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Article 79

The School Counselor's Role on Behalf of College Bound Special Education Students

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Introduction

It is well acknowledged that professional school counselors play an important role in career/college readiness planning with their students. In fact, they are often the key school personnel in helping students prepare for making the successful transition from high school to college. Unfortunately, most of their work appears to be geared toward students in the general education setting (Milsom, 2002) with often limited roles in the postsecondary planning on behalf of students with disabilities.

School counselors, by the nature of their commitment to serve all students, are in an excellent position for influencing the outcomes on behalf of college bound special education students. We believe that school counselors need to play a more active role in the process of transition and in the career, personal/social, and academic development of

students in special education. Considering the counselor's training, expertise, access to resources (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005), and their contributions on behalf of the general student body, their involvement with students with disabilities could be of substantial benefit. To accomplish such contributions, systemic changes need to be put into place in schools as well as in school counselor education programs.

In advocating for a more visible role for the school counselor on behalf of college bound special education students we start by pointing out the benefits of a college degree even in our current economic climate; we identify the paucity of students with disabilities that enroll in, let alone graduate from, college; we explore some of the effects of inequitable professional practices on students with disabilities; we elucidate the supportive benefits of the Individuals with Disabilities Act along with its specific provisions for enhancing the successful transition of students with disabilities from school to adult life; we describe a potentially key role for the school counselor as a facilitator on the Individual Education Planning (IEP) team; and we conclude by describing a variety of ways in which school counselors could work with, and on behalf of, students with disabilities (a) using evidenced based practices, and (b) promoting students' self-advocacy.

Current Economic Situation

According to research conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2009), the current economic crisis continues to have a severe impact on the U.S. employment rate. In fact, in September of 2009 the U.S. unemployment rate was at its highest in 10 years (BLS, 2009) with minority groups being most impacted. However, while the economy may be somewhat unpredictable, researchers continue to provide solid evidence reiterating the benefits of pursuing higher education.

The College Board reports that those who earn a bachelor's degree are far less likely to experience unemployment and are at a lower risk of living in poverty (Baum & Ma, 2007). Although data show that overall the number of adults who possess a baccalaureate degree has doubled over the past three decades, particular subgroups continue to be underrepresented (Baum & Ma, 2007). Among those subgroups are students with disabilities.

According to the most recent data collected by the United States Census Bureau (2008), over 15% of the population reported having a disability. Researchers investigating the impact on college students with learning disabilities found that those who earned a college degree were 35% more likely to obtain full-time employment in comparison to those who did not (Madaus, 2006). Despite these well documented benefits, only a small percentage of students with disabilities achieve their bachelor degrees (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2010).

A report on the 2005 National Longitudinal Transition Study (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005) indicated that less than 10% of students with disabilities attended four year colleges in comparison to 30% of their peers without disabilities. Furthermore, it was reported that only six percent of college students with disabilities actually completed their graduation requirements. This particular finding is unsettling considering that 96% of students with disabilities who participated in this study

identified completion of higher education as one of their personal goals. This speaks to issues of college preparedness as well as retention for students with disabilities who attend institutions of higher education.

Inequitable Educational Practices

One of the many benefits of a high school diploma is the ability to maintain employment and explore postsecondary options. However, students with disabilities who have not received their high school diploma do not have those opportunities afforded to them. The school dropout rate for students with disabilities is more than 38% the rate for their non disabled peers (Baumberger & Harper, 2007). Unemployment and incarceration are just two of the reported outcomes for students with disabilities who do not graduate from high school (Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002). These data reveal a startling glimpse into the poor academic and educational outcomes for students with disabilities who drop out of school and do not pursue post secondary education.

Educational support and encouragement have been documented as contributing factors to a student's academic achievement and pursuit of a higher education (Tavani & Losh, 2003). This is especially true for students with disabilities. However, students with disabilities often are not provided with the same college planning resources and supports as students in the general education population (Brinckerhoff, 1996). Two-thirds of students with disabilities will apply for college but will not be qualified to attend (Baumberger & Harper, 2007). The problem becomes even more acute for students of color with disabilities.

Students of color, particularly in urban settings, are often disproportionately placed in special education. This proves to be even more salient for male students of color who are more likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability, mental retardation, or being emotionally disturbed (Salend & Duhaney, 2005). There are many theories as to why students of color are disproportionately placed in special education which can include limited access to educational resources or inappropriate/biased standardized evaluations (Salend & Duhaney, 2005). Despite the increased attention and interventions developed to impact the academic success of students of color, the academic achievement gap persists and continues to persist even further for students of color with disabilities. The outcomes for such students have significant implications for equitable counseling professional practice in urban settings and in areas where there is a high percentage of students of color.

The current academic achievement and college entry levels for students of color with a disability or students from an urban setting provides a startling view of the inequitable educational practices. Thirty-eight percent of students with disabilities, living in urban areas will drop out of high school compared to 24% of their peers in suburban areas (Tavani & Losh, 2003). In a related study, Researchers for the Advocates for Children of New York, Inc. (Silverman, 2007) examined the efforts of the NYC Department of Education in preparing students with disabilities for adult life upon leaving the school system. Their analysis, based on data from 2005-2006, revealed the disturbing findings that 82% of students with disabilities left the NYC DOE with no diploma, placing a population of students already at greater susceptibility to unemployment and poverty, even more at risk.

Students of color with disabilities are also less likely to receive educational goals related to transition which is a violation of the transition provisions mandated by the federal special education law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). When IDEA was re-authorized in 1990, transition amendments were included. This law specifies that transition goals and objectives be developed beginning at age 16. When IDEA was reauthorized again in 1997, there was a new provision that required transition planning to begin at age 14 specifying that a statement of transition needs must be in place which must focus on the student's course of study during their secondary school years. During this critical period, the law intended that schools begin to discuss long-term transition goals and the appropriate course of study in which a student must participate at the high school in order to be prepared to meet these goals. Transition is defined by IDEA as a coordinated set of activities within an outcome oriented process that promotes movement from school to post school activities, including postsecondary education.

Under IDEA transitional planning is the right of all students with disabilities who receive mandated educational services. Unfortunately, the percentages of students with disabilities who are not receiving transitional planning to college or a career are discouraging. Well defined individualized transition plans for students with disabilities are imperative for increasing the opportunities for success in adulthood (McKenna, 2000), and the purpose of transition services is to ensure that a student is prepared for adulthood upon graduation from high school. Despite the provisions mandated by IDEA, many students in urban areas are not adequately prepared for adulthood as they enter adult life (Silverman, 2007).

Further, students of color with disabilities who do happen to receive transitional services are more likely to be tracked into vocational/technical training or in jobs requiring little education or skill (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). Such students, along with their parents, are less likely to be involved in the IEP process (Cameto et al., 2004).

Expanding the Role of School Counselors on Behalf of Their Students With Disabilities

Considering the overrepresentation of students of color in special education and the unfortunate outcomes of students with disabilities who do not receive sufficient support, school counselors need to play a more active role in the process of transition, and in the student's career, personal/social, and academic development.

These are critical roles which school counselors already play with their students from among the general education population. As examples, individual counseling, group counseling, and developmental school counseling lesson plans are just some of the responsibilities of the professional school counselor (ASCA, 2005). Developing equitable strategies to identify opportunity gaps in schools and the use of data to address the academic achievement gap are two ways in which school counselors use their leadership, advocacy skills, and expertise to ensure the success of K-12 students. They are typically involved with the academic and postsecondary planning with students, including the college planning process.

Further, school counselors play a vital role in career/college readiness with students which can consist of providing information/assistance about the college

application process. This can include financial aid workshops, SAT preparation, transcript review, career exploration and the preparation of letters of recommendation. College planning is typically delivered to students individually, in small groups, or to entire classrooms in the form of school counseling developmental lesson plans. The equitable school counseling professional emphasizes the importance of postsecondary planning for all students, including those of first generation families, who might need additional support and assistance. In short, school counselors are the key school personnel in helping students prepare for college transition. Unfortunately, most of their work appears to be geared toward students in the general education setting (Milsom, 2002) and they often have limited roles in the postsecondary planning on behalf of students with disabilities.

Yet, considering the counselor's training, expertise, access to resources (ASCA, 2005), and their contributions on behalf of the general student body, their involvement with students with disabilities could be of substantial benefit. Milsom (2002) reported that schools may not be taking advantage of the services that school counselors can offer to students with disabilities in regards to career and college readiness. In a national study, over 30% of school counselor participants indicated that they were not included in working with students with disabilities as they transition to adulthood (Milsom, 2002).

Establishing a bridge between high school and post secondary education is necessary to ensure both long-term and financial success for students with disabilities. To facilitate this connection, systemic changes need to be put into place in schools as well as school counselor education programs. To start, programs in school counselor education need to offer counseling coursework that intertwines topics on disabilities and special education so that counselors are prepared and feel adequately equipped to work with students with disabilities.

A national survey by Milsom (2002) found that feelings of preparedness on the part of school counselors was correlated to the number of courses they had taken that contained topics on students with disabilities. School counseling candidates can seek valuable practical experience working with individuals with disabilities at their practicum and internship sites. School counseling programs may need to require their students to complete a set number of hours working with students with special needs as part of their degree requirements. The modification of school counseling programs to mandate the completion of courses in special education, coupled with mandatory field work with students with disabilities may serve as a necessary catalyst for increasing and improving the role of school counselors in working with students with disabilities.

Most school counseling graduate programs offer courses that train counselors to become group facilitators where they use their facilitative skills to manage the dynamics created by group members. Based on this training, school counselors are in a unique position to use their facilitative and leadership skills to manage dynamics of professionals within a school setting.

Although there are currently no requirements within IDEA for school counselors to even attend IEP meetings, Milsom (2007) suggests that school counselors should be considered to serve as the facilitator for such meetings. Due to the different views of teaching staff, administrators, and parents, IEP meetings can become contentious. School counselors receive training on group facilitation making them ideal candidates to serve in such a role (Milsom, 2007). Additionally, allowing school

counselors to work collaboratively with the IEP team members will not only provide them with the opportunity to better understand the needs of the students but also to offer their expertise in college readiness. This also indicates how important it is for the school counselor to remain up-to-date on current research pertaining to the needs of students with disabilities at the college level as well as to the types of supports that will help them meet these needs.

Milsom (2007) recently identified many of the needs for students with disabilities as reported by various professionals. The needs at the top of the list primarily related to personal, social and emotional characteristics of individuals and to academics. It is imperative that individuals with disabilities are tested in these areas, using the appropriate assessment tools, so specific goals and objectives can be built around their strengths and geared toward their specific needs. Examples of necessary supports for academic achievement and advancement can include career or college counseling, mentoring, the use of technology and inclusion in developmental school counseling programs as well as appropriate academic support (Milsom, 2005; 2006). Consultation with teachers to raise their expectations for students with disabilities could also be useful given that teacher expectations can play a major role in student academic achievement and influence a student's decision to pursue postsecondary education (Hinnant, O'Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009). School counselors can also build resource packets that contain information about what disability support services are available at particular colleges, providing students with disabilities the opportunity to choose the program that will best meet their academic, personal/social and career needs.

Interestingly, it appears that many of the needs identified in Milsom's (2007) study are similar to those of students who are not identified as having a disability. Many of these needs are already being addressed by school counselors through small group work and classroom developmental guidance lessons. Students with disabilities must also be included during classroom lessons that address these areas. To begin, needs assessments, or "brag sheets" (Thompson, Loesch, & Seraphine, 2003) on college preparedness and other areas addressed by school counselors, could be modified if necessary to ensure that they are an accurate measure of the needs and performance of the student. School counselors may use differentiated instruction to meet the individual learning needs of each student and collaborate with the special education teacher to modify the material appropriately. Resources and accommodations for learning must also be available for developmental school counseling lesson plans. For example, if the use of assistive technology will help the student better access the learning material, the school counselor must ensure that this is available with the appropriate supports.

As discussed earlier, it is imperative for school counselors to stay up to date on current research on issues for students with disabilities on college campuses and find out what preventive measures could be put in place to help students overcome potential barriers. There are several explanations as to why this may be so. First, there appears to be tremendous inconsistency between what high schools and colleges are obligated to offer students with disabilities. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 1997), schools are legally mandated to provide students in K-12 settings with an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) that is designed to meet their unique learning needs with a specific focus on preparing the student for adulthood under the transition provisions of IDEA once the student reaches the age of 16 or even earlier if so

determined by his/her IEP team. Upon graduation from high school, education shifts from being defined as “free and appropriate” (IDEA) to being equally accessible (ADA 2008). This transfers an enormous responsibility from the school onto the student.

School counselors need to share these findings with students and families so that they know what to expect and can make other arrangements if necessary. It is particularly important for students to be as well informed as possible so they can plan and take action accordingly as self-advocates because under special education law the decision making rights previously held by the student’s parents/guardians transfer to the student once s/he reaches the age of majority. For example, they may not be aware that the support mandated services they received in high school such as tutoring, resource room, and various therapies, are no longer available for free. Instead they are now only entitled to receive reasonable accommodations such as assistance from note takers and testing modifications. Yet, some of the services that were previously available through their IEP may still be necessary for them to learn at their full capacity.

Unfortunately, students with disabilities who attend colleges have reported that having access and availability of disability support services is limited and serves as a key factor that interferes with their ability to be successful in college (McKenzie, 2009). Despite reports that disability support services offered at universities are not always adequate for students, they are still available. However, they are only made available upon disclosure and documentation that proves that the student has a disability (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2007). Interestingly it has been reported that many students in post secondary school are not forthcoming about their disability. In fact, according to NLTS (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009), less than 33% of students who were previously identified as having a disability in K-12, considered themselves to have a disability in college. This underscores the importance of insuring that students with disabilities are well informed about the implications of their educational decisions and teaching them how to self-advocate. This might include educating them about their disability, teaching them about the implications of having a disability (including accessing and utilizing the tools necessary for academic success), and alleviating the mystification associated with lack of awareness.

Research on college retention rates suggests that social connectedness is an additional key construct in retaining students (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2009). In fact, students who lack social connectedness are at greater risk of leaving college prematurely and should therefore be identified and provided with support services (Allen, Robbins, & Sawyer, 2008). Social connectedness, according to Kohut (1984) is the basis for behavior that is goal directed and represents an individual’s need for belonging. He found that those who have high social connectedness report having a solid internal base allowing them to achieve particular goals. This could explain why many college students with disabilities who may not be or feel socially connected, despite having established college completion as a goal, drop out before graduation (Newman et al., 2009). School counselors may be able to proactively help such students by researching available resources on college campuses that promote social connectedness, such as peer mentoring programs, study groups, student social clubs and other networking opportunities and sharing such information with their students with disabilities.

Student Self-Advocacy in Combination With Evidence-Based Plans

As mentioned previously, once a student reaches the age of majority all of the entitlements under IDEA are transferred to the student. Information is power and with it students can better make informed decisions and choices. Students who are able to play a major role in developing their plan can provide feedback on what works and what doesn't and can therefore play an important role in their transition (IDEA, 1997). Student involvement is a key factor in the success of the transitional plan as the student is more likely to take ownership and have a personal attachment to the transitional plan.

Research also supports the use of interventions that are evidence-based with an emphasis on student strengths and unique abilities. Students able to self-advocate will maximize their own personal agency and learn to be resilient in achieving their goals and dreams. Their plans for accomplishing their goals and pursuing their dreams should also be evidence based in order to measure the appropriateness of interventions and the student's progression towards their goals. Evidence-based plans provide a way for the counselor to ensure that the efforts of the school counseling program are specifically geared towards the needs of students (Carey & Dimmit, 2008). They also ensure effectiveness of school counseling interventions and allow for feedback and consultation with the school community, including the student. Using an evidence-based strategic plan while encouraging and supporting the student's self-advocacy will provide the school counselor with the requisite information to revise the plan when necessary (Carey & Dimmit, 2008).

Conclusion

The vision of the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) is that "every student exits high school with the educational preparation and social capital necessary for college success" within their mission which "advocates for college readiness for all students" (p. 1). Unfortunately, too many students with disabilities drop out of high school before they graduate, are inadequately prepared for post-secondary options, or are pigeon holed into tracks or jobs requiring little education or skills. For those that do get to college an overwhelming number fail to graduate. In addition, students with disabilities often are not provided with the same college planning resources and supports as their non disabled peers. This paper has encouraged the professional school counselor to take on a leadership role with respect to supporting and informing college bound students with disabilities. The Federal law known as the Individuals with Disabilities Act has mandated transition planning and services for all special education students starting in their mid-teen years as a way to prepare them for adulthood which for some means post-secondary education. Unfortunately, neither this law, nor counselor education training programs, nor customary professional practice, has recognized the significant role which professional school counselors could play on behalf of students with disabilities. However, we believe it is time to correct this oversight and fill this current professional gap with the expertise and skills of school counselors. In this manuscript we have identified some of the ways that school counselors can expand their role on behalf of college bound special education students, and in so doing, better insure their commitment to "every and all students."

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