of deeper study, this article offers some points of guidance to counselors as they work to implement individual student planning as part of the delivery system component of the framework of the ASCA National Model (American School Counselor Association [ASCA] 2005).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Perna (2006) and Perna and Thomas (2008) developed a conceptual model based on various theoretical approaches to student success, including those from the disciplines of psychology, sociology, economics, and education. This approach recognizes that students do not exist in isolation, but rather interact in and with a larger social environment. Student outcomes vary and are influenced by the different contexts within which they live and learn. Furthermore, student success is the result of a longitudinal process throughout the student's preschool, primary, and secondary school experiences.

This model is certainly not the only approach that emphasizes the importance of context or longitudinal processes when studying the high

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELING

At one time, college counseling was a high school counselor's primary task, with counselors acting as "gatekeepers" to help a privileged few access college (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996). During the 1970s, counselors

took on more visible administrative duties in order to maintain their positions (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). However, as responsibilities were added, none were removed, and high school counselors' professional identities shifted, leading to the expectation that they would be mental health experts as well as administrators and college counselors (McDonough, 2005). Meanwhile, policies have changed, and where once only an elite group of students was expected to attain college credentials, it is now a common expectation that all students attend college after high school (Krei & Rosenbaum, 2001; Rasinski, Ingels, Rock, & Pollock, 1993). As counseling programs and policies changed, the types of colleges expanded to include both those with selective admission criteria and those with open admissions policies (Rosenbaum et al., 1996).

Through all these varying expectations of what tasks counselors are expected to do and how much of their time is to be spent on the tasks, role confusion emerges (Janson, 2009; Lieberman, 2000). When school counselors do not have a clear definition of their job position, other roles and duties can easily get in the way of college counseling, and do (Joyce Ivy Foundation, 2008, 2009). School counselors vary greatly in their reports of day-to-day duties, including student registration and scheduling for classes, crisis counseling, handling disciplinary problems, test administration, and other administrative tasks that help keep the school running smoothly (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; MacAllum, Glover, Queen, & Riggs, 2007; Parsad, Alexander, Farris, & Hudson, 2003). This role confusion likely has an impact on counselors' effectiveness, although these issues have not been sufficiently linked by the research to counselor's abilities to effectively help prepare students for college access and success.

Furthermore, although college counseling is an important responsibility of the expanded job list of high school counselors (Parsad et al., 2003), some evidence suggests that pre-service edu-

cation programs for school counselors do not emphasize preparation for college counseling (McDonough, 2005; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005; Pérusse, Goodnough, & Noel, 2001). This lack of training in college counseling often means that counselors must take the initiative once established in high schools to seek out knowledge on how to help students prepare for college (McDonough, 2005).

High school counselors also encounter structural constraints at the district and state level that prevent them from offering adequate college counseling to students. For example, financial constraints at the administrative level prevent schools from hiring more school counselors when there is a need. Case-study research by Perna et al. (2008) in five states demonstrated how district-level commitments to college opportunity, complex financial aid policies at the state level, reliance of schools on state agencies, and involvement of local colleges and universities impact the availability of college

service training counselors receive and their actual practice when they enter schools. The need also exists for research that expands on the study by Perna et al. (2008) to understand the way the larger social context at the national, state, or district level impacts the high school counselor-student relationship in college preparation.

SCHOOL CONTEXT

Various researchers call for an approach to the study of student access to college that examines the overall college-going culture in a school, or the extent to which staff expect, encourage, and provide practical steps for all students to access what they need for college (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). Four aspects of a school college-going culture that may impact the school counselor's role with college preparatory help in the school are: (a) organization of the counsel-

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counseling at the high school level. State-level mandates for counseling, however, appear to have little impact on the availability of college counseling at the school level.

The results of research on the social context of school counseling offer a few implications for policy and future research. A counselor's ability to work effectively with students could be improved with a more explicit definition of high school counselor roles and duties. Research is needed to test this connection more explicitly by examining alignment between counselors' visions of their job duties in college preparation and their actual daily activities, and between the pre-

ing department within the school, (b) college preparation that is early and ongoing, (c) collaboration with other staff and teachers that allow school counselors to work to build and maintain this culture, and (d) resources to help in college preparatory activities. The interaction between school counselors and students fall in this fourth category. Each aspect is described below.

One consideration in terms of school context is the structure of the counseling department within the school, as researchers argue that organizational challenges often limit counselor effectiveness (Farmer-Hinton & McCullough, 2008). Two organizational

components of the department are the number of students for each counselor, and the time allotted for counselors to spend on college counseling. Students (Ceja, 2000; Corwin, Venegas, Oliveriez, & Colyar, 2004; González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003), parents (MacAllum et al., 2007), and counselors themselves (Joyce Ivy Foundation, 2008, 2009) argue that counselors are overburdened and do not have time to give all students in their caseload the college preparatory help they need.

Counselors' lack of time for college preparatory help is due to the combination of two factors: the large numbers of students that counselors tend to have in their caseloads, and the limited amount of time most counselors have during their day to devote to college preparatory activities. Considering these two factors in tandem is important, because research looking only at student-to-counselor ratios has found no relationship between this ratio and college enrollment of students (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009). A low student-to-counselor ratio is not very helpful to address college preparatory issues if the demands on the coun-

in her study of four high school counseling programs that schools do better preparing students for college if they start with students in the ninth grade. This finding, supported by other research (Cooper & Liou, 2007), connects with theories of college preparation, defined as a process in which students move through stages during the pre-college years (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). As Tierney and Venegas (2006) concluded in their study of peer advisors and peer groups in high school as a means of sharing college information, "the insertion of one treatment at the end of the process cannot overcome the lack of other necessary treatments along the way" (p. 1698). This early counseling does not appear to be common in high schools, however, as Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, and Perna (2009) found that ninth-graders had much less college counseling exposure than did students in the upper grades of high school.

A third school contextual factor that impacts the school culture is collaboration between counselors and the rest of the school community. The literature often cites the need for col-

tors (Cooper & Liou, 2007; Perna et al., 2008). These resources may be material resources such as brochures and admissions requirements for particular schools, but more often than not, researchers are referring to less-tangible information and knowledge that school staff, including counselors, share with students (Cooper & Liou, 2007).

Results from national surveys of high school students offer support for the importance of school-level resources for college preparations. For instance, Plank and Jordan (2001) used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988 (NELS:88) and found that students whose parents reported using more financial aid resources, including talking with the high school counselor, were more likely to enroll in a four-year institution as compared to enrolling in a two-year institution or never enrolling. Furthermore, students who reported more school-level guidance in terms of the school's assistance in filling out college applications, financial aid forms, writings essays, or days off to visit colleges were more likely to enroll in a four-year institution as compared to enrolling in a two-year institution or never enrolling. The findings of Plank and Jordan (2001) were mirrored in a similar study also using NELS:88 data (Cabrera & Nasa, 2001). More recently, Engberg and Wolniak (2009) used data from the national Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002) and found that students who reported seeking college entrance information were more likely to enroll in college than students who did not, with counselors included along with many others as possible sources of this college information. These national-level studies, however, do not offer great detail about the resources offered to students, nor do the surveys used ask students explicitly about the role of their counselors in accessing these resources.

A growing number of researchers have found connections between one specific resource—student access to a rigorous curriculum—and college

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selor's time push him or her to focus on other things (Lee, 2005). Similarly, a high student-to-counselor ratio may not be such a burden in schools where the counselor has his or her schedule cleared of other tasks to focus on college counseling. Qualitative research that has considered student-to-counselor ratios within the larger school context has found an association between lower student-to-counselor ratios and more proactive college preparation for students with increases in college attendance of students after high school (McDonough, 1997).

Second, McDonough (1997) found

laborative teams in schools between counselors and other staff and teachers (ASCA, n.d.; Breen & Quaglia, 1991). Although researchers have not linked this collaboration directly to student outcomes, some researchers have found that a lack of collaboration impacts the abilities of counselors to serve their students (Corwin et al., 2004; Janson, 2009), while the presence of collaboration improves counselor job satisfaction and retention (Clemens, 2009).

Finally, researchers often find that inadequate college resources are a concern among school staff and educa-

success outcomes. Course-taking paths in high school impact college enrollment (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009) and persistence (Adelman, 2006; Trusty, 2004). Furthermore, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) reports that college admissions officers cite students' academic achievements, including grades, course-taking history, and admission test scores as the most important factors in their admission decisions (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2009). Tracking in high school moves some students on a college path and others elsewhere, often to the detriment of Black, Latino/a, and lower-income students (Deil-Amen & Turley, 2007; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Mahoney & Merritt, 1993). Counselors can play a role in who goes on which path (Howard, 2003), although research is needed to directly link counselor's activities to student course access and their subsequent success in college.

The research using national surveys of high school students and research investigating the importance of high school course rigor demonstrate the importance of these school-level resources. Although high school counselors can impact student access to these materials, the studies reviewed do not directly address the role of school counselors. Some qualitative researchers have looked more closely at high school counselors and their role in delivering school-level resources. For example, Farmer-Hinton (2008) studied the types of resources and information offered by high school counselors to students through focus group interviews with seniors at one high school with a college-going focus. The seniors spoke of how college materials were readily available, and interactions with counselors and teachers helped them to more critically analyze their choices.

The types of interactions identified by Farmer-Hinton (2008) are similar to those advocated by Rosenbaum et al. (1996) based on interviews with school counselors in Chicago. Rosenbaum et al. advocated for interactions that walk the middle ground between "gatekeeping" and "college-for-all."

Gatekeeping means discouraging certain students from attending college but encouraging others, while the college-for-all approach refers to lukewarmly encouraging all students towards college. The preferred interaction, they argue, is that counselors provide "concrete information about such things as college admissions standards and job characteristics and offer alternatives to plans that are implausible" (p. 273). Students appear

SCHOOLS DO BETTER PREPARING STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE IF THEY START WITH STUDENTS IN THE NINTH GRADE.

to be much more satisfied with their counselors when they have quality interactions that offer them access to information about colleges and the application process (Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009).

Research suggests that, unfortunately, meetings between counselors and students all too often focus on exchanging functional information (Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010), and students much less often get access to more critical information such as identifying colleges, navigating the application process, and making college decisions (Roderick, Nagoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008). Students are found to lack accurate information about college costs and availability (Gibbons, Borders, Wiles, Stephan, & Davis, 2006), as well as both a developed understanding of the financial aid process and the practical assistance to navigate this process (Luna De La Rosa, 2006; McDonough & Calderone, 2006).

At the school level, given the results of the research presented in this section, staff should consider the organization of the school counseling department and aim for early and ongoing college preparatory help. School staff also should not underestimate the importance of collaboration and adequate resources. However, additional research is needed to more carefully isolate these and other school-level factors. Much of the cur-

rent research asks about school-level resources without separating counselors from other school staff, or asks about student-counselor interactions without considering context. With a large-scale research study, researchers could gather comprehensive information on the school-level characteristics listed above and follow students in their transitions after high school. On a smaller scale, researchers could focus on school counselors in similar school

contexts who have similar time and resources to devote to college counseling. What strategies do the more successful counselors use to make the most effective use of their time and resources?

FAMILY CONTEXT

School counselors and other mentors outside of the home are particularly crucial for students who lack other resources, such as parents and guardians who have already navigated the college-going process themselves (Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009; Levinsen & Nidiffer, 1996). These ideas have been developed through social capital theory, as introduced by Bourdieu (1977) and further defined and applied to educational settings by Coleman (1988). Social capital is found in the structure of relations between people, such as the close ties among family members, community residents, and religious affiliates. When considering students and schools, Coleman theorized that social capital can be found in the relationships that exist among students' parents and in parents' relationships with their children. The presence of social capital leads to the creation of human capital—defined by Coleman as knowledge or skills acquired through education. For example, parents who are connected with parents of their child's classmates

can share information and resources that can improve the educational experiences of their child.

Stanton-Salazar (1995) developed these ideas of social capital further to address the college preparatory process among Mexican-origin high school students. A student, through a relationship with a school staff member such as a school counselor (called school-level “institutional agents”), may receive knowledge-based resources such as information on college

year college also increased.

The research of González et al. (2003) was more specific to school counselors as agents who help to build social capital. They interviewed 20 Latina students from high poverty schools and working class backgrounds: one half attended a selective university; the other half attended community college with the intention of transferring to a four-year college. They found that those who were successful at the selective university

difference are unclear (Roderick et al., 2008).

A national-level quantitative study of school resources and their connection to college enrollment after high school finds that tangible resources are important, but more so is connecting deeply with students and families (Hill, 2008). Hill used the High School Effectiveness Study conducted in conjunction with the NELS:88 and its follow-up study in 1994 and found that schools that initiated outreach to families regarding the college planning process, above and beyond the resources offered within the school walls, seemed to have the more effective strategy for facilitating four-year college enrollment, as compared to schools that only offered resources but no outreach, or schools that offered little to no resources or outreach.

What the research on social capital noted above suggests is that, first and foremost, students rely on their parents and immediate family for any college knowledge and support they can get. Students with parents from higher education levels and from higher socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds tend to rely more on parents for information and less on high school counselors (MacAllum et al., 2007). But when families do not have the information students need, which is more often the case for lower-income students whose parents did not attend college, school counselors often become the primary source of information to help students access college (Choy, 2001; Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010; Fallon, 1997; Hurtado & Gauvain, 1997; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Mahoney & Merritt, 1993; McDonough, 1997). This is the case even for students who feel their counselors are not serving them well (Ceja, 2000; Howard, 2003; MacAllum et al., 2007).

At the same time, research suggests that the students who most need the assistance of the school counselor and could benefit most from this assistance in their preparation for college are more likely to have trouble accessing the school counselor (Erickson et

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admission policies, or may receive help in connecting to other institutional agents, such as college recruiters or college preparatory programs offered outside of school, thereby increasing his or her social capital. Students need social capital to successfully navigate the path through high school and into college, and school-level institutional agents such as school counselors can be essential to developing social capital for students who do not have access to social capital through other means (i.e., family members, friends, neighbors).

Research that explicitly examines social capital finds that relationships are indeed important to predicting college enrollment, although how social capital is operationalized varies across studies (Engberg & Wolniak, 2009; González et al., 2003; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Plank & Jordan, 2001). For example, Engberg and Wolniak (2009) found that as the number of people (including school counselors) sought out by students for college entrance information increased and as the frequency with which students discussed school- and college-related issues with their parents increased, the likelihood that students attended a two- or four-

year college increased. Quantitative research using Chicago public school data collected through the Consortium on Chicago School Research also suggests a benefit to Latino/a students in particular (Roderick et al., 2008). Controlling for student characteristics, Latino/a students were much more likely to apply to a four-year school if they reported that they had strong levels of support from teachers and school counselors in completing tasks such as filling out applications and making decisions about what school to attend. Latino/a students who attended schools where students often reported that their counselors were active in helping them make post-graduation plans were also more likely to follow through on their plans and apply to a four-year college. Strong counselor and teacher support had a large impact on Latino/a students, although their effect on other students' likelihood of applying was modest, and the reasons for this

had access to high volumes of social capital during their K-12 experience that the community college Latina students did not, including access to very supportive school counselors who devoted a great deal of time to helping the students.

al, 2009). This includes: first-generation, lower income students (Ceja, 2000; Cooper & Liou, 2007; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Lee & Ekstrom, 1987); students who are not in the top 10% of their grade (Kimura-Walsh et al, 2009); students with low post-secondary aspirations in the early years of high school (Roderick et al., 2008); Black or Latino/a students (Ceja, 2000; Lee & Ekstrom, 1987; González, 2003); and students from small schools in rural areas (Lee & Ekstrom, 1987). In these cases, when help from families and counselors is not sufficient, sometimes students are able to access social capital through alternative routes like college preparation programs, teachers, or others (Ceja, 2000; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009), but in other cases, they leave high school inadequately counseled (Roderick et al., 2008).

The social capital literature is important in furthering an understanding of why some high school students make successful transitions to college and others do not. To better comprehend the role of high school counselors, it is critical to know what college preparation students have received from their families and community outside of the school before and during their time in high school. The social capital research suggests that students without social capital from other sources need substantive, on-going interactions with school-based institutional agents such as school counselors, and benefit from them in ways that other students do not. This research also suggests the value of the interaction between family and school context, since students who have trouble accessing social capital at home are more likely to have trouble accessing social capital at school. Strategies are needed at the school level to help counselors to identify which students may need more support in college preparatory guidance than others. Future research is needed to examine particular ways school counselors can identify students who could benefit from additional resources, and concrete ways school counselors can help these students to

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understand the college-going process and be successful on the path.

STUDENT CONTEXT

High school counselors can help students on the path to college by offering individualized services that meet each student's needs. This approach was addressed in the above section, in terms of counselors taking the time to identify the academic strengths and weaknesses of students as they move through the college preparatory process. But individualized services go beyond this and require that school counselors address student's attitudes and behaviors in school (Perna & Thomas, 2008). This is because a lack of student motivation and effort seems to be a significant roadblock to college success (Avery, 2009). Individualized services include helping students to develop coping strategies to address the psychological aspects of transitioning to college when living in communities where college is not the norm (Farmer-Hinton, 2008).

Individualized services also require that school counselors address individual student needs. In other words, counselors should account for the social capital that they are able to access from other sources, and provide additional information and guidance for each student to succeed. Schools with a mission to prepare students for college that have a significant population of students who are lower-income, first generation college-bound, or from Black, Latino/a, and American Indian backgrounds, may need to account for individualized attention in the time their school counselors are allotted to spend on college preparatory activities with these students. Holcomb-McCoy (2007) addressed the distinction between viewing col-

lege for all as meaning offering equality of services to all students versus offering equitable access to students. Holcomb-McCoy stated, "At its most fundamental level, equity is an orientation toward doing the right thing by students, which does not mean treating students equally regardless of their different needs" (p. 20).

Changing student motivation and effort in school is not easily impacted by policy. As noted above, Avery (2009) found that more than one-third of the low-income, high-achieving students who received college counseling advice did not follow through on the advice they received. What prevents students from translating advice into action? How can counselors better identify the disconnect that happens and improve the outcomes for their students? Clearly, additional research is needed to extend Avery's findings.

CONCLUSION

This literature review emphasized two research trends: (a) the importance of high school counselors as social agents who can help students along the path toward college, and (b) the need for improvements and expansion of research conducted on school counselors as they work to prepare high school students for college success. Some promising research has suggested ways to improve the school counselor's ability to effectively help students prepare for college. However, to draw stronger conclusions about how counselors can assist high school students to prepare for college success, additional research that sufficiently considers the multiple layers of context surrounding high school counselors is needed.

Of particular importance, future investigations should be designed with a strong conceptual framework such

as Perna and Thomas's (2008) model of student success elucidated here. School counselors would benefit from additional information on how the larger social environment (in terms of policy, counselor training, and job descriptions) shapes the counselor's ef-

SCHOOL COUNSELORS CAN BE ESSENTIAL TO DEVELOPING SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR STUDENTS WHO DO NOT HAVE ACCESS TO SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH OTHER MEANS

fectiveness in the schools. Subsequent research on school counselors and the college preparatory resources they can provide to students must consider the larger college-going culture of the high school, including how the counseling department is organized, when students begin to access these resources, and how counselors collaborate with each other and with other staff to develop and maintain the culture of the school. Current research suggests that, to help prepare students for college, particularly those who lack the social capital from other sources (e.g., family members), students need ongoing access to and individualized engagement with college preparatory knowledge and information. However, additional studies are needed on specific aspects of which information and what resources can be most beneficial to students and how counselors can best help students to access the materials.

With a stronger appreciation of the environment within which school counselors interact with students to help in college preparation, research can better consider what counselors are doing and if they are effective. Furthermore, a better understanding of the effectiveness of school counselors at preparing students for college success is particularly important as calls for counselor accountability increase (Dimmitt, Carey, McGannon, & Henningson, 2005; Sink, 2009). As secondary school administrators seek ways to increase student academic success within the constraints of their budgets and limited staff, recognizing

the role and potential of their school counselors is critical.

An awareness of context will help researchers and educational stakeholders to recognize external factors that impact the ability of school counselors to adequately reach students. For

example, Scarborough and Culbreth (2008) found that school counselors prefer to spend their time in accord with best practice, but context affects whether they actually carry out the goals they wish to accomplish. The context may change the approach a counselor will use to ensure student success; it does not make student success impossible or remove responsibility from school counselors to impact the students with whom they work.

From Research to Practice

What can school counselors do to improve their effectiveness in terms of helping students prepare for college? A strong understanding of the context surrounding their school is important, but a great deal of this is out of the counselor's direct control. School counselors can have an indirect influence on family and student context by making efforts to acknowledge the backgrounds of students and encourage parental involvement in the school, and by working to find ways to motivate students to increase the students' own efforts to succeed.

At the high school level, counselors can analyze the current organization of their school counseling department and determine whether altering its current structure would improve interventions with students, particularly in terms of offering early and ongoing college guidance. School counselors also can take leadership roles to build more collaboration among school staff and to bring more resources to students (one key resource: helping stu-

dents to access rigorous coursework). Counselors can also work with other staff and the students themselves, and rely on administrative-level data to target students for college preparation (e.g. by first generation status, by achievement records) who might otherwise fall through the cracks. With this approach, school counselors can develop tailored interventions to better reach these students and provide them with concrete steps to improve their chances of college access and success. These suggestions can help school counselors to improve their interactions with students in terms of college preparation, but also can help counselors to increase their visibility as leaders within the school. These suggestions are aligned with the framework of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2005), particularly the method of individual student planning whereby school counselors assist students individually through ongoing systematic activities to establish personal goals and develop future plans. ■

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