

Variation in Counseling Styles in High Schools: Effects of Context and Location

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Abstract

This study addresses the following research question: *How do counselors in different school contexts evaluate their students' college readiness and offer post-secondary guidance?* Best practices in school counselor use of time and job duties are well understood and studied. Similar guidelines for best practices in post-secondary advising exist but have not been studied in the same way. Based on standards established by the American School Counselor Association, a Scale of Student Development and Control is used to understand how much student autonomy counselors give to students in the post-secondary advising and guidance process. Counselor placement on this scale is analyzed in the context of various job, school, and counselor characteristics to better understand the factors that influence a counselor's strategy for appropriate post-secondary guidance.

Interviews with a variety of counselors indicate that graduate training for post-secondary guidance is not adequate, that counselors are more likely to exhibit guidance that offers a high level of student autonomy if they are in collaboration with colleagues, and that college advisors who are not trained as counselors are likely to use more directive guidance strategies.

Dedication

For my wife, Julie Hesel. Her constant encouragement and support allowed me to pursue this doctoral program.

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Chapter I: Introduction

This study addresses the following research question: *How do counselors in different school contexts evaluate their students' college readiness and offer post-secondary guidance?* While literature has examined counselors' job duties and use of time, it has yet to examine best practices in evaluation of college readiness and corresponding post-secondary guidance to students. A gap exists in understanding how counselors arrive at their post-secondary decisions and guidance styles, and it is unclear whether the same factors that limit counselors' use of time also affect this component of their job duties.

Post-secondary guidance is more important than ever before. Students are more likely to pursue post-secondary education than in any previous time, and college is also much more expensive than it ever has been before, even adjusted for inflation. In addition, jobs, even in more rural states like Kansas, are likely to require certification, training, or education past high school. This means that the pressure to make the right post-secondary decision is incredibly important for today's students.

The school counselor is not a new position, but it is a role that has changed and developed a great deal in the recent past. School counselors were initially tasked with pushing students into specific careers that would most benefit the country as a whole. More recently, school counselors have been tasked instead with helping every individual student reach his or her potential, including in the post-secondary decision-making process. This change in the role of the counselor has made the issue of appropriate guidance strategies vital in the modern education setting.

Counselors today, despite clear best-practice frameworks, are given many different job duties that take away from what they should be doing. These "time robbers" affect counselors'

role within the school and give them less time to engage in the direct and indirect student services that, according to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), should be making up at least 80% of their time (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012). A great deal of research in this area has shown the relationship between various counselor characteristics and their use of time, compared with best practice.

In addition to the best-practice recommendations of job duties like direct and indirect student support, there are conceptual frameworks for post-secondary guidance. These benchmarks of guidance style can be arranged on a spectrum from low to high student development and control. Research and counselor training suggests that counselors should engage in post-secondary guidance that is high on this spectrum rather than directive of student choice.

This study examines the post-secondary evaluation tools and guidance styles of high school counselors in northeast Kansas. In addition to placing them on the scale of student control and development, it also seeks to understand school and counselor context. It attempts to more thoroughly understand the relationship between various factors like job duties, student composition, and counselor attributes and placement on the conceptual framework of student control. Large schools with high levels of counseling resources are compared with smaller schools with very few counseling resources in an effort to see what characteristics provide students with the most beneficial counselor evaluation and guidance.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Increasing Importance of Post-Secondary Guidance

Despite a strong body of research on school counseling—theoretical constructs of the role, actual job duties, biases demonstrated by counselors—limited attention has been paid to how counselors conceptually approach student post-secondary decision making. Researchers agree that the role of the counselor is not clearly defined (O’Dell, 1996; Paisley & Borders, 1995; Partin, 1993). This has led to a substantial amount of research about the job duties of counselors in the field and their relationship to identified best practices as defined by the ASCA. Best practices from the ASCA also provide four concepts of post-secondary guidance, but unfortunately these strategies have not been studied in the same way as use of time. This lack of understanding is an increasingly significant gap in a larger educational context where the discourse in Kansas, the United States, and beyond focuses on college preparedness and attendance for everyone. For some students, post-secondary choices may have little to do with a counselor’s input. For other students, this guidance may be far more important. In either case, understanding the perspective of the counselor in navigating this transition is important to understand.

This topic is so crucial because the importance of a college education is increasing. According to the Census Bureau, the number of people with a college degree has risen during every census since the 1940s (“College enrollment up,” 2010). The results of the last census in 1999 demonstrated the continued upward progression in percentage of high school graduates attending college. This phenomenon is illustrated in Figure 1. This makes each student’s decision even more important; their peers are more likely to attend college. If they choose incorrectly, they will either be far less competitive in the labor force or seek more education than they are

capable of successfully completing and end up deeply in debt. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in today’s dollars, the cost of a four-year college degree is five times what it was in 1984–1985 (“Fast facts,” 2018), so the cost of attending has risen, adding to the importance of the decision. The wrong decision is costly, regardless of whether the student chooses to attend a college.

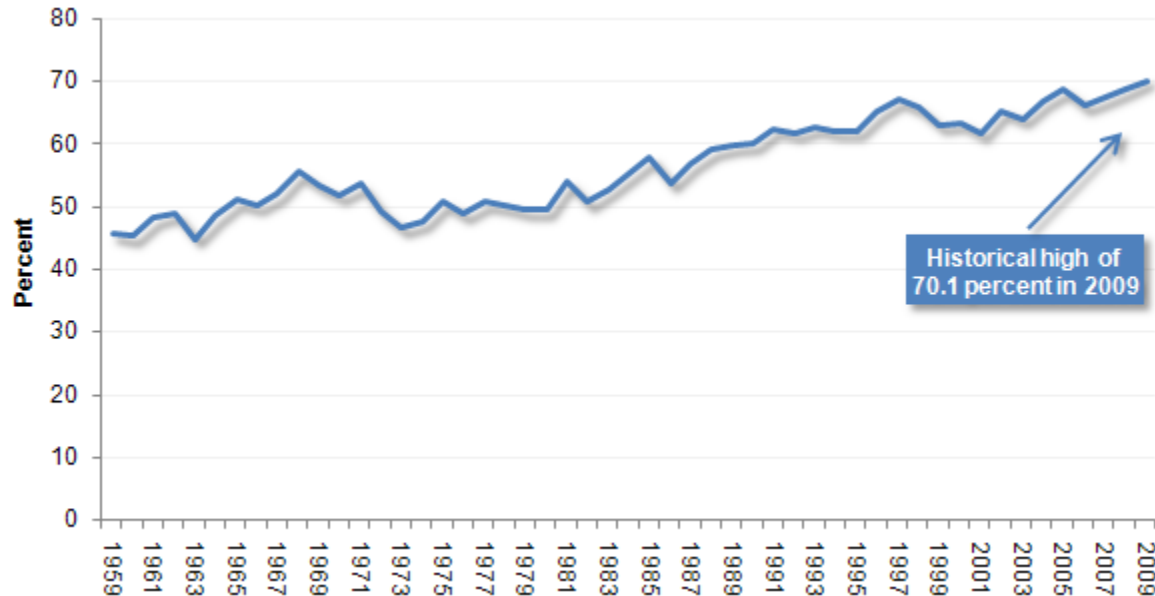


Figure 1. College enrollment rate of recent high school graduates, 1959 to 2009. Adapted from “College enrollment up,” 2010.

The increase in the number of people with college degrees is paralleled by an increase in the expectations of employers for some kind of post-secondary education. According to the Kansas Department of Labor, of the fifty jobs most likely to be available in Kansas in 2020, every single one requires some form of education past high school (“50 top jobs,” 2015). This means that students must have a plan upon leaving high school to obtain this additional education if they are to be competitive in the marketplace. Those without the proper credentials are far less likely to find a job, and those jobs that are available to people without post-secondary education pay a great deal less. For students who lack guardians or other resources with the

knowledge and experience to navigate this situation, the counselor serves as a crucial source in identifying not just the careers but the appropriate post-secondary training to obtain a job in one of these competitive fields.

The increase in importance of a college education has led to a large increase in the number of students taking standardized college-readiness testing like the ACT and the SAT, as seen in Figure 2. According to the College Board and ACT, Inc., as reported to *Education Week*, there is substantial growth in the number of student testing (Adams, 2017). For the 2018–2019 school year, the Kansas legislature voted for the first time to pay for an ACT test for every single junior in the state who wished to take it. Students who would in previous generations not even pursue choices leading to post-secondary admission are now at least putting themselves on the path to a college education. Scores on these tests, however, do not clearly identify the appropriate placement for a student who wants to obtain schooling past high school. Interpreting the scores, knowing the amount of financial aid available from institution to institution based on those scores, and understanding which schools are likely to accept such scores requires expertise that may be unavailable to many students and their parents. The school counselor serves a crucial role in helping these students as they take college entrance exams and then consider the opportunities that might be available.

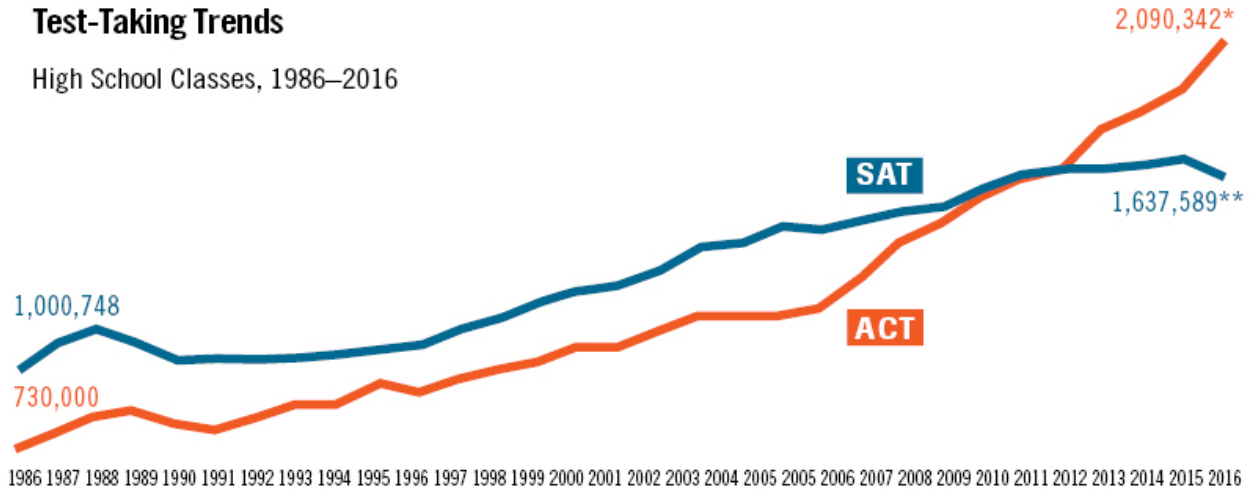


Figure 2. ACT and SAT tests by year, 1996 to 2016. Adapted from Adams, 2017.

High school counselors are therefore faced with guiding students through their decisions in the following context: Most jobs require some education past high school, the peer group of a student is more and more likely to attend college, and more and more students are taking tests to prepare each student for the possibility of college admittance. The counselor must also decide how to guide these students as they make decisions about their future—whether to direct them based on test scores; allow them to decide entirely for themselves; or provide some combination of advising, evaluating, directing, and educating. Unfortunately, although we know how the counselors may spend their time, we do not have a good understanding of the strategy they use when helping students to make this increasingly important decision about post-secondary academic attendance.

We also know a counselor's work as described by the ASCA is incredibly important for a student's post-secondary success and attainment after a decision has been made. Working with a counselor improves a student's chances of attending a post-secondary institution, and the results are greatest for those with low socioeconomic status (SES) (Belasco, 2013). From this perspective, providing a counselor with the proper job duties and equipping them with the proper

understandings of their guidance role is part of the solution to eliminate the achievement gap. However, it is clear that counselor bias exists (Linnehan, Weer, & Stonely, 2011), and it is important that the role of the counselor be clearly defined to allow equal support for all students. Fortunately, at least one study has suggested that in predominately African-American schools, counselors report the ability to engage in activities as prescribed by the ASCA (Dye, 2014). What this study and others like it do not reveal is whether counselors use the same post-secondary guidance strategies, regardless of their jobs' cohesion to the duties found in the literature. In the same way that the role should be clearly defined and followed, the appropriate guidance strategy for the modern school counselor should be used with fidelity.

Because of a lack of scholarship on how counselors approach their guidance with students, we are unable to fully understand the ways that discrepancy from best practice in guidance style plays out in schools across the state. This is despite the fact that it is understood that building student knowledge about college options is an important part of the counselor's job (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Given the importance of this counselor duty, we must spend time understanding the perspective with which counselors approach this guidance.

While many careers in the field of education are relatively well understood and defined, school counselors do their work in a distinctly complex and differentiated context. The discrepancies between expected and actual job duties, between the wishes of counselors and the wishes of administrators, between the wishes of parents and the wishes of students, and between the counselor's own belief about the best future for students and the need to let students make their own decisions, have resulted in a varied and challenging field. Consider an issue as simple as providing guidance to a student while knowing that the student, who is a minor, wishes for something different than his or her parents, the current legal educational decision makers.

Navigating the competing interests of parents and students is just one of the complexities and conflicts of the position (Hoyt, 2001; Stone, 2009).

The role of the counselor dates back well over one hundred years, but it is a role that is far from static. Its original intentions help us picture the outline of what would become the current profession, but even today, the role of the counselor is changing (Brott & Myers, 1999; O'Dell, 1996; Paisley & Borders, 1995; Tennyson, Miller, Skovholt, & Williams, 1989). These changes are the result of a changing workforce, changing laws, and the changing needs of students, but the lack of a clearly identified role is potentially a threat to the counseling profession (Coll & Freeman, 1997). After all, a mature profession requires a clearly defined role and scope of practice (Remley, 2014); no such framework exists for the modern school counselor.

Despite the challenges of counseling, and school counseling especially, the position is incredibly important, and school counselors are an important part of school reform (Herr, 2002). Their ever-changing job is increasingly focused on helping students select and obtain admission to a post-secondary educational institution, and their strategies for doing so are fertile ground for academic study. A fuller picture of their importance can be obtained by examining the traditional role, current job duties, existing theories of post-secondary counseling guidance, and finally examining the counselor role today in Kansas.

The History of School Counseling: A Traditional Role Develops

Although post-secondary guidance is an important part of the counselor's role today, this is a relatively recent development. The counselor position was not established to help students educate and guide themselves along the proper post-secondary path. In fact, the spread of counselors in schools was very much about directing students toward specific areas that

benefited the country as a whole. As with many other school reforms, the push for counselors was a response not to educational issues but more broadly to perceived societal issues.

School counseling first arose in the late 1800s and early 1900s in response to issues outside the scope of the school (Herr, 2002). In response to immigration, a changing labor force, and the Industrial Revolution, vocational planning was one of the first job roles for counselors (Paisley & Borders, 1995). Unlike counselors today, these counselors would not have viewed the student's inclinations as the most important factor in advising and guiding them. Rather, these first counselors sought ways to improve the country by directing students to where they belonged.

The father of the school counselor position is widely agreed to be Frank Parsons, a man active from the beginning of the movement in suggesting the need for a professional who could guide workers to the correct employment. During World War I, Frank Parsons developed the idea that U.S. citizens should have professional assistance to find a career that matched their interests and abilities. It might be worth considering that, in general, he felt that the school was too focused on book learning (Herr, 2002; Remley, 2014) and fell short in helping students gain positive employment. Once again, the counselor's obligation was to the wider society, rather than the student, and post-secondary academic work was not the primary goal.

Still later, the United States saw a renewed push for counselors in schools during the Cold War. During this time, counselors were partly placed in schools based on the efforts of Congress to push students into math and science courses as a response to Russia's launching of Sputnik (Remley, 2014). Again, during this time, the role of the counselor was not seen as a support to allow students to make their own decisions but as a driving force urging people to

make choices believed to be beneficial to society. Counselors today would likely view the role of their forebearers as not only archaic but potentially even harmful to students.

The idea of counselor as coordinator of career guidance was pervasive through much of the century and was reinforced by government grants such as the Perkins Act, which sought to help students with training for future careers. The 1984 Act as described by Herr, for instance, included wording about “career awareness, career planning, career decision making, placement skills . . . and labor market needs” (Herr, 2002, p. 228). This emphasis continued the understanding of counselors not as academic advisors but as career and job educators.

The concept of counselor as post-secondary academic guide and resource did not fully develop until 1983’s *A Nation at Risk*, which focused on the “college-bound, the meritocratic” (Herr, 2002, p. 229). It suggested that all students should use school to prepare themselves for rigorous academic work and college preparation. At this point, the role of counselor shifted to include guidance in post-secondary academic paths.

Other changes since 1983 include an increased understanding of the role of counselors in treating mental illness, working with neglect, and helping in cases of family crisis. Counselors are also expected to help eliminate bullying, process grief with students, and provide support for issues outside the school context. Kansas law currently requires all schools to implement a social and emotional learning curriculum and suicide prevention training for all staff; these responsibilities routinely fall to counselors.

More recently, many school districts have reduced or eliminated counselor positions or modified them to include clerking, technician, and coordinator roles (O’Dell, 1996), reducing the amount of time available for post-secondary guidance even further. While many counseling departments continue to be allowed to work in a strictly school counselor setting, it is fair to say

that the position across the country is often used to fill gaps that exist in the school, regardless of the type of work needed. Fortunately, the ASCA, through a variety of role statements and texts, has attempted to clearly define the modern role both in terms of job duties and in terms of conceptions of decision-making.

Variation in Guidance Opportunities for Counselors

To understand why counselors may select their particular post-secondary guidance strategies, it is important to understand how the structural role of the counselor today limits and affects their opportunities to provide guidance. The limitations imposed by use of time constraints and additional duties play a role in the effectiveness of counselors as post-secondary guides. This area of the counselor's job is far better studied and understood than the use of guidance strategies.

The day-to-day job duties of a school counselor are incredibly varied. There is no single agreed-upon job description to which all districts adhere. There is even variation within districts themselves. However, one of the most influential perspectives comes from the ASCA. According to the ASCA, as described in *ASCA National Model* (2012), a graduate-level textbook used by some counselor training programs, school counselors should spend 80% or more of their time in direct and indirect student services. The other 20% of time includes program management and school support services (ASCA, 2012). Job duties that fall within each category are clearly defined by the organization. The ASCA's perspective is worth considering as the roles suggested are beneficial when followed (Borders & Drury, 1992; Whiston & Sexton, 1998).

Direct student services include in-person interaction with students, individual student planning, and responsive or crisis services. They also include instruction, group activities,

appraisal, advisement, counseling, and crisis response (ASCA, 2012). These direct student services also include post-secondary guidance.

Indirect student services, in contrast, are things done on behalf of students but not directly with them. Indirect student services include referrals, consultation, and collaboration (ASCA, 2012). Much of the work of the counselor is directly for student benefit but exists behind the scenes and is not necessarily performed with a student present. The ASCA appreciates these roles and considers them to be valuable uses of the counselor's day. While these particular job duties cannot be described as individual post-secondary guidance, high-quality use of this time could theoretically be important in designing a high-quality counseling program that is equitable in guidance for all students, so counselors ideally should have this time available as well.

The 20% not included in direct and indirect services can include things like "fair-share" responsibilities, which include the duties associated with the routine running of the school that are shared equally with all staff, like lunch duty, bus duty, or similar school-wide needs. These duties in no way improve post-secondary guidance, so schools that expect a great deal of time be spent on this category could theoretically be decreasing the quality of the guidance students receive.

The guidelines of the ASCA may theoretically suggest the job duties of a counselor, but in some cases, counselor use of time is actually guided by law. Some states have legislated the amount of time that counselors must spend in direct counseling with students (Partin, 1993; Wadhvani, 2018). It is also worth noting that not all studies agree that direct student services are the best use of a counselor's time. There is evidence that student academic outcomes are improved by academically focused counselors who spend more time on program management,

coordination, and alignment of programs rather than direct student services (Fitch & Marshall, 2004).

To monitor the appropriateness of a counseling program, the ASCA recommends that counselors perform a use-of-time assessment twice a year (ASCA, 2012). Because of the clear definitions and the ease of monitoring use of time, many studies have sought to identify how the day-to-day work of counselors is spent as compared with those standards identified previously.

The previously described appropriate job duties, however, are far from the only jobs of the modern school counselor. A variety of other roles are expected, assigned, or otherwise common practice in the profession. This ambiguity, here defined as the lack of a clearly defined set of responsibilities (Freeman & Coll, 1997), means that many parts of the counselor's day could be considered inappropriate professional obligations. And it is important to understand how great the variation is from district to district. There is a stark difference in quality between counseling programs (O'Dell, 1996). These differences may help explain the type of guidance given to seniors as they make their post-secondary choices; this issue is discussed in Chapter IV.

Some of the major "time robbers" according to counselors are meetings, scheduling, administrative tasks, paperwork, supervision of students, teaching, nursing, secretarial duties, listening to complaints, talking on the phone, discipline, and subbing (Partin, 1993). These other roles are not unusual. In fact, they are far too common. A vast majority of counselors feel that they are performing job duties outside those of the counselor (Benigno, 2017). How these roles affect the approach that the counselor brings to post-secondary guidance has yet to be identified.

Performing these outside, "time robber" duties affects more than just the student body. The profession itself suffers because of these increased expectations. It means that counselors end up doing a job that they do not want to do. Studies confirm that there is variation between

what counselors would like to do and what they often do day to day (Scarborough, 2005; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). As one would expect, performing tasks that are unwanted or preventing other more appropriate tasks from being done results in lower morale across the profession. Because of this, appropriate duties are an important indicator of counselor job satisfaction (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Bardhoshi, Schweinle, & Duncan, 2014).

The roles of a counselor—disciplinarian and student advocate—often conflict, the one role making the other more difficult (Freeman & Coll, 1997). Adding in additional duties therefore increases the likelihood of the counselor being put in positions that are at odds with being an effective and appropriate counselor. Counselors, it should be noted, typically do not want increased administrative tasks. There is discrepancy between actual and preferred duties, and counselors would prefer fewer administrative duties (Boswell & Carr, 1988; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008).

The variation in what counselors actually do can be seen as an outcome of several different theoretical perspectives on what a “counselor” actually should be. From a different perspective, however, the theoretical perspective of the counselor is at least partially guided by the job duties and time constraints of the position. As previously mentioned, administration has a great deal of control over the day-to-day activities of the counselor, and principals often view counselors as clerical and administrative employees (Tennyson et al., 1989). In more general terms, principals and counselors significantly differ in whether they view the position as specialized professional or staff to be given duties as required by the district (Herrington & Ross, 2006).

Many different studies examine use of time discrepancies between best practice and actual practice. These studies often focus on explaining why the discrepancy exists. As is true in

other roles with high levels of variation, role ambiguity, role incongruity, and role conflict help to define the discrepancies (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970).

The age level of the student body in the counselor's building, for instance, affects counselor job duties. Counselors at combined junior–senior high schools, for instance, have different job duties than those at senior-only high schools (Tennyson et al., 1989). The age of student also seems to influence in some way how much discrepancy exists with ASCA best practices. Some studies have shown that elementary school counselors have a higher amount of role conflict than middle and high school counselors (Coll & Freeman, 1997). Other studies have, in contrast, found that counselor roles are most aligned to ASCA standards at the elementary level, then the middle school level, and almost not at all at the high school level (Leuwerke, Bruinekool, & Lane, 2008). Another study confirmed that higher school level is associated with higher discrepancy in role (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008).

Other studies have examined how attributes like resources contribute to counselor practice. The idea of what a counselor is varies from place to place, partially based on what other resources that district has (Herr, 2002). For instance, in a district without a social worker, registrar, assistant principal, psychologist, or enough supervisory personnel, the counselor may end up taking on the duties of one or all of those positions. This suggests that smaller buildings and districts are more likely to end up with counselors performing inappropriate roles.

Other factors that may affect counselor roles include years of experience, number of students per counselor, time spent in direct versus indirect student roles, professional identity, and culture of the school (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). Again, these indicators point to small and poor districts as being far more likely to employ counselors in positions that overextend their professional obligations or push them toward doing the quickest job possible.

As might be expected, less-experienced counselors also have a greater discrepancy with ASCA best-practice job duties than their more experienced peers (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). This, too, suggests that poor and rural districts, which tend to hire cheaper, inexperienced counselors, are more likely to task those counselors with inappropriate job duties.

In general, it seems fair to say that there is considerable diversity in what counselors do, which may be attributed to population, school level, and size, among other factors; but it is also accurate to say that there is a great deal of confusion about the job duties of a counselor (Lieberman, 2004). Even the variation between counselor jobs at different age levels suggests that there is no consistent expectation of job duties in the counselor role.

One could rightly wonder why counselors take on duties that they are not trained for, that they believe they should not take on, and that deprive them of time to perform their actual duties. As one would expect, some counseling staff will take on tasks in an effort to keep job security (O'Dell, 1996). Others exist in systems where the principal is in charge of the assignment of duties, including those of the counseling staff. A variety of factors influence what a counselor does in his or her job and who makes the decision about their duties, but in general the principal has a great deal of control over the job description of the counselors in the building (Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009). These administrators might view the role much differently than the counselor. Or perhaps the principal has duties outside of his or her control and needs as much help as possible to make the school function. No matter the explanation, the literature confirms that a major issue in school counseling is the lack of control that counselors have over their day-to-day work activities (Paisley & Borders, 1995).

To this point, however, very little work has looked at how these job duties and time requirements influence the post-secondary guidance strategies.

Views of Guidance in Counseling

Not only are guidance opportunities limited because of time and job-duty constraints, the actual practice of guidance is incredibly diverse, despite a consensus understanding of the best practice. These various strategies of guidance are influenced by the larger context of the position as it exists in the modern school setting.

A few specific role dichotomies can help illustrate how these counselor constructs play out in both the abstract and in a practical way. Seen together, these pairs of perspectives form a spectrum of counselor control in the decision-making process of individual student counseling. We can examine school counselor post-secondary guidance through the lens of these four perspectives.

Educating versus Directing

When working with a student to make post-secondary plans, a counselor can choose to either educate or direct the student. *Educating* places the majority of the decision-making process on the student. *Directing* refers to those situations when the counselor tells the student what he or she should do or what decision he or she should make.

The role of educator recognizes that the student, and only the student, is capable of making the decisions that affect the rest of their lives. It also recognizes, however, that each student has the right to make that decision in the most informed way possible and that many students are unable to make that decision. Students' rights include self-direction, determination, and autonomy, but they also have the right to understand the full weight of their decisions and how those decisions affect future outcomes, which are greatly shaped by their choices in college and career (Hoyt, 2001; Stone, 2009).

The counselor's role, therefore, is to help the student grow as a person to the point where he or she is capable of making the right decisions. One author phrased the work as helping "them see the potential of their lives and gently push them toward being informed, solid decision makers" (Stone, 2009). In the educator role, the counselor teaches, informs, suggests, and helps the student to grow, but would never *tell*.

A competing perspective may be equally well intentioned, but it is certainly not as positively described. The directing mindset is based on the idea of counselor as the most educated, informed, and able to make a judgment about college readiness. It is, in fact, what they have been trained to do. In this construct of counselor, the role is seen as that of a gatekeeper. This mindset says that schools have a moral obligation, a duty, to keep their students from applying to post-secondary institutions with requirements that are beyond their abilities (Stone, 2009). If students are incapable of making this judgment for themselves, they could end up in a situation destined for failure, expense, and a lifetime of debt for no real benefit. The role of the counselor is to prevent this from happening.

On a practical level, these two perspectives guide the way that counselors spend their individual planning time with students. According to the ASCA National Model, this time should consist of helping students plan, monitor, and manage their own learning (ASCA, 2012). This, of course, is representative of the "educating" perspective.

The real-world difficulty of the educating perspective is the required amount of time and greater need for certified personnel. Counselors are often given extremely large caseloads, despite calls for fewer students per counselor. Given the time constraints with each student, it is easier and less time-consuming for a counselor to tell a student what to do rather than help them develop their own autonomy and decision-making skills (Stone, 2009).

Appraisal versus Advisement

Another counselor construct divides counselors into two perspectives: *appraisal* and *advisement*. Although in some ways similar to the previous construct, this is in many ways a very different way of looking at the counselor. In the educator role, the counselor informs, but in the appraisal role, the counselor's responsibility is to professionally measure and clarify for the students their level of ability and where their interests may be strongest. According to the ASCA, this mindset refers to the counselor's effort to analyze and evaluate a student's abilities, interests, skills, and achievement (ASCA, 2012). This, of course, requires some degree of subjective judgment, which puts the counselor role in a different light than one who merely informs.

The counter to this perspective is the counselor serving in the role of an advisor. This pushes the counselor toward taking control of the decision-making process, but it does not quite approach the level of directing. The ASCA describes this perspective as the counselor's effort to help students make decisions for their future (ASCA, 2012).

It might be helpful to view these two perspectives as more centrist in the continuum of counselor power in the relationship, with educating and directing on the two extremes: educating, appraising, advising, directing. This spectrum works from most to least student-centered, and it allows us to think about various ways that a counselor might approach individual counseling with a prospective post-secondary student.

Table 1
Scale of Student Development and Control

	High		Low	
	Educating	Appraising	Advising	Directing
Decision-maker	Student	Student with information from a counselor	Counselor with input and direction from the student, working cooperatively	Counselor
Counselor's Objective	Provide information and help the student grow in decision-making capability.	Provide objective and subjective analysis that guides that student's decision.	Provide suggested decision for student based on capabilities and needs.	Tell the student the best decision.
Decision Process	Student grows in maturity and capability until he or she is able to make the correct decision.	Student receives professional input from counselor and reaches the decision based on that evidence.	Counselor works to understand the student's situation and makes a judgment about how the student should proceed.	Counselor examines the student's records and scores and tells the student where he or she belongs academically.
Ultimate Goal of Guidance	Student success	An informed decision from the student	Students making the choice recommended by their counselor	A time-effective decision given to a student about where he or she belongs.

How Context Influences Guidance Styles

Collectively, these studies suggest an interesting and potentially harmful systematic bias for students from certain types of schools. Many of the school and counselor characteristics related to ineffectual use of time are consistent with poor and rural schools: younger and cheaper

employees (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008), fewer student-support resources in other areas (Herr, 2002), more students per caseload (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008), and so on.

Researchers have demonstrated that all of these factors result in an increased likelihood of non-best-practice job duties and use of time, but no research has yet established how it affects guidance strategies.

If we can assume that the context makes it more likely for counselors at poor and rural districts to have inappropriate job duties, we must also begin to question whether these job duties promote certain guidance styles over others. A counselor with too many students on his or her workload might not have time to educate students and instead might quickly direct students to the choice that seems best from the outside. A school district without sufficient resources might assign the counselor nearly full-time substitute teaching duties, administrative tasks, or other “time robbers” that prevent the counselor from properly appraising students and providing small-group and individual guidance. A school district in a rural or low-income area might not receive applications from good candidates and thus might hire someone for the counselor position who is not trained or licensed as an actual school counselor. Because of this, it is entirely possible that the “counselor” might not even understand the four conceptual perspectives of counseling (ASCA, 2012) or be able to identify superior strategies when confronted with a subjective decision.

The link between use of time and guidance strategies might be clear and consistent. Or perhaps other contexts play an important role in how these crucial discussions happen. Finding out the various duties of school counselors in Kansas and their understanding of how best to help with post-secondary guidance requires extensive interviews with participants from a variety of school and personal contexts. It also requires asking counselors to think about not just the *how*

but the *why* of their post-secondary guidance. This work is important in helping to understand some of the discrepancy in quality of counseling for students of different races and backgrounds.

In the end, we know that counselors are more likely to recommend community colleges to students from lower-SES backgrounds and to minority students (Linnehan et al., 2011). But why are counselors recommending a college at all? Currently, counselors are opposed to the idea of “shifting and sorting” students (Stone, 2009). The recommendation itself is against the current understanding of the counselor role, which should be focused on educating rather than directing. It might be that inferior strategies (at least as defined by the ASCA) like ordering students and directing their decisions are more likely to be used with these poor and minority students for the same reason that counselors are given incorrect job duties.

In this way of thinking, it might not be fair to say that counselors are biased, *per se*. Instead it might be more accurate to understand that certain types of counselors are more likely to use directive guidance strategies, which lead to subjective judgments that many other counselors simply never put themselves in a position to make. This, in turn, leads to bias in outcomes, regardless of intention of the counselors themselves.

It seems possible that part of the answer as to why counselors demonstrate bias is simply that students at poor and small schools, which already contain students who are more at risk and less likely to attend college, are also more likely to receive guidance from counselors that demonstrate more directive strategies not recommended by the ASCA. This hypothesis, however, must be studied more thoroughly.

Chapter III: Methods

This study addresses the following research question: *How do counselors in different school contexts evaluate their students' college readiness and offer post-secondary guidance?*

This study, therefore, examines how student assessment and evaluation, guidance styles, and, relatedly, job duties vary across school contexts, net of other counselor traits. Accordingly, counselors are chosen from schools in northeast Kansas with significant differences in SES, size, racial demographics, environment, and academic success metrics to investigate their connection to a counselor's evaluation of a student and post-secondary guidance strategies.

As discussed previously, the literature suggests that several factors can be linked to counselor job duties considered inappropriate by the ASCA, and that these may also be related to more directive guidance strategies. This study thus includes counselors at schools that exhibit extremes of these characteristics of size, racial diversity, support personnel, and financial resources. This maximum variation sampling is an effort to understand how these factors function in affecting guidance strategy. In addition, other schools with noteworthy makeup in cultural demographics, unusual academic success, and post-secondary success are examined.

Because of the focus on small, poor, and otherwise less-advantaged schools on one end of the spectrum, in many cases the counselor chosen for the interview was the only one for the building or the district. When selecting a counselor for the larger schools with entire departments of counselors, an effort was made to contact the person listed on the district's website with job duties or titles involving college or academic advising. In cases where no positions were listed or job duties were divided in other ways, the department chair was selected. Counselors were contacted via email or phone call and asked to participate in a study about post-secondary

readiness and guidance. Interviews were conducted in person whenever possible and by phone if an in-person interview was not possible.

The schools in this study varied in many ways—from some of the very smallest schools in Kansas to some of the largest. They varied in location, demographics, and academic success. They varied a great deal in financial resources. Prior to meeting the counselors and reporting their personal and professional characteristics, it is worth quickly exploring each of the buildings and introducing characteristics of the counselors. A brief summary of some of the information can be found on the School Characteristics and Counselor Characteristics charts in the following sections.

Site and Sample Characteristics

In Table 2, School Characteristics, statistics are largely from the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) (“Kansas State Department,” 2019) with the exception of the Kansas State High School Activities Association for school size (“Kansas State High School,” 2019). The table contains the percentage of students claiming a racial ethnicity of only white; percentage of students considered to be economically disadvantaged; rural, suburban, or urban designations; five-year average ACT composite scores; a five-year district graduation rate average; and an average district effectiveness rate with as many years as possible included for each school. The post-secondary effectiveness rate considers the number of high school graduates who are in college full time or make a living earning more than minimum wage five years after graduation. This is obtained by taking the total number of graduates who can be determined to be continuing their education or employed in an above-entry-level job and multiplying it by that year’s graduation rate.

Table 2
School Characteristics

Building	Size	% White	Economic Disadvantage	Context	ACT	Grad Rate	Effectiveness Rate
Smallville	1A	96%	52%	Rural	21.73	95%	57%
Rolling Hills	1A	95%	25%	Rural	19.91	84%	54%
Riverwalk	1A	98%	31%	Rural	20.88	93%	53%
Starville	3A	91%	28%	Rural	22.86	95%	57%
Midway	3A	85%	37%	Rural	22.08	91%	48%
Gateway	3A	60%	45%	Rural	20.55	89%	38%
St. August	3A	86%	47%	Rural	19.81	90%	33%
Fisher	5A	82%	18%	Suburban	23.36	96%	66%
Central City	5A	11%	78%	Urban	22.35	67%	27%
Opal Heights	6A	74%	30%	Suburban	23.32	92%	53%
Metropolis	6A	39%	69%	Urban	20.65	71%	26%

Rolling Hills, Riverwalk, and St. August are all found in Gotham County. Rolling Hills and Riverwalk are both 1A schools, and St. August is a 3A school. Two of the counselors from this county were interviewed for this study. Mrs. Jackson, a relatively new counselor, works only at Riverwalk and is a PK–12 counselor. Riverwalk has a student body that is 31% economically disadvantaged, according to KSDE. It is the least diverse of all the schools in this study—98% of the student body is white. The average ACT score during the last five years is a 20.88, approximately in the middle of the pack for the schools in this study. Their graduation rate is 93%, fourth highest of all schools studied, and their post-secondary effectiveness rate is listed as fifth highest at 53%. They are the only remaining unconsolidated school in the county, and the prospect of closure or further consolidation exists for this district.

Rolling Hills and St. August are the two other schools in this district, and their counseling needs, along with those of Riverwalk, are partially met by a counselor employed by the Gotham County Special Education Coop. Rolling Hills, like Riverwalk, is a 1A school, but only 25% of the student body is considered to be economically disadvantaged, the second smallest percentage of any school in this study. Riverside is larger, a 3A school, and is 47% economically

disadvantaged, the fourth highest rate in the study. These two schools are ranked last and second to last in average ACT score, and third and fifth to last in graduation rate. Their post-secondary effectiveness scores are somewhere in the middle of all the schools studied. Mrs. Johnson, a sixth-year school counselor, helps support the counselors at these three county schools. She does not have a specific caseload but instead takes a supportive role, helping with guidance as requested by the counselors in each building. These three schools and the county counselor were specifically selected because the counselor works in three different districts with three different student bodies and demographics. It will be instructive to understand if the large caseload and differing assignments change the way that she provides post-secondary guidance.

Smallville is a 1A school that is part of a larger district centered in Starville. Because of its size and dependence on a larger town for educational services, the school is served only by part-time counseling. Mrs. Morris covers the elementary students of Smallville along with the middle school students of Starville. She is only in the Smallville district one day per week. The high school students of Smallville are primarily served by Mrs. Burrton, who is also the high school counselor at Starville. She spends one day each week in Smallville to meet with students. Smallville is both small and poor. It has very little racial diversity and is 96% white. In this rural school, 52% of students are listed as “economically disadvantaged” by the KSDE, the third most of any school in this study. Its five-year ACT average composite scores fall right in the middle of all schools studied, its graduation rate is third highest in this study, and its effectiveness rate is tied for second, although it should be noted that KSDE only releases effectiveness rates for districts as a whole and not individual schools. Smallville is housed in a single K–12 building, and this small community relies on the traveling counselors from Starville and the larger district to meet the needs of its students. Smallville is constantly under threat of consolidation, and many

of its patrons do not believe that the school district will be open much longer. Many teachers keep an eye out for jobs in the area as well as in-district in Starville to make sure that they will be employed for the foreseeable future. Smallville was chosen for this study because of its extreme lack of resources, lack of diversity, small size, and limited counseling support.

Starville High School is located in the largest town in the same district as Smallville and is the largest high school in the district, although it is still small by the standards of this study. A 3A school, Starville employs a high school counselor, Mrs. Burrton, who splits time with Smallville one day a week. Their district is also served by an elementary and middle school counselor, Mrs. Morris, who also splits time with Smallville one day a week. Starville High School is successful in academics and athletics, and the town has substantial employment and a large number of businesses for a rural Kansas town. One of the larger towns in its region, it is home to a hospital, gas stations, restaurants, and grocery stores. It is 91% white and the third most prosperous student body in the study. Only 28% of students are listed as economically disadvantaged by KSDE. Its ACT scores over the last five years are also third highest of the schools in this study. Its graduation rate is tied for second highest, and its post-secondary effectiveness rate is also tied for second highest. For a rural Kansas school district, Starville is relatively well-off and can count on being open and well-attended for years into the future, something not all rural Kansas schools can depend on. Starville was chosen for this study because of its high academic success, its substantial resources for a small school, and the important consideration that it shares two counselors with Smallville, both of whom had assignments as high school counselors in their careers. This study examines whether the counselors respond differently to students at these two very different schools and whether their post-secondary guidance is affected by the context of each.

Midway is similar in size to Starville, although not quite as well-off in economic strength. The town has fewer employers, and the student body is more transient. At Midway, 37% of the students are economically disadvantaged, somewhere in the middle of all schools in this study; 85% of its student body identified as white, according to KSDE, and its ACT scores were slightly lower than Starville's. Its graduation rate is also slightly lower at 91%, and its post-secondary effectiveness rate is 48%, lower as well. Midway High School is served by two counselors, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Black. Mrs. Brown is a full-time high school counselor, and Mrs. Black is at the high school two or three days a week while also working at the elementary school across town. Midway was chosen because it represents a more typical small school; it has fewer resources than Starville but is relatively stable. The existence of two counselors is also instructive because it will help to illustrate whether context makes a difference in guidance styles for two different employees or whether their personal characteristics will be more important than their shared environment.

Gateway High School is similar in size to Starville and Midway, but, whereas Starville represents a particularly high-achieving and prosperous small Kansas town, and Midway represents an average small Kansas town, Gateway High School is faced with a more difficult economic context. Gateway's student body is 60% white, and many of its students draw from a neighboring Native American reservation. Economic disadvantage affects 45% of its students, and its ACT scores over the last five years are the third worst of the schools in this study. The graduation rate is 89%, fourth worst, and the post-secondary effectiveness rate is also fourth worst at 38%. For a small Kansas town, Gateway High School is relatively diverse, relatively poor, and relatively low achieving in standardized testing. The towns in the district have very few employers, and the district has a reputation for drugs and rough-around-the-edges students.

Its student body is served by a single counselor at the high school, a first-year counselor who is an alumni of the school named Mrs. Washington. This school was chosen to illustrate whether the more at-risk students in a small Kansas district receive the same counseling as the more fortunate students in similar-sized districts.

Opal Heights is one of the more well-respected high schools in Kansas. The single high school in its district is 6A in size, and its student body is 74% white. Only 30% of its student body is considered economically disadvantaged, and the district is known for its wealth and facilities. It is located on the edge of a large metro area, and is largely considered to be the most desirable school in the county. It has the second highest ACT scores of the schools studied and is close to having the highest. Its graduation rate is 92%, and its post-secondary effectiveness rate is 53%. It has a large staff of six counselors, here represented by Mrs. West. Opal Heights has the resources and the academic success to rightly consider itself one of the better schools in Kansas. Opal Heights was chosen because it is wealthy and academically successful, and has a large counseling department and a great deal of support.

Metropolis High School is the urban, city school in the same county as Opal Heights. It is one of three high schools in the district and serves a diverse and relatively needy clientele of students. A 6A high school, it is 39% white, the second lowest rate of the schools in this study. Economic disadvantage affects 69% of the students, which is the second most extreme measure in this study. Its ACT scores are fourth lowest, and its graduation rate of 71% is the second lowest. Its post-secondary effectiveness rate of 26% is the lowest of all schools in this study. This school represents a contrast to Opal Heights. While equally large, it is different in demographic makeup and academic successes. It has a similar counseling department of six counselors, including two social-emotional counselors, and a seventh member of the department

who serves as a college and career advisor but is not a certified counselor. In this study, I spoke with Mrs. Lewis, the chair of the counseling department. Whether the different student body needs and fewer resources changes how the counselors here think about post-secondary guidance may give some indication about what factors are most linked to this part of the counselor job. Metropolis was chosen because it is the same size as Opal Heights but with different demographics and much less historic academic success. It will help to show the ways in which these contexts change the guidance provided by counseling departments.

Another large, suburban school is Fisher High School. It is a wealthy school district on the edges of one of the larger metro areas in Kansas. It is 82% white and has the lowest percentage of economically disadvantaged students by a substantial margin. It also has the highest average ACT composite scores in the last five years of all the schools in this study. Its graduation rate is also the highest and so is its post-secondary effectiveness rate. Fisher is representative, along with Opal Heights, of a school district with every resource and a very high level of academic success. If any school is situationally likely to have counselors' best-practice job duties and post-secondary guidance, Fisher is it. Fisher is served by three counselors, represented in this study by Mrs. Porter. Fisher was chosen because it resembles Opal Heights—while slightly smaller in size and counseling resources, it has similar wealth and academic success.

Central City is an International Baccalaureate school in a large, urban school district. Students are held to high standards of grades and behavior and can only attend if they keep a 2.5 GPA. It is only 11% white, and 78% of students are listed as economically disadvantaged, the lowest and highest numbers in this study, respectively. Despite the stereotypes of their location and demographics, this building reports the fourth highest ACT scores in the study. Their

graduation and post-secondary rates, available only at the larger district level, are near the bottom. This study addresses a college advisor employed through the Kansas State College Advising Corps, a federal branch of AmeriCorps run through Kansas State University. She is in year one of a two-year commitment and is not a certified counselor, the only such study participant. Central City was chosen because it is a large urban school. However, unlike Metropolis, Central City is incredibly successful in producing high-achieving academic students. It was important to understand whether the counseling would be best practice or be more directive in spite of the high success of the student body. It also allows us to think about what role counselors have in making such great strides in closing the achievement gap.

Interview Protocol and Questions

The questions are designed to clearly understand personal counselor characteristics, use of time and job duties, and school contexts. The most important part of the questioning, however, will be to understand the counselor's actions in the context of the educating–directing spectrum without specifically asking counselors for their view or practice on this framework. It is hoped that by asking detailed questions of situations and practice, counselors will make their position on this chart clear, while also providing some explanation for how they select the practices that they use.

The purpose of the interviews follow:

1. Determine the counselor-specific characteristics that must be ruled out. These include length of time in the position, gender, and training.
2. Determine the counselor- and school-specific characteristics that are of interest for this study. These include job duties, staffing and case-load issues, and use of time. To some degree, this also includes the length of time in the position and training insofar as it is

representative of the department as a whole and indicates a contextual weakness in providing a high-level counseling program.

3. Determine how the counselor establishes a student's college readiness, including evaluation measures that are both objective and subjective. As much as possible, these tools will be viewed in terms of the educating–directing spectrum.
4. Determine the guidance strategies used by the counselor and place these strategies on the continuum from educating to directing.

The responses from participating counselors should help draw conclusions about how school contexts of size and financial resources contribute to guidance strategies of counselors as well as the relationship between duties and guidance strategy. The goal of the study is to select counselors with variation in personal traits to more clearly identify whether the context of the school influences guidance strategies regardless of the individual attributes of the counselor. It is also hoped that finding schools that provide a similar context but expect very different job duties of their counselors will clarify whether job duties are the mechanism that influences strategies or whether context is able to do that directly.

Interview Protocol

Section 1: Counselor Characteristics

1. How long have you been a counselor? How long at this school?
2. What training did you have to become a counselor?
3. Do you feel prepared by your training to offer post-secondary guidance to students?

Section 2: School Context

1. How many counselors are there in your building?
2. What grade levels are you responsible for?

3. Approximately how many students are on your caseload?
4. What are some of the job duties you are routinely responsible for?
5. How much of your time would you say is spent in direct student services?
6. How much of your time is spent in indirect or fair-share services?
7. Are you responsible for job duties that you feel are not typical or appropriate for a school counselor?
8. Who determines your job duties and evaluates your performance?
9. Do you have administrative support and protection of your time to be a counselor?

Section 3: Student College Readiness

1. What makes a student “ready” for college?
2. What determines a student’s “readiness” for different types of college?
3. What’s the ideal way for a counselor to determine a student’s level of college readiness?
How often do you deviate from this ideal? Why?
4. How do you work with students who have a different understanding of their college readiness than you do?
5. If a student is not ready for college and decides to attend despite this, has he or she made a mistake?
6. Do all students have the college conversation with you? How do you determine who has this guidance and how often?

Section 4: Post-Secondary Guidance Strategies

1. Do your students typically have access to college advice outside of your office or the school setting?
2. How would you approach a student who has no concept of post-secondary options?

3. How would you approach a student who is committed to a post-secondary option that you firmly believe is not the best decision?
4. How do you navigate competing interests and desires of students and parents?
5. What role do you see as most beneficial for a student when you have a professional opinion on their decision? Does it matter how much students know about his or her options?
6. How do you communicate your opinion to a student about what decision he or she should make?

Chapter IV: Results

The Counselors

The counselors in this study shared many similarities in career trajectory, training, and personal characteristics. Table 3 lists some of the important counselor characteristics studied for this case, followed by brief narrative descriptions of each category. Years of experience includes counseling only, and the graduate school listed is where counseling training occurred. A majority of counselors attended a graduate counseling program after a brief teaching career.

Job Certification and Titles

Of the eleven counselors interviewed, ten were certified by the KSDE as a counselor. Nine of these were employed by public school districts in the state of Kansas. The other certified counselor was employed by a county-wide special-education coop. The eleventh counselor, Mrs. Davies, works at Central City High School, although she is an employee of a large Regents university through a federal program bringing college guidance to high-impact school districts. Mrs. Davies is not licensed as a counselor and her only training was a month-long orientation.

Job titles are also largely equivalent. Most refer to themselves as a “school counselor,” while Mrs. Davies at Central City refers to her position as “college advisor.” Two of the counselors, Mrs. Lewis from Metropolis and Mrs. West from Opal Heights, have the additional job description of chair of their department, and Mrs. Porter, the counselor from Fisher, considers herself to effectively be the chair of the department, although the title does not exist. Mrs. West additionally mentioned her responsibility in the hiring process at her school, something that no other counselor is responsible for. In her hiring role, she looks to hire candidates who have previously been teachers, for reasons discussed later in this section. The information in Table 3 summarizes the basic information about each counselor.

Table 3
Counselor Characteristics

Counselor	School(s)	Certified?	Experience	Grad School	Teaching Experience
Lewis	Metropolis	Yes	20+	K-State	History, PE
Brown	Midway	Yes	20+	K-State	Health, PE
Washington	Gateway	Yes	1–5	Fort Hays State	Elementary
Morris	Starville and Smallville	Yes	10–20	K-State	Science, Social Studies
West	Opal Heights	Yes	20+	Emporia State	Business
Burrton	Smallville and Starville	Yes	10–20	K-State	English
Black	Midway	Yes	20+	Emporia State	English
Porter	Fisher	Yes	10–20	Emporia State	Biology
Jackson	Riverwalk	Yes	1–5	Fort Hays State	Family and Consumer Sciences
Johnson	Gotham County	Yes	5–10	Fort Hays State	N/A
Davies	Central City	No	1–5	N/A	N/A

The Training Programs

The counselors also revealed a number of similarities in their training programs, despite differences in institution and when their training had taken place. While the state of Kansas now allows for counselor certification through parallel or alternative pathways, a vast majority of the counselors interviewed went through a traditional counselor-training program prior to being hired as a counselor. In many cases, this was the only option at the time of their certification in Kansas and, in one case, Nebraska. The traditional counselor-training system also required that counselors had spent at least two years teaching prior to entering a counselor-training graduate program, so a majority of counselors interviewed for this study were classroom teachers to begin their career. Their classroom teaching assignments included elementary, English, science, physical education, and business positions, and it did not appear that a specific teaching job was desirable or more common for those who knew that they wanted to become counselors after their brief, two-year teaching career had passed. Table 3 highlights their teaching experience. The particulars of their teaching experience did not appear to be connected to their guidance strategies, although Mrs. West spoke about the importance of a teaching background for a school

counselor in the way that it prepared them to give presentations and work with larger groups of students as an educator about college and career options. When hiring, she believes strongly in the presentational skills, empathy, and knowledge of a former teacher. Despite this, her department includes two counselors who were certified through an alternative pathway.

The training programs themselves were widely similar. The most noticeable commonality was that counselors did not recall their program covering post-secondary or academic guidance in a way that prepared them adequately for their future profession. When asked about the degree to which their counselor training covered social–emotional concepts, therapeutic strategies, and academic or career guidance, clear themes began to emerge. Mrs. Burrton, the counselor at Smallville recalled that her “training was not as much academic development. Career and social–emotional were stronger than academic.” She was therefore a little taken aback when her first counseling job did not require much in the way of emotional counseling but instead required her to know about academic standards and career advising. When students had questions about colleges, she was “aware that different colleges might have different entrance policies as well as scholarships . . . but there was a lot of that where if the kid was interested . . . I did a lot of research alongside the kid.”

At Riverwalk, Mrs. Jackson recalls being trained in a little “bit of everything.” Uniquely, she completed an additional seven hours for certification as an licensed clinical professional counselor to practice community health. The program at Fort Hays State University (FHSU) offers but does not require these additional hours. She felt that the additional community health hours were particularly helpful because of the increasing need for social and emotional support for students. When it came to academic and post-secondary advising, Mrs. Jackson felt somewhat prepared, but she acknowledged that might partially be from her background as a

Family and Consumer Science Teacher. In this teaching role, she often found herself being questioned by students about future opportunities as well as relied upon for emotional support and counseling in times of trouble.

Mrs. Johnson, the Gotham County counselor, is one of the few who did not begin as a teacher. Instead, she began with a degree in family studies and human services from Kansas State and served on a lockdown unit at a local hospital and as a case manager. From her community health background, she went to FHSU, where she completed the same program as several other counselors in this study. There, she felt she was mostly trained in social–emotional counseling. The real focus of the program at FHSU, according to Mrs. Johnson, is mental health. This description is consistent with other counselors who completed the program.

At Starville, Mrs. Morris recalls similar training: “I remember being trained . . . characterized lessons, social–emotional, role-playing. I don’t really remember a whole lot as far as post-secondary, guiding high school kids.” She did recall taking a data course that included looking at state assessment scores, but when asked if she felt prepared in her first job for student questions about post-secondary options, her answer is clear: “No. That was one thing I was very scared of. I did not feel very prepared. I don’t remember taking classes like that—how to guide kids.”

Midway’s two counselors, Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Black, attended different colleges at different times for their graduate training in counseling, and their experiences were not quite the same. Mrs. Brown, the primary high school counselor, viewed it mostly as training for career guidance. It’s worth noting that her training occurred at a time when career guidance was still the primary objective for school counselors. At the time, social–emotional counseling was the least important part of her training, and she doesn’t recall any training on suicide or mandatory reporting. “The world,” she says, “was different.” However, she found the most influential part

of her program to be the training that covered this individual counseling. She recalls it helping to make her more insightful when working with others. This idea, that the training to be a counselor is useful when applied to post-secondary guidance, is shared by Mrs. West at Opal Heights.

Mrs. Black, Mrs. Brown's compatriot in the same district who shares high school counselor duties with her, attended another Board of Regents institution several years later, and found mostly social-emotional training and "not as much academic" counseling. When asked whether she was prepared in her first job to help people with post-secondary guidance, Mrs. Black sounds much like the counselor of Smallville: "No. I used a lot of resources of counselors that I had networked with." Like the other counselors, her training in post-secondary guidance came from on-the-job-training and a willingness to learn along with her students.

At Gateway High School, Mrs. Washington remembers her training clearly—it ended only last year. In her first year as a counselor, she looks back to recall training that was "basically social and emotional." As she recalls, she was never taught anything about post-secondary guidance in her online coursework from FHSU. She, too, did not feel prepared to offer post-secondary guidance to students at the high school level. Her practicum, unfortunately, was almost entirely focused at the elementary level and with social and emotional counseling.

A counselor at one of the larger schools would seem likely to have finished the same graduate counselor training program as a counselor at a small school, and similarities certainly emerge. Mrs. West at Opal Heights attended the same Emporia State program as Mrs. Black at Midway, for instance. Like her fellow alumnus, Mrs. West recalls that "the main training was in the social and emotional. I think that's a problem. There was a career counseling course, but you're never working on college counseling. All of that training came independently." However, it would not be fair to say that the program failed her entirely. She says, "There is a lot of value

in the training we did. Counselors without that training are so quick to give their advice . . . project their own opinions and experiences. A big part of the counseling program is learning how not to project.” According to Mrs. West, even if the program did not cover the academic and post-secondary guidance strategies she needed, the training in therapeutic counseling helped her recognize when her own biases and judgment were being projected onto the student, and she was able to translate that understanding to her later post-secondary academic guidance. Because of her training, she grew even in areas that were not specifically covered. Mrs. West makes hiring decisions for her department and still believes that a former teacher and traditionally educated counselor has the best shot at being a high-quality candidate.

Central City’s college advisor, Mrs. Davies, has no training as a school counselor. Instead, her two-year commitment through the College Advising Corps began with a month-long training in filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), college applications, and other specific practical details of the position. She received no training on the social and emotional aspect of the position and is not expected to provide therapeutic interventions with any students. In fact, she considers that the job came about fortuitously, as she saw the position on Indeed.com, a job listing website, while she was “trying to figure out my own life.” She had majored in English and communication studies in college but first recognized her interest in helping people while serving as a resident assistant. After college, she worked at a press, sold insurance, did file prep work on a computer, and worked as a copy editor. The goal of the College Advising Corps is to have a “near-peer” situation with advisors and students, so many in her position have graduated in the semester before they began advising students.

Summary of Training Information

Mrs. Lewis (6A), Mrs. Brown (3A), Mrs. Morris (1A and 3A), and Mrs. Burrton (1A and 3A) all attended the same graduate program at K-State, and their opinions and understandings of the counselor profession and the appropriate role of personal advice in guidance were clearly different in several ways. Mrs. Washington (3A), Mrs. Johnson (1A and 3A), and Mrs. Jackson (1A) all got their graduate degrees from FHSU, and they also fall in different places on the scale of student self-control and autonomy. Mrs. West, Mrs. Black, and Mrs. Porter received their degrees from Emporia State University, but were extremely different in the strategies that they chose to employ with their students. It does not appear, by and large, that the training program itself influences post-secondary guidance strategies, although counselors did often admit to feeling unprepared for that topic. In fact, if one consistent theme emerged, it was that academic and post-secondary guidance is the least-covered topic in counselor-training programs. Both mental health therapy and career guidance are more commonly covered subjects.

Another consistent theme that developed was that counseling programs had prepared them for a world with different students and different needs. In some cases, the counseling program was no longer easy to even recall. At Metropolis, Mrs. Lewis went through a program “so long ago” that she “no longer remembers the content” of her training program. Like Mrs. Brown at Midway, however, Mrs. Lewis seems to believe that the world is different, and that her counseling program probably prepared her for a much different world. “It was a long time ago, and kids were a lot different back then. . . . I don’t know. That was thirty years ago.” Mrs. Porter at Fisher agrees that the job has changed and that the kids have as well. She claims that the biggest area of difference is that the social and emotional needs of students have grown. Students now need someone to talk to at all times. Her program, similarly, did “not really [have] a class

on academic advising.” Luckily, the academic “thing” came naturally to her. It is still today the part of the job that she enjoys the most and believes that counselors are most equipped to do.

Her biggest complaint about her training was that it did not cover the special education knowledge and procedures that she needs as a coordinator of all building 504 plans, a job that Mrs. Porter claims is commonly done by a counselor in her experience. Several of the counselors had major roles in the special education process at their schools, a topic that none of them mentioned receiving any training for.

Not every recollection of the counselor training program was consistent. There were also areas of disagreement in how counselors recalled the program. Some, like Mrs. Brown and Mrs. West, felt that the programs they had attended were largely thorough and helpful. Others, including Mrs. Morris, Mrs. Burrton, and Mrs. Washington, saw the course work as severely lacking to adequately prepare them for the job duties they encountered in the real world.

These interviews were valuable in suggesting that it is not the length of time that a counselor has taught, the training that they have had, the institution that they have attended, or their job title that correlates to their post-secondary guidance strategies. Some counselors with similar training felt differently about guidance, and some counselors from different programs in different decades agreed strongly with each other. As seen in Table 3, no specific personal counselor characteristics was clearly indicative of how they would approach secondary guidance.

Job Duties and Roles

There is a great deal of variation in the counselor role at each school, which matches much of the literature on counselor job duties. These counselors have a wide variety of assignments, caseloads, department sizes, and use of time. The counselor role is perceived differently from institution to institution and even from counselor to counselor within a building.

Counselors interviewed are responsible for a wide range of roles, described in Table 4, beginning with some of the smaller buildings and ending with the job role for counselors in larger districts. Table 4 summarizes some basic information about the job itself and counselors' responsibilities, including the school or schools under their responsibility, their approximate caseload, the number of counselors in their building, the grade levels they serve, and the percentage of time they estimate that they spend in direct student services.

Table 4
Summary of Job Characteristics

Counselor	Schools	Caseload	Number of Counselors	Grade Levels	Schools Covered	Direct Student Services
Jackson	Riverwalk	350	1	PK-12	2	50%
Johnson	Gotham County	N/A	N/A	PK-12	3	85%
Morris	Smallville and Starville	630	1	PK-12	3	85%
Burrton	Starville and Smallville	300	1	7-12	2	40%
Black	Midway	400	1.4	PK-12	2	50%
Brown	Midway	314	1.4	9-12	1	50%
Washington	Gateway	265	1	9-12	1	20%
West	Opal Heights	460	6	9-12	1	85%
Lewis	Metropolis	450	6	9-12	1	20%
Porter	Fisher	350	3	9-12	1	25%
Davies	Central City	350	1	9-12	1	85%

Riverwalk's counselor, Mrs. Jackson, has many duties, especially considering the wide age range and large number of students she is responsible for. She has 350 students on a PK-12 caseload. She also serves as the district's test coordinator, state assessment coordinator, and ACT coordinator; serves on many committees; serves on the site council and teacher advisory councils; is a field trip sponsor and vo-tech coordinator; and serves as a liaison for the local community college. Because of her large number of role expectations, she estimates that last year she maybe had 50% of her time open for student contact. This year, she feels, she's been a little bit higher than that, but this has meant an enormous workload at home.

Mrs. Johnson is unique in that she is employed by a county-wide special education coop. In this role, she does guidance, social–emotional lessons, small-group and individual counseling, suicide prevention training, crisis training, individualized educational program (IEP) support, and input on behavior plans, and she assists the three districts’ counselors with post-secondary guidance. In this unique role, she is lucky to have 85% of her time available for direct student services. She does admit that she’s often thrown into an administrative role, especially when a principal or other administrator is not in the building. She recognizes that this makes some sense but does seem to understand that it is not ideal.

Mrs. Burrton, the counselor at Smallville, has job duties including testing, scheduling, coordinating individual plans of study (IPs), coordinating online course work, distributing scholarships and running the scholarship awards night, assisting with academic planning, and organizing career prep night. She refers to her roles as having “got a million other things I need to do” and “pretty exhausting.” In addition to her work at Smallville, this counselor also spends time at Starville, which means she spends a great deal of time on the road. Because she works at two schools, has other duties, and requires travel time, she estimates that she spends only about 40% of her time in direct student contact with her approximately three-hundred-student caseload. She admits to spending quite a bit of time at home working on school projects to get more time with kids at school, however. As she says, “The kids need interaction with me.” She also recognizes that being at Smallville only one day a week means that she needs to concentrate on as much direct contact with students during that time as possible. It helps that at Smallville she does not serve as testing coordinator or event planner. At Starville, on the other hand, she has additional duties, and, as seen later, she has a different conceptual framework for her post-secondary advising from school to school.

Mrs. Burrton shares duties with Mrs. Morris, who has been a counselor from PK–12 in her career but is currently assigned to three buildings—two elementary and a middle school. Unlike her colleague, Mrs. Morris’s time is almost entirely protected for student contact. This is partially because she has a caseload of 630 kids in three different buildings. “We’re all running crazy,” she told me when thinking about her student load. However, a high number of students does have some benefit to her job description. “That is one thing that is nice with this,” Mrs. Morris tells me. “I don’t do a lot outside of kid interaction. I don’t really have time. They don’t put a lot on my plate.” Prior to this year’s role, she had other duties, including state reporting, scheduling, student information system maintenance, and even lunch duty. However, with this current assignment, she is able to spend “probably 80% to 85%” of time with direct student contact. She suggests that some of this administrative support to protect her time may come from having a superintendent whose wife is a counselor. She suspects he hears from her how incredibly time consuming the job is and how much is expected of counselors. A principal at one of her schools was also a counselor prior to moving to administration. While she recognizes that she should have one-third of her current caseload, she also recognizes the positives of having time that can be almost completely dedicated to direct student services.

Mrs. Brown, the primary high school counselor for Midway, spends time in IEPs for special education students, organizes career and technical education programs, organizes senior meetings with parents, coordinates job and career fairs, and goes to a number of academic meetings. These duties at her one assigned building mean that she is able to spend approximately 50% of her time in direct student services for her 314-student caseload. Her situation, however, was not always as conducive to counseling. The counselor she replaced was doing “crazy” tasks, including filling and managing the pop machines, lunch duty, and counting money. Mrs. Brown

was adamant from the beginning that she was a counselor, and her insistence seems to have paid off with substantially better job duties. “I do not substitute teach. I will help out in an emergency. I’m not a substitute teacher.” While she has a supportive administration, her refusal to take on tasks that she sees as inappropriate is her primary reason for her current job duties.

Mrs. Black, Mrs. Brown’s counterpart at Midway, spends two to three days a week at the high school and splits many of the counselor duties with Mrs. Brown. She is the testing coordinator for the entire district, including ACTs; attends IEP meetings; does all the transcript analysis for the district, including for the alternative adult school; does much of the college guidance; and also “whatever gets thrown our way.” She attends a lot of meetings as well: “There’s a lot of meetings that we get called into. A lot of meetings that are just brainstorming . . . that isn’t direct contact with a student. And then all the paperwork!” Her biggest frustration with her role is the scheduling. “I don’t think . . . we were always told, don’t do the schedule, this is not what your job is. But realistically, that is not what schools need counselors to do.” She spends part of her time at the high school and is also at the elementary school in the district as well, which means that she sees approximately four hundred students on her caseload. Like Mrs. Brown, she estimates being able to spend about 50% of her time in direct student services. Also like her colleague, she can “count on one hand the number of times I’ve had to step into a classroom.” In this district, counselors are not expected to be substitute teachers—often a huge drain on the counselor’s day.

Mrs. Washington, the first-year counselor at Gateway, is busy as well. She is responsible for freshmen orientation, enrollment, scheduling, scholarships, graduation checks, suicide prevention programming, technical education, transcription, and student information system maintenance and record keeping. In addition, she is responsible for a caseload of approximately

265 students for individual counseling. Because of the amount of work on her plate, especially clerical work in the student information system, she estimates that she spends only approximately 20% of her time in direct student services. A vast majority of her time is taken up by various meetings, scheduling, and student information system data entry. Despite this, Mrs. Washington feels that administration does their best to protect her time as a counselor. She mentions that she volunteers to substitute teach frequently, but administration refuses to let her because of their insistence that she always be available for students. She's most uncomfortable when her role strays too far into discipline. She mentions, for instance, that she does not enjoy her role in handling dress code violations, especially for female students. She feels that this disciplinary role makes it more difficult for her to later achieve a measure of trust and comfort with the same students in a counselor or therapeutic role.

In these smaller schools, a couple of interesting themes emerge. The first is that the counselor is often, but not always, seen as a catch-all position that includes any number of non-counselor job duties. A second noteworthy consistency is that the amount of direct student contact tends to be extremely low in this group. While one counselor did find herself currently in a position of high student contact hours, she acknowledges that this arrangement was made possible because she no longer works at the high school level and has a caseload of three times the recommended number of students, effectively preventing her from having any other role in that district. A final interesting theme is that these counselors are largely self-sufficient and independent in their department. They work by themselves in multiple buildings or have limited and part-time contact with no more than one other colleague for less than full time. As discussed later, this isolated working condition seems to have some correlation to post-secondary guidance styles.

Counselors at some of the larger schools share similar job duties and caseloads as their more rural peers. Mrs. West, the counselor at Opal Heights, for instance, has as many job duties as anyone interviewed. In addition to being the department chair, she coordinates much of the student information system, preenrollment, graduation checks, college visits, post-secondary guidance, IPS programs, ACT tests, International Baccalaureate classes and programs, and individual and group meetings. In addition, her department chair role includes hiring counselors, a job duty that no one else seems to have. Her caseload is also incredibly high: approximately 460 students, organized by last name. “It’s too many,” she says. “I cannot serve the needs of everybody.” She talks about how her incredibly large caseload means that she is able to do “less classroom guidance,” a part of her job that she considers to be incredibly important in a high-quality counseling department. Unlike at smaller schools, however, she interacts a great deal with other counselors—six in her building alone. She also has a very supportive principal, a trait that she ascribes to his coming from out of state. He knows all the position statements and will go to bat for counselors if she sends him information on why they should not fill a particular role. She acknowledges that even then, “a lot of the scheduling . . . that data entry . . . could be done by someone else. The amount of data entry we have to do for scheduling . . . is a mess.” She estimates that she could easily be at 100% direct student contact if she didn’t intentionally close the door sometimes to do her other work, and she is hoping that their building will get another full-time counselor soon.

Mrs. Lewis, the counselor at Metropolis High, is also incredibly busy. She is responsible for 450 kids divided by last name, which she acknowledges is not an ideal situation. “The numbers are overwhelming. That’s the problem.” She sees herself largely as an academic guide. There are four academic counselors, two emotional counselors, and a career and job advisor.

Being an academic counselor, however, does not mean that she has a simple job. She is responsible for testing, English language learner students, department chair duties, NCAA, fee waivers, FAFSA, scheduling, academic advising, and many presentations to students and parents. “Sometimes when you’re a counselor, you take on things you don’t want to do,” Mrs. Lewis admits. If a student has social or emotional concerns, however, they are referred to a separate counselor. This allows her to focus on the academic counselor role. “There are a thousand things that the district wants me to do academically.” She notes that if she had to take on the social–emotional counselor role, she wouldn’t be able to dedicate any time to academic success because the immediate need of literally trying to save lives would become too important. When it comes to direct student services, she says her various job duties allowed her “not near enough” direct student contact. The previous district director of counseling used to mandate occasional use-of-time studies, but her departure means that those have not been happening. These job duties mean that her time with students is not as high quality as she would like. “It’s kind of like a sale barn; you’re like: next, next.” Like many other counselors who had been performing the job for more than ten years, she was concerned by the increasing level of responsibility being assigned to counselors: “I can’t think of anything that has ever gone off my plate . . . things keep coming on . . . it’s just a lot of stuff.” Much of the post-secondary guidance is currently in the hands of a young college advisor who is not trained as a counselor. His view of the appropriate role of the adult in student guidance is much different than Mrs. Lewis’s.

Mrs. Porter, the counselor at Fisher, acknowledges feeling burned out from the never-ending additional job duties in her time as a counselor. She and the two other counselors in her building each have 350 students on their caseloads. Prior to last year, there were only two counselors, and each had over 450 kids to see. Her job duties include advanced placement (AP)

testing, College Now Coordinator, coordination of all 504 plans, senior counseling, ACT testing, the master schedule, IPSs, and even maintaining the website for the school. Although IPS is a new program in Kansas, she acknowledges that she and her colleagues were already doing many elements of it. Because of all of these job duties, she guesses that she only spends maybe 25% of her time in direct student contact. She mentions that her building administrators are aware that the three counselors at Fisher are overworked and have even suggested a career and college counselor or someone to take on a social worker role. She agrees that “a social–emotional counselor would be awesome.” She has spent more and more of her time recently dealing with these issues, including significantly more calls to protective services on behalf of children. She also mentions the hundreds of emails from students, parents, and faculty members that she gets each day.

Mrs. Davies at Central City has only one job: college advising. There are some bureaucratic elements to the job like detailed recordkeeping on her conversations with students, but she says that she can avoid many of the duties assigned to other counselors because “I can say no to anything because the school is not my employer.” Because of this luxury, she is able to spend 85% of her time in student contact with the 350 students in the junior and senior class at Central City. She encourages students to sign up for the ACT as part of her job, although she inaccurately claims that “Kansas requires everyone to take the ACT now.” She is not responsible for actually proctoring the test or coordinating any assessment for her students. She considers her job description to be “finding the students’ best matching fit.”

Summary of Job Duties and Roles

Counselors at the larger schools are equally burdened in comparison with small-school counselors. Having more staff did not indicate that a counselor is able to be a full-time counselor

and avoid many of the additional duties seen at the smaller schools. They do, however, have a staff to work with, communicate with, and plan with. Counselors at large schools mention the importance of those relationships and the way that they are able to work as a team to help students. This connection to other professionals seems to be an important part of encouraging high-quality post-secondary guidance.

An interesting part of the job mentioned by several counselors is the physical construction and location of the counseling facilities. At Midway, the counselors talk about the advantages and disadvantages of their offices' locations, designs, and sizes. At Metropolis, Mrs. Lewis is upset because an administrative decision to split the counseling department and put it in different areas of the building means that there is less collaboration with her colleagues and a more difficult time in dealing with students who might need assistance from someone in a different location. Several counselors have strong opinions about the ways in which the physical layout of the school can help or hinder their ability to do a good job.

Unlike in personal characteristics, the job and contextual environment of that job seems to be linked to the likelihood of a counselor using directive-guidance strategies. In Chapter V, I further examine the importance of colleagues, school size, and department size in encouraging high-quality post-secondary guidance.

Establishing College Readiness: ACT and GPA

One of the first goals in the interview was to establish the factors that counselors consider when evaluating a student's post-secondary readiness. Are some counselors more likely to value ACT, GPA, or other "objective measures"? Do some counselors value soft skills differently when appraising a student? Across school size and training, counselors seem to have quite a bit

in common when thinking about their evaluation of students and their readiness to be successful at the college level.

In this study, counselors were relatively consistent in their skepticism of high-stakes testing, although several counselors take it into consideration more easily. No counselor interviewed listed the ACT, for instance, as a completely accurate indication of future success in college, and no counselor bases recommendations for education of students specifically on this score. This is a positive indicator since ACT scores, as discussed in Chapter II, are well understood to be biased along racial and economic lines.

When discussing ACT scores, counselors shared the following thoughts: Mrs. Jackson doesn't believe that ACT is all that useful as a metric, but she acknowledges that she is under pressure to consider scores. "Administration thinks so. Or maybe they just want to have good ACT scores for our district. Some kids just aren't good test takers. I don't really like the ACT." Her colleague, Mrs. Johnson, thinks that GPA is more important than ACT. She cites bad testers and anxiety as potential problems with the ACT and admits that she factors test scores differently from student to student rather than as an objective measurement that can be depended on.

Mrs. Burrton at Smallville speaks about having students score very high on the ACT but not be on track to graduate from high school because of a lack of work ethic or academic ability apart from intelligence. At Starville, Mrs. Morris is a little more willing to think about the ACT's value: "[Scores] do a little bit. Some that are lower, you do wonder if they are going to be able to make it in college. If they have good work ethic, it's still possible. But it's kind of a concern." This is as close to "believing" in an ACT score as any counselor seems to get.

At Midway, Mrs. Brown had previously served as a college admissions counselor and confessed that because of her experience in that realm of education, she was more used to the

idea than many of her colleagues that a student should have to meet certain standards. However, she does acknowledge that she is “not a good test taker” herself, and thinks that the ACT should only be one of many different objective and subjective standards considered. Her colleague at Midway, Mrs. Black, is dismissive of the ACT’s value. “It’s one test on one given day at one particular time.” In her mind, scores could be very different depending on the specific testing circumstances, and she feels that scores don’t mean that a student will or will not be successful. It’s interesting to note that Mrs. Black serves as the ACT and testing coordinator for the district and yet is rightly skeptical of what is being measured in the high-stakes tests.

At Gateway, Mrs. Washington does not consider ACT scores to be of much value, partially because of her own experience. Like Mrs. Brown, she does not consider herself a good test taker and says, “I did awful on the ACT but did well in college because I worked really hard.” She has never told a student with a bad ACT score that they shouldn’t go to college. That being said, Mrs. Washington is extremely comfortable with the idea that a counselor’s role is sometimes to directly advise students about their choices, even if the ACT itself is not a particularly important factor in her decision-making process. This idea, that a counselor should be relatively directive even while not caring all that much about standardized test scores is an interesting and surprising discovery.

At Opal Heights, Mrs. West recognizes that ACT scores do matter. “You have to look at it. It’s connected to scholarships.” She feels that it is primarily useful when it is a reflection of harder classes taken. In her mind, the harder classes students take, the better they will do on the ACT. The test, therefore, may represent a student’s likelihood of being prepared during high school by college-level rigor. The score itself, however, is less important to her. She mentions

that a student can have a low score but great resilience and do incredibly well in college, a common suggestion of many of the counselors.

With Mrs. Porter at Fisher, the suburban kids work with a counselor who is also less than smitten with ACT scores. She feels that the scores are useful when showing students how they compare with the average incoming freshmen at an institution, but her preference is to consider their GPA and academic success in high school classes. She is not alone in this belief.

Mrs. Davies thinks about the ACT mainly in terms of where students want to go and the need to meet minimum requirements. She does not, however, seem to feel that it's a particularly fool-proof method of establishing college readiness. Because she has not had training as a counselor and instead only had a brief lesson on college standards and entrance requirements, it is interesting to see that she does not concentrate too heavily on standardized test scores.

Counselor Views on GPA

Counselors, in general, seem to find grade point average more useful and instructive when thinking about how well a student will do in college, although there is no universal belief in the importance of GPA, either. Mrs. Brown at Midway thinks that grades are inflated, and so she remains a little skeptical of their accuracy. She's more interested in grades in AP courses, although she acknowledges that seeing things in this way is not always practical. Her colleague, Mrs. Black, agrees: "I don't think grades are always the way to make a student ready for college." At Opal Heights, Mrs. West thinks that GPA and class rigor are a better indicator of future success than ACT. She mentions that there is a vast gap in difficulty between high school and college courses and feels that taking the hardest courses one can and doing well is a good indicator of future success. "Where are they going to learn," she asks, "their skills to be

successful in college?” At Fisher, Mrs. Porter agrees that she’d care more about a high GPA than an ACT score.

Summary of Counselor Views on ACT and GPA

By and large, it is encouraging that counselors have hesitations about basing judgment on high-stakes testing. While some are cognizant of its importance, they all have hesitations. Given the previously discussed concerns about the accuracy and bias of these scores, it is a positive finding that none of the counselors interviewed consider the score to be incredibly important or base their guidance on a student’s performance on the ACT. So what do counselors consider to be good indicators of future post-secondary academic success? Counselors share a lot of common thinking about the traits that would be most useful in college.

College Readiness According to Counselors

While no counselor answered the question of evaluating college readiness by referring immediately to standardized testing or GPA, many identified common themes when thinking about what would make one of their students ready for college in their personal opinion.

- Mrs. Johnson: Maturity, goals, previous academic success, support at home
- Mrs. Burrton: Self-regulation, problem-solving, decision-making
- Mrs. Morris: Dependable, trusty-worthy, community involvement, responsibility
- Mrs. Brown: Taken hard classes, made preparations, visited schools
- Mrs. Black: Inquisitive, focused, care about school, able to meet deadlines
- Mrs. Washington: Having taken the right classes
- Mrs. West: A rigorous curriculum, problem-solving and collaborating
- Mrs. Lewis: Solid academics and able to advocate for themselves

In general, all the counselors seemed to feel that success in college was more related to soft skills and previous experience with taking challenging academic work. A student with a good work ethic who values education and has a plan is more likely to succeed than someone with a high ACT score but a lack of concern for academic success. Counselors largely evaluate students holistically, rather than as simply identifying where they fall on a metric or score sheet. This type of evaluation is unaffected by the size of the school, the experience of the counselor, or the number of people in the department.

Post-Secondary Guidance Strategies

Based on interviews with each counselor, it is possible to evaluate their perspective on post-secondary guidance and assign them to one of the four categories on the Scale of Student Development and Control. In the interest of attempting to understand the complexity of the issue, it is worth looking at each potential post-secondary guidance element individually, since counselors often are flexible and vary from role to role in how much control they feel is appropriate over this decision-making process.

Mrs. Jackson considers herself to be “kind of in the middle when it comes to advice. I want them to think about what it takes to get there, and how they can get there, and if they’ll be successful.” While she hopes students will figure it out on their own, she does say that there are times she has to show students what they need to consider pretty directly in order to “guide them to what I’m thinking.” Because she’s the first resource for 70% of students on college guidance, she does seem to feel some pressure to make sure they have the right information to understand their current situation.

Mrs. Johnson is one of the counselors in this study who is more willing to give students her personal advice and opinion about their next directions. She asks, “Realistically, are their

grades going to match up with what they are going into? If you've got a C student, and they want to be a doctor, probably not going to happen. I'm very real with kids." She finds that it is her role to help the students with a lot of self-assessment. She is clear, however, that she would not tell a kid straight out that they were incapable of doing something. "I'm not that blunt with them. I let them try to figure it out." She sees her role as presenting the information they need to make the right decision. But she recognizes that her opinion should matter to students. If they make the wrong choice, "they just wasted four years of their life and a lot of money." She prefers the term *appraisal* rather than *direction*, although she does admit, "I've had a few students that we, the principal and I, just had to sit down and say, 'Listen, I'm afraid you're not going to be. . . . I think you're going to be let down, run into a road block here.' We've had to do that." She is one of the few counselors in this study who would, at times, feel comfortable directing students who she believes are not making the right choice for their future. And she takes this role partially based on the needs of the student. When asked if she's more directive with a kid who doesn't have the experience and knowledge to understand post-secondary choices, she responds, "Yeah, I look at the whole picture. . . . If their parents never went to college, they are the ones."

Mrs. Burrton acknowledges that she does not always agree with a student's understanding of their college readiness. "Some kids have a different . . . perception [than] reality," she says. But in spite of this, she has never told a kid that they can't achieve their goal. She will show them qualified admission standards and make sure they know what needs to be done to fulfill their plans. Even if she won't tell a student no, she does communicate to them some of her concern. "I'll tell a kid . . . I have a hard time, if I have to write a letter or whatever for that . . . school . . . I'm going to have a hard time supporting that." She also will be clear with the student about why she has concerns: "I do tell them, it's concerning to me that . . . the

curriculum . . . you have not taken. I do have those conversations.” She might also question their choices by asking, “Is this really a good choice for you? Some need to start a little bit smaller.” In the end, despite her hesitations and her willingness to communicate disapproval of a choice, she’s adamant that “I have never told a kid that they can’t do it. I understand that kids can always change.” She prefers to think of herself as advising a student, but is clear that she will not direct them. She prefers to ask them, “What do you need from me to help you get there?”

Interestingly, Mrs. Burrton acknowledges that she uses a different strategy in general with a Smallville student than with a Starville student. Kids at Starville understand college a lot better than kids at Smallville, in her mind. And this means that she’s more hands-off with her approach to a Starville student. “The Starville kids have an advantage there. . . . They have parents who graduated from colleges. Smallville? Their access is very limited. They are worried sometimes . . . how are they going to get the gas to get to school the next day? I probably do step back in all honesty from the Starville kids more because they have more opportunities. The [college] reps don’t even go to Smallville. [Starville students] have assistance in their homes. Smallville students really don’t.”

At Starville, Mrs. Morris seemed to feel a little differently. Like Mrs. Burrton, she agreed that you “never said no.” Instead, “we research.” She points out the things that they’ll have to consider and tries to help the kid learn what they have to do. “I’d hate to mess up something for somebody, where they had a plan,” she tells me. Her role is “just kind of to educate.” She did not feel comfortable with any mention of the term *advising*, preferring to think of herself as a teacher.

Mrs. Brown at Midway has an opinion partially shaded by her own experiences. “I would never say to a kid, ‘you’ll never make it in college.’ I’ve known too many people where

counselors or teachers have told them that.” However, Mrs. Brown does feel that her role is to give advice if she has a professional disagreement with a student’s choice: “Yes. I would say, ‘Have you looked at . . . what KU requires?’ We spend a lot of time looking at what they require.” She also will make recommendations about how students can better prepare for their future. She encourages them to take college classes: “You don’t like to take English, but in college you’re going to have to take Comp 1, Comp 2.” And she also tries to get them to understand the ramifications of their decision. “Look at what it’s going to cost. Sometimes I think money gets to them more than anything.” For Mrs. Brown, it is important that the student understands their choices and the consequences. She much prefers the term *advising* to *directing*. As she says, “Some kids are very unrealistic. I will never say, ‘you’re not going to make it in college,’ but I’ll say, ‘this is going to be really tough.’” She sometimes recommends that a student consider a community college to start out: “I’ll tell parents, you’re spending a lot of money. . . . They’ve never taken a college class. . . . [I] try to lead them down the path.” In her role, she recognizes that students may not receive competent direction from anyone but her. “Some parents don’t get it. They think KU [a four-year university] and Highland [a community college] are the same thing.” Along with the counselors at Gateway and Central City, Mrs. Brown seemed to be the most comfortable with the idea of specifically telling a student the things they need to understand and giving suggestions to create the best situation for that student to succeed.

Some students at Midway elect to use Mrs. Black as their primary counselor, and she seems to feel much the same about the proper amount of student development and control. Like all counselors, she is clear: “I will never tell a kid that you can’t do this. Never.” However, she does want to make sure that the student is aware of her thinking on the matter. “Have you

thought about this? What about starting at one of these kinds of colleges?” she might ask. She thinks it is important, as well, that the student understand how she is arriving at her conclusions. “I’m really concerned about you going to a four-year college, and here’s why: You haven’t shown in your grades . . . doesn’t mean you can’t be successful, but have you thought about . . . ?” For Mrs. Black the line that she will never cross is specifically directing a student what they should do. “It is hard, and I never want to say . . . because I’ve heard stories . . . you absolutely can’t do that. I think sometimes we provide directions. We will often say, what are your backup schools? There is nothing that says you can’t apply to more than one college.” Students at Midway, regardless of which counselor they choose, are likely to get someone who will work with them to understand their current situation and provide them with some advice and direction on the next phase of their lives.

Mrs. Washington, at Gateway High School, is one of the counselors who is most comfortable with the idea of telling students what they should or should not do. When asked if she would tell a kid he or she is making a mistake, she responds, “I’d advise them that I don’t think going to a large university like that might be a wise decision. They should probably start out somewhere smaller because if they don’t do well in high school, how would they do well in a big university like that?” And would she be comfortable saying, *I’m going to save you from making a mistake?* “Yup!” She mentions one student that she’s been trying to work with. “I have a girl who doesn’t want to go to college. Every time we talk about it . . . she just bawls. She doesn’t want to go at all. I keep trying to tell her you’ll have fun. You’ll really like it out there. She’s eventually going to like it, I think.” Mrs. Washington also does her best to let students know if they are selecting the wrong classes or if she feels that they are making a mistake in their

course load, and she discusses telling a student not to drop a specific class that she feels they'd need later more than the elective that they are hoping to take.

At Opal Heights, Mrs. West started as a teacher and still considers herself an educator. Her goal is to give the students the information they need to achieve their goals. "What I do is . . . I ask them what they want to do . . . show them the classes they are going to be taking in college. If they want to go into accounting but don't want to take a fourth-year math, just show them what they'll take in college in an accounting program. I ask them to look at that. How prepared do you want to be for that?" She presents her guidance as questions because it's important not to direct. "Give as much information as possible," she says. Mrs. West seems very committed to providing students with information and letting them decide what to do with it. She is self-conscious and aware of her own potential biases and projections and considers her training in counseling to be helpful in recognizing the danger of projecting your own thoughts or opinions on students. She looks for similar characteristics in counseling and teaching backgrounds when hiring people for her department.

In the urban school district next door, Mrs. Lewis largely seems to agree. It's "a lot of talking and getting online and exploring." She's always asking questions, but she "never ever suggest[s]." Like a few of the counselors, she mentions that her refusal to give her own opinion stems from personal experience. "My sister was told she'd never make it in college." That sister is now a high-level district administrator at a large public district in Kansas. Instead of advising or directing, "I try to help them look at, here's what it's going to take" to reach their goals. She tries to establish "what it is that you really want to accomplish." But she adds, "I'd never come right out and say something." She uses this superior guidance strategy despite an incredible work load. "The job is so overwhelming. When you have so many things on your plate. . . ." She also

mentioned the unfortunate feeling of sometimes seeing students like cattle in a feed lot, as a process of working with one after the other. "I don't have time with 450 kids to help everyone," she laments. It's interesting to note that her college and career advisor colleague, who is not a counselor, is not necessarily in agreement, and she seems fine with this difference. "He tells things just point blank. He can do that. I could never. He has a different rapport with kids." It's curious that she feels his bluntness and advising techniques are actually a sign of a superior relationship with students and not a defect in his training or experience as a counselor or teacher. In fact, she sometimes seems to question her own strategy. "I'm a softy," she tells me. She appears to feel that it is a positive thing for the students to have her educational guidance but also his advice and direction available. This college advisor is himself an alumni who has return after graduating from Yale to help point students in the right direction and "give back" to his community.

At Fisher, Mrs. Porter is intent on meeting kids where they are. The district gives all students a survey asking what they know about the post-secondary world, and the counselors use that information to meet with the students who need it the most. She does not, however, give them any of her own opinions. Instead, she's a fan of "letting them figure it out on their own. Show them what they need to reach their goals and how they compare in objective measures." She also tries to teach them the habits of kids who are successful. She also tries to show them alternatives they may really like but were not aware of. Her hope is that, through educating students, she can get them on their own to "try to realize, yeah, maybe that's not a realistic goal for me." In general she favors educating, but is willing to help students through the process of self-appraisal.

At Central City, Mrs. Davies has not been trained as a counselor and thinks of her role much differently than any of the other people interviewed. In fact, she seems very much like the college and career advisor who is not a trained counselor described by Mrs. Lewis at Metropolis. “I give my personal advice all the time. That’s what I’ve been trained to do. There’s a reason that college advising as a near-peer situation [is effective], and that’s because they want to see that . . . I understand how it [college] works.” In her mind, the first-generation students served by this program may not have the self-confidence needed to end up in the right place. She often encourages students to aim higher. “We don’t want students who have an ACT of 30 and a GPA of 3.5 going to a community college,” she tells me. So is she more directive about what they should do the less that they know? “Oh, yeah!” She attempts to help students map out a path to where they want to go, but she is not afraid to tell people the reality of their situation. “I’m not ever really breaking down people a lot. I mean sometimes I am. But I never want to be like, ‘you can never do this.’” She mentions how her mindset on this partially is guided by a conference she attended where a presenter shared that Michelle Obama’s high school counselor told her that she was not Princeton material. Since then, Mrs. Davies says “I never want to be that person where I’m just like you can’t do that.”

Placement on the Scale of Student Development and Control

Based on the interviewees’ responses, Table 5 illustrates where each counselor seems to fall on the Scale of Student Development and Control. It is worth noting that counselors are fluid in their beliefs and adaptable to different circumstances. Some counselors express a desire to be an educator but acknowledge a practical need to be an advisor or director, especially with a certain segment of their population. Others describe in a theory of counseling they believe to be nonnegotiable and then in the next sentence explain the scenarios where they clearly violate their

previously expressed value system. Almost all would probably place themselves as high as possible on the Scale of Student Development and Control conceptually, but their responses and examples of styles in the reality of their position may require a different placement. The placement, therefore, is based on a summative, aggregate understanding of their position from the entirety of the interview and in comparison with the other counselors' positions and clarifications of some of the minutia of their responses.

Table 5

Counselor Placement on the Scale of Student Development and Control

Scale of Student Development and Control				
	High			Low
	Educating	Appraising	Advising	Directing
Decision-maker	Mrs. Morris Mrs. West Mrs. Lewis Mrs. Porter	Mrs. Burrton Mrs. Jackson	Mrs. Brown Mrs. Black	Mrs. Washington Mrs. Johnson Mrs. Davies
Counselor's Objective	Mrs. Morris Mrs. West Mrs. Lewis	Mrs. Burrton Mrs. Porter Mrs. Jackson	Mrs. Brown Mrs. Black Mrs. Johnson	Mrs. Washington Mrs. Davies
Decision Process	Mrs. Morris Mrs. West Mrs. Lewis Mrs. Porter	Mrs. Burrton Mrs. Jackson	Mrs. Brown Mrs. Black Mrs. Washington Mrs. Davies	Mrs. Johnson
Ultimate Goal of Guidance	Mrs. Morris Mrs. West Mrs. Lewis Mrs. Porter	Mrs. Burrton Mrs. Jackson	Mrs. Brown Mrs. Black Mrs. Washington Mrs. Johnson Mrs. Davies	
Overall Guidance Strategy	Mrs. Morris Mrs. West Mrs. Lewis Mrs. Porter	Mrs. Burrton Mrs. Jackson	Mrs. Brown Mrs. Black Mrs. Washington Mrs. Johnson	Mrs. Davies

Chapter V: Discussion

This study set out with a goal to answer the question: *How do counselors in different school contexts evaluate their students' college readiness and offer post-secondary guidance?* Previous studies have determined that the number of students taking standardized college-entrance examinations has increased (Adams, 2017). In Kansas, the legislature's decision to fund an ACT test for every junior has also increased the number of students taking tests. Fortunately, based on the interviews, it appears that, regardless of context, counselors are very similar in how they evaluate college readiness. They, in general, do not believe that the ACT or other standardized test scores are a good indicator of the future success of a student, even though they recognize that the ACT has become important for students to receive financial aid and scholarships. The counselors' attitude is positive because of evidence that standardized tests scores exhibit bias along racial and financial lines (Rattani, 2016). In fact, counselors primarily identified college readiness as being composed of more subjective character traits that included work ethic, resiliency, and academic preparedness.

The developing role of the counselor (Herr, 2002) and the lack of a clearly defined role (O'Dell, 1996; Paisley & Borders, 1995; Partin, 1993) were readily apparent in interviews. Counselors mentioned changes in their job duties, being asked to take on roles that they felt were inappropriate, and the effect of a changing world and developing student needs on their job descriptions. Counselors unanimously mentioned job duties that are listed as "inappropriate" by the ASCA.

The variation in guidance opportunity for counselors appeared to be unrelated to the size of the school, the years of experience of the counselor, or the financial well-being of the district and its patrons. Counselors in all districts report caseloads far above ASCA standards, and

counselors spend less than 80% of their time in direct and indirect student services at all sizes and contexts of schools. Counselors could also be found with lots of opportunity for student contact across the spectrum of districts.

Unfortunately, there did appear to be evidence that context potentially influences post-secondary guidance. This context, however, does not appear to be the job duties of the counselor, the financial resources of the school, the size of the school specifically, the age and experience of costs to employ the counselors (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008), fewer student support resources in other areas (Herr, 2002), or even more students per caseload (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). This is true in spite of the fact that we know that all of these things result in an increased likelihood of non–best-practice job duties and use of time. While none of these characteristics seemed to be pertinent with the counselors interviewed for this study, one job context did seem to make a difference: opportunity to work closely in collaboration with other trained, certified counselors.

At the conclusion of these eleven interviews with counselors from a wide variety of experience levels, school sizes, school financial resources, and training experiences, three important themes emerged that are worth exploring in more detail. While it is clear that no specific argument here can be “proven,” they each serve as an interesting possible consideration for future study and examination. The first theme is that counselor training programs from across the state of Kansas do not do enough to prepare counselors for academic and post-secondary guidance. The second theme is that contact with other counseling professionals in daily work seems to encourage better counseling strategies. The final theme that emerged, from one interviewee directly and from mention by another, is that “advisors” who are not trained as

counselors seem to be assigned to schools with the highest need for good guidance but do not seem to have the training or best-practice strategies to be good purveyors of education guidance.

Training Programs

No counselor in this study, regardless of institution or years of training, felt that their courses adequately prepared them for academic and post-secondary guidance. In general, counselors seem to feel like they were trained most in social and emotional counseling. While some counselors feel that the strategies learned in this more therapeutic counseling training are applicable and transferrable to post-secondary counseling, it is concerning how little preparation schools give to future counselors in this area. Counselors should be made aware of the appropriate level of student control and strategies for best designing a post-secondary guidance program based on educating rather than directing.

Counselor programs could work with the ASCA to design curriculum that covers theories of post-secondary guidance and gives future counselors the best practices they need to provide high-quality guidance to all students (ASCA, 2012). In addition, counselor conferences, like those sponsored by the KSDE, could focus on the importance of high student autonomy, self-direction, and post-secondary education when designing curriculum and breakout sessions for future Kansas counselors. It seems clear that counselors care deeply about student success and attainment. Even those counselors who take a more directive approach to guidance do so with the belief that they are best serving the needs of their students based on existing knowledge and availability of other educational and guidance resources in the family and community. If counselors are trained more adequately and clearly in the theory and practice of post-secondary guidance, it appears that they will happily engage in best-practice guidance strategies. Reinforcing these ideas and practices at counselor trainings and gatherings throughout the year

would allow counselors the opportunity to rethink their programs in collaboration with other counselors, something that also appears to be important.

Counselor Collaboration

While student population does not contribute directly to caseload, job duties, or post-secondary guidance strategies, there does seem to be a link between counselor contact with colleagues and the likelihood of wanting more student autonomy in the decision-making process. Counselors at some of the smaller schools had caseloads just as high as any at the 6A level, so it is not the caseload itself that influences how counselors perceive post-secondary guidance. Likewise, job duties are equally expansive throughout the spectrum of school size. Counselors at very large schools, like Mrs. Davies at Central City and the college and career advisor at Metropolis, also appeared to believe in more counselor control and directive guidance, just like some of their smaller-school counterparts. The question then becomes, why is it that counselors at smaller schools (even though they have had the same training) and non-counselor advisors at larger schools (even though they are in a large building) seem to be the most likely to exhibit negative post-secondary guidance strategies?

One potential explanation that requires additional study is that negative post-secondary guidance strategies are most likely to exist when a counselor works in isolation, either because of the small size of the department or because he or she is not part of the department at all. If an alternate pathway counselor at Opal Heights tried to tell a student what do to after high school, he or she would quickly be set straight by the department chair. When discussing students and guidance in a department meeting at Metropolis, a counselor receives feedback and thoughts from five other counselors who would respond with concern (even informally in friendly interaction) upon hearing that a student had been given too much advice or direction. These

counselors, too, would work for an administration that is potentially more familiar with the ASCA standards and proper job duties and practices for counselors. They might even have a Director of Counseling, like Metropolis once had, at the district level to depend on for support and professional development for their staff. This person would also serve as a liaison with the counselors as a whole, increasing collaboration within the department and with administration.

On the other hand, when the counselors at small schools make a decision to be more directive with students, there is no critique or feedback from other counselors. They work in isolation. In a similar way, the college advisors associated with AmeriCorps are a bit more standalone than their colleagues. While they certainly receive less training, they also are not a member of the department, do not share in the fair-share duties of the school, and are beholden to people outside the building rather than the staff within. It is interesting to note that Mrs. Davies appeared to rethink her stand on telling students what they need to do after attending a conference and hearing about the experiences of former First Lady Michelle Obama, which highlight the dangers of directive counseling. The collaboration and association with other counselors helped to change her mind. Close collaboration with colleagues may prevent a counselor from straying too far into directive guidance activities.

College and Career Advisors

As mentioned previously, the concept of a non-counselor, lightly trained college and career advisor at a high-needs school was not a topic of this study but became an important factor. In the first interview, Mrs. Lewis from Metropolis mentioned her staff's advisor and his willingness to tell kids how it is and be more directive. She mentioned that he was not a counselor but instead had decided to come home and "give back" for a year or two after leaving Metropolis and graduating from Yale. From her description, it appears he is able to work with

kids a little more informally and give them advice and direction, along with letting them know if something is not going to work out.

Mrs. Davies at Central City appeared to function in much the same way. While she had hesitations about telling a kid they could never do something, she saw her duty and job as being focused on giving kids advice about the next step in their lives and where they best fit and belonged. Both of these advisors are young, have just finished college themselves, and have been put into a situation with very little training about the best practices in guidance and support. Additionally, they appear to have been placed specifically in schools with higher needs where the students are poorer and more diverse, and are likely to be first-generation college students, among other factors. Unfortunately, this also appears to mean that those students most in need of a high-quality guidance system from their counseling staff may be referred to a less well-trained advisor who gives them more directive and less autonomous advisory experience. Further research on the role and training of non-counselor advisors could help to better understand these programs and the ways in which this guidance affects students.

Summary of Discussion

In seeking to understand evaluation of college readiness and post-secondary guidance styles, these interviews suggested that counselors largely sought to understand student levels of college readiness in similar ways. It also suggests that it is not the same educational contexts as use of time that affect guidance strategies. Rather, it might be that collaboration with colleagues is an important key in ensuring best-practice guidance strategies. Additionally, these interviews suggested that training for post-secondary and academic guidance is insufficient and that college and career advisors who are not trained as counselors are not prepared for the best practices of their new role and are engaging in much more directive guidance with students.

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