

# Career Guidance and Counseling for Secondary School Students in the United States

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The United States educational system is perhaps unique, in that while there is a national agency (the United States Department of Education) that serves to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), by law, the education of the citizenry is largely left to each of the country's 50 states. As a result, each state sets policies and procedures for its students, especially in the K-12 education system. This has led, in some instances, to 50 different models for many of the elements of K-12 education systems across the U.S., including any aspects related to career education

As a clarifying note, in the United States at present, educational programming known as vocational education in most other parts of the world, is referred to as "career and technical education". This name change took place in the late 1990's. For the purposes of this paper, the terms "career guidance" career counseling" and "career education" do not refer to career and technical education, but rather the process by which all students, not just those enrolled in vocationally-specific courses, receive information and guidance regarding careers and the workplace in general. More specifically, the following definitions apply:

- *Guidance* — an overall term encompassing many services aimed at student's personal and career development.
- *Career guidance* — the portion of school guidance program focused on students' career development; this can include career counseling or other career-related services.
- *Career counseling* — the portion of the

guidance program in which trained professionals interact with students to assist them with their career development.

- *Academic counseling* — This generally refers to trained professionals counseling students on their academic plans, for course-taking while in secondary school as well as for postsecondary education (Hughes & Karp, 2004).

## Middle/Junior High Schools and Their Learners

According to the National Middle School Association (1995) a middle school usually consists of grades 6-8, but may also be comprised of grades 5-7, 6-7, 5-8, and 7-8. A junior high school usually consists of grades 7-9, but may also be comprised of grades 5-9, 6-9, and 8-9. Variations are due to such variables as the individual philosophy of a school district with respect to age groupings, available resources (usually physical facilities) and curriculum needs. Some districts may have both a middle school and a junior high school.

Historically, junior high schools have been designed similarly to high schools, with faculty organized into academic departments which operate more or less independently of one another. Sometimes called intermediate schools, junior high schools were originally developed as a strategy for combating school drop-outs. In 1909, the Columbus, Ohio, Board of Education authorized the creation of the first junior high school in the United States. Previously, students in Columbus remained in elementary school through the eighth grade, when they then attended high school. Unfortunately, 52% of Columbus's students dropped out of school before entering the tenth grade.

Only seven percent of Columbus's children actually graduated from high school. Columbus school officials hoped that new schools, consisting of the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, might better prepare students for the rigors of high school and keep a larger percentage of students enrolled in school (Ohio Historical Society, 2012) This organizational structure, now nearly 100 years old, is still in place in many school districts.

Early exposure to career and technical education programs fit with the instructional philosophy of both middle and junior high schools, by providing the exploratory (and perhaps pre-vocational) activities needed by students at these grade levels. Students at these grade levels are developing specific interests and hobbies, and can easily relate to the content of career and technology education programs.

## High Schools and Their Learners

There are three major settings for the delivery of educational programming in U.S. high schools: comprehensive high schools, vocational/career and technical high schools, and area or regional vocational schools/career centers serving multiple high schools (Scott and Sarkees-Wircenski, 2008). A growing number of students are also being home-schooled. Comprehensive high schools, by virtue of their classification, offer a wide range of courses and programs, from general education to college preparatory, as well as vocational/career and technical education. Career and technical education offerings vary by high school, again dependent upon variables such as school philosophy and mission, resources (facilities and equipment), community desires, and economic opportunity. There are approximately 17,000 public and 6,300 private comprehensive high schools in the United States (Levesque et al., 2008). In addition, there are approximately 900 high schools are classified as vocational/career and technical education high schools (Levesque et al., 2008). Area career centers are designed to serve students from a specified geographic area, from several "feeder" high schools.

By serving several high schools, economies of scale can be achieved. Thus vocationally-oriented courses and programs that one high school would find cost-prohibitive to provide can be offered to a large number of students.

U.S. high schools usually serve a very diverse student body, reflective of the country's diversity of population. As a result, students have many different aspirations, both for employment after high school and for postsecondary education.

With respect to courses and programs focused on careers, career and technical education at the high school level in most states is an elective. High school students may not be required to take a career and technical education class in order to graduate. However, the vast majority of high school students take at least one career and technical education course during their high school years, and some students take many courses in a specialized sequence. This is an interesting statistic, given the recent focus on traditional academic areas such as math, science and language arts, and the implementation of exit tests in many states for high school graduation. Students still find career and technical education courses interesting and viable. In addition, curricular innovations such as Tech Prep, Project Lead the Way, and High Schools That Work, have made it easier for career and technical education courses and programs to establish articulated pathways to post-secondary education. By doing so, career and technical education provides opportunities for high school students graduating into the workforce or entering college.

## Career Guidance and Counseling

So how are students in these schools provided with information regarding careers? With fifty states, and thousands of middle and junior high schools, and as many high schools, this process is not standardized, and varies greatly from school to school.

### *Middle School/Junior High School*

In the “middle grades”, the focus is on career awareness, exploration and planning (American School Counselor Association, 2012). Awareness is facilitated through “career days” in which schools bring in guest speakers and other resources to provide introductory information regarding careers. Exploration is accomplished through various means, including short-term courses (perhaps nine weeks) in business education, family and consumer sciences, and technology education. Unfortunately, these courses are becoming scarce in both middle and junior high schools, as budget cuts and financial constraints limit the number of these courses. Some schools do not offer any of these courses to their students. Planning is usually focused on the transition to the next educational level, such as the movement from junior high school to high school. It is also at the later grades in these schools (grades 7-9) that the possibility of students dropping out of school begins. Many of these students are “at-risk” because of poor academic performance, low socioeconomic status, lack of parental support, and other factors. Some of these students are advised/placed into work-based learning programs, consisting of half-days of school and paid work. These programs seek to keep students enrolled in school, lessen the focus on academics, and provide an income for the student.

School guidance counselors in these grades are focused on many tasks, one of which is concerned with counseling students with respect to career development. However, this area often has less importance for counselors. The American School Counselor Association (2012) lists many different responsibilities for counselors in these grade levels, including:

- Academic skills support
- Organizational, study and test-taking skills
- Education in understanding self and others
- Coping strategies
- Peer relationships and effective social skills
- Communication, problem-solving, decision-making and conflict resolution

The listed tasks are only a small part of the responsibilities of a guidance counselor in these grade levels, so career development and career counseling is not always a top priority.

### *High School*

At the high school level, students need to make informed educational and career choices. Information is needed on high school course offerings, career options, the type of academic and occupational training needed to succeed in the workplace, and postsecondary opportunities. The United States Department of Education (2012) lists the following activities associated with career guidance and counseling programs:

- Advising students and parents on high school programs and academic curriculum, preparing them for college application and admission.
- Arranging dual/concurrent enrollment and Advanced Placement credits to prepare students for the rigor of postsecondary education.
- Planning and preparation for college admissions tests, SAT and ACT.
- Informing students about post-secondary financing that can be used to support advanced education and training.
- Developing career portfolios, which include test and grades results, examples of student work, and resumes and cover letters to prospective employers.
- Arranging job shadowing, work placements, and community-based learning programs to allow students to directly experience workplace situations.
- Sponsoring workshops, classes, focus groups, and special presentations that focus on job skills and personal development.
- Providing specialized counseling and intervention services to provide students with individualized attention.

The American School Counselor Association (2012) also described the role of secondary (high school) counselors, by providing a comprehensive list of tasks provided by counselors, broken into categories. Many of these categories have aspects of career guidance and counseling. The first category is *Classroom Guidance*, which focuses on tasks such as test-taking skills, peer relationships communication skills, diversity awareness, post-secondary planning and career planning. The second category, *Individual Student Planning* is dedicated to the development of academic plans, goals setting, career plans, and the transition from school to the next stage, whether it is post-secondary education or into the workplace. The third category, *Responsive Services*, addresses how counseling services respond to student needs, and includes such tasks as individual and small-group counseling, individual/family/school crisis interventions, and referrals to other agencies or professionals. The final category, *System Support*, defines the counseling function as part of the larger school system and includes professional development, consultation, collaboration and teaming and program management and operation. The tasks within these categories point to the large set of responsibilities a K-12 counselor has within their work day, and as with their middle/junior high school counterparts, most high school guidance counselors cannot always place a high priority on career guidance because of these other duties.

### Constraints on Career Guidance and Counseling

As previously mentioned, school guidance counselors in the U.S. K-12 school system perform a variety of tasks, and the amount of time spent on activities related to career guidance and counseling is very minimal. This has caused much concern among guidance counselors. In a recent study of more than 5,300 school guidance counselors across the U.S., more than 75% of them would like to spend more time on targeted activities that promote student success, including career counseling and exploration, while 67% of the counselors would like to spend less

time on administrative tasks (Bridgeland and Bruce, 2011). Another study conducted by Foster, Young and Hermann (2005) examined the major work activities of school counselors that promote career development and found much of their time was spent on tasks such as facilitating students' development of decision-making skills, planning and conducting classroom guidance, assessing students' educational preparation, and assisting students in understanding test results. Farther down the list were such tasks as providing career counseling for students, evaluating students' occupational skills, and facilitating students' development of job search skills.

The lack of time available for career guidance and counseling activities has had a direct impact on the perceptions of students regarding the effectiveness of guidance counselors in general, and specifically in those areas related to career guidance and counseling. In a recent study of over 600 young adults who graduated from high school and started some form of postsecondary education, 62% of those surveyed gave their high school guidance counselors "fair" or "poor" ratings for helping them think about different careers (Johnson & Rochkind, 2010). Counselors recognize the disconnection between themselves and their students. Bridgeland and Bruce (2011), in their survey of school counselors, repeatedly found instances where the reality of counselors' day-to-day experiences fell short of the ideal they envisioned for their profession, their schools and the U.S. education system. For example, in the area of career readiness, 71% of counselors felt this was an important area, yet only 34% perceived their school as successful in the endeavor. This disparity between what counselors felt was important, and their perception of their schools' achievement was observed in other areas as well, such as career exploration and the transition from high school to college or the workplace.

### *Some Recommendations to consider*

The United States K-12 educational system faces a continual struggle on many fronts: the dropout

problem, the need to get students prepared for post-secondary education, and the call to have students “career-ready” when they exit the system are but a few of the challenges. Focusing on the last issue, related to career readiness, some recommendations and suggestions can be made with respect to the career guidance and counseling of U.S. students

First, focus guidance counselors’ work on activities that are directly related to student career success. A lessening of administrative duties and more time dedicated to the career guidance and counseling of all students would be a significant step. A consistent criticism voiced by guidance counselors is the tremendous amount of time spent on testing, student scheduling and other “paperwork”. Time for one-on-one counseling must be provided.

Second, establish partnerships with the workplace for the purposes of career guidance and counseling. Many schools have “one-shot” career days, where individuals come in from the community, present information about their specific career or occupation, and are never involved with the school or students again. Systems of mentoring, advising, job-shadowing and other activities can be coordinated by guidance counselors to provide students with a sustained, structured set of career guidance activities.

Finally, one aspect not broadly discussed, is the knowledge level of guidance counselors of the workplace and careers in general. In the U.S., most school guidance counselors were teachers first, and completed a graduate degree program in guidance and counseling to become licensed or certified as a guidance counselor. In many of these programs, perhaps one course is dedicated to the topic of careers, and in most cases, the topic is not a major focus of the preparation of a guidance counselor. This issue, coupled with the fact that many of these individuals may have no work experience except for that of a teacher, means many guidance counselors do not have a clear vision of the U.S. labor market and related careers, and the associated education and skill requirements. This can be addressed through professional development targeted at critical levers like college and career readiness (Bridgeland &

Bruce (2011). Internships in the workplace could also be offered to guidance counselors.

Many recent studies of the guidance system as it operates in public schools today indicate that guidance counselors are often overworked and underprepared when it comes to helping students make the best decisions about their lives after high school (Johnson & Rochkind, 2010). Especially in the area related to career guidance and counseling, this issue has implications for the competitiveness of the U.S. in a global economy. Students must be provided viable information with which to make educated decisions about potential careers and post-secondary options. The guidance counselor is the key individual for making certain this occurs. Their importance in the K-12 educational system cannot be overstated.

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