URBAN HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS’ EXPERIENCES
WITH STUDENTS’ ACCESS TO AND SUCCESS IN COLLEGE

KRISTIE LYNN COOPER

Bachelor of Science in Education
Miami University
May, 1993

Master of Education
Cleveland State University
May, 1998

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN URBAN EDUCATION: COUNSELING

at
CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY
May, 2008
©Copyright by Kristie Lynn Cooper 2008
This dissertation has been approved for
the Office of Doctoral Studies,
College of Education
and the College of Graduate Studies by

Kathryn MacCluskie, Chairperson 02/07/2008

Counseling, Administration, Supervision, and Adult Learning

Carl F. Rak, Methodologist 02/07/2008

Counseling, Administration, Supervision, and Adult Learning

Ann Bauer, Member 02/07/2008

Counseling, Administration, Supervision, and Adult Learning

Frederick Hampton, Member 02/07/2008

Counseling, Administration, Supervision, and Adult Learning

Mitte Davis Jones, Member 02/07/2008

Urban Studies
DEDICATION

To my success stories…

Adrian
Angela
Brandon
David
Denicka
Elizabeth
Evan
Geri
Grace
Jasmine
Julius
Kenny
Leah
Luvirt
Matt
Michael
Mohammed
Rebecca
Thandiwe
Vanessa

and the hundreds of others who have shared their college journeys with me.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My decision to pursue a doctoral degree in education was inspired by the hundreds of high school students who have passed through my life on the way to their dreams. I am grateful to have had the privilege to know them.

I am indebted to the eleven high school counselors who participated in this study. I specifically appreciate their willingness to share their time, which I know to be precious and valuable. Combined, their personal and professional experiences and perspectives produced a snapshot of a profession I believe in and a study of which I am incredibly proud. I also thank them on behalf of the hundreds of children who make it to and through higher education because of their vocational commitment and hard work.

I have tremendous respect for all of the members of my committee who readily gave of their time and expertise. Thank you. Dr. Kathryn MacCluskie, my dissertation advisor and personal cheerleader, your enthusiasm was contagious and convincing. You made me believe in myself and my ability to do this over and over again. Dr. Carl Rak, my methodologist, introduced me to qualitative research and always treated me as a colleague. You knew when to challenge and when to compliment. When you said it was “excellent,” I knew I could stop holding my breath. It was done.

Pursuing a Ph.D. is a lifestyle and you can never truly understand it until you live it. Cohort XVI in the doctoral studies program at Cleveland State University has encouraged me and motivated me to always seek the “value added.” We are change agents!

The best urban high school counselors in the world work at Cleveland Heights High School! To my dear friends and colleagues - I learn so much from each of you
everyday and am so impressed by the ceaseless dedication you have to children. No one will ever know the blood, sweat, and tears you pour into your work. Thank you for your tireless support.

This work would have been impossible if not for my family who supported me even when they didn’t understand why I was still in school or what I was going to do with another degree. My parents, Dexter and Beatrice Cooper, taught me to value education and loved me unconditionally. My brother, Bruce, challenged me to be better, to be smarter, and my sister, Kathy, reminded me not to take myself so seriously.

To Mike, who came into my life in the middle of this adventure, thank you for never being overly impressed and for showing me that being intelligent is more than going to school. Your love and generosity encourage me to go beyond my own limits, create balance in my life, and become a better person. I thank God for you everyday.
URBAN HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS’ EXPERIENCES WITH STUDENTS’ ACCESS TO AND SUCCESS IN COLLEGE

KRISTIE LYNN COOPER

ABSTRACT

Higher education is not equally accessible for low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color, nor are these students equally prepared for post-secondary success. Although much has been gained from substantial research identifying factors that predict college access and retention for underrepresented students, the role of the high school counselor, which has been identified as critical for college planning among urban students, has been conspicuously absent. Based on the role of school counselors in providing influence on underrepresented students' postsecondary planning, this study examined the experiences of urban high school counselors.

Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data on counselors' perceptions of their ability to influence college access and retention of their students. Participants consisted of eleven urban high school counselors who have had experience college planning with low-income, first-generation, and students of color. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using HyperResearch software. The results of this study were examined within the context of social capital theory and its role in understanding how the transmission of capital is critical for educational attainment.

Five major themes surfaced in relation to counselors' experiences: counselor under-preparedness, urban school settings, complex college planning process, accountability, and vocational commitment. The findings reveal that urban high school
counselors believe they have the ability to influence college access and retention among their students; however, informal and formal policies and a lack of preparation for their work constrain their ability to exert this influence. Despite these challenges, urban counselors remain committed to their work and thus continue to transmit social capital through their relationships with students. These findings suggest that policy efforts should be geared towards increasing urban high school counselors' capacity to build quality relationships with their students in effort to improve their ability to promote the educational attainment of their students.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIST OF TABLES</th>
<th>xii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

### I. INTRODUCTION

- Statement of the Problem ........................................ 1
- Purpose of the Study .............................................. 3
- Significance .......................................................... 4
  - The Traditional Case for Access and Retention Literature ......... 5
  - Why K-12 Education? ............................................. 7
  - Why School Counselors? ......................................... 9
- Definition of Terms ................................................... 12
- Theoretical Perspective ............................................. 13
- Personal Experience with the Topic ................................ 14
- Chapter Summary ..................................................... 15

### II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

- Urban Students and Schools ...................................... 17
- College Access and Retention .................................... 20
  - College Access .................................................. 22
    - Insufficient Academic Preparation ........................ 24
    - Low Educational Aspirations .............................. 25
    - Inadequate College Planning .............................. 27
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unsupportive School Climates</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Retention</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Preparation</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Educational Aspirations</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient College Planning</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-College Outreach Programs</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Counseling</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital Theory</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital and Schools</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital and School Counselors</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital and Research</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesis of the Literature</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Summary</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Research</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructivism</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Recruitment</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District Selection</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Informant Selection</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Interviewing</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Two-part Interview .................................................................71
Interview Questions ...............................................................72
Interview Process ......................................................................74
Field Notes ................................................................................75
Data Coding ...............................................................................75
Data Analysis .............................................................................77
Credibility ..................................................................................78
Member Checking .......................................................................79
Triangulation .............................................................................79
Thick Description .......................................................................80
Audit Trail ..................................................................................80
School and Key Informant Demographics .....................................81
City of Eastland ..........................................................................82
Eastland Public School System ..................................................83
Bolton High School ....................................................................84
Webster High School .................................................................86
City of Northridge .......................................................................87
Northridge Public Schools .........................................................88
Cook High School ......................................................................89
Warren High School .................................................................90
River City ....................................................................................91
River City School District ..........................................................92
Monroe High School .................................................................93
Final Thoughts .................................................................................................................. 298

REFERENCES .................................................................................................................. 300

APPENDICES .................................................................................................................. 314
  A. Institutional Review Board and Site Access Documents............................... 315
  B. Interview Questions and Preliminary Findings............................................. 323
  C. Audit Trail.............................................................................................................. 328
  D. Interview Transcripts ....................................................................................... 334
LIST OF TABLES

1. Participant Demographics................................................................................................................96
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Typical sequence of events in the social capital property, obligations........................271

2. Flow of capital in a student-counselor relationship obligations ........................................273
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

This is a dissertation about enhancing justice. Higher education is not equally accessible to all students, nor are all students equally prepared for postsecondary success. Economic, social, and academic poverty reduce the likelihood that some students, primarily underrepresented minorities, first generation, and low-income students, will enroll in or graduate from college (Kezar, 2000; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996). Improving college access and retention among underrepresented students has been a high priority among higher education researchers and policymakers over the last two decades. Faced with an increasingly diverse society, a growing need for higher education, and a desire to maintain a globally competitive society, higher education researchers and policymakers have initiated significant research examining this gap in student access. Higher education has responded to this concern by modifying admissions and recruitment policies, establishing remedial courses, and creating outreach programs (Massey, Charles, Lundy, & Fischer, 2003). Similarly, state and federal initiatives have been established to improve access to higher education through financial aid and early intervention programs. However, despite substantial efforts at narrowing the academic achievement gap that
exists between urban students and their peers from suburban schools, minimal progress has been made. New approaches to creating equal access to enroll and succeed in college are critical if American higher education is to be genuinely accessible to all members of an increasingly diverse society. This is particularly true at a time when rising tuition costs, challenges to affirmative action policies, and growing competition for enrollment further limit college access for urban students. This study investigates an unstudied approach, school counseling, as a focus for improving access and retention among low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students.

To date, the research agenda on college access and retention has largely been set by higher education researchers and policy makers. While increasing college access and retention among underrepresented minorities and low-income youth has focused on postsecondary issues and conditions for some time, recent interventions have been directed at the K-12 level. Students attending urban schools are particularly at risk of not pursuing higher education or persisting towards college graduation based primarily on their academic, economic, and social experiences (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Thayer, 2000). This has led to higher education-sponsored research and initiatives directed at improving academic achievement and readiness for postsecondary education. For example, college and university outreach programs and research projects have been established to improve academic preparation and college planning in high school, primarily through college preparation programs, scholarly research, and educational reform projects. However, these efforts have largely missed an essential factor in today’s struggle to increase urban youth’s prospects for postsecondary education, namely high school counseling. Almost universally, counselor experiences are not reflected in the
access and retention literature. This is particularly alarming given empirical research, which reveals that low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students, all of whom are heavily concentrated in urban high schools, rely primarily on their school counselors for college planning, encouragement, and guidance (Johnson, Stewart, & Eberly, 1991; King, 1996; McDonough, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Therefore, counselors working in urban high schools are critical to urban students’ access to and success in higher education.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to provide an account of urban high school counselors’ perceptions of their ability to increase college access and retention among their students. Urban high school counselors play a vital role in whether or not low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students will enroll and succeed in higher education. Research on predictors of college access and retention, specifically among students who are low-income, first-generation, or members of underrepresented minority groups, has identified several essential high school conditions. These include, but are not limited to, a rigorous academic curriculum, sufficient college planning information and assistance, strong college-bound culture, and high educational aspirations. Not only are school counselors uniquely positioned to address these conditions (McDonough, 2005), but, in doing so, they also influence both college access and retention simultaneously. Furthermore, because they are school-based personnel, they are best suited to reach greater numbers of students than external or supplemental college counseling programs that work with a select few.
This study is based on the premise that college access and retention literature and practice will be improved by examining an important high school condition, school counseling, as necessary to improving urban high school students’ chances for college enrollment and success. One assumption of this study is that social mobility among urban high school students, as a result of postsecondary enrollment and graduation, is influenced by relationships with their school counselors. This assumption is based on social capital theory. The research questions for this study are:

1. How do urban high school counselors perceive their ability to influence college access and retention?

2. What informal and formal practices do counselors feel enable or challenge them to focus on this issue?

3. How do school counselors view their preparation for addressing issues of college access and retention?

Significance

There are numerous compelling reasons to advance research on improving college access and success among urban youth. In the majority of reports and studies examining college access and retention, the case has faithfully been made for the significance of the topic. The motivation behind advancing our understanding of college access and retention among underrepresented students is driven by social, institutional, and individual needs. However, the unique significance behind this particular study extends beyond the traditional rationale for access and retention research. The case has yet to be made for the significance of examining school counselors and their role in improving college access.
and retention. Before addressing this, a brief description of the traditional significance of studying college access and retention is warranted.

**The Traditional Case for Access and Retention Literature**

As stated previously, much attention is being paid to increasing college access among low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students. A reflection of this importance is indicated by grant funding choices. Between July 1 and September 30, 2002, Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation for Education approved 26 grants totaling nearly $10 million to expand college access and student success nationwide (Lumina Foundation announces nearly $10 million in grants to improve college access, 2002). On the state level, the California Legislature appropriated $38.5 million to augment university outreach efforts in the 1998-99 and 1999-2000 state budgets (Gándara, 2001). There are several compelling reasons that private and public organizations would invest substantial dollars in improving college access and success among urban youth. Although not always explicitly stated as such, these concerns derive from societal, institutional, and personal concerns.

Possibly the most commonly cited argument for responding to the low number of underrepresented youth graduating from college is the need for a competent workforce, which ultimately leads to more highly trained workers and a competitive edge for our economy’s continued growth (Carnevale & Fry, 2000). Today, the greatest job growth in the United States is in high-paying, high skilled, service-sector jobs, which rely on academic achievement (Carnevale & Fry, 2000). Furthermore, society greatly benefits from an educated citizenry. The social and economic costs of an uneducated society are substantial (Paul, 2002). Educated members of society are less likely to drain our nation’s
social services and more likely to contribute to their communities through volunteer and leadership positions (Bowen & Bok, 1998). Also stemming from societal needs, efforts to create equal systems of opportunity resonate with our nation’s democratic and civil ideals. “Education plays a foundational role in democracy for equipping students for meaningful participation” (Gurin, 1999, p. 5). If students from subordinate groups are restricted from equal access to systems that promote social mobility, their relative position in the social structure would be maintained (Karen, 1991).

The second force behind the importance of studying access and retention among urban youth is higher education institutions themselves. Here, two interests are relevant. First, institutional concern for racial, ethnic, and class diversity drives colleges and universities to seek remedies to past discrimination through improved access and retention. In the past, institutions have believed in the social benefits of diversity on their campuses. However, recently the cognitive benefits of a diverse student body have surfaced in response to legal challenges to affirmative action. Gurin (1999) found that “students learn more and think in deeper, more complex ways in a diverse educational environment” (p. 3). Although these findings are still open to be challenged, they suggest a greater need to ensure students from ethnic and racial minority groups have access to higher education. Second, higher education institutions have a stake in improved access and retention for accountability purposes. Competition for federal funds, increasing competition for students, as well as an increasing need for accountability, have lead institutions to focus on keeping the students that they accept. Tinto (1993) suggests that decreased enrollments and reduced financial resources have led institutions to concentrate energies on retaining as many of their students as possible.
Finally, the third argument, and to some, the most compelling, involves the individual student and her family. An individual’s occupational, monetary, and other social awards are conditional upon a college degree (Tinto, 1993). The occupational outcomes of having a college degree are significant, including better and higher paying jobs. Research reveals that once first-generation college students complete a degree or certification, they are generally similarly distributed among their peers in occupational groups and salaries (Choy, 2001). More specifically, educational attainment impacts whether one has a job, the status of that job, and the salary. Beyond the financial benefits of having a college degree are its social benefits. People with higher levels of education are more likely to enjoy better health and live longer lives (Gándara, 2001). On a more personal level, students and families sacrifice money and time in order to matriculate and a college student’s success may determine whether or not subsequent siblings will attend college.

These three examples do not exhaust the reasons why improved research on college access and retention is imperative. However, they do provide an accurate understanding of the far-reaching impact of urban students’ need for college attainment. The significance of this study, which stands apart from previous research, is the focus on K-12 education, more specifically school counselors as a means to enhance our understanding of college access and retention.

*Why K-12 Education?*

College access and retention is widely covered in the literature, however, this particular research approach connects two previously disconnected topics. This research examines the high school experience, which has only recently been considered as
relevant to understanding college access, and in particular, school counseling, about which even less is known. The simple rationale for this approach is that traditional approaches have narrowly addressed this issue with minimal results. However, there are additional reasons for expanding traditional access and retention literature to include the work of school counselors, which are discussed below.

Higher education, and public higher education in particular, has been charged with solving public problems for decades, evident as early as the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862. More specific to the topic at hand, schools and departments of education are uniquely positioned to respond to universities’ commitment to the social good by meeting the challenges of K-12 education (Oakes & Rogers, 2001). Today, K-12 education is faced with needs for new teachers, expanded pedagogies and knowledge appropriate for multilingual and multicultural classrooms, and improved approaches to education reform (Oakes & Rogers, 2001). Schools of education are uniquely positioned to address these issues through scholarly research, university outreach, and professional training and development.

Higher education is also perfectly situated to respond to calls for improved college access and retention. Until recently, higher education researchers had neglected the critical role of K-12 education in improving college access and retention. Earlier responses to low enrollment and graduation rates among urban youth had focused solely on enrollment predictions and remedial education programs. Fortunately, this has changed. Today instead of blaming struggling schools for not producing eligible college students, higher education research is examining the pre-college experience and its influence on college access and retention. Insufficient academic preparation, lack of
family and peer support, low educational aspirations, insufficient college planning, and unsupportive school climates all have been found to influence the likelihood that students will not enroll in postsecondary education (Choy, 2001; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Paul, 2002). With regard to college retention, inadequate academic preparation, low educational aspirations, and poor college planning also influence the probability that a student will not persist once in college (Horn & Choy, 1998; Paul, 2002; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). In response to these findings, colleges and universities have established pre-college outreach programs to increase the pool of underrepresented students who are eligible for higher education. Although many of these outreach programs include an add-on college planning component, they have largely neglected the role of school counselors.

In sum, many higher education institutions are involved in education reform on the K-12 level with the goal of improving college access and retention. Some universities have established models to be implemented in secondary schools, such as the Coalition of Essential Schools (Martinez & Klopott, 2002). In this case, colleges and universities have attempted to increase graduation rates and thus college enrollment by improving academic success. However, I propose that higher education might expand its role in K-12 reform and school partnerships by attending to school counselors, specifically given their promise for increasing college access and retention.

**Why School Counselors?**

Despite substantial research revealing the importance of high school experience on college access and retention, the literature lacks information on those professionals, already situated in schools, who are charged with helping students plan for postsecondary
education. One rationale for examining urban high school counselors in an effort to improve college access and success among urban students is based on considerable empirical research revealing counselors’ critical role in the college planning processes among this population of students. Urban students’ postsecondary resources differ from middle and upper class students who gather information from family members and peers who have attended college, private counseling services, and less overburdened school counselors. Unlike students in more affluent schools who rely on parents and other adults and peers to provide them with college assistance (Terenzini et al, 2001), urban students rely heavily on their school counselors for assistance with college planning (Choy, 2001; Fallon, 1997; Johnson et al, 1991; Terenzini et al, 2001).

The second rationale for examining urban high school counselors as a means for improving access is due to the fact that they are uniquely positioned in schools to reach the largest numbers of students. University and federal outreach programs have attempted to replicate the college planning process with urban students with the hopes of compensating for weak counseling services. However, despite modest gains, these programs fail to reach the numbers of students necessary to witness or effect significant change. Only school counselors are positioned to influence systemic reform in this area due to the relationships they build with students and their proximity to all students. Furthermore, counselors are better able to build long-term relationships with students than is available to short-term program staff or college recruiters (Chapman, O'Brien, & DeMasi, 1987).

The final, and perhaps most logical, reason to feature school counselors in research on college access is so that their voices can be useful in developing solutions to
this problem. Freeman (1997) appropriately pointed out that researchers and policymakers seldom include the individuals who are central to a problem in the development of solutions. Numerous studies cite weak counseling programs as the root of the problem behind limited access and retention for some students, yet those very individuals who are involved in such weak counseling programs are not given a voice in the literature. This research suggests asking school counselors questions about access and retention, and their ability to influence them, with the hope that their opinions, experiences, and voices will uncover areas for improvement.

These rationales suggest the need to add the experiences of urban high school counselors to the college access and retention literature. Unfortunately, the literature on school counselors in general is limited. Specifically, college access and retention literature has not featured school counselors in the research. Basic information about their professional experiences is necessary to influence practice and interventions focusing on improving college access and retention, specifically among underrepresented youth. Research that examines how urban high school counselors are able to, or unable to, address college planning and transition with their students will contribute to the current body of literature on college access and retention among urban students.

College access and retention among urban students is important on societal, institutional, and personal levels. A competent society, democratic ideals, institutional effectiveness, institutional diversity, and personal growth rely on urban students’ access to and success in postsecondary education at rates similar to their peers. Sadly, traditional efforts at increasing college access and retention lack critical information about the people best positioned to address this issue on a larger scale. By examining urban high
school counseling as a potential source of strength to influence college access and retention among underrepresented youth, we may ultimately identify areas for improvement in policy development, graduate training programs, and intervention programs. However, with little information on their experiences, the literature will continue to criticize them as a part of the problem, rather than an element of the solution.

**Definition of Terms**

Throughout this study, a number of terms are used which require some clarification.

*Postsecondary Education, Higher Education, and College* are used interchangeably. These terms are used to include community colleges, two-year colleges, and four-year colleges unless otherwise stated.

*Access* is used to refer to the action of enrolling in higher education. Simply applying to college does not connote *access* to college. Along similar lines, the term *retention* refers to the action of persisting in college. For this reason, the terms *retention*, *persistence*, and *success in college* are used interchangeably to suggest a student’s ability to stay in college once enrolled. Some research limits the use of the term retention to completion of a degree at a specific institution. However, in the case of this study, the term retention refers to the act of succeeding in college once enrolled. This general definition is sufficient due to the pre-college nature of this study.

*Social Mobility* is the degree to which, in a given society, an individual's, family's, or group's social status can change throughout the course of their life through a system of social hierarchy or stratification. Subsequently, it is also the degree to which that individual's or group's descendants move up and down the class system. The degree to
which an individual can move through their system can be based on attributes and achievements or factors beyond their control. This study assumes that level of education can positively influence one’s social mobility.

*Urban* simply means related to cities and *Urban Students*, which will be discussed fully in the literature review section on urban students, refers to those students who attend high schools located in cities. These students may be, but are not limited to, low-income, first-generation, or from an underrepresented minority group as these populations often reside in higher concentrations in urban cities rather than in suburban areas.

*School counselor* denotes those professionals staffed in schools that are typically charged with helping students with social, academic, and career issues. This term does not include psychologists, social workers, and other counselors placed in schools solely to address students’ mental health needs.

**Theoretical Perspective**

Urban high school counselors appear to be critically positioned to help their students gain access to and succeed in higher education; however, their experiences remain unexamined. This study uses social capital theory to provide direction in understanding specifically why urban high school counselors are so critical to their students gaining access and succeeding in higher education. Based on the belief that social capital is necessary for the acquisition of human capital (Coleman, 1988), social capital theory provides a lens to guide the research process toward specific elements of school counseling most influential in increasing college access and retention among urban students. In this case, social capital is formed through school counselors’ efforts to influence educational attainment and social mobility. Hallinan (2001) and Perna (2000)
suggested that using school counselors as a focus point of study on students’ educational attainment is a logical extension of mobility research.

This research proposes that social capital theory, and specifically the properties that constitute social capital, are applicable to the relationships school counselors form with their students and their ability to influence college access and retention as a result of these relationships. Unlike studies that use variables to measure social capital, this study uses social capital theory to understand what specific aspects of college counseling are most likely to affect college access and retention. The challenge to using social capital theory in this way involves two issues: first, defining the social capital of schools and specifically school counselors; and second, how to identify the properties of this concept in the context of this study. A review of the literature in Chapter Two will address the origins of social capital theory and its definitions and explain how this concept may be contextualized in the experiences of urban high school counselors.

**Personal Experience with the Topic**

My own professional experiences have led me to consider the intersection between secondary and postsecondary systems. As a school counselor in an urban public school district, I am aware of the demand on school counselors to provide accurate postsecondary information to students to increase their access to higher education. I am also concerned about the dismal college access and retention rates for urban students. Significant time and money is invested for students to attend college and low retention rates are disheartening on many levels. My professional experience as a school counselor combined with my educational experience in higher education has brought me to consider the disconnection between higher education and secondary education. School
partnerships, K-16 reform efforts, and outreach programs have all made small steps. However, there is much room for advancement and it seems logical that we turn our attention to a group of professionals who have not yet been a part of the discourse.

It is not my intention by conducting this research to imply that college is the best path or only path for high school students to take after high school graduation. College is simply one option among many. However, as a school counselor, I see students struggle with the college-going decision and process more than the processes involved with other postsecondary choices. I believe I am in a position to assist these students given the proper resources and support. I firmly believe that every student should be college ready upon high school graduation. The decision to attend college should be made by the student, not by the school counselor or the policies of the school.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter one introduced the topic to be investigated by this dissertation and stated the research problem: higher education is not equally accessible to all students and all students equally prepared for postsecondary success. Despite research that says low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students, rely primarily on their school counselors for college planning, encouragement, and guidance, the voice of the school counselor is conspicuously absent in the college assess and retention literature. Additionally, the purpose of the study was presented: to provide an account of urban high school counselors’ perceptions of their ability to increase college access and retention among their students. Chapter one also included the definition of terms which will be important in the study, introduced the theoretical perspective, and established the research questions for the study. This study uses social capital theory to provide direction
in understanding specifically why urban high school counselors are so critical to their students gaining access and succeeding in higher education. Next, chapter two contains a review of the literature related to the problem being examined and the theoretical perspective that informs the study.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To better understand the importance of school counselors in influencing college access and retention among urban students, specifically through the lens of social capital theory, this study relies on research from three disassociated bodies of literature: urban students and schools, college access and retention, and school counselors. The brief literature review on urban schools and students illustrates why urban high school counseling experiences are unique and a feature of this study. The review of the relevant literature on college access and retention reveals those specific high school conditions most influential in increasing college access and retention among urban students. This section also highlights those pre-college conditions identified by social capital theory as most relevant. Included in the literature review on college access and retention is a review of pre-college programs that have attempted to improve college access among urban students. Finally, the literature review on school counselors demonstrates their role in college planning.

Urban Students and Schools

The context for this study is the state of access and retention of urban students. It is therefore necessary to define the group of individuals referred to in this paper, urban
students, and the context of their high school experience, urban schools. Although the majority of relevant research presented in this paper specifically refers to students of color, first-generation college students, at-risk students, and students from low socioeconomic status (SES), this paper correlates such findings to urban high school youth. This connection seems appropriate given the concentration of those characteristics of students in urban high schools. For example, African American and Latino students are disproportionately located in urban areas (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002), masses of immigrants flock to urban areas, and poverty levels are highest in urban cities and among minorities (Land & Legters, 2002). These identifying characteristics also contain substantial overlap with one another. For example, among 1992 high school graduates, the 27% who were first-generation college students were also more likely to be black or Hispanic, and to be from families from the lowest income quartile (Choy, 2001). While ethnicity, first-generation status, socioeconomic class, and schooling are not synonymous, they are interrelated. This literature review uses related research in the context of urban students. Unfortunately, to date, little research has focused specifically on urban students, when in fact their experiences may differ from a low-income student from a rural area, a black student from a private school, or a first-generation student attending a suburban high school.

Schooling in our society is “linked to political, social, economic, and cultural structures that reflect to some degree the dominant views of what society is and what it should be” (Kretovics & Nussel, 1994, p. 7). There is a sizeable body of literature on urban schooling in general (Kozol, 1991; Kretovics & Nussel, 1994; Ravitch & Viteritti, 2000). Typically “urban education” is a term used to describe school systems that serve
primarily students from low SES backgrounds, are located in low SES locations, and, in this case, urban locations. Urban schools have also been defined by the percentage of students who participate in the federal reduced lunch program (Adelman, 2002). Although urban schools also include charter schools, independent schools, parochial schools, and other private schools, this study will focus on urban, public school districts, located in urban centers with the majority of students participating in the federal lunch program.

Students’ school experiences greatly impact their opportunities. McDonough (1997) suggested that differences in college enrollment rates by SES can be partly explained by high school quality. Those students attending urban schools are particularly at risk of not pursuing higher education or persisting towards graduation for college, based primarily on their academic, economic, and social experiences (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Thayer, 2000). Students who attend urban district high schools encounter things such as teen pregnancy, abuse, domestic violence, poverty, poor education, and lack of health or support services that may result in a stress level unique to urban students. Furthermore, their educational experience differs as they face deteriorating buildings, overcrowded schools, higher dropout rates, low student achievement, funding problems, and frequent changes in school leadership (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Additionally, inherent inequalities in urban education present obstacles for students’ opportunity for academic achievement as well. Freeman (1997) pointed out that the quality of the school has implications for whether or not students will choose to pursue higher education. Students attending urban schools often do not have access to rigorous college preparatory curricula, quality teachers, honors courses, sufficient
counseling, or peer support (Gándara, 2002). Also, many urban students have not been identified early in their academic career as college-bound, which limits their chances for taking appropriate college preparatory coursework (Fallon, 1997).

Urban students are complex and are often disadvantaged economically, educationally, and socially. In fact, in an urban high school context, students are making decisions about college while faced with poverty, unstable home environments, and inhospitable school environments. Based on these differences, some researchers posit that beyond socioeconomic status and risk characteristics, the type of K-12 education that students are exposed to may be more effective at predicting postsecondary choices and success than any other variable (Gándara, 2001). Adelman (2002) claimed that urban students with mediocre or poor high school academic records are less likely to continue their educations than their suburban counterparts with the same records. This is likely due to college access barriers common to urban school students such as insufficient academic preparation, low educational aspirations, low SAT Scores, and limited knowledge about the process. Urban high school graduates are substantially at risk of not attending college, which makes their absence in the literature particularly alarming.

**College Access and Retention**

There is vast literature on college access and retention, as it is not a new area to higher education research. Policymakers have been concerned with expanding opportunity to those previously denied since the inception of massification, the movement in higher education to universal access. A recent shift in the literature has brought about a focus on the high school conditions most associated with college access and success among urban students. Research reveals that the pre-college experience and
its influence on college access and retention is a target for intervention (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002b). This section of the literature review identifies those high school conditions influenced by school counselors and determined to be examples of social capital. In some studies, college access has been researched separately from retention, yet in many ways, these two topics are inextricably connected. One of the assumptions of this study is that there are some high school conditions that simultaneously have the potential to influence both college access and retention among urban youth. For this reason, relevant literature is presented on both college access and retention as it relates to urban students and school conditions.

Within this review of the college access and retention literature, the impact of financial aid has been purposefully excluded. It should not be interpreted from this omission that the availability of financial aid plays a minimal role in college access and retention, particularly among urban students. The availability and awareness of financial aid helps to mitigate barriers of enrolling and succeeding in higher education (Choy, 2001). However, a comprehensive review of the financial aid literature is beyond the scope and purpose of this review. This review focuses on those conditions that foster college access and retention that may be addressed on the high school level. Although it is true that school counseling includes assistance with the financial aid process, this aspect is included in college planning. Some higher education advocates feel that college planning, rather than an analysis of financial aid policies or practices, may be more effective than increased funding alone (Burd, 2002). Some researchers argue that the intensity and quality of a students’ secondary education are better predictors of college enrollment than finances (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). For these reasons, along
with the fact that despite millions of dollars spent on aid, access and retention rates remain dismal, this review has excluded the role of financial aid.

**College Access**

Changes in legislation, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the G.I. Bill, the land grant movement, and various federal and state loan and grant policies have been designed to increase access to higher education to those who otherwise could not attend. These policies have been driven by our society’s democratic ideals of equal opportunity, interest in remaining competitive globally, and a desire to create an educated citizenry (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Federal and state governments have infused considerable resources into achieving equal access to college (Terenzini et al, 2001). Improvements have been reflected in increased enrollment of underrepresented students. As an example of this trend, the number of minority college undergraduates rose 61% between 1984 and 1994. This differs dramatically from an increase of 5.1% among white college undergraduates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). One reason for this increase is a narrowing of the high school graduation gap between whites and African Americans (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). However, although the graduation gap has decreased, there remains an achievement gap between urban students and suburban students, which accounts for much of the remaining disparities in retention among urban students (Haycock, 2001). Another explanation for the expansion of access is an increase in federal financial support in the form of Pell Grants, the major source of financial aid for low-income students (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002).

Despite this increased access to higher education among minority students, underrepresentation continues. According to McDonough (1997), aggregate college
enrollment rates mask widespread discrepancies in the access and retention of underrepresented students. In fact, African Americans and Latinos are underrepresented among undergraduates and bachelor degree recipients relative to their representation among the college population (Perna, 2000). Although African American students represent 25 percent of the college population, they represent only 16 percent of students enrolled at four-year colleges (Hawkins, 2003). Additionally, at four-year institutions, students in the lowest socioeconomic (SES) quartile were outnumbered more than 10 to 1 by their highest SES quartile peers among the entering class of the 1989-90 academic year (Terenzini et al, 2001). First-generation college students are no more represented on college campuses. Twenty-six percent of students whose parents have no more than a high school diploma enroll in four-year colleges compared to seventy-one percent of those students whose parents are college graduates (Gándara, 2002).

These disparities have alarming consequences for society, higher education institutions, and students, thereby driving continued efforts to improve the state of college access and retention among this group of students. However, current efforts are narrowly tailored approaches to increasing access (Swail & Perna, 2002). Earlier responses to low enrollment and graduation rates among urban youth focused on enrollment predictions and remedial programs. Only recently have higher education researchers attended to the role K-12 education plays in improving access to college among urban students. Choy (2001) suggested that programs and practices that encourage first-generation college students to take academically challenging courses, and counsel students and their families about college hold the most promise for improving college access. This points to the importance of understanding how K-12 education influences college enrollment. This
literature review presents high school conditions such as: insufficient academic preparation, low educational aspirations, inadequate college planning, and unsupportive school climates, based on their capacity to be addressed by school counselors to influence college access.

**Insufficient Academic Preparation**

The most commonly cited obstacle to college access among urban youth is insufficient academic preparation (Horn, 1995; Terenzini et al, 2001). Adelman (2002) claimed that high school academic intensity and curriculum is the single most important factor in predicting enrollment. Insufficient academic preparation is attributed to a lack of access to college preparatory courses in high school and high enrollment in general diploma rather than academic programs (Simon, 1993). Some urban students may not be eligible to enroll in postsecondary education due to lack of academic preparation, while others will struggle once enrolled. Likewise, first-generation and low-income students are less likely than their peers to be academically prepared for a 4-year college (Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al, 2001). Students from low-income families and with minority status are less likely to have access to school counselors to discuss their high school course of study (Lee & Workman, 1992).

College enrollment has also been linked to specific academic curriculum. Using the *High School and Beyond* data set, Pelavin and Kane (1990) found that high school mathematics courses, specifically algebra and geometry, were positively correlated with college attendance. Students who take at least one year of algebra or geometry are significantly more likely to attend college. However, between the two courses, geometry was more critical than algebra (Pelavin & Kane, 1990). Numerous other reports suggest
that participation in an advanced math curriculum improves a student’s chances for postsecondary education enrollment among low-income students and first-generation college attendees (Adelman, 2002; Choy, 2001). For example, Pelavin and Kane (1990) found that the lowest income students enroll in geometry at less than half the rate of the highest income students. Likewise, first-generation college students are less likely to complete any advanced math courses (Choy, 2001). Pelavin and Kane (1990) also found that enrollment in at least one year of laboratory science and two years of a foreign language was correlated to students’ likelihood of college enrollment.

In a recent policy report from Stanford University’s Bridge Project, researchers found that the disconnect between K-12 and postsecondary systems with regard to academic standards is to blame for disparate access and retention rates. For example, this report posits high school assessments often stress different knowledge and skills than do college admissions requirements (Venezia et al, 2003). Therefore, students are confused and struggle once enrolled in college.

These findings highlight the importance of urban students enrolling in appropriate classes to prepare them for college access. School counselors were historically charged with tracking poor and minority students into vocational and watered-down courses (Lennon, Blackwell, Bridgeforth, & Cole, 1996). Now, we see how important it is for counselors to become advocates for students to enroll in the classes that will best prepare them for college enrollment.

**Low Educational Aspirations**

College choice literature reveals that the first stage of choosing a college begins with aspiring to attend postsecondary education. Interestingly, researchers have further
indicated that students’ educational aspirations are strong predictors of college attendance (McDonough, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pelavin & Kane, 1990; Perna, 2000; Venezia et al, 2003). Students who articulate postsecondary aspirations are more likely to enroll in college. Pelavin and Kane (1990) found that high school sophomores’ intentions for postsecondary educational are strongly associated with their college attendance. First-generation college students report lower educational aspirations than their peers as early as eighth grade (Choy, 2001).

There are three factors that have the capacity to encourage or discourage the formation of college aspirations: socioeconomic background, academic factors, and contextual factors, such as encouragement from people and school environment. Students’ educational aspirations may be specifically affected by the normative expectations set by the personnel in the high school. In the context of this study, school counselors have the potential to impact educational aspirations. This is partly because educational aspirations typically develop early in the school years.

The potential for school counselors to make an impact by holding high educational expectations can be illustrated by a close examination of the literature on parental encouragement. College access literature suggests that parental encouragement is strongest for students’ early educational plans (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a). There are two dimensions to parental encouragement: holding high educational expectations of the student and maintaining educational aspirations through involvement in the college planning process. Although counselors in school are not parents, they are positioned to act in a similar manner. Holding high expectations for students and maintaining and developing college plans through on-going college planning is entirely appropriate for
school counselors. In fact, Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003) suggested that students’ educational aspirations are a reflection of parents, teachers, and counselors’ ability to communicate the importance of college.

**Inadequate College Planning**

In addition to academic preparation and high educational aspirations, strong college planning has been linked to college enrollment. This process includes talking to individuals about attending college, gathering information on postsecondary education, attending programs on educational opportunities, taking appropriate entrance examinations, and obtaining assistance with the college application and financial aid process. Horn and Choy (1998) found that at-risk students who participated in college preparation activities were more likely to enroll in college. Unfortunately, urban students often lack the college planning information necessary for successful matriculation. Inequities in educational systems’ college counseling and college preparation courses, result in some students having differential access to college planning (Venezia et al, 2003). In a study of urban African American and Latino students, ACT researchers found the students lacked basic college planning information. For example, many of the students were not able to differentiate between a two-year and a four-year college (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Similarly, McDonough (1997) believed that first-generation college students often lack appropriate college planning information, begin to plan for college much later in their high school career, and fail to take college required classes in high school. Choy, Horn, Nuñez, and Chen (2000) found first-generation college and at-risk students were less likely than their peers to participate in college planning activities that lead to enrollment. Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio (2003) suggested that although some of
these students may have high educational aspirations, they are apathetic about the college planning process.

A critical element of college planning is the relationship between students and the person providing the college planning assistance. One reason urban students lack basic college planning information is due to an absence of a “network of adults or peers with first-hand experience and contacts in the college, business, or professional world” (Keeping the options open, 1986, p. 22). Pre-college outreach programs stress the importance of mentoring in encouraging college access. Edwards (1976) found that African American students with close working relationships with their counselors were better informed about postsecondary opportunities and more likely to receive college scholarships. Although there does not appear to be substantial literature pointing to the importance of trust in influencing college access, there is an indirect relationship. Literature suggests that at-risk students who trust their counselors and perceive them to be helpful are more likely to confide and listen to them (Good, 1977; Taylor-Dunlop & Norton, 1994). Students who meet regularly with their counselor are more disposed to attend college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000b). Therefore, trusting relationships between counselors and students are ideal for the sharing of college information, setting high educational aspiration and making choices about college enrollment.

Unsupportive School Climates

The final high school condition associated with influencing college access among urban students is school climate. McDonough (1997) claimed that high school environments have a powerful influence on how students choose colleges. In a study of how social class impacts college choice, McDonough (1997) found that schools structure
opportunity through such things as timing, availability, and support for college planning, organizational missions that emphasize college planning, assumptions of students’ cultural capital, and counselor role expectations and the enactment of those expectations. Schools foster a college culture by how they structure the flow and content of information, highlight or downplay specific options, or impose a specific schedule (McDonough, 1997). There are “structural and cultural deterrents in K-12 schools and surrounding communities that shape students’ pathways through high school and beyond” (Jones, Yonezawa, Ballesteros, & Mehan, 2002, p.3). For example, the presence of specific colleges and universities at a high school college fair sends a message to students about postsecondary opportunities. School climate and school structure have been identified as target areas for improvement in urban educational reform (Martinez & Klopott, 2002).

School policies, resources, and organizational structures also influence a college-bound culture (McDonough, 2005). High school resources, such as college planning centers, expand opportunities for students. Cabrera and LaNasa (2000a) found that low-income students who consulted regularly with a college counselor were more disposed to attend college. In this case, schools’ resources include the number of counselors assigned to help students with college planning. McDonough (2005) pointed out that the schools most likely to have inadequate counseling are in communities and schools serving students of color. It is clear that a rigorous academic curriculum, high educational aspirations, sufficient college planning, and a supportive college-bound culture all increase urban students’ chances for postsecondary access. In fact, it is often the combination or the cumulative effect of the lack of each of these factors that is primarily
responsible for underrepresentation of urban students on college campuses. Perna (2000) pointed out that simply aspiring to achieve a bachelor’s degree is not sufficient to ensure enrolling in higher education. Individually, strong academic curriculum, effective college planning, and supportive school climate will increase students’ chances, but addressing all three systemically is most likely to have the greatest impact. Before addressing how school counselors are positioned to address these conditions, the next section presents the literature on how improving college access may simultaneously improve retention.

College Retention

The literature presented so far highlights the obstacles urban students must overcome in order to achieve access to college, however, not all access is equal. Equality of access describes the degree to which students have equal access to the same types of institutions and opportunities. Given that American higher education is extremely diversified, with varying levels of efficacy, access to one institution is not necessarily equal to access to all higher education. For example, research has shown that a disproportionate number of Latino students, low-income African American students, and first generation college students attend two-year and community colleges (Avalos & Pavel, 1993). This is particularly disturbing given reports that retention rates at these institutions tend to be lower than at four-year colleges and private colleges (Astin, Tsui, & Avalos, 1996). For this reason, equal access to college includes access to an institution where that student has the potential to succeed. For many urban students who overcome barriers to enroll in postsecondary education, they are still at a disadvantage with respect to persisting in college (Choy, 2001). In fact, for these students “access is a hollow promise when graduation rates are far below those of students from other backgrounds”
In fact, many would agree that genuine access to college includes persistence towards a college degree. Unfortunately, similar to college access, the statistics reveal disparities.

Research indicates that college students of color, students with low SES, and students who are first-generation college attendees have lower college attainment rates than their peers. Astin, Tsui, and Avalos (1996) reported that within a nine-year period, degree completion rates were the highest among Asian-American students (57.6%) and white students (47.3%). However, lower degree completion rates were found among African American students (33.9%), Mexican-American/Chicano students (39.5%), Puerto Rican students (36.9%) and American Indian students (33.2%) (Astin et al, 1996). In 1999, the nationwide college graduation rate for black students was as low as 38% ("Why aren't there more blacks graduating from college?" 2000/2001). Low income students are equally underrepresented. McDonough (1997) found that graduates in the top income quartile completed their bachelor degree at a 74% rate compared to 5% from the bottom income quartile. The same holds for first-generation college students. First generation college students leave college before their second year at twice the rate of their peers (Choy, 2001). These disparities in educational attainment continue despite numerous policy studies and outreach efforts on federal and local levels.

The simple rationale for addressing college retention on the high school level is that it is not enough to simply get the students into college; we must also get them through (Burd, 2002). Student success in college, particularly among underrepresented students, is influenced by student’s high school experiences. Certainly the case has been made that academic preparation increases urban student’s chances for success in college
(Adelman, 2002; Lennon et al, 1996; Martinez & Klopott, 2002). There is no argument that academic readiness is directly correlated with retention. However, there are other means by which college retention may be addressed on the K-12 level. First, the obstacles to college access faced by urban youth reappear as students persist through college. Pelavin and Kane (1990) claimed that if students are properly prepared for college, they are more likely to persist. Simply put, the conditions that assist a student’s likelihood for college enrollment may also help them stay in college. Second, if the transition from high school to college is negotiated smoothly, the likelihood of persistence is increased (Nora, 2002). Finally, helping students make appropriate postsecondary plans will improve their possibility of persisting in college, specifically by improving their chances for social and academic integration.

Many of the barriers to college access are similar to those to degree attainment. More specifically, pre-college academic preparation, high degree aspirations, and college planning may all be addressed on the high school level and have the potential to impact persistence among underrepresented students in college.

Academic Preparation

It should come as no surprise that academic preparation is positively related to student persistence. Academic background impacts student’s progress in college (Terenzini et al, 2001). Like college access, some courses are more specifically related to high achievement in college. Adelman (2002) claimed that high school curriculum is the most influential predictor of degree attainment. Academic intensity and curriculum positively correlates with college success. More specifically, Pelavin and Kane (1990) found that degree attainment was positively correlated with enrollment in at least one
year of geometry and two years of foreign language in high school. Again, it is evident that scheduling students into particular courses has far-reaching impact on their potential for postsecondary success.

Based on evidence that academic preparation is highly correlated to college success, many educational reform efforts have been designed intentionally, and unintentionally in some cases, to improve college readiness. School reform initiatives that address the predictors of college going behavior include academic rigor of the curriculum, academic and social structure of the school, and the alignment of curriculum between high school and postsecondary education (Martinez & Klopott, 2002). These high school conditions are clearly targets for college preparation based on their relationships with college access and success.

**Low Educational Aspirations**

Although rigorous high school course taking decreases the gaps in access and persistence, it does not close the gaps between urban students and their peers (Choy, 2001). As in the case of college access, research suggests that students who have high academic aspirations are more likely to be successful in college. In a study of Native American college attendees, high academic aspirations were common among successful students (Brown-Robinson & Kurpius, 1997). Using the High School and Beyond data set, Pelavin and Kane (1990) determined that aspirations toward a bachelor’s degree had an effect on graduation rates among minority and low-income students. Clearly having high educational aspirations will assist students to access higher education and achieve once there. Unfortunately, degree aspirations are also associated with socioeconomic status (Terenzini et al, 2001), which increases the likelihood that urban students will not
hold high academic goals for themselves. The importance of inculcating high educational aspirations is paramount.

**Insufficient College Planning**

College planning on the high school level has the potential to benefit students beyond accessing college. Studies suggest appropriate college planning also influences college retention among urban students. This is most evident when students receive information about choosing specific colleges. Satisfaction with a college and achieving educational goals are conditioned by the quality of information provided in high school during the college planning process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Terenzini et al, 2001). The better the fit between the student and the institution, the better the chances are for student retention (Ramist, 1981; Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfle, 1988). This process involves matching an individual to a particular postsecondary institution based on both parties’ interests. Those most satisfied in college and less likely to depart are those that experience congruence between personality and institution environment (Tinto, 1993). Unfortunately, many urban students choose their schools haphazardly (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Therefore, college success may be improved by helping students choose an institution more efficiently.

In summary, a strong academic curriculum, high educational aspirations, and sufficient college planning have been recognized to influence retention. These high school conditions are the same as those that have the potential to influence college access, which supports the notion that both college access and retention may be simultaneously addressed on the high school level. More specifically, school counselors have the ability to address these conditions. In light of social capital theory, which points
to the function of information channels and norms and effective sanctions, these high school conditions are in fact the specific reasons why school counselors are so critical to urban students.

The goal for higher education has been equal access for all students. However, not all students have access to the same high school conditions necessary for successful college enrollment and success. With regard to K-12 education and college preparation, things are far from equal (McDonough, 2005). This is not surprising given statements suggesting that access to higher education is more an issue of social and cultural capital than anything else (Swail, 2000). McDonough (2005) proposed that knowledgeable and available counselors are critical for successful college planning. Still, we know very little about how school counselors are able to address those conditions necessary for college access and success. Before moving into a review of the literature on school counselors, the next section will provide a brief description of how pre-college outreach programs have attempted to equalize access.

**Pre-College Outreach Programs**

In response to substantial literature citing the importance of pre-college experience, pre-college outreach programs have been developed around the country. Most of these programs take place outside of the student’s school. These college preparatory programs are “enhancement programs that supplement a school’s regular activities” (Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002a). The foundation of these programs is to offer services to compensate for perceived deficiencies in schools and families. Most programs cite weak school and family systems as impetus for their work, yet few target school-based counselors or services for reform. Instead, university, community, and federal
outreach programs initiate supplemental, add-on programs, which have produced questionable results.

Programs such as AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), the I Have a Dream Foundation, Upward Bound, and the Puente Project, to name a few, have been working with urban students for many years to improve college access, and in some cases retention. Though program specifics differ, common denominators include the selection of students, parental involvement, academic enrichment, college counseling, and mentoring (Gándara, 2002; Gándara & Moreno, 2002). The goals of these programs also vary, yet all seem to focus on improving student’s chances for college enrollment and success. Colleges and universities are prime hosts for these programs. Scholars in departments and schools of education engage in scholarly research with local schools and often seek to provide a service to local communities. College outreach programs offer an opportunity for both of these activities. While some colleges and universities do not have formal pre-college programs, many have established partnerships with local schools systems to create tutoring and mentoring programs (Gándara, 2002). Most of these programs are designed to increase the number of underrepresented students eligible for postsecondary admission and more broadly, increase social mobility (Yonezawa, Jones, & Mehan, 2002).

The potential for benefit from pre-college outreach programs is high. Early outcomes suggest that outreach programs do make a difference (Gándara & Moreno, 2002). Students who participate in outreach programs over a considerable length of time are almost twice as likely to enroll in some kind of college (Gándara, 2002). However,
despite gains, there are significant limitations to this approach. For starters, Gándara (2002) stated that few studies employ true control groups, which makes drawing definitive conclusions about program effectiveness difficult. Typically, control groups consist of students who attend the same school the participating students have been drawn from, yet did not participate in the program. The challenge to such an approach is that it ignores the selection process of those students who participated in the program. For example, many outreach programs require parent involvement in the selection process. Therefore, those students whose parents are not actively involved in their child’s academic life and would not participate in a selection process are at a disadvantage in the selection process and in their overall ability to be academically successful.

An additional limitation to the effectiveness of outreach programs is the relatively small number of students served by these programs. College preparation programs fail to reach the numbers of students necessary to make a difference (Adelman, 2002). For example, it has been estimated that TRIO programs, such as Upward Bound and Talent Search, are able to serve no more than ten percent of the eligible student population (Swail & Perna, 2002). Tierney and Hagedorn (2002) pointed out that despite “‘gallant’ efforts by some programs there has not been a dramatic increase in college attendance, retention, and graduation for low-income and minority youth” (p. 1). Along similar lines are concerns about those students who are being served by such programs. Among the students being served by such programs, critics question if these programs are serving the right students. Some accuse programs of enrolling students who would otherwise make it through the educational pipeline or are already prepared to apply to college (Hawkins, 2003). It is true that in these cases, pre-college programs help identified students
maximize their potential for success (Gándara & Moreno, 2002). In a recent evaluation of the Puente Project in California, counselors admitted to selecting primarily students who were highly achieving or highly motivated. This suggests that these programs are not meeting the needs of perhaps the neediest students.

In sum, despite modest gains, these outreach programs do not have the potential to respond to the magnitude of the problem of college access and retention among underrepresented students. Indeed, pre-college outreach programs benefit the few students they serve. However, they are simply not moving in the direction of systemic reform, which is sorely needed to ensure that all urban students are encouraged to succeed beyond high school. Moreno (2002) claimed that “it is entirely unrealistic to expect outreach programs to address the social situations of students who often find themselves marginalized economically, educationally, and socially” (2002, p. 585). However, programs that select a portion of college-bound students to benefit from services are, in essence, tracking. If indeed this is the case, then new, creative approaches to improving college access and retention are warranted to ensure more urban students have the capacity to matriculate and succeed in college.

If we consider lessons learned from education reform, we see that add-on programs can only do so much and that they will never reach or benefit large numbers of students. In fact, programs that select students, whether high performing or otherwise, run the risk of being perceived as unfair, a form of tracking, or simply not far-reaching enough. Addressing this issue by identifying those professionals who have the potential to influence the greatest numbers of students through their work in college planning is the strategy most likely to succeed. More importantly, in families where college knowledge
and experience is limited, schools are the ideal resource for students to develop high educational aspirations and college plans. There are several people on the high school level who can contribute to college planning; however, school counselors are the most logical choice for building relationships with students. Edwards (1976) maintained that school counselors are those professionals charged with fostering academic success beyond secondary education.

**School Counseling**

High school counselors are in a powerful position to have a significant influence on urban students as they consider postsecondary education (Fallon, 1997; King, 1996; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Recent policy reports on current challenges to college access and retention for underrepresented students have warned against neglecting the critical role of school counselors (Carnevale & Fry, 2000; Hawkins, 2003; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Yet, despite such warnings, few studies have targeted school counselors’ impact or experiences with college planning. There have been many calls for programs to address the weaknesses in college planning, educational aspirations, academic curriculum, and transitions to college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Paul, 2002). Unfortunately, responses have typically consisted of the provision of additional, external counseling services, rather than addressing existing counseling services in schools. Therefore, the literature on school counselors, specifically as they address college access and retention among urban students, is limited. This review of school counseling literature includes a brief history of the profession, the role of counselors in assisting urban students’ planning for college, and relevant empirical research.
The school counseling profession has largely been shaped by national events, economic shifts, and educational reform efforts. Since the profession emerged in the late 1800s, the role of school counselors has evolved to respond to national needs and challenges. The need for school counselors emerged in schools around the 1880s, when secondary schools’ missions shifted to meet the needs of new constituencies. Traditional, classical schools were transformed to include and serve diverse populations from the middle and working classes, and from ethnic and racial minority groups (Sedlak, 1997). With these changes came a desire to prepare the majority of children for life by encouraging vocational development, preventing maladjustment, and guaranteeing personal hygiene and public health (Sedlak, 1997, p. 77). While social workers were eventually introduced to schools to address the mental health needs of immigrant families, specialists in guidance and counseling joined schools to “improve industrial and human efficiency by helping adolescents connect with higher education or the labor market” (Sedlak, 1997, p. 351). Another responsibility at this time included influencing the moral and vocational issues facing students. This meant helping recent immigrants adopt the moral standards of citizenship. In many schools, teachers were asked to take on guidance tasks in addition to their teaching responsibilities. This was largely due to the fact that the profession had not yet established itself through professional training programs. This early rise of the school counseling profession was fueled by the demands of the industrial revolution for workers, the need to connect increasing numbers of immigrants to economic opportunities with available jobs, and the growing concerns of early pioneers about refining the profession.
Beginning in the 1960s, primarily as a response to the national Defense Education Act of 1958, school counseling in the schools emerged. Significant investment in school counselors followed the launching of Sputnik in 1957, (Coy, 1999) redirecting them to encourage students’ enrollment in math and science courses and to prepare students for postsecondary education. It was also during this time that the profession began focusing on college admissions (Krei & Rosenbaum, 2001). However, school counselors were additionally instructed to “advise students whose personal problems might thwart academic success” (Lawton, 1998, p.34). These two federal goals resulted in a dichotomy of students being served, the college-bound and those without much chance for postsecondary success (Lawton, 1998).

The profession has since evolved due to the numerous challenges students bring to school. However, these changes were not without struggles. Since the 1980s, the profession has been a “battleground for contending perspectives” (Paul, 2002, p. 1). Reference to school counselors as “gatekeepers” highlighted concerns that counselors were tracking students into college-bound and non-college-bound classes and systems. These attacks encouraged counselors to take a neutral stance when planning with students, thereby limiting themselves to providing information without guidance. Other challenges to changes in the profession centered on the psychological counseling aspect. Some counselors felt that shifts away from the mental-health counseling component lowered their professional status and were reluctant to do so (McDonough, 2005). Today, school counseling has shifted from simply providing guidance and career information to addressing the developmental needs of all students including their social, personal, educational, and career needs (Coy, 1999). With these changes have come increased
demands on the school counselor’s time and a shifting of responsibility. Some feel school counseling has evolved into a shopping mall of services (Lawton, 1998). School counselors are still charged with helping students plan for postsecondary education. However, in addition to these tasks, school counselor responsibilities include: scheduling students’ classes, monitoring attendance, participating in special education placements, managing administrative duties, dealing with students’ social and personal issues, disciplining students, acting as liaison between school and external agencies, managing student records, and communicating with parents (Keeping the options open, 1986). Krei and Rosenbaum (2001) suggested that the growing scope of counselors’ tasks and increasing caseloads have resulted in limited opportunity for counselors to know their students individually and have less time for one on one student advising.

While the duties of school counselors may be similar in urban and suburban schools, their students’ needs do differ in important ways. Urban students college planning needs differ from their peers in more affluent schools. It seems that urban youth rely primarily on their school counselors for assistance with college planning (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Chapman et al, 1987; Johnson et al, 1991; Terenzini et al, 2001). Studies have found that students relied more on their school counselor than any other resource for information on college choice (Johnson et al, 1991; Terenzini et al, 2001). Similarly, in a study of low-income and minority students, researchers found that high school teachers, school counselors, and coaches/mentors had a stronger influence on the decision-making process for minority students than among non-minority students (O’Brien & Shedd, 2001). Low-income youth also rely on their high school counselor as the single most consulted source of college information (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a; Terenzini et al,
Likewise, King (1996) found that low-income students who met regularly with their high school counselor to discuss college plans were more disposed to plan on attending college. On the other hand, in suburban schools, students rely on parents and other adults and peers to provide them with the college assistance (Terenzini et al, 2001). In fact, upper income students have reported a variety of sources of college planning support such as private counselors, college representatives, catalogues, and friends.

The resources available to urban students for college planning also differ from those of middle and upper class students, who gather information from family members and peers who have attended college, private counseling services, and less overburdened school counselors. For example, first-generation college students have reported receiving less parental support than their peers when applying to college (Choy, 2001; Fallon, 1997). Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal (2001) found that low SES students are more likely to make the decision to attend college without consulting with a parent. After surveying approximately 1100 urban high school students regarding their college choice process, Kern (2000) found that because the postsecondary experience is new to many students and their families, students may need direct guidance and assistance in the postsecondary planning process.

Another noteworthy difference between counselors’ work environment is the types of students’ distinct social and personal needs as well. As previously mentioned, urban students are faced with social situations unique to their environment such as poverty, teen pregnancy, violence, and failing schools. Therefore, urban counselors’ experiences are likely to be quite different from their suburban colleagues.
Studies suggest urban students are relying heavily on school counselors for information and advice, however, access to counselors varies between urban and suburban schools (*Keeping the Options Open*, 1986) depending on counselor-to-student ratios. While suburban students may have a counselor who is responsible for 200 students, most urban counselors have much higher caseloads. Although both the American Counselor Association (ACA) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommend a maximum counselor-to-student ratio of 1:250, the national average is 1:513. Private schools report counselor-to-student ratios of approximately 1:161 (Sanoff, 1999). McDonough (2005) suggested that counselors working in large cities and school districts who serve primarily students and communities of color are responsible for larger caseloads. Also, urban counselors are pulled in many directions. Collison (1990) suggested that urban students are so busy dealing with students’ social issues that they have little time for college planning. Not only are urban students competing with suburban students who have access to more information and resources, they are also competing with suburban kids whose counselors have more resources. Many middle-class students and their families have turned to private counselors to help students get into the best colleges and universities. These private counselors charge as much as $3,000 per student (Collison, 1990), a price very few urban students could pay.

Counselors who work primarily with urban youth also lack college resources and materials and specific knowledge of college preparation issues (Venezia et al, 2003). One particular resource important in the college planning process for current high school students is the Internet. The Internet affords a prospective student with unlimited access
to both formal and informal information about any institution. Colleges, in fact, are relying more and more on technology during the admissions process; most admission offices have placed their formal information (e.g., viewbook, video tour, application) on their institution's website and many accept applications online. Clearly, more and more college-bound students will be using the Internet to examine a prospective college. The extent to which students will access this information is determined in large part by the ease of access to the appropriate technology. Recent data demonstrate that urban students are, here too, at yet another disadvantage.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) reports that households with incomes of $75,000 and higher are more than twenty times more likely to have access to the Internet than households at the lowest income levels -- and nine times as more likely to have a computer in the home. Additionally, Black and Latino households are roughly two-fifths as likely to have home Internet access as White households. This divide between White and Latino and between White and Black households is widening and are now six percentage points larger than they were in 1994 (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1999).

While many urban households still do not have Internet access, there appears to be greater progress in gaining access to the Internet for schools in general, and disadvantaged schools in particular. However, there is great variation in quality of that Internet access. A recent study conducted by the University of California at Irvine's Center for Research on Information Technology and Organizations concludes that low-income schools were much less likely to have high-speed network connections than higher income schools. Only 16% of schools in low-income communities have high
speed Internet access (T1 lines or faster), whereas 37% of schools in wealthier communities have some form of broadband access (Center for Research on Information Technology in Organization, 2002).

With the increase of college information available online, school counselors will be expected by their constituents to not only be functionally literate and knowledgeable about online services but also able to use the technology to do their work more effectively and efficiently. Despite this expectation and the trend to provide Internet access for students in schools, counselors are the last school professionals to gain the benefit of technology. Eichenholtz (2001) conducted a national survey of secondary school counselors for her doctoral dissertation. Although nearly all of the 420 respondents reported that they use computers, more than 12 percent did not have access to PCs in their offices. The most worrisome finding was that counselors with the largest caseloads, between 600 and 900 students, were the least likely to use technology. These challenges suggest that urban students are at an extreme disadvantage on many levels.

There appears to be contradictory findings regarding school counselors’ ability to influence students’ college enrollment (McDonough, 2005). Although I have focused on the positive role that counselors play, it is necessary to point out that other research has found counselors absent among the influential factors students report in college planning (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000a). Some research suggests counselors have a negative impact on educational aspirations and college planning. However, McDonough warned against over interpreting such findings. She argued that such studies over-rely on non-counselor data and may not be representative of low-income and first-generation students (McDonough, 2005). This apparent contradiction among these findings calls for
additional research. We are slowly learning that counselors are overworked and college planning time is often compromised by clerical and administrative tasks (Paul, 2002). Therefore, it is important that we learn more about the challenges counselors face in trying to increase college access for their students, specifically those counselors who work directly with students currently underrepresented on college campuses.

To date, very little is known about counselor experiences. There are several reasons for this scarcity of literature. First of all, the difficulty in quantifying the outcomes of guidance and counseling may be responsible for insufficient research (Keeping the options open, 1986). Lee and Workman (1992) suggested that the lack of research may also be attributable to counselors’ lack of research training or time for research. Finally, much of the existing data have come from student or parent perceptions, which limits what we know about counselors’ direct experiences (Chapman et al, 1987; MacGowan, 2002). Despite these limitations to research activity, some literature has surfaced on school counselors. The final section of this literature review presents relevant empirical research on school counselors, specifically as it provides a foundation for this study.

Espinoza, Bradshaw, and Hausman (2002) conducted one of the few studies that featured the perspective of high school counselors in relation to college choice. However, these authors were primarily interested in which college factors counselors ranked most important in the college choice process. This research was largely driven by institutional admissions and marketing initiatives. Although the findings are not directly relevant to this dissertation study, the findings represent the importance of counselor perspectives to university personnel based on counselor influence on students’ college choice process. In
a similar study, Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly (1991) examined what resources high school students use in the college choice process use. These authors found that information gained from college students, friends, and the high school counselor were the most important for students. In this same study, African American students were more likely to rely on their counselors than white students (Johnson et al, 1991). Similarly, low-income students often report school counselors, teachers, or extracurricular advisors before parents when asked who helped them to formulate their college aspirations (Keeping the Options Open, 1986).

In one of the largest studies of pre-college school counseling, the National Association for College Admission Counseling’s Counseling Trends Survey, researchers gathered information on pre-college counseling infrastructure. Although a large percentage of the respondents were from private schools, some findings are relevant to this study. This study found that counselor’s workweek consisted of responsibilities ranging from college counseling to personal counseling to test proctoring and administrative duties (Hawkins, 2003). This study also found that counselors were dissatisfied with the professional development offered to them. Again, as this study oversampled private school counselors, it is likely that public school counselors must face worse professional development options.

Studies on school counselors are limited, and those featuring urban school counselors are almost non-existent. It seems that despite expanded research on the topic of college access and retention, research on the process of guidance and counseling has not progressed at all. Early research on school counselors, specifically with reference to their role in social mobility, found that counselors exert significant influence on
educational aspirations (Edwards, 1976; Keeping the options open, 1986; Rehberg & Hotchkiss, 1972). However, despite calls for investments in school counselors, minimal research has been pursued.

The school counseling profession is at a critical point of transition. Again, calls for counselor improvements have been heard to some degree. Recent policy reports and evaluations of special college preparation programs have identified effective counseling as a key element for improving access to college (Gándara & Moreno, 2002; Hawkins, 2003; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002; Paul, 2002). The Education Trust, a group working with disadvantaged schools and students to promote high standards and accountability for all students, is currently initiating research on the transformation of school counseling. The Education Trust provides professional development training for practicing school counselors through the National School Counselor Training Initiative. In a similar endeavor, The College Board has initiated EQUITY 2000, a program designed to provide equal education to disadvantaged students with a special module devoted to guidance and counseling. This guidance and counseling module strives to change counselors’ service delivery to disadvantaged students (Lennon et al, 1996). Both the Education Trust’s initiatives and the College Board’s EQUITY 2000 advocate for counselors to commit more time to academic counseling and students’ social and personal well being, and less time to scheduling, administrative duties, and testing.

These efforts could not come at a better time. With increasing evidence that a new economy will require a highly educated workforce, an economic crisis that is certain to cut spending on outreach efforts and challenges to affirmative action policies, ensuring urban students have access to enroll and succeed in college is paramount. If school
counseling is to be a key player in promoting college access and success for urban students, it is imperative that research efforts focus on their experiences to identify potential areas for change.

**Social Capital Theory**

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept of social capital to describe actual or potential resources, which are a product of a network of more or less institutionalized relationships (Bourdieu, 1985). Bourdieu (1985) emphasized the importance of social capital in increasing an individual’s access to economic and cultural capital. Glen Loury (1977) later employed social capital to describe the differential access to opportunities through social connections for minority and non-minority youth. Although Loury was not specifically referring to educational attainment, he set the stage for future use of the term for social mobility research. Based on Loury’s writings on social capital, James Coleman later cited social capital as instrumental in the acquisition of human capital, similar to Bourdieu’s earlier assertions. Coleman (1988) further conceived that social capital “constitutes a particular kind of resource available to an actor…making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible” (Coleman, 1988, p. 98). In this regard, social capital consists of relationships that harvest economic and cultural capital through elements of relationships.

Coleman (1988) proposed three properties that comprise social capital emerging from relationships and thus constitute capital resources for individuals. The first property, *obligations, expectations and trustworthiness*, refers to the exchange between two individuals where trustworthiness ensures the repayment of obligations after a service is performed. The second property, *information channels*, represents the potential for
information to be shared as a basis for action. The third property, *norms and effective sanctions*, suggests prescribed behaviors compelling people to act in a specific way. Each of these properties has the potential to foster social capital for an individual. In some cases all three properties will be at work, but not necessarily. This study relies on all three of these properties, which will be discussed in detail later in this section.

Based on this early work by Bourdieu, Loury, and Coleman, many researchers have utilized social capital theory for research purposes, however, with varying definitions (Portes, 1998). Social capital is a difficult concept to define because the concept is defined by its function. Lopez (1996) defined social capital as the attention and high expectations that result from trusting relationships others form with the students. Kahne and Bailey (1999) described social capital as highlighting ways in which a social organization “enhances the productive capacity of individuals and groups” (p. 553). Finally, Portes (1998) suggested that the most common application of social capital is as a source of “network-mediated benefits beyond the immediate family” (p. 12). For the purpose of this research, social capital is used to describe relationships that advance social mobility making possible the achievement of certain ends that in their absence would not be possible. This application of the concept will be used to illustrate how urban high school counselors foster social capital through their relationships with students, with the goal of postsecondary attainment.

**Social Capital and Schools**

Although social capital is often accrued in the home or the community, schools are also a central institution for the acquisition of capital (Coleman & Hoffer, 2000; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Some researchers have identified specific aspects of social capital
in schools (Kahne & Bailey, 1999; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001). These studies are based on the idea that social organizations transmit social capital, in the form of networks and relationships, to advance individual opportunity. Social capital derived from schools and relations with school personnel plays a large role in the creation of human capital for rising generations. Although some community programs seek to compensate family social capital, Kahne and Bailey (1999) pointed out that schools have the best access to youth and to a stable base for sources of social capital.

A critical characteristic of social capital is that “sources differ for different persons and can constitute an important advantage for children and adolescents in the development of their human capital” (Coleman, 1990, p. 1). This statement suggests that people benefit from social capital from different sources. For example, social capital constituted in schools is particularly valuable for students who come from homes where social and human capital are limited. In some cases, social capital in schools and communities compensates for its absence in families. This is based on the belief that social capital confers benefits onto individuals by providing them access to information that would otherwise be unavailable. However, Lopez (1996) asserted that a typical school in the United States can be characterized as having low levels of social capital, based on large class sizes and the lack of trust between parents and schools. This is particularly disturbing given that schools constitute a critical source of social capital for urban students. Therefore, schools are in desperate need of reform to improve their ability to formulate social capital.

Numerous studies have identified the ability of schools and communities to transmit social capital. Some studies have attempted to operationalize the concept of
social capital in an effort to measure it (Kahne & Bailey, 1999; Lopez, 1996). Empirical studies have applied the concept as a predictor of school attrition and academic performance, children’s academic choices, intellectual and psychological development, income and occupational attainment, and juvenile delinquency (Kahne & Bailey, 1999; Portes, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Kahne and Bailey (1999) examined the programmatic features of the I Have A Dream Program from the theoretical standpoint of social capital. These researchers focused on the significance of differing properties of social capital in facilitating support of inner city youth. In a study of the educational performance of Latino and non-Latino youth, Lopez (1996) constructed variables for social capital of the home and school to test their importance in relation to socioeconomic status and student effort. Results from this quantitative analysis found that both home and school social capital influenced the educational achievement of Latino and non-Latino students. Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine (1995) used the social capital concept to estimate how expectations of college attendance influence subsequent college attendance among high school students living in rural, urban, and suburban communities. These authors found that social capital measures exert independent influences on the likelihood of attending college (Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995). Finally, Stanton-Salazar (1997) used social capital theory to explain how minority youth develop healthy relationships with institutional agents such as teachers and counselors, in order to manage their participation in multiple worlds and overcome various obstacles to school success.

These studies have two common points. First, they each highlight the importance of social capital acquisition and in some cases suggest that investments in social capital will result in improved human capital. Underlying this research is an assumption that the
human capital possessed by those people surrounding the student is valuable because it is potentially passed on to the student. Therefore, “increases in the level of human capital surrounding the student improve the educational performance of the student” (Lopez, 1996, p. 8). Coleman (1988) stated “the concept of social capital allows taking such resources and showing the way they can be combined with other resources to produce different system-level behavior or, in other cases, different outcomes for individuals” (p. 101). As stated previously, one purpose of this research is to identify areas for reform in college planning and outreach. Therefore, investments in the human capital of urban school counselors will ultimately result in increased capital for the students they reach. Social capital in schools that gives students access to counselors’ human capital depends on both the physical presence of counselors and the attentions given by the counselors to the student (Coleman, 1988). For example, policies and practices that inhibit counselors from building relationships with students should be examined.

The second commonality among the relevant research on social capital is the emphasis placed on relationships in the transmission of social capital. This is due to the fact that social capital is not tangible, but rather inherent in relations between people. Therefore, the relationships are key components in the formation of social capital. In each of the aforementioned studies, school personnel were points of focus. This study proposes that urban high school counselors are critical school personnel to build such relationships and convey social capital. The final section illustrates this point.

**Social Capital and School Counselors**

In light of the outcomes associated with gaining a college degree, namely increased salary and professional status, school counselors are sources of social capital
for students to access opportunities, such as postsecondary enrollment, which leads to social mobility. There are two central reasons to highlight urban high school counselors as sources of social capital. The first reason stems from Coleman’s assertion that sources of social capital differ for different persons (Coleman & Hoffer, 2000). Urban high school counselors are situated to build relationships with students whose home or community capital may be limited. This concept is illustrated by the critical role that school counselors play in college planning with students from low-income families, first-generation students, and members of underrepresented minority groups. The second rationale for specifically identifying urban high school counselors as sources of social capital is based on the specific properties of social capital. Based on social capital theory, school counselors are key people to enhance *information channels, norms and effective sanctions, and trust and obligations*. Stanton-Salazar (1997) referred to those people who have the “capacity and commitment to transmit directly, or negotiate the transmission of institutional resources and opportunities” (p. 6) as institutional agents. Therefore, school counselors transmit social capital when they encourage high educational aspirations, provide information about college planning, and contribute to a strong college-bound culture. The following section explains specifically how counselors’ actions, relative to the properties of social capital, have the potential to influence college access and retention follows.

The property of social capital most relevant to this study is the potential for transmission of information that is inherent in social relations. The social networks available to students account for the possibility of information sharing. According to Coleman, this aspect of social capital is particularly depicted by “information that
facilitates action” (Coleman, 1988, p.100). In the case of this research, that action is matriculation into higher education. One of the most common means to guide students towards higher education is the provision of information unknown to the student. Such information sharing includes college entrance requirements, career information, scholarship and financial aid facts, and general college survival skills. Substantial literature cites the information gap existing for urban students as a cause for decreased access and retention in college (Arnold, 1993; Bowen & Bok, 1998; McDonough, 1997; Wilson, 1996). In fact, many recent policy reports illuminating the challenges to college access and retention among urban students reveal the need for improved college counseling and the provision of more information about the college planning process (Carnevale & Fry, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). High school counselors are positioned to provide this information and build relationships with students. School counselors are links to information rich networks, which are critical for urban students, specifically given that they may not have access to information about navigating postsecondary education elsewhere (Jones et al, 2002). Wilson (1996) cited a Chicago public school study finding which is relevant to this point. In this particular study of inner-city schools, seniors reported attainable postsecondary goals and stated that they could have made a successful transition from high school, but did not receive adequate information, guidance, or resources. In the same study, each of the school counselors reported not having sufficient information, materials, or time to provide effective counseling (Wilson, 1996).

The second relevant property of social capital is the establishment of norms and effective sanctions. The relationship built between individuals or groups accounts for the
obligations and expectations. Coleman (1990) suggested that when a norm is present, it exerts a powerful, though sometimes fragile, form of social capital. In this regard, the use of norms to encourage social capital formation is illustrated through educational aspirations and a strong college-bound culture in the school, both of which influence the likelihood that urban students will access and succeed in postsecondary education. Schools, specifically with the help of school counselors, are positioned to create a college-bound culture where postsecondary education is not only valued, but also strongly encouraged. This encouragement ultimately shapes students’ educational aspirations as well. In one final note on norms and effective sanctions, Coleman (1990) thoughtfully pointed out that effective norms not only facilitate certain actions, but also restrain other actions. In the case of college-going norms, one might argue that such a college-bound culture and high postsecondary expectations may be perceived as constricting to those students for whom vocational or military opportunities may be a more appropriate option (Krei & Rosenbaum, 2001). Although a sufficient discussion of the “college for all” philosophy is beyond the scope of this study, I will point out that this study is premised on the fact that too few urban students are enrolling and succeeding in postsecondary education. For that reason, school counselor behaviors that create college-bound cultures and high educational aspirations are most relevant to this study.

The final relevant property of social capital is trustworthiness and obligations. The central component of this property is the establishment of an obligation based on trust in response to someone doing something for another person. Without a high degree of trustworthiness, the transformation of social capital through information sharing and expectations is compromised. Although one can make the case that basic information
sharing is possible without high levels of trust, in the case of college access and information, high levels of trust encourage the formation of relationships beyond mere information exchanges. Unlike the previous two social capital properties, there are not specific examples in the college access and retention literature pointing to the role of trust in college planning. However, it is not implausible to suggest that trusting relationships will enhance the college planning process, particularly when the counselor may be the sole person involved in a student’s college planning process. For example, Stanton-Salazar (1997) suggested that access to support depends on built-up trust. Therefore, the trust built through counseling may enhance the college planning process. Students may be more likely to solicit college-planning assistance if they have an existing relationship with their counselor.

There are two additional aspects of social capital that are especially relevant to this research. One feature of social capital is that “social organization constitutes social capital facilitating the achievement of goals that could not be achieved in its absence or could be achieved only at a higher cost” (Coleman, 1990, p. 5). Therefore, this suggests that social capital produced by urban high school counselors has the potential to facilitate social mobility among urban students who otherwise have limited access to such resources. The relevance of this point can be illustrated by the privatization of college counseling. There is a growing industry of private college counselors, hired by families to assist students in accessing higher education (McDonough, 1997). These costly private counselors, also sources of social capital, are less likely to be accessible to low income students who cannot afford these services. Therefore, for many urban students, school counselors are the sole provider of college planning resources.
The second related component of social capital is illustrated by school counselors’ occasional competing role as mental health counselors. Coleman (1990) posited that social capital depends on its sometimes being a by-product of activities engaged in for other purposes. This seems particularly true for the urban high school counselor. As stated previously, school counselors are charged with a myriad of responsibilities in addition to college planning, one of which is mental health counseling. Therefore, counselors’ dual roles in social and academic counseling enhance opportunity for social capital formation. It is likely that the relationships built through the social and personal counseling heavily required of urban counselors enhances social capital formation in an academic context. For example, counseling relationships provide an opportunity for the counselor to know the student closely, which may influence the counselor’s ability to advise the student about appropriate college choices.

Social mobility among urban high school graduates, as a result of postsecondary education enrollment, is likely to be increased by social capital gained through relationships with a school counselor. Urban high school counselors are critically positioned to build social networks with students by functioning “as lifelines to resources that permit low-status individuals to overcome structural barriers and to experience healthy human development, school achievement, and social mobility” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Therefore, this research proposes that urban high school counselors’ importance can be seen in their ability to act as information channels, establish norms and effective sanctions, and build trusting relationships with students. The literature on college access and retention will illustrate specifically how counselors address these properties.
**Social Capital and Research**

Portes (1998) asserted that the concept of social capital has been overused to the point of misuse in some cases. However, I am confident that social capital theory is the proper foundation for this research. The value of understanding social capital is in the ability to identify certain characteristics of a social structure by their function (Coleman, 1990). In the case of this study, urban high school counseling is an aspect of schools with a key role in creating social capital. Coleman (1990) suggested that by investigating the details of such organizational resources, we can “understand the elements that are critical to their usefulness as resources for a given purpose” (p. 6). In the case of this research, social capital theory aids in the discovery of those elements of school counseling most critical to urban students’ access and success in college. Portes (1998) agreed that the popularity of social capital is warranted given its application to real and important phenomena. Therefore, this study will utilize the concept of social capital, more specifically the properties of social capital, information sharing, norms and expectations, and trustworthiness to examine the perceptions of urban high school counselors’ experiences in an effort to understand their usefulness as resources to improving college access and retention.

**Synthesis of the Literature**

This review of the literature suggests that urban student’s chances for accessing and succeeding in college remain dismal. Despite current initiatives and federal policies, there is much room for improvement. The research suggests that school counselors are in a powerful position to influence college access and retention. Using social capital theory, we find examples of information channels, establishment of norms and expectations, and
trustworthiness in the college access and retention literature. Specifically, school counselor’s ability to encourage a rigorous academic curriculum, set high educational expectations, share information about postsecondary education, and contribute to a college culture all point to why urban high school counselors are so critical in encouraging educational attainment. Based on this review of the literature, the research proposes to explore school counselors’ experiences with these issues.

**Chapter Summary**

Chapter two examined the literature from three areas - urban students and schools, college access and retention, and school counselors – to better understand the importance of urban school counselors in influencing college access and retention among their students. Chapter two also reviewed the literature addressing the origins of social capital theory and its definitions and explained how this concept may be contextualized in the experiences of urban high school counselors. This research and theory informs the methodology which will be detailed in chapter three, including the specifics of qualitative inquiry, participants, data collection, data coding and analysis, and credibility.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to provide an account of urban high school counselors’ experiences with students’ access to and success in college. The research design for this study was drawn from the tenets of qualitative research and qualitative interviewing. Tierney and Dilley (2002) suggested that interviewing in the field of education has four primary purposes: to explain policies, plans, or strategies within an educational system; to understand the social context of learning; to develop case studies of particular individuals or groups of individuals; and to specify how educational practices may be reformed. This study is primarily concerned with the fourth purpose, the acquisition of information through interviews that will ultimately reveal how urban high school practices and contexts may be reformed or improved. Systematic intervention efforts directed at urban high school counselors have the potential to impact social and economic inequalities in our society.

This chapter outlines the methodology of this study and begins with a statement of the specific research questions that guided the study. Additionally, the specifics of qualitative inquiry, participants, data collection, data coding and analysis, and credibility are discussed in this chapter.
Research Questions

The research questions for this study were:

1. How do urban high school counselors perceive their ability to influence college access and retention?
2. What informal and formal practices do counselors feel enable or challenge them to focus on this issue?
3. How do school counselors view their preparation for addressing issues of college access and retention?

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is an appropriate approach to study the experiences of urban high school counselors for several reasons. First, qualitative studies “facilitate study of issues in depth and detail” (Patton, 2002, p. 14). This element is imperative given how little we know about urban high school counselors. Second, one of the key qualities of qualitative research is the absence of specific, testable hypotheses. Rather, qualitative researchers formulate studies to investigate topics in all their complexity (Bodgan & Biklen, 1998). In this case, I was less interested in quantifying or measuring aspects of college counseling and social capital, and more interested in the essential qualities of the urban high school counselors’ experiences. Third, this study was specifically designed to gather information and perspectives directly from school counselors, rather than their students or other staff. This reflects the qualitative researchers’ interest in understanding behavior from the subject’s own frame of reference. Finally, as stated previously, this study was designed to influence practices and policies to ultimately increase college access and retention. In this regard, a qualitative look at the experiences of urban high
school counselors provides a foundation for future quantitative and quasi-experimental qualitative designs by uncovering potential independent and dependent variables, which are currently unknown.

**Constructivism**

This qualitative study was constructivist in nature. It is recognized, in the constructivist paradigm, that there are multiple realities and the researcher and participant create meaning together in the natural environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) went to say, “Most of us would agree that knowing is not passive…but active…. In this sense, constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as we construct or make it” (p. 197).

Knowledge and interpretation in a constructivist research paradigm is thus the result of a collective, not an individual, process. Constructivists assume that there are many possible interpretations of the same data, all of which are potentially meaningful. Constructions are therefore not separate from those who make the constructions; they "are not part of some 'objective' world that exists apart from their constructors," as Guba and Lincoln (1989) wrote (p. 143). Guba and Lincoln further argued that a "malconstruction" would be an analysis that is "incomplete, simplistic, uninformed, internally inconsistent, or derived by an inadequate methodology." (p. 143).

Constructivist researchers see method differently than empirical scientists. While scientists attempt to limit or eliminate personal, subjective judgment, constructionists see it as an important aid in good judgment and understanding. The researcher is the research instrument, and thus the goal is not to remove the researcher's perspective, but to hone it
so that the researcher is as equipped as possible to make a sophisticated analysis and argument about the phenomena observed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In survey research, reliability refers to the notion that one question should have the same meaning to different respondents. Constructivism assumes that no two interview encounters will ever be the same. Even if the same interviewer were to ask the same questions of the same respondent, on another day the answers might be slightly different depending on contextual factors, such as contact with other people or experiences that shape an interviewee's views. This is not to say that there is no baseline for examining whether or not a statement is a reliable representation of a person's views or a trustworthy account of their experiences; it is simply to recognize that all such self-reports must be understood as constructed within a specific context and for a particular audience. Such an approach makes it more difficult to establish reliability and contributes to the challenges of interpretation that are central to the qualitative approach. It also places much more emphasis on a study's validity.

In the constructivist paradigm, the validity of a study is not determined with reference to scientific methods or a study's replicability, but on how a given interpretation may be judged. Is it thorough, coherent, and comprehensive? Does it make sense, or ring true? Is it useful? In particular, is the interpretation provocative and generative of further inquiry? If a study meets these criteria, it may be said to be valid (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). A valid qualitative study is one that takes into consideration the context of those who are the subject of inquiry and offers a promising analysis of why an event occurs or how events, symbols, and narratives are made meaningful for people.
Constructivist research recognizes that data collection is a discovery process. While positivist and post-positivist research tends to focus on verification or falsification of hypotheses, constructivists recognize that their hypotheses may change as their study evolves. Through their interactions with people, they may come to learn that their original hypothesis was too narrow, too broad, or simply inconsistent with the ways in which people actually experience themselves and their practices. In simple terms, while quantitative researchers begin with a hypothesis, constructivists are more likely to end their study with a working hypothesis.

The purpose of this study was to provide an account of urban high school counselors’ perceptions of their ability to influence college access and retention among their students. To do this, I engaged in a constructivist relationship with the participants and attempted to actively create meaning with them about their perceptions and practices around working with college-bound students.

There is no literature that discusses school counselors’ perceptions of their ability to increase college access and retention among their students. I chose to use the constructivist framework because I did not want to make assumptions about the experiences of the counselors. By using this paradigm, I attempted to remove as much bias as possible and engage in creating knowledge with the participants. However, bias can never be truly eliminated from this type of inquiry so constructivist research is more interested in the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and the researched.

Participants

The novelty of this study was the focus on school counselors and their perceptions of college access and retention. This study featured urban high school counselors to
provide insight into their perceptions of their ability to influence college access and retention. Substantial research covers predictive and descriptive analysis of college access and retention, yet rarely do these studies include the perspective of school counselors, whose individual and collective experiences constitute college planning. In fact, school counselors are conspicuously missing from much of the empirical research on college access and retention. Tierney and Dilley (2002) defined “absent respondents” as those who have been historically absent from educational interviews. These authors posited that students, faculty, and administrators of lesser status are among those absent respondents and are often overlooked for a particular reason. The conspicuous absence of school counselors’ experiences in the literature, despite research pointing to their influence, suggests a need to ask questions directly of them. In fact, Tierney and Dilley (2002) implied that by simply incorporating new respondents in a study, the researcher has already begun to answer some of the larger research questions.

**Participant Recruitment**

In light of their absence in the literature, purposeful selection, which suggests that all selection is done with some purpose in mind, was used to select urban high school counselors to participate as key informants in this study. Key informants are individuals who possess special knowledge or status, who are willing to share their knowledge and skills with the researcher, and who have access to perspectives or observations denied to the researcher (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Key informants therefore are not to be selected randomly, but have to be chosen on the basis of "theory and/or data driven" criteria first (who has access to the data), and "personality" criteria second (who is able, willing, etc.) (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). In this case, I identified eleven high school
counselors from selected urban public school districts in the Midwest region of the United States. In order to identify these key informants, two separate selection processes took place, first with the school district and then with the counselor.

**School District Selection**

By identifying public urban high schools located in high poverty areas, there was an increased likelihood that the key informants had experienced counseling students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students, as these three groups are concentrated in such schools. Second, the school districts were chosen based on the number of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. By purposefully selecting school districts providing this benefit to at least 50% of the students, the key informants were more likely to work with low-income or first-generation students. The final criterion for selecting school districts was based on the number of high schools in the school district. Only those school districts consisting of multiple high schools were eligible for this study. This enabled me to interview more than one key informant from the same district, though from different high schools.

**Key Informant Selection**

The second level of selection consisted of purposefully inviting the key informant school counselors from the identified school districts. Counselors working within the selected urban districts met two additional criteria to be considered key informants: experience as a school counselor for more than three years and college planning with students as one, though not the sole, job responsibility. The selection of school counselors with three or more years of experience guaranteed the key informants have rich experience with this topic and this will improve the quality of the data collected.
Additionally, the rationale for selecting school counselors for whom college planning process for students was one responsibility of many ensured that the counselor could speak specifically about the postsecondary aspect planning of the job as well as other aspects of the role of the school counselor.

Based on the rationale set for this purposeful selection, urban high school counselors from three urban school districts were invited to participate in this study; however the processes for invitation varied by district. In the Eastland Public Schools (EPS), the district Office for Guidance and Counseling provided the names of the counselors at each of the high schools and letters of invitation were sent directly to school counselors from me. In the two other districts, Northridge Public Schools (NPS) and River City School District (RCSD), the district guidance offices preferred to forward my invitation to the counselors through their offices. This phase of outreach yielded a total of five counselors from the three districts. The next phase of participant solicitation consisted of faxing flyers to guidance offices in individual schools in the three districts. This yielded three more counselors from EPS and NPS. Participating counselors referred the final three counselors from their respective school districts. This process yielded eleven urban high school counselors representing three districts and six high schools.

The decision to interview eleven school counselors was made for two reasons. First, as previously mentioned in the review of the literature, the demands on school counselors’ time are substantial. Counselor-student ratios are particularly high in urban districts, suggesting that counselors are overworked and may not be inclined to participate. Furthermore, I did not offer compensation for the counselors’ time. Therefore, I was not confident that this study would yield a high response rate given these
factors. For these reasons, I chose to limit the number of counselors, while also increasing the level of depth through a two-part interview process.

The second reason for the number of participants was based on “redundancy.” Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed sampling until the point of saturation. Based on this concept, Patton (2002) suggested specifying minimum samples, based on “expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study and stakeholder interests” (p.246). In this case, I predetermined that sampling would be terminated after ten counselors or when no new information was presented. Therefore, after the eleventh interview I determined that I had reached the point of saturation with the counselors.

**Data Collection**

In order to provide a full account of urban high school counselors’ perceptions of their experiences with college planning, I employed a qualitative interview research design. This section outlines the data collection process I used for this study. The use of qualitative interviews, the semi-structured interview process, and field notes are each described in detail.

**Qualitative Interviewing**

The most basic rationale for employing interviews as a means to collect data is their usefulness in understanding respondents’ experiences. Seidman (1998) believed that interviewing is a powerful way to gain insight into a particular educational experience through the process of understanding the experiences of those professionals whose lives constitute education. Interviews allowed me to gather information and perspectives about the educational practices of urban high school counselors. The best way to understand a practice or an organization is through the experience of the people who carry out the
process (Seidman, 1998). By interviewing counselors, I was able to develop an understanding of the details of their college planning experiences with students.

A second component of qualitative interviewing is the importance placed on the respondent as a knower. The basic principle behind interviewing is a belief that the stories told by the respondents are of worth (Seidman, 1998), which resonates well with the purpose of this study. This research was premised on the fact that relevant literature has not featured the voices or experiences of school counselors, yet their experiences are central to a complete understanding of how and why college access and retention is limited for urban youth. Therefore, by directing questions toward urban high school counselors, the assumption follows that their experiences and opinions are critical to understanding the larger issue of access and retention for the students they serve.

Finally, the ultimate goal of this study was to reveal potential areas for innovative intervention, educational reform, and social policy. Interviews are “sites for discourse and social analysis, for gathering data about educational practices and identities, and for the production of these practices and identities” (Tierney & Dilley, 2002, p. 454). Interviews increase the likelihood that data will reveal potential sites for future study, intervention, and policy changes. Each of these tenets of qualitative interviewing corresponds to the goals and purposes of this study.

**Two-part Interview**

Data collection for this study included two rounds of semi-structured interviews with key informants. My decision to utilize a two-part interview was based on a desire to capture in-depth data, while also including multiple counselors. The first round of semi-structured interviews was used to gather facts, opinions, and examples. More specifically,
the primary function of this interview was to collect data on the key informants’ professional experiences. In this regard, interview questions solicited information on roles, relationships, and perceptions. The second phase of interviews was used to gather more than facts and opinions. Rather, this interview solicited the key informants’ beliefs and philosophies about their experiences. There were two central purposes to the second interview. The central purpose of the second interview was to provide an opportunity for the key informants to reflect on the preliminary findings from interview one, thereby also reflecting on their own professional experiences. As a result, the second interview elicited responses regarding the key informants’ feelings about initial findings and why their own work is important to them. I sent copies of the preliminary findings to the key informants prior to our second interview and provided them with guided questions that we discussed in the second interview. The second purpose of the second interview was the opportunity to check the data against the key informants to increase validity. Additionally, I was able to ask clarifying questions based on the first interview. My personal interest in this aspect of the two-part interview was partially based on a belief that opportunities for professionals to reflect on their work are a useful form of professional development (Smith, Bingman, Hofer, & Medine, 2002). I was also hopeful that the key informants would benefit from hearing each others’ voices.

**Interview Questions**

The semi-structured nature of the interviews supported the utilization of predetermined questions, as well as allowed for new issues to be brought up during the interviews. Qualitative interviews typically utilize various kinds of questions to encourage clarity on the part of the interviewer and to facilitate clarity and
appropriateness on the part of the respondent. Patton (2002) suggested that six kinds of questions may be used in qualitative interviewing: experience and behavior questions, opinion and value questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, and background questions. In this study, experience and behavior questions were used for the first interview to elicit responses on the key informants’ experiences, behaviors, and actions. Opinion and value questions and feeling questions were utilized in the second interview to gather information about how the key informants’ perceive and make meaning out of their experiences. Finally, background and demographic questions were used to complement the data and distinguish experiences for analysis. The content of the interview questions for round one were drawn from the relevant literature on college access and retention as it relates to the high school experience. The specific sources that influenced the questions for interview one are discussed below.

The college access and retention literature suggests that there are specific high school conditions that influence the likelihood that urban students will enroll and succeed in postsecondary education. Specifically, empirical research has identified insufficient college counseling, low educational aspiration, unsupportive school climates, and inadequate academic preparation as challenges to access and retention among urban students. Based on this research, interview questions inquired about the counselors’ ability to address college planning by focusing on these challenges. The specific questions examined how school counselors perceive their ability to conduct college planning and how they view formal and informal practices as influencing their ability to plan for college with their students. The key informants were also asked about other methods they employ to address college access and retention.
Once a preliminary analysis of the data based on the first round of counselor interviews was completed, I conducted a second round of interviews. The specific questions used for the second interview focused on how the counselors felt about the preliminary findings from interview one. The first goal of the second interview, providing the key informants space to reflect on their own experiences, was met by asking questions about the key informants’ feelings regarding the preliminary findings. Given the second goal of the second interview, checking the data against the participants, the key informants were asked to identify any findings they felt did not resonate with them. Clarifying questions were also utilized to gather missing information. By using the preliminary findings in the follow up interview, the data provided an opportunity for the key informants to confirm the findings. This technique, often called member checking, contributed to the credibility of the study. The questions which guided both interviews and the summary of findings which was sent to the key informants prior to the second round of interviews are included in the appendix.

**Interview Process**

Each interview took place at the key informants’ home school. I spent approximately forty-five minutes with each counselor, with the actual interviews lasting around twenty minutes. By interviewing the counselors at their home schools, I was able to gather relevant observational data during the interview. During each interview, I used a tape recorder to capture the key informants’ voices. Although disadvantages to using a tape recorder include altering the nature of the conversation and the potential for technical difficulties, tape recording the counselors’ responses enabled me to note unrecorded data, such as non-verbal expressions, and to take focused and strategic notes.
throughout the interview. Furthermore, tape recorded interviews allowed me to use direct quotes to support analysis, which is considered the “prize sought by the qualitative inquirer” (Patton, 2002, p. 380).

Field Notes

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) defined field notes as “the written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study” (p.108). Field notes consist of two types of material: descriptive and reflective. Descriptive field notes objectively record a description of the setting and people. Conversely, reflective field notes record the subjective side of the researcher’s experience.

Field notes taken during the first interview promoted the formulation of new questions and consideration of possible themes prior to transcription, enhanced future analysis and information location, and served as backup in the event of technical difficulties (Patton, 2002). Conducting the interviews in the key informants’ home schools provided rich data through field note descriptions of the settings in which the key informants work.

Data Coding

Each taped interview was transcribed and coded. The audiotapes were transcribed verbatim by professional transcribers. Data collected from the interviews was coded line by line using HyperRESEARCH computer software, which assists with the organizing, indexing, and retrieving of data. Coding the interview data allows a researcher to condense the bulk of “data sets into analyzable units by creating categories with and from our data” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 26). I also used this coding process to build
themes throughout the data collection, to refine current interview protocol, and to generate new questions.

There have been critiques of technology use in qualitative research due to its resemblance to quantitative research, separation from the creative process, inclination to restrict data analysis, and potential loss of confidentiality when using mass media (Hesse-Biber, 1995). However, despite these disadvantages, there are several advantages to computer usage aiding qualitative research. First, and to some qualitative researchers most important, computer software programs reduce the laborious process of coding.

The traditional process of cutting, pasting, highlighting and indexing is time consuming, especially with large and diverse sources of data. Second, the computerized organization enables the researcher to code, delete codes, recode, collapse codes, and has the capability to affect all cases in a single study. Therefore, in addition to lessening the time spent coding, this feature allows for the evolution of coding and theme development.

The coding process in itself is an attempt to “link different segments or instances in the data” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 27). This allows a researcher to use specific instances, or responses, to generate ideas about the data. The coding process may also include simplification or reduction of the data. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggested that coding data may also include data complication, which is the process of opening up data to ask questions while generating theories and frameworks. In this case, rather than aggregate instances, coding can also disaggregate instances by speculating about additional features from the responses. In sum, the coding process facilitates future analysis and the formation of comparisons and contrasts of the views expressed by the key informants. Finally, with specific regard to this dissertation, the initial coding process
also provided the foundation from which I asked the key informants to make meaning out of their experiences during the second round of interviews.

The initial coding process also provided an opportunity to increase my reliability as a researcher. During the initial coding process, following the first round of interviews, a second researcher read and coded one interview. Although the primary importance of this task was to ensure my codes are appropriate, this also served to strengthen the reliability of this study. The researcher’s task was to read passages of the interview and assign appropriate codes. After comparing the second researcher’s codes to my own for the same interview, I was able to determine if the majority of the study was coded in a similar way.

**Data Analysis**

Although the coding process is part of the analysis, it is not the analysis in itself. Data analysis of qualitative research involves “making sense out of what people have said, looking for patterns, putting together what is said in one place with what is said in another place, and integrating what different people have said” (Patton, 2002, p. 380). Although the purpose of this study was not to compare urban high school counselors, identifying differences and similarities provided a fuller description of the phenomenon. Primarily, analysis involves examining the codes and the relationships among the codes in order to generate meaning. Data analysis took place following both rounds of interviews.

Miles and Huberman (1984) offered several tactics for generating meaning from data. Noting patterns and themes, clustering codes, making metaphors, counting, and making contrasts and comparisons may be employed to build meaning from the data.
During the first phase of analysis, I read chunks of data associated with particular codes to identify common themes. I then identified whether or not specific codes were present across counselors or school districts. In addition to identifying common themes and patterns of specific question areas, I searched for larger overarching themes in the key informants’ responses. Once meaning was generated, I employed techniques to test or confirm findings. Miles and Huberman (1984) suggested that checking for representatives, considering researcher effects, triangulating the data, checking the meaning of outliers, looking for negative evidence, and replicating a finding are all useful ways to confirm an analysis is as close to accurate as possible. Using school-based differences, demographic differences, and experiential differences, I ultimately identified common themes out of the experiences of the counselors. Themes that were not relevant to the research questions or not relatively consistent with other key informants were discarded. I then collapsed codes into common areas or larger themes. In processing and analyzing the data, I looked for collective challenges faced by counselors in addressing college access. Finally, based on the major themes that surfaced during the interviews, I analyzed the data in light of social capital theory.

Credibility

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) provided several methods to enhance the credibility or trustworthiness of qualitative data collected with the key informant interview method. The more of these criteria that are utilized in a study, the more the data collected can be trusted and deemed valid. The methods I used in this study to increase credibility are member checking, triangulation, thick description, and an audit trail.
Member Checking

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that member checking is a technique used to establish the truthfulness of qualitative research. This process tries to tackle the pitfall of unchecked interpretation. During the interview it consists of restating, summarizing, or paraphrasing the information from the key informant, making sure that the researcher’s perception of the key informants’ responses is accurate. At the end of the information gathering process, member checking consists of recycling the preliminary findings to the key informants.

In this study, member checking was employed to increase the validity of my findings. This was accomplished in two ways. First, the follow-up interviews provided an opportunity to check my data with the key informants. Second, I send a copy of the interview transcripts and the preliminary findings to each the key informants prior to the second interview. Member checking had two benefits. One, it assured the key informants that I accurately interpreted their responses. Second, this practice provided me the opportunity to substantiate the validity of my findings. Furthermore, in addition to checking factual and interpretive accuracy, some researchers suggest that this step increases the credibility of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seidman, 1998; Glense & Peshkin, 1992).

Triangulation

Another method is called triangulation, which means the use of multiple data sources, multiple informants and multiple methods in order to seek agreement (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Triangulation is based on the wish to obtain multiple perspectives on a phenomenon - to see it from different angles - in order to create a more complete
understanding. Triangulation is most often thought of as obtaining information from multiple sources. Denzin (1978), however, asserted that one may also employ multiple and different methods, investigators, and theories.

In this study, the eleven key informants were multiple data sources which provided varying perspectives on the same topics. In addition to the two key informant interviews, I also collected data through field notes. Use of these multiple methods further increased my ability to triangulate the data and enhance credibility.

**Thick Description**

Thick description is a thorough description of the way in which the data were collected, including the context and the processes observed that might be relevant to the issue (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Originally used by Geertz (1973), the term refers to a detailed description of the context and process of a qualitative investigation so as to allow the reader to consider whether the product of the inquiry - the interpretation of the data - may be relevant in another context. In this study, rich data collected via field notes was combined with the information provided by the key informants through their interviews. This combination provided thick description necessary to provide credibility for the study.

**Audit Trail**

An audit trail is a documentation of the methods, procedures, and decisions made in a qualitative research study including the sample selection and explanation of the coding categories used (Hull, 1997; Merriam, 2002). Auditing in qualitative research is analogous to a fiscal audit. Schwandt (1997, p. 6) stated that auditing is "a procedure whereby a third-party examiner systematically reviews the audit trail maintained by the
inquirer." Although replicability of the findings may be impossible, if researchers study the same community of research participants at a similar time, the data sets obtained by these researchers and their interpretation should be largely comparable (James & Mulcahy, 1999). More simply stated, an audit trail allows someone to challenge or confirm the interpretation of the data made by the researcher. Consequently, the audit trail lends credibility to a study.

In this study, an audit trail, included in the appendix documents, provides a record of the interview transcripts and describes precisely which passages of the data were used in the formation of codes and themes. Specific passages from interviews are notated by name, interview number, and line number(s). This format enables the reader to locate each passage referenced in the body of the original document. This audit trail allows the reader to determine if the results of the study are consistent with the data collected and if there are sufficient accounts of the data and the analysis.

**School and Key Informant Demographics**

Throughout both rounds of interviews, I gathered descriptive data regarding the city, school districts, schools, and key informants. Basic information on the city provided a context through which to understand the functioning of the school district. School district descriptions provided information on the demographics of students served, graduation rates, structure of the guidance program, and any unique initiatives such as implementation of small learning communities. School descriptives are particularly useful to frame the environment in which counselors are working and those students with which the counselors are working. Key informant descriptives include gender, race, ethnicity, number of years counseling, previous counseling positions, and professional
responsibilities. Warren (2002) pointed out that one purpose of qualitative interviewing is to “discern meaningful patterns within thick description” (p. 87). Therefore, descriptive information facilitates the identification of themes or contrast patterns in the data.

For each of the urban school districts represented, a brief overview of the surrounding urban community, the school district, and the specific schools represented are provided.

City of Eastland

Eastland is a large urban city with a population of approximately 190,000 residents. The area is home to a number of international businesses, including three Fortune 1000 companies, as well as several national and regional companies. Because of the high prevalence of imaging and optical science among the industry and the universities, Eastland is known as the world capital of imaging. Education is another of Eastland’s primary economic areas. The city and its suburbs are home to a number of colleges and universities, including the city’s largest employer, a large, private research university. Other educational facilities include a prestigious music school, a major institute of technology, a divinity school, and a community college.

The residents of Eastland are racially and ethnically diverse. The city’s demographic makeup includes 46% African American residents, 45% white residents, 13% Latino residents, 3.4% Asian residents, and 2.7% residents of other backgrounds. The diversity of the city is also represented in language, with 13% of the population speaking a language other than English at home. Many immigrants also inhabit the city, with 8.5% of the population born outside of the United States.
**Eastland Public School System**

Approximately 34,000 of Eastland’s students attend the city’s public schools, roughly 89% of school-age students. The system serves students in grades Pre-K – 12 through their 59 public schools and met the sampling criteria set forth in this study. In an effort to identify school counselors who have expertise working with students who are low-income, first-generation college-goers, and students of color, the critical factors were free lunch eligibility, racial diversity, and multiple high schools. Eighty percent of the students in this school district were eligible for the subsidized lunch program. The students’ racial backgrounds are: 64% African American, 20% Latino, 14% are white, and 2% other. Reflecting this diversity, 17.2% of the students come from homes where English is not the first language. The district includes 13 high schools and reports a 52% graduation rate.

With regard to postsecondary education, the mayor of Eastland recently announced that he seeks to increase the number of Eastland graduates who apply to four-year colleges twenty-five percent over the next four years. According to the mayor, too few African American and Latino students have had high expectations set for them and they lack the support from people to pursue postsecondary education. During my second interview with the counselors from Eastland, I was informed that the mayor had even more recently launched a new higher education initiative with an educational foundation. This initiative is an effort to partner local college with elementary, middle, and high schools to create and implement a higher education plan for each school. The mayor’s recent announcement was mentioned as affecting the city’s school counselors and their experiences during the interviews.
The Eastland Public School System guidance program is managed by the Director of Guidance. This person is charged with providing support to counselors and working directly with lead counselors in each high school. These lead counselors have reduced caseloads and receive small stipends for their additional responsibilities, which include data collection, facilitation of the building level guidance program, and serving as a liaison between the guidance department and the administration. It is worth pointing out, as each counselor in this district did, that the citywide Director of Guidance has no previous experience in school counseling.

In this district, the Director of Guidance provided me a list of high school counselors and I was able to invite them directly to participate in my study. The initial invitation solicited responses from two counselors. A follow-up fax to the guidance offices yielded one more positive response. The final participant was recruited by another participating counselor. In total, four counselors representing two high schools from the Eastland Public School System participated. A brief introduction to those two schools follows.

**Bolton High School.**

Bolton High School is the largest comprehensive high school in the Eastland School District serving approximately 1835 students. Daily attendance at Bolton averages 85%. Bolton High School claims to be the most diverse high school in the city, consisting of 65% African American students, 22% Latino students, 10% white students, and 3% students of other backgrounds. The school offers both special education and bilingual education programs. Approximately 14% of the students at Bolton High School come from homes where a language other than English is spoken.
With regard to college preparation, Bolton High School reports 59% of its students take the SAT Reasoning Test, compared to 71% in the school district. The average math score is 379 and the average verbal score is 378. The school houses a college and career center, which is run by a para-professional. The school reports that 80% of the 2006 graduates have gone on to pursue postsecondary education and 18% have pursued the military. Of those who have gone on to postsecondary education 24% have gone on to a four-year college or university, 50% to a two-year college, and 6% to a business or technical school.

The school has five counselors and one lead counselor. Each of the counselors has approximately 300 students in their caseload, with the exception of the lead counselor who has 75 students. The lead counselor is not a supervisory position; rather this person is designated to be a liaison between counselors and administrators. The counselors are not assigned to students in any particular fashion; rather their caseloads include specific homerooms. Although Bolton High School is in the process of implementing a small learning community model, at the time of my visits, it had not yet been decided how counselor caseloads will fit into this new model. Despite a bilingual program at the school, there is no longer a designated bilingual counselor. Rather, each counselor may have within their caseload students for whom English is not their first language. There are two guidance suites located just a few doors from one another with a secretary in each suite. The guidance suites also house an assistant principal, who is responsible for supervising the guidance department, three social workers, and a registrar.

During my visits, I observed a steady flow of students in and out of the guidance suites. The offices provide a variety of services so it was difficult to determine if the
students were there to see the counselors. The college and career center was not located near the guidance suites but I did visit it during a tour of the building. Decorated with posters and banners of universities, the center was a library of sorts, containing college applications, college viewbooks, exam registration materials, etc. The counselors rely on a para-professional to run the center and assist the students. The counselors all reported that they rarely visit the center with students.

**Webster High School.**

With an enrollment of 1280, Webster High School is a comprehensive high school serving grades 9-12 in regular and special education. The school implemented a small academy model last year, which includes: the Information Technology Academy, the Police and Fire Academy, the Finance Academy and the Health Careers Academy. This school does not offer bilingual education, but does offer special education. Daily attendance at Webster High School is at 86%.

The student demographics at Webster High School are: 79% African American students, 10% Hispanic students, and 10% white students. Approximately 5% of the students come from homes where a language other than English is spoken. With regard to college preparation, approximately 76.2% of Webster High School students took the SAT. The average math score was 351 and average verbal score was 369. Seventy-four percent of Webster graduates go on to pursue postsecondary education, while ten percent pursue the military. There is no college and career center at this high school.

Webster High School has four school counselors. There are two guidance suites located near each other on the same floor. Two counselors are housed in each suite and a secretary is located in one of the suites. Each counselor is assigned to one of the small
academies; however they maintained the seniors with whom they have previously worked and built relationships. This results in each counselor having a caseload of approximately 300 students.

City of Northridge

Northridge, home to over 900,000 people, is a major port city in the Midwest region of the United States. At its peak, the city was the fourth largest in the country, but has steadily declined in population since the 1960s. Northridge is home to several of the area’s institutions of higher learning, including a national research university with medical and law schools, a private university with schools of law and dentistry, several private colleges specializing in art, business, and education, and a two-year community college. A huge center of manufacturing, particularly in the automotive field, Northridge has recently enjoyed a revival, much of it centered downtown. New venues for sports and gaming have been constructed to attract people into the heart of the city and the riverfront has been the focus of much development, including a river walk with miles of parks and fountains. This new urban development in Northridge is a mainstay in the city's earnest desire to reinvent its economic identity through tourism.

During the 1960s and 1970s, many of the city’s white residents moved to the suburbs as a reaction to racial tension and rioting and court-ordered busing in the public schools. Northridge’s demographic makeup still reflects this “white flight” and includes 82% African American residents, 11% white residents, 6% Latino residents, and 1% residents of other backgrounds. Approximately 5% of the population of Northridge was born outside of the United States.
Northridge Public Schools

Approximately 116,000 students are enrolled in the Northridge Public School District, representing 58% of the city’s school-age population. The district is comprised of 220 schools and met the sampling criteria which have previously been described. Seventy-two percent of the students in this school district were eligible for the subsidized lunch program in 2006. Approximately 90% of the students are African American, 5.5% are Latino, and 2.8% are white. There are 28 high schools in the Northridge Public School District and the district reports a 61% graduation rate.

The district’s Department of Student Support Programs, Guidance, and Counseling falls under the supervision of the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction but is managed the department’s director. The high school counselors are coordinated by the department’s high school supervisor. This position seems to include providing opportunities for professional development, support for counselors, and assistance to lead counselors in each high school. Each individual high school has a lead counselor who facilitates the guidance program at the building level. Although the lead counselors do not take on a supervisory role, they are offered a reduced caseload and an additional stipend in exchange for their additional responsibilities. Lead counselors are asked to take on the role of collecting data, managing the department, and serving as a liaison between counselors and administrators.

As I mentioned briefly in the participant recruitment section of this study, counselors from this district received my letter of invitation to participate in the study directly from the city’s Director of Guidance. I received responses from two counselors as a result of my letter. I then faxed the invitation, with permission from the Director of
Guidance, to each of the high school guidance offices. This resulted in two more responses. In total, four counselors from two high schools in the Northridge Public School District participated. Introductions to these two schools follow.

*Cook High School.*

Cook High School is the largest comprehensive high school in the Northridge School District serving approximately 1755 students. The school has three magnet programs: Business, Law & Government, and the Career & Technology Center. Daily attendance at Cook High School averages 80% and the school has a graduation rate of 61%. Cook High School has the largest ESL/Bilingual Program and the largest Special Needs Program in the Northridge Public School District.

The racial backgrounds of the students are: 64% African American, 24% Latino, and 12% white. The majority of the non-English speaking population is Latino. With regard to college preparation, Cook High School reports 65% of its students take the SAT Reasoning Test. The average for the Math section is 363 and the Verbal average is 347. The student mobility for Cook High School in 2005-2006 was at 39%, the Northridge School District at 28%, and the state at 17%.

There are six school counselors and one guidance department secretary at Cook High School. Each counselor is assigned to students by grade and magnet program. Their caseload of students varies throughout the year, but it typically falls around 300 students. In addition to their student assignments, counselors are also broken into committees for attendance, scheduling, and counseling. Under this organization, counselors are responsible for facilitating one of these areas as well as their own caseloads. The
guidance office is located relatively central in the school building, but separate from the main office.

As I sat in the waiting area of the guidance suite, I noticed the walls were adorned with college posters, inspirational signs, postings for clubs, enrichment programs, and other school/guidance related notices. Students incessantly entered in and out of the guidance suite during my visits to this school. The office also posts the American School Counselor Association’s School Counseling Standards on the walls. There are additional signs announcing specific guidance counselor messages about their work. For example, two signs read, “Last year, Cook school counselors made over 450 home visits” and “The absentee rate has gone from 40% to 18%.” These signs are part of a larger effort to advertise or advocate for their work. This guidance department is the pilot for a results-based developmental guidance program in the district. This program involves the guidance department setting goals for the academic year along with specific activities to reach that goal.

Warren High School.

Warren High School is a comprehensive high school in the Northridge School District serving approximately 1400 students. The school has four magnet programs: Arts Essential, International, ROTC Leadership/Public Service and the School to Career-Computer Applications. Additionally, the ninth grade students are in their own small academy. Daily attendance at Warren High School averages 75% and the school reports a graduation rate of 55%. The school offers both an ESL/Bilingual Program and a Special Education Program.
Warren High School’s ethnic breakdown is: 78% African American, 15% Latino, and 7% white. This school also has a relatively high student mobility rate. Student mobility for Warren High School was 51% in 2005-2006, for the Northridge School District at 28%, and for the state at 17%. Warren High School reports that 74% of their seniors have taken the SAT with an average verbal score of 353 and an average math score of 356. In 2006, 88% of graduates went on to postsecondary education and 2% went into the military.

At Warren High School, there are four guidance counselors and one lead counselor with a reduced caseload. Each of the counselors is assigned to grades 10-12 in each academy, with the exception of one counselor who is specifically assigned to the ninth grade academy. Counselors maintain a caseload of approximately 325 students. The five counselors share a suite. One unique geographic element of the school guidance department is its relation to the main office. The two offices are linked by a door, which appears to remain open at all times. Additionally, the five counselors at this high school share their office suite with two assistant principals. Like other guidance offices, the walls are covered with college posters, announcements, and inspirational sayings. There was a constant flow of students entering and exiting this office during both of my visits.

River City

Like Northridge, River City is also a major port city in the Midwest region of the United States. Founded near the mouth of a river, River City became a manufacturing center owing to its location at the head of numerous canals and railroad lines. With the decline of heavy manufacturing, River City’s businesses have diversified into the service economy, including the financial services, insurance, and healthcare sectors. River City is
the corporate headquarters of many large companies and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration maintains a facility there. Additionally, one of the oldest law firms in the world traces its origins to River City, and its River City office remains the firm's largest. River City's largest employer ranks among America's best hospitals and the city is an emerging area for biotechnology and fuel cell research.

A city of nearly 500,000 residents, the ethnic demographics of River City are: 53.8% African American, 38.7% white, 7.7% Latino, 1.5% Asian, and 1.5% multiracial. Of the three cities represented in this study, River City boasts the largest international population, with 37% of its residents being born outside of the United States.

**River City School District**

Approximately 60,000 students are enrolled in the River City School District, representing 68% of the city’s school-age population. This district met the sampling criteria previously described for this study. One hundred percent of the students in this school district were eligible for the subsidized lunch program. The students racial backgrounds were: 66.6% African American, 16.1% white, 14.5% Latino, and 2.7% other. While the city has a large immigrant population, only 5.3% of the enrolled students come from homes where English is not the first language. The River City School District has 15 high schools and reports a 55% graduation rate.

This district, too, has a Director of Guidance who reports to the Deputy Chief of Curriculum. Each school has a lead counselor, like the other two districts, who has a reduced caseload but serves in no supervisory capacity. The role of this counselor includes facilitating the building level guidance program and acting as a liaison between the guidance department and the administration.
The counselors from this district received my letter of invitation to participate in the study directly from the district’s Director of Guidance. Only one counselor responded to the initial invitation. She was then able to recruit two other counselors. In total, three counselor representing two high schools in the River City School District participated. Descriptions of these two schools follow.

**Monroe High School.**

Monroe High School is a large comprehensive high school in the River City School District serving approximately 1800 students. Daily attendance at Monroe averages 83%, compared to 91% in the district. The Monroe High School student body consists of 42% white students, 38% African American students, 15% Latino students, 3% Asian students, and 2% students of other backgrounds. The school offers a special education program but no bilingual education program. Approximately 19% of the Monroe student body has been identified as having special needs.

With regard to college preparation, Monroe High School reports that 41% of its graduates take the ACT and the average composite score is 18.5. Only 18.9% of Monroe graduates take the SAT Reasoning Test; the average combined math and verbal score is 928. The school reports that 78% of the 2006 graduates have gone on to pursue postsecondary education and 12% have pursued the military. Of those who have gone on to postsecondary education 44% have matriculated to a four-year college or university, 50% to a two-year college, and 6% to a business or technical school.

The school has five counselors and one lead counselor. Each of the counselors has approximately 330 students in their caseload, with the exception of the lead counselor who has 150 students. The counselors are assigned to students by first letter of the
students’ last names. Thus, caseloads include students from all four grade levels. All of the counselors and one secretary are housed in a guidance suite which is centrally located on the second floor of the school. Bulletin boards outside the guidance office announce SAT and ACT test dates as well as information about programs such as City Year, the military and local colleges.

**Port Academy.**

Port Academy is a new small high school in the River City School District. Approximately 200 students attend this pilot school. The school runs on a block schedule and has a special team focus. Daily attendance at this school is 89%. The racial breakdown of the students is: 61% African American, 16% Latino, 16% white, and 7% multiracial. The school provides special education services; however bilingual education is not offered at this school. Unfortunately, due to the newness of this school, very little data is available on the school or its students, specifically with regard to SAT scores, postsecondary placements, and graduation rate.

The guidance office in this school is located directly across from the main office and is situated near the front door. The one school counselor shares an office with several other support staff, including a probation officer and a hospital partnership director. All of the facilities in this school are brand new and the school counselor’s office seemed only partially unpacked. The walls are not covered with posters; however, this is likely due to the recent opening of the school.

Another unique aspect of Port Academy, and one particularly relevant to college planning, is the existence of an “advisory.” The advisory is a fifty minute block during the day in which a homeroom teacher or “advisor” is charged with building relationships
with students and assisting them with academic, career, and social development. In this regard, some of the college planning in this school is carried out by the advisor and during the advisory period. The counselor in this school sees herself as a consultant to these advisors and works with them on a daily basis. This school is the only school in this study with an ‘advisory’ or any structure such as this. Although only 200 students attend this school, the school counselor from Port Academy is also responsible for college planning with 80 seniors from another small pilot school nearby, resulting in a caseload of 280 students.

These profiles are certainly not exhaustive descriptions of the urban environment, the school districts, or the individual schools; however, they do provide a context from which to understand the findings from this study. Many of these contextual factors aided me in the analysis process.

**Participant Demographics**

Based on the sampling criteria described above, eleven high school counselors from three school districts participated in this study. Table one summarizes their demographic data. Six of the key informants were white, four were African American, and one was Latina. All of the counselors were women, which is likely due to the prevalence of women in the school counseling field. The counselors’ degree of experience ranged from 3 to 32 years. Four of the counselors have spent their entire professional careers as school counselors. Five counselors began as teachers - three as special education teachers, one as a science teacher, and the other as a business teacher. The remaining two counselors began their professional careers outside the field of education. During both rounds of interviews, the key informants willingly provided
information about their schools’ guidance structure as well as their own professional and personal experiences.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Counselor</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Years as Counselor</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>Bolton</td>
<td>Eastland</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>Bolton</td>
<td>Eastland</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>Webster</td>
<td>Eastland</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>Webster</td>
<td>Eastland</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladys</td>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>Northridge</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>Northridge</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>Northridge</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>Northridge</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>Monroe</td>
<td>River</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Monroe</td>
<td>River</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>Port</td>
<td>River</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of each participant, each counselor, school, school district, and city has been given a pseudonym. However, because some identifying information has been provided, it is possible that the cities, schools, or counselors could be identified. However, I have made solid attempts to preserve their identities.
Strengths and Limitations

The presence of school counselors’ voices in the research on college access and retention is by far the strength of this study. Similarly, the chance for counselors to reflect on their individual and collective experiences adds yet another benefit to the two-part interview protocol. However, despite the strength behind this study of urban high school counselors, the limitations are worthy of equal consideration. The limitations of this study include sampling limitations and limitations common to qualitative research.

With such a small sample of urban high school counselors, this study was intended to be exploratory in nature, rather than generalizable. The small sample size mitigates the degree to which the findings may be generalized. In contrast to quantitative analysis, where generalization is used for prediction and control, remains context free, and sustains absolute status, qualitative inquiry seeks generalizability, yet with a different approach. In the case of qualitative research, the goal of generalizability is more aligned with the characteristics of the inquiry. Qualitative methods are useful in that they produce a “wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 14). In response to this limitation, Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered the term, “working hypothesis” to give proper weight to the unique, local context and conditions of the study. Therefore, the findings from this study are generalizable to counselors who meet all of the sampling criteria specified previously. As stated earlier, the more strata used in sampling, the greater the ease at identifying future contexts for application.

The narrow focus on school counselors as a strength of this study might also be considered a limitation. By limiting my data collection to school counselors, I reduced
the opportunity to triangulate the data with other professionals and students. This study was not an attempt to provide a comprehensive look at the college planning processes of urban students and certainly a study that incorporated additional points of view would enhance my findings, thereby promoting validity. However, given that this study was born from the absence of counselors’ experiences, I accept this limitation given the benefits of focusing entirely on counselors. Nevertheless, I attempted to utilize other methods of validating my findings. For example, by putting as much of the data into context as possible, I sought to enhance validity. This also allowed me to check for inconsistencies and unique situations. Likewise, the second round of interviews provided an additional means to check information against the key informants to enhance the validity of the findings.

The final sampling limitation was the concentration on school counselors from strictly urban settings. This research was fueled by concerns about issues of access and retention among students who are low-income, first-generation, or members of underrepresented minority groups. Certainly there are non-urban school counselors whose work reaches one or more of these groups of students. Indeed, the experiences of those counselors would be informative. In fact, rural counselors’ experiences are equally ignored in the literature and similarly concerning. However, this study was not intended to be a comparative look at counselors working in different environments. Rather, by narrowing the sample of school counselors working in urban high schools, the data are better representative of those counselors working primarily with underserved students and best positioned to influence the likelihood for college access and success. Furthermore, isolating counselors working in urban school settings provides a better
understanding of those organizational issues that counselors perceive to affect their work with students.

In addition to sampling limitations, there are some limitations particular to qualitative research. First, the interaction between the interviewer and the participant is central to qualitative research. Critics of qualitative methods believe that the data are influenced by such interactions. Concerns about validity hinge on the credibility of the instrument, in this case the researcher. In response to such claims, Seidman (1998) suggested that rather than apologize for the fact that the interviewer might affect the process, it is necessary to recognize and appreciate the skills the human being brings to that interview process as positive. Patton (2002) further suggested, “the quality of the information obtained during an interview is largely dependent on the interviewer” (p.341).

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) discussed a continuum from total observer to total participant and note that each inquiry requires the inquirer to find an appropriate role to play along that continuum. However, when we participate in the lives of others, we are inevitably holding those lives before ourselves as a mirror of our own lives. This can create problems when researchers do into the field to conduct research. In the case of this research, my personal participation as an interviewer can be interpreted as both positive, based on my ability to be empathetic, or potentially negative, because of my experiences as a school counselor. As a school counselor, respondents considered me to be an insider and perceived me to be empathetic to their experiences. I also believe that my experience as an urban high school counselor assisted me in securing interviews with these very busy
professionals. Furthermore, as an insider, I was familiar with the professional experiences and jargon.

I was certainly able to use my experience as a school counselor to build rapport with the counselors; however, I also recognize the limitations this presented. Patton (2002) suggested that researchers should report any personal or professional information that may influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation. I took several steps to avoid using my experiences to make inferences or meaning out of counselor responses. First, I asked clarifying questions and utilized the second interview to ensure that I did not rely on my own experiences for clarification. Seidman (1998) suggested that by not interrupting the participant and allowing her to grapple for words and ideas, the researcher enhances validity because the thoughts belong to the participant and not the interviewer. Additionally, I kept track of my own preconceptions and thoughts in a journal and field notes. In these ways, I positioned myself closer to the observer end of the participant-observer continuum. Despite these attempts, however, I often found myself surprised at how similar the responses of the key informants were to those I would have given myself.

These methodological limitations are common to qualitative inquiry. Seidman (1998) advocated against new, formulaic approaches to ensuring validity or trustworthiness, but rather for an understanding of and respect for the issues that underlie those terms. This qualitative approach sought to respect the experiences and opinions of urban high school counselors and rests on a belief that their responses will lead to a greater understanding of the challenges towards increasing college access and retention among urban students.
Chapter Summary

Chapter three outlined the methodology of this study, beginning with a statement of the specific research questions that guided it. Additionally the specifics of constructivism within the qualitative research paradigm and the selection of school districts and key informants were detailed. The data collection section described the two-part, semi-structured qualitative interviews and the field notes which generated the raw data of the study. An explanation of the data coding process, involving HyperREARCH computer software, and the data analysis was then followed by descriptions of the credibility methods of member checking, triangulation, thick description, and audit trail that were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the data collected. Chapter three concluded with demographic information about the six schools and eleven key informants followed by the strengths and limitations of the study. Chapter four will present the findings from this study.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from this study of urban high school counselors and their experiences with college planning. Two-part qualitative interviews conducted with urban high school counselors produced five major themes: (a) counselor under-preparedness; (b) urban school settings; (c) complex college planning process; (d) accountability; and (d) counselor commitment. The first theme, under-preparedness, refers to counselors’ perceptions that graduate education and training as well as professional development have failed to prepare them for the realities of being an urban high school counselor. The second theme, urban school settings, describes the ways in which school structures undermine counselors’ abilities to do their jobs. The third theme, complex college planning process, explains the ways in which urban student and family issues make the college counseling process unwieldy relative to that encountered by suburban and private school counselors. The fourth theme, accountability, portrays the absence of appropriate accountability measures that exist for counselors. The fifth, and final theme, vocational commitment, details the personal convictions counselors bring to their work that enables them to persist despite the numerous challenges.
In order to present the data relating to each of these themes, categories have been identified within each theme and subsequently broken into sub-themes, which describe in detail how counselors perceive their experiences in urban schools. However, it is essential to point out that, although I have grouped the data in these five major themes, findings overlap and are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Because of the interdependent nature of these themes, there are additional ways to organize these data. For example, many of the sub-themes may be applicable to more than one category. This issue reflects the nature of how counselors experience their work and how all of these issues are inextricably bound to one another.

**Under-Preparedness**

In each of the interviews with counselors, participants expressed frustration with how little they felt prepared for their jobs. Counselors offered their perspectives on the consequences of being unprepared by their graduate training programs in school counseling and subsequent professional development opportunities. Counselors also reported that their insufficient graduate education and inadequate professional development contributed to new counselors being ill equipped and, therefore, exhibiting a strong reliance on colleagues for professional guidance.

**Under-Preparedness: Graduate Training**

Counselors felt that their graduate training programs failed to prepare them for the realities of their day-to-day work. When the counselors discussed their graduate programs’ weaknesses, they generally spoke about three topics: (a) focus on counseling, (b) non-urban focus, and (c) importance of learning on the job. First, counselors felt their graduate programs focused on clinical counseling skills, yet few of the counselors admit
to having much time to perform individual or group counseling. Second, counselors believed that a lack of attention paid to urban student and school issues in graduate professional education and training put counselors at a disadvantage in terms of serving their students. Along similar lines, counselors felt there was minimal attention paid to the college planning aspect of their job, despite the fact they spend a significant amount of time with college planning. The third reason counselors felt graduate programs failed to prepare them stems from counselors’ belief that the best preparation for their work comes from learning on the job and practicum experiences.

Focus on Counseling

When asked about the ways in which they felt their graduate training programs failed to prepare them for the realities of their jobs, counselors reported that their graduate education primarily concentrated on clinical counseling skills, whereas the reality of their experiences provided minimal opportunity for individual counseling. Counselors felt the focus on graduate education did not particularly prepare them for the realities of the job. In this regard, Debbie describes her graduate school experience:

Well, you know, graduate school was interesting, I enjoyed it, I think I learned a lot, and I may apply 10% of it in the Eastland School System and that’s about it, OK. And that’s the truth, that’s the way it is.

It appears that courses in personal counseling, group counseling, counseling theories, and family therapy were prioritized in the graduate programs. However, according to Debbie, these courses only prepared the counselors for a small portion of their responsibilities. Nonetheless, counselors admitted that they graduated from their programs with a solid
foundation in counseling skills. Although not comprehensive preparation for her work, Ana was grateful for this foundation in counseling:

I am thankful that my program gave me a solid grounding in counseling skills. I use that, God knows, every single day. My graduate program wasn't even to become a school counselor. It was a generic counseling program, which did give me good grounding in counseling skills, and I am thankful for that preparation. There are many, many things that I have used over the years as far as that goes.

Apparently, the clinical counseling skills seem to carry over in their work through conversations with students, parents, and administrators. Debbie even believed it gave her “an eye for pathology.”

Another frustration with the emphasis in graduate study on clinical counseling was the limited time the counselors have to put these skills to use for individual or group counseling. For example, Olivia, who has been a counselor for seven years, wished she were able to invest more time counseling students.

Because of the counseling degree that I got, I feel that it more addressed counseling. I took theories of counseling, group processing, all this stuff which is fine and dandy, but I don't use any of that. Because I can't. I don't have time. There's not time in my schedule to do a group. I'd love to, but there's just no time in my schedule.

Olivia particularly felt this was due to the numerous other demands placed on counselors’ time:
Well, I meet with a lot of students a lot of times, but I meet with them quite frequently on clerk-like things. Their schedules, changing classes, that kind of thing. I do meet very heavily with kids on college counseling, and I don't meet half so much as I would like to with kids on emotional...that are having emotional difficulties. We used to have, when I first started we used to a lot more of that. But as the other duties increased, that is what got pushed down the drain. We don't have time for that. We don't. No.

Abby, one of the three lead counselors in the study, agreed with Olivia: “here there is a strong focus on personal, individual counseling though not as much as you get to do in your graduate training program, that's for sure.” I further noted that in my time in guidance offices during the course of data collection, rarely did I notice closed office doors, a sign of private, individual counseling.

It seems, however, that counselors wished they were able to be involved in counseling students. In fact, some counselors make time for individual, personal counseling; however, it appeared that as professionals, they must struggle for change in this regard. For example, Andrea recalled how her department battled with administration to maintain counseling as an aspect of the job:

We get into the counseling piece of it, but unfortunately that isn’t really a big piece here without making a lot of noise, which is what we’ve been doing. I don’t think that the graduate program is really in conjunction with what we do. It prepares you to be a counselor but it doesn’t prepare you to be in the guidance department. I guess I would put it that way. That kind
of thing. And the counseling stuff is kind of, you know, that comes if there is time left over. Fortunately in this department we’re all counselors, and we spend a lot of time battling with the administration around that and getting our point out there saying, this is why we’re here, this is why we’re needed.

It seems as though even though some counselors are able to retain some of the counseling piece of their jobs, they also need to prioritize this. Ana described how she prioritizes her efforts to preserve opportunities for counseling:

Too much paperwork, and so that paperwork takes away from the personal counseling. What happens is, when a student comes with their concern, and it is of a personal nature, and although I want to work with him, I can see that it’s going to require multiple sessions, I draw back and make a referral to the social worker, which is unfortunate, but I have to do it. I cannot take on counseling that I see is going to be…more than short term. Very short term. I can’t take it on. When I do, then I know I am really making a commitment, and I can only do that in very select situations.

Although counselors revealed the ways in which they maintain some level of personal counseling with students, for the most part they sacrifice the counseling piece despite their preparation in this field. In sum, although counselors felt counseling skills are important, they are not aligned with the realities of their jobs in the school guidance department. In their opinions, counseling technique should have been only one aspect of the larger graduate program.
Non-Urban Focus

The value of counselors’ graduate programs was also described by its ability to prepare counselors to address issues germane to urban students and schools. In this case, counselors felt their graduate education failed them. Although many counselors recalled taking a class in multicultural counseling, counselors wished they had more preparation for the issues facing urban students and schools. In the following quote, Ana detailed the types of issues she wished she had more preparation in:

There was nothing, absolutely nothing, about the English language learner, the high dropout rate, the changing picture in the American high school, the impact of that in the community, the effect of poverty had on student achievement. Those are just some of the things that come to the top of my head about the issues that weren’t touched in my graduate program nor has it been ever since.

In a similar remark, Olivia objected to the lack of focus on urban schools or counseling in her graduate program:

And I don't recall any of them teaching me anything that has to do with an urban setting. I'm not saying there wasn't some reference. But it wasn't like anything was geared towards urban counseling. If anything, the type of classes I took in my recollection is more general counseling than the guidance counselor here.

For the most part, counselors felt their graduate programs provided minimal coverage on school issues, despite the fact that, with the exception of two counselors who received
their degrees more than 15 years ago, they were enrolled in concentrations in school counseling.

Along with urban school issues, there was an absence of consideration for college planning in the counselors’ graduate programs. Ana specifically expressed concern for the dearth of college planning issues, specific to urban students, in her graduate program when she said, “there isn't anybody that I know of that is offering how to help the urban student make a transition to college. It is not on the agenda of the graduate school.”

The subject most closely related to college planning that was covered in school counseling programs is career development. However, even in these courses, counselors felt there was little useful information for their work. Ana described how she failed to use this in her work:

Oh, let’s see, there was one course in careers. I took a graduate course in careers and they are always looking at all those models, Holland’s model for careers…and all of the different categories of a job, but that is even further removed from the reality. It gets even further into a career area than we go.

Counselors admitted they did use some of what they learned from career development when they taught classes on career choices, however, it was relatively rare.

Counselors seemed to have given a lot of thought to what content needs to be incorporated into graduate training programs, specifically for those counselors who might become employed in an urban schools. For example, Linda listed some topics she wished were covered:
I wish there were at least one or two classes to address the inner-city child, you know, certain agencies. If you're homeless, this is where you go. This is the court process, and this is this process. You have to learn that. You don't really get that. And I think that would be wonderful; about the court system, and truancy, and what we have to do, and how you can motivate a student or empower them.

Andrea, who is now an adjunct professor in a school counseling graduate program is well aware of the limited preparation, specifically with regard to those who plan to work in urban schools. Andrea said this about the students she teaches:

This is probably why I’m teaching right now. I complain every single day. I kept saying “this is not what it’s like in a public high school - in an inner city public high school.” People that are sitting here that are gonna want to go off into the inner city, you’re going to be eaten alive. But if you haven’t taught in that setting and have some experience in that setting, going into guidance in that setting you’re going to be totally lost. It is very difficult. I’ve worked with people who come from the “burbs” and you come in here and you’re talking about all these wonderful trips you’ve taken and all these great wonderful things. And I’m talking to kids who, and my issue is, some of these kids don’t know if this is gonna be the house I’m living in when I get home today. Or if there’s gonna be a meal today. I better eat lunch. They have immediate issues that sometimes, if you don’t have the experience and you haven’t been in that setting, you’re clueless. You’re totally, totally, totally clueless.
The counselors believed that graduate programs in school counseling should be revamped. One counselor even suggested that perhaps there should be specific tracks for those counselors interested in working in an urban setting. More attention to schools and urban students would have been useful to these counselors.

**Learning on the Job**

According to the key informants in this study, the best preparation for working as a school counselor in an urban school takes place on the job. More specifically, counselors felt their practicum and internship experiences and simply learning on the job were more useful than their graduate programs. For new counselors, the internship experience seemed to be particularly critical. Although states differ with regard to practicum and internship requirements, most counselors agreed that this experience is where the bulk of the learning takes place prior to becoming a counselor. Heather, who completed her practicum in the same school where she is now employed, felt lucky to have had that preparation:

I was really prepared, probably more so than some of the counselors who have even been here 25 years. I learned how to schedule a bilingual student. I learned about cultural differences, I think much more effectively than had you just had one population of students. The fact that I had that experience I think prepared me tremendously. So I lucked out. I would think for somebody else who is in grad school they don't have access to some of these systems. So, I thought I was really prepared, and above and beyond because I happened to spend a year here. I think if you get in an internship that stinks, you are in trouble.
However, even Abby felt that sometimes the practicum is not sufficient:

Becoming a high school counselor and your training, whatever internship you did, is very helpful but it doesn’t really teach you what you need to know. Certainly, it didn’t in my experience. Until you have your own students and you are doing it yourself, that’s how you learn.

Along these lines, counselors pointed out that if a new counselor participates in a practicum at a school unlike where she ultimately works, it could be quite difficult. For example, two of the counselors in this study completed their practicum at elementary schools and were eventually placed in high schools. Although they agreed the experience was valuable, they felt they started an entirely new job when they entered the high school.

Aside from the practicum and internship, counselors stated that the real learning process happens on the job. Ana described how she felt the bulk of the learning does not take place in the classroom:

I just feel that they don't give you the nuts and bolts of the job. They really don't. I got my Master's a long time ago. So, who knows, maybe it's changed, but at the time when I got my Master's, I just felt that I had a lot of good knowledge, but I felt also that it was just a learn-by-doing.

Because schools are so unique, much of counselors’ work is learned on the job. Olivia compared this experience to learning Spanish in a foreign country, “I’ve found that we’re teaching and we’re counseling on the job and this taught me a lot more than a bunch of classrooms. Even with Spanish, I studied in Spain and I learned a lot more in Spain in six
weeks than I ever learned in the classroom.” So, it seemed as though counselors felt they pretty much “learned by the seat of their pants” and less from their graduate training.

With regard to feeling unprepared, counselors’ frustration with their graduate programs was evident in each of the interviews. With the exception of one counselor, who received her degree more than 20 years ago, each of the counselors completed her Master of School Counseling degree. Given the range of experience among these counselors, it appears that not much has changed.

**Under-Preparedness: Professional Development**

The second topic that counselors commented on in evaluating preparation for their professional duties was professional development. Similar to their frustrations with graduate education, counselors brought up issues relevant to professional development, which they perceived as inadequate. The four most common topics were: (a) teacher-focused professional development; (b) suburban bias in organization-based professional development; (c) logistical challenges to participation; and (d) beneficial professional development topics.

**Teacher Focused Professional Development**

Professional development sponsored by individual schools seemed to be focused on teachers and rarely addressed those issues germane to school counselors. Topics covered typically related to classroom issues or educational initiatives taking place in the school district and rarely pertained to counselor needs. For example, Gloria described how the system-wide push for literacy drove professional development at her school:

> But the professional development we've had has been more towards literacy and is not meaningful to me at all. There was a big literacy push,
and we, as counselors have had to attend professional development days about scope and sequence about math. It is totally irrelevant and nobody seems to realize that we need help in other issues.

As a result of irrelevant content, counselors consistently referred to school-sponsored professional development as a waste of their time. However, counselors are quick to point out that sometimes the basic information is important. Ana made this point about requiring counselors to sit through topics unrelated to her work:

Let's see if I can remember some of the programs from last year. Ok, Reading Across the Curriculum. Yes, something that we're involved in, but you could give me a summary and that would be enough. I'd rather be in an abuse workshop. Those professional development sessions are mostly worthless.

Unfortunately, the schools are not addressing the topics that are applicable to counselors. For the most part, counselors recognized that schools offer individual professional development for teachers because they are the majority of the professionals in the building. However, despite this awareness, they are still frustrated by school requirements that force them to sit through such workshops when they have additional work to be done in their offices. On the other hand, those counselors from this study who are told to work in their offices when professional development is offered expressed resentment towards what they perceive as a lack of concern for what counselors may need.

According to the counselors from River Public School System, even the district sponsored professional development, which typically comes from the Director of
Guidance, often seems like a waste of time. Judy suggested that too often the same presentations are offered year after year:

Our professional development is usually a complete and total waste. And it is not intensive enough and it is not directly related to our needs. And they just get speakers in depending on who comes to the administrators’ notice, who is offering their services. Some things get recycled, like the Job Corps program, that's very important, and that's done on a yearly or every other year basis, and that's very important. But not enough is done that's valuable.

District-wide professional development apparently is expected to cover the counselors’ needs for professional development given the teacher focused efforts of the individual schools. However, counselors felt even that was lacking.

**Suburban Bias**

Dissatisfaction with professional development included workshops sponsored by organization-based agencies because of their irrelevance to urban students. Counselors felt that professional development opportunities sponsored by organizations such as the College Board are often a waste of counselors’ time. For example, topics such as the College Board’s “Early Decision” or “Dealing with Difficult Parents” are not particularly useful to urban counselors. Karen described how her students’ rarely qualify for the programs and opportunities offered by college preparation programs:

Oh, they are okay. I just -- I suppose if I worked at [area private school], the College Board would be the bible. It would be, what's their next breath? I mean, I…you know, I read their book about the new PSAT's,
and I told my kids how to do this better, how to take the questions and do better, but it doesn't matter to me that they are changing the test because my kids don't do good anyway. So...so, you know, some of that information, I just...I don't use it in my daily work.

Along similar lines, Ana believed the information most relevant to urban students is not widely known or covered by these organizations:

Many times they don't know how to answer our questions about the ELPT [English Language Proficiency Test], or the TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language], about the costs, about this or that. We usually have to dig around and talk to this one, that one and the other one to get an answer, and we have to talk to each other a lot to get the answers, because sometimes the colleges don't necessarily have the answer or the college board doesn't either. It is among us that we figure it out. Like the TOEFL is offered out of town, it costs a lot of money now. What are we going to do for our kids? And we kind of get together and try to come up with some solutions. No one else has these issues, so we just talk to each other. We rely on each other a whole lot.

The topics that counselors would like to see covered by such organizations as the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC) or the College Board are often not what they provide. For example, counselors requested information on college planning assistance for students without legal immigrant status, those who are parents, or those independent of their families. Because the content seems biased towards
suburban counselors, the participants felt they were less likely to sacrifice the time necessary to participate in such workshops.

**Logistical Challenges to Participation**

In addition to dissatisfaction with the content of professional development, counselors shared their frustrations regarding the logistical challenges they face in participation. The most cited example of a logistical barrier was time. Given the multiple demands placed on counselors in their work, they feel they are constantly questioning the worth of professional development in relation to time away from their work. For example, Gloria, who works in a brand new school with only 19 seniors, admitted that some workshops were not worth the time away:

> Now I was invited to a reception at the Westin for [nearby private university]. And I said, “no way do I have time to be with them and lollygag around with them when my students need me.” And in reality I said, “Gloria, is [nearby private university] going to be a university for these kids?” And I said, “No, I don't think so, not right now. Maybe in four years, but not right now.”

Counselors admitted to receiving numerous invitations daily to workshops and conferences, some of which they don’t even read.

> In addition to counselor concerns, there are school policies and structures that present obstacles to participation in professional development. Judy recalled an instance when a request for personal day was not approved for several months:

> The principal, I think, likes to have people in the building. I'm taking a personal day this Friday, and I had submitted that the first day of school,
because I'm going to [nearby private university]…but you feel so…I have not heard anything, whether I will get that day or not. They haven't sent back the paper to me. So it gives you a double message.

Also troublesome in this example, is Judy’s reference to using a personal day for a professional development visit. Counselors typically reported being able to take approved professional leave for college visits. However, Gladys added that in some cases administrators are reluctant to allow more than one counselor to attend a professional development workshop.

This principal doesn't allow everyone to go in the guidance office. In other words, there was professional development today, and a couple of people could go. She doesn't want the whole guidance office to go. That’s what they have to do here. They have to go and bring back the information and any handouts that were given to them. It’s still not like being there.

In this case, those counselors who do attend the professional development are expected to share the information with their colleagues. However, as Gladys stated, it is not the same as being there, which counselors agree is the best way to learn about the college or university.

In some cases, like Gloria, who avoided the university workshop, counselors impose these restrictions on themselves. For example, Judy questioned whether concern for time away from the school building is personally imposed, rather than imposed through school policies:

I don't know if it's imposed by myself or not - do you know what I'm saying. It's hard to separate that out because your own personal code of
ethics behavior, whatever - I don't know. It's just hard…like I said, I just want an hour, just until 9:30…I'd be back here by 10:00, but you just know that so many people are going to be around looking for me that it's hard to take… You've just been so good. I never miss a day. You just feel so good, but it's only 9:30 and it's in town, but - and also the expectations are that you're here.

Whether personally imposed or imposed through school policies, counselors reported constantly weighing time away from their work with the perceived value of the workshop.

Another logistical challenge to professional development participation brought up by the counselors is money or the ability to visit colleges located further away. Some workshops are costly or require an overnight stay in a hotel and are often not funded by the school district. For example, Gladys described how money prevented her from participating in something because of money and concern for relevant content:

A lot of times too, the information that they send us about these professional development that they have out of town - it's like $150 to stay overnight. If you have a family, it's difficult to do that. Whereas if they came here, and they had it say at one of the local hotels - at the Marriott or a place like that - which they have had - we do go to them. But again, it's not focused on the urban school. It's a little different. And you say to yourself, gee, when do they talk about our situation.
Gladys and Andrea also added that in the instance that the administrators want the counselors to attend a particular workshop, it is paid for. However, in some cases, counselors are expected to pay for the workshop.

Individually, these challenges are manageable; however, counselors pointed out that considering the potential for the topics to be inapplicable, the challenges often hardly seem worth it.

**Beneficial Professional Development**

Despite irrelevant and challenging professional development, participants additionally identified those types of professional development that have been particularly useful or would be most appreciated. Addressing specific student needs stood out as among those topics most useful. For example, Abby felt that a professional development workshop on NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) standards was quite useful:

They had a really good workshop last year on NCAA regulations. They had somebody here from the NCAA, somebody from [nearby public university], and they had somebody else here from another university, [nearby private university], I think, who is the NCAA eligibility officer at her school. That was very helpful to me because I was in the middle of trying to straighten us out with the NCAA. This school was in a big mess with the course file not being updated. NCAA was something I didn't know anything about being from a middle school.

In a similar vein, Ana excitedly described a professional development workshop designed to educate counselors about supporting gay, lesbian, and transgendered students:
We had a wonderful one last year. That was one PD in four years that I thought was wonderful. She was great. Yeah gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, I forget the acronym. They came in and talked to the counselors and oh that was just the best information. You know, things that you think you know and you know nothing about, you know, the terms and what does that mean and, you know, these are the things you need to know, you know? They came to the school and spoke to all the guidance counselors.

Although these are not urban-specific topics, they addressed situations the counselors were currently dealing with in their schools. Additionally, in both of these examples, the counselors pointed out that the facilitators came to their schools, which encouraged participation.

College planning specialized for urban students represented a common theme among the counselors with regard to beneficial workshops. More specifically, college admissions workshops designed to provide counselors’ specific insight into the college admissions process for their students were described most positively. In the following two quotes, Olivia recalled two separate workshops sponsored by local colleges that she learned a great deal from:

[Local public university] had a wonderful thing last year... where they really talked about how we could get kids in, how we could better service the kids, how we could increase their diversity, because they count on us to provide them with a lot of the students that they want to get in. Just this past Friday at our regular meeting, the admissions person from [local public university] came to talk to us about their admissions
policy and the changes in their admissions policy because we were quite ticked off at her last year. We felt that kids that should have been accepted into [university] didn't, and we couldn't quite understand what was going on. Well she came in and explained to a certain extent… standards are going up, and if your kids don't get 930 on the SATs they are not getting into [university], which right away is a whole bunch of our kids. Do you know what our kids’ SATs are? Please. They want 930. That's 400/400 at least...that's high for our kids…for suburbs it is fine, but for here?

Counselors’ beliefs that they are not supported by useful professional development appears to stem from frustrations with inapplicable school-based professional development, organization-based focus on suburban college planning and logistical challenges to participation. The examples of beneficial topics such as college planning specific to their students or support for gay, lesbian, and transgendered students reflect counselors’ desire for more directly applicable topics to be offered to them.

**Under-Preparedness: Potential Outcomes**

Counselors in this study were clear about the reasons graduate training and professional development failed to prepare them for the realities of being an urban school counselor. They were additionally forthright about the potential outcomes of under-preparation. In this regard, counselors commented about: (a) concern for new counselors; (b) importance of collegial support; (c) limited information; and (d) responsibility on counselors. Counselors believed that as a result of these issues, new counselors face much difficulty when entering the field. They also indicated that under-preparedness contributed to the need to rely heavily on their colleagues for help.
Concerns for New Counselors

In interviews with new and experienced counselors, participants expressed concern about the unfortunate consequences that insufficient graduate programs have on new counselors. According to the counselors, because the graduate training programs fail to prepare counselors for the reality of urban schools, new counselors are particularly ill prepared when they begin. In this quote, Olivia expressed how she felt about learning the aspects of the school counseling job:

There is so much to learn because there's nothing written down. You just have to “osmose it.” You have to get it. It is not easy to learn this stuff. If you don't feel free to ask, ask, ask, and luckily I always did, then you're not going to learn things because nobody...it's stuff, you can't read it. You can't buy a book and read it. You have to kind of just suck it up. So I don't know.

Counselors’ specific worry was for the ways new counselors would learn the information that was not provided them in graduate school, yet not acquired through experience. New and veteran counselors alike expressed this concern for new counselors. For Heather, who was relatively new to counseling, she wished for a mentor of some sort:

There should be, you know, a mentor for you. There is no mentor. I just lucked out because I had [previous practicum supervisor], and I happened to be here, but there should be a mentor for those counselors, those new counselors for at least a year, you know someone you can cry to. Because you are going to make mistakes, as we all do, and I did, and still do. Cause you have so many questions you know: what can you do? How can you do
this? Is this legal, is it not...not legal, but you know what I mean? Is this within the parameters of the rules?

Similarly, Debbie recalled what little orientation she received as a new counselor:

Citywide there is nothing. Forget about it. When you take a job with this school system, they say report to room 43. That's it. They don't tell you what you're doing, where to go, how to find anything, no. You just...when I first came here other teachers said OK, come on, let me show you where the ladies room is. That's about it, really.

However, even veteran counselors realized how difficult it was for new counselors entering the field. For example, Abby, suggested this places a lot of responsibility on new counselors:

Unfortunately there is no good orientation program for new counselors, especially not new high school counselors. You learn by the seat of your pants. You ask your colleagues, which is not always the best way. People do make mistakes. You go to workshops like the College Board workshop for new counselors. I found that very helpful. But, you have to do your homework. You know I took home the College Board college handbook the first summer that I was here, and read the first section. You have to do your homework on your own time.

**Importance of Collegial Support**

Another outcome of insufficient graduate programs, as described by the counselors in this study, was the importance placed on collegial support. This refers to the counselors’ belief that they heavily rely on one another for information not gained
elsewhere. Obviously, new counselors relied a great deal on more experienced counselors. Heather had this to say about what she has learned from her colleagues:

You know as a new counselor, I initially went to a lot of the college showcases and ask questions and the lunches that they have, but there is nothing like going through the application process with the actual school. That's how you get your expertise just with experience. Experience. And I'll tell you, the counselors that I work with have been here forever so they're just a huge wealth of information and the saving grace about this department is we are all, our styles are all very different, but my God, if I ever have a problem or a question, I could go to anyone. I could go to anyone and ask, you know, how did you do this?

Likewise, veteran counselors pointed out how much they benefit from one another. In this quote, Debbie described just how colleagues fill in the gap left by the absence of a staff orientation:

There are always new things coming up and you don't know about them, and another counselor will say I'm doing this, and you'll say where did you get that? I don't know anything about that. So we learn from each other. And I just wish it was, there was some kind of directory that was better, but there is nothing like that. It's more or less off the cuff and off the top of my head. And that's not the best way to operate. We don't have the kind of information that I would like to have. It has never been compiled.
This emphasis on sharing information with one another also came through in other
themes in this study. It seems as though the sharing of information through colleagues is
critical in the absence of sufficient graduate training.

**Limited Information**

This final outcome, specific to the challenges to participation in professional development, refers to counselors’ concern that they have limited information about colleges and universities. As previously mentioned, money and time are barriers for counselors thereby limiting college visits to local schools. Counselors described this unfortunate consequence as having an impact on whether or not they have sufficient information on colleges. Ana described her wish to gather more information through the college tours that introduce counselors to a group of colleges within a specific area.

We have to do more of this than what we do. There is a tour, I don’t know whether you’ve been on these things, but there is a [name of state] tour, a [name of neighboring state] tour, there’s probably a Midwest tour, I’d like to go on the Midwest tour by the way because so many of our kids look at this area as one of their top areas to go to college. We have to go on these tours to find out what these institutions are like. It is hard to know from long distance. The websites make a big difference, and that has added a different dimension. I think those virtual tours on the websites; they’re wonderful. But there is no replacing being on campus.

Due to the logistical challenges to participation, counselors admitted that they prioritize which colleges they visit. The priority seems to be placed on those colleges attended by the majority of their students. At stated previously in the example provided by Gloria in
the case of the university presentation at the Westin, it was clear that she did not feel attendance at this university’s open house was worthy of her absence from school.

**Responsibility on Counselors**

The final outcome suggested by the participants described the responsibility placed on counselors to gather appropriate information on topics otherwise not covered in graduate school or through professional development. In interviews with counselors, I often heard how counselors developed their repertoire of information through their own initiative. Olivia described how she heard about a program at an SAT workshop and followed up with the person for more information:

> You get information in different places. And you have to go look for it too. And you have to listen to what's going on. I was at this SAT workshop and somebody was talking at the table about something he does with minority schools, it's a federally funded program and anybody can have access to it. It had nothing to do with the SATs he just happened to be sitting there. I got his card and I had him send me the information. I can't say where I get this information. It depends, I just get it. You just do it.

In this case Olivia was at a workshop with her colleagues and learned something that was ultimately valuable to her. In other instances, counselors described more random ways of gathering useful information for their students. For example, Karen shared:

> I think you just learn what you learn because you are constantly searching for the best thing for your student and through that you, you know, I mean, you are always saying to yourself, well, what can I offer them because I
want to help them and then you start investigating and working with a social worker to put together a plan…I was at something in the community one night, and was introduced to the two nuns that run a Family Learning Center right around the corner, and they deal with the whole family issue. So I learned about what they offered and them hooked one of my students up with them. That's how it happens, you know? Really. Because you are looking for something and then you hear something that your students could use.

In this example, Karen was at a non-school related event and had her students’ needs in mind. This was one of many examples counselors shared illustrating how they gather their information.

This first overarching theme, under-preparedness, emerged from the interviews with specific concentration on graduate training and professional development. This theme reflects the frustration of counselors feel about their being unprepared for much of what their work demands of them. In regard to graduate training, it appears that the reality of school counseling is learned on the job; however, the counselors believed there are additional issues that need to be covered in graduate programs. Additionally, these findings imply counselors are lacking opportunities through professional development to better serve their students. As a result, counselors described the ways in which their work is affected. In this regard, counselors described their concern for new counselors, the importance of collegial support, their limited information, and the responsibility on counselors. Additionally, some of these outcomes appeared in response to other themes that surfaced in this study.
Urban School Settings

When asked to share their experiences as urban high school counselors, respondents commonly referred to the inherent problems of working in an urban school setting. This second major theme that surfaced in the data involves counselors’ perceptions that aspects of working in an urban school setting undermine their ability to perform their jobs. Counselors’ opinions, which were reflected during both the first and second round of interviews, have been organized into three categories (a) dysfunctional school structures, (b) multiple expectations on counselors’ time, and (c) negative perceptions of counselors by others. Similar to the first major theme, the participants offered their perspectives on potentially adverse outcomes of urban school settings on their work. In this respect, counselors described engaging in professional triage, having difficulty building relationships with students, and creating their own structures as elements of their jobs which are required as a result of problematic school settings. These outcomes reflect counselors’ perceptions of how elements of an urban school setting potentially undermine their ability to do their jobs.

Urban School Settings: Dysfunctional School Structures

Counselors shared their frustration with school structures that they perceived inhibited their ability to do their work. In particular, the key informants commented on school policies and practices and administrative decisions which serve as barriers to effectively doing their jobs. These two topics capture the urban school structural issues counselors felt most undermined their capacity to help students.
School Policies and Practices

Counselors representing six different schools identified specific urban school policies and practices that they felt infringed on their efforts. School practices regarding caseload assignments, counselor-student interaction, and the absence of established structures to address college planning were revealed as specific examples that inhibited counselors’ work with students.

School practices regarding counselor caseload were described as problematic during the interviews. All of the counselors in this study, with the exception of the lead counselors who have reduced caseloads, admitted that their caseloads are high in number. In general, the counselors in this study were servicing caseloads ranging from 280-350 students per counselor despite the recommendations from the American Counselor Association (ACA) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) of maximum counselor-student ratios of 1:250. However, counselors did not feel their caseload size alone was a problem. Rather, counselors felt that the size of their caseloads was compounded by the high student mobility at some of the schools. The counselors from Webster High School, which reportedly experienced a high rate of students entering and exiting their school within one school year, pointed out that although their caseloads are set around 300, at any given time, they might actually serve over 400 students throughout the school year. Ana referred to this as the “hidden caseload.” Debbie described how this high mobility plays out with regard to caseload:

My load at any given time will go from 300 to 320. However, over a course of the year, I believe it is over 500 kids because they come and go and come back again. The population is tremendously mobile. And when
you have that kind of thing, you are signing them in, signing them out, sending them to alternative schools; they are coming back from alternative schools. Really I think we have huge loads.

Ana pointed out that the high mobility also leads counselors to perform the same tasks multiple times:

We carry very high loads, I think, because of the demands of our load, and the fact that one of the things our system never does is it doesn't account for the fact that we service a population with such high mobility, so they come and go. An example is I had a student here who decided he preferred the suburban school. He went there and didn't get accepted, so he returned here and had to be reentered. Then he had a problem at a soccer game and was being suspended, and he left again and tried to reenter the suburban school for a second time. They didn't accept him again, and he came back. So he reregistered twice within a month’s time, and we had to do restoring of the schedule twice. So that's...the first time, then restoring it the first, then restoring it the second, and then he was just here an hour ago wanting to discuss his schedule again. So because there is this mobility, it means we are reviewing tasks that we have already done with a lot of frequency.

It was apparent among the counselors from schools with high mobility rates that this compounded caseload issues for the counselors. Although the high student mobility rates are not a direct result of a school policy, it is a reality of an urban school setting and one which counselors feel is not considered when establishing policies regard counselors’ caseloads.
Worse than the impact of high mobility on caseloads, counselors felt that student assignments were often haphazard and were done with little regard for how counselors actually do their jobs. The counselors from Webster High School felt that their school policy of haphazardly assigning students to counselors reflected a disregard in how assignments matter to counselors’ work. For example, Debbie described how students are assigned to counselors at her school:

We don’t have any system for assigning students to counselors, it is just willynilly. We used to. When I first came we used the alphabet, you know, she had B and C. So now it is first come, first serve. They deal them out like cards, that’s it.

At Cook High School, counselors were assigned students by homeroom, which changed year to year. The counselors at this school felt this precluded them from establishing a connection with students. For example, Gladys, who had been at two schools during her 32 years as a counselor, felt the current system, which did not involve following the same students for all four years, was problematic:

To be perfectly honest, I don't like this system. At [previous school] what we did was we would follow the same class for four years. We would get them as ninth graders and work with them, and I think the advantage to that is that you get to know the kids very, very well. You get to know their parents very well, and by the time a lot of those seniors were - a lot of those kids were seniors - the parents were calling me by my first name, and I was calling them by their first name. And they felt very comfortable talking with me, and we really got to know the student a lot better than
having them for one year as we have here, and then next year they'll have
a different guidance counselor. So, I just don't think there is any
continuity, and I also found that the students opened up a lot more with me
if they got to know me, and they knew that I was going to be their
counselor for four years. By the time they were seniors, some of them
were calling me Ma…Well, I think it's better if you hold on to them
starting in 9th grade, and they feel a lot more comfortable with you.

To the counselors from these two schools, caseload assignments made a difference in
their work with students. This was also true for the counselors who were assigned to
particular grades or small learning communities. In these cases, counselors were able to
work on grade or community specific issues that were missing for those counselors
randomly assigned to students. For example, the counselor whose assignment included
grades nine and eleven was able to focus her efforts with the ninth graders on transition
issue and life skills.

Another outcome of haphazard caseload assignments was the potential for an
unequal distribution of students. For example, Ana pointed out that a large percentage of
her caseload was made up of special education students, who require special team
meetings for their Individual Education Plans (IEP):

And I had PPTs and SSTs constantly. The PPTs are for special ed
students, and each time you need them, you have to get progress
reports…which you have to arrive at the PPT informed of the student
progress to be able to report what is happening in each class.
In addition to preparing for these meetings, Ana informed me that she was responsible for setting up the meetings, inviting the team members, and running the meetings, which obviously added a significant amount of work to her caseload given the large percentage of special education students.

Concern for building relationships and the potential to service a disproportionate number of special education students were just two examples of how haphazard counselor assignments could go wrong. It is important to emphasize, the counselors did not feel that policies regarding the size of their caseloads were inherently problematic. Rather, the counselors were frustrated by school practices that failed to consider how assignments are critical to counselors’ ability to work with students and the ways in which high student mobility affect their already high caseloads.

School practices that limited counselor-student interaction were also perceived as an urban school structure that undermined counselors’ effectiveness. In this respect, the participants commented on policies that directly limited counselor-student interaction as well as the absence of structures to facilitate such interaction.

It seemed to be the case at each of the high schools that policies were in place limiting counselors from taking students out of class, which ultimately made it quite difficult for counselors to work with students. At Cook High School, counselors were expected to see students only during homeroom and at lunch, which made it difficult to accomplish much with students. Karen, the schools’ lead counselor, explained how this time is insufficient:

Since we can't take them out of the class, we go to homerooms. Our homeroom, used to have a twenty-minute homeroom, and now it is down
to ten minutes. Really, after announcements, it's probably four. So, we can't get anything done in homeroom, and that used to be a very good way to see students. Now we have actually talked about going into the lunchroom because that a good place to meet kids.

Andrea expressed her frustration and not being able to work thoroughly with students as a result of such policies:

It all goes back to the whole No Child Left Behind thing. With teaching from bell to bell and not being allowed to pull kids out of classes, not really having time to really do one-on-one or even small group conversations unless you go into a classroom…you can’t form those relationships. But you do what you have to do. I think that it is, if you want to do it right…[In my old job] I had the opportunity to sit with the kid an entire period on the computer and look at schools…see what this is like, check this out…giving them a check list of what things to look for in colleges. Guidance counselors don’t really have the time to do that or the opportunity to do that. I have 75 seniors. So it makes it really hard to do.

Similar policies existed at the other schools, although the degree to which they were enforced varied. Nonetheless, counselors were well aware of the reluctance to allow students class time to meet with counselors.

Finding time to meet with students was a constant theme in my conversations with counselors. It seemed that as a result of school policies limiting their time with students, counselors spent a great deal of time finding creative ways to meet with students. In some cases, counselors reported seeing students during electives or when the
students have substitutes. In this next quote, Linda explained how she works around not being able to take students from their classes:

Maybe there is a different angle I can use, if there is a substitute in foreign language, and there isn’t an assignment for them. In the morning, I try to find out if there are any substitutes for that day. Can I pull that student from that? So you have to try to be creative.

Sometimes counselors are forced to take students out of classes, which unfortunately sets up a bad dynamic with teachers. Olivia described how she felt about taking students from classes:

Teachers see us as taking somebody out of their classroom, which, unfortunately, there is no other time to take them if they have a full schedule, no study halls, what else am I going to do? I have to take them sometime. Then, I am the rotten one who is always taking students from their work. What am I supposed to do?

The counselors reported various ways in which they work around policies restricting their time with students. In my conversations with counselors, they admitted they were reluctant to take students out of academic classes regardless of school policies, as they themselves realized the importance of students’ attendance in class. However, they believed that such policies exacerbated an already difficult situation with regard to meeting with students.

The majority of the counselors in this study admitted that if the issue was of a personal nature and was pressing, they would go against the policy in order to help the student. Linda offered this as her rationale for doing this:
If a student comes and is having a really rough day, and has something very private and they want to share it with me, I’ll keep them. I’ll just decide that there is no way that this student is going to learn English, Math, Science, Social Studies anyway. If mom and dad are getting a divorce or the fact that there is no food in the house, or the fact that they witnessed something on the street, or there is a fight, or they’re afraid of a fight. Under circumstances like that, the administrator will understand. I mean I’ll deal with the fact if I get in trouble you know, but then I’ll say “I chose to do this because of what was happening” and just trust that she’ll know I made a good decision.

However, this prioritization was expressed in regard only to personal issues. Counselors felt they were less likely to make this choice if the issue were related to college planning.

In addition to policies limiting counselors from taking students from class, urban school settings appear to lack structures that would otherwise be in place to provide opportunities for counselors to meet with students. This was particularly evident when counselors described their efforts with college planning. With the exception of two schools in this study, there was no time during the day designated for counselors to meet with students. At Warren High School, where there was no structure in place to discuss college planning, this became particularly troubling when counselors wanted to invite college admissions representatives to the school. Andrea shared her attempts to gain approval from administration to invite representatives to visit the school:

As far as the college stuff is concerned, having recruiters coming during the day is a problem. The principal definitely won’t allow this. I’ve battled
with her for three years over the issue of having them come in during the
day. A lot of times our kids don’t know about some of these schools. I try
to explain that it is so influential for a student to sit and talk to an actual
person from a campus rather than me just giving them information. But as
far as being able to schedule recruiters to come into the building it has to
be after school. And my argument to that is we have a large number of
kids who have to work. We have large numbers of kids who have to get
home because of childcare or because they’re in charge of their siblings.
They have responsibilities. So after school is kind of difficult. We battled
with it and…it was really ugly.

According to the counselors, students genuinely missed out by not having access to
admissions counselors. Aside from counselors’ limited experience with many of these
schools, Andrea pointed out that by bringing college representatives in, those students
who would otherwise not pursue higher education might be sparked by the idea.

At both Port Academy and Monroe High School, there is a structure in place for
counselors to bring in representatives or conduct college planning with groups of
students. Gloria described the “advisories” that are in place at her pilot school:

Well, we are very fortunate in that this school is new and the principal has
initiated 20-minute advisory periods in the homeroom periods. There
again these teachers really have been hand picked, and there is a
wonderful climate here of cooperation. And nobody says this is your job,
it is not my job. So my role is to work within the advisory structure.
Similarly, Olivia described her school’s implementation of a twenty-minute learning activity period that was scheduled into their day. Like Gloria, Olivia described her ability to reach groups of students though this structured time. It seems as though the advisory and scheduled learning activity periods create the time and space for counselors to talk with their students about college and any other issues that might be relevant for her students.

Counselors told me that they would meet with many students after school; however, as Andrea pointed out, many students are unable to stay after school due to work and family responsibilities. Furthermore, the counselors emphasized that the students who often are most in need of the help are not the ones who are most likely to stay after school.

School policies and practices and the lack of established structures inhibit the abilities of counselors to reach their students. Although many described the ways they were able to work around these systems present in urban schools, it was evident that counselors wished for more time and opportunities to meet with students.

**Administrative Decisions**

Closely related to school policies, counselors also believed that administrative decisions potentially undermine counselors’ effectiveness. In this regard, counselors referred to decisions regarding graduation requirements, scheduling, and school improvement plans as problematic. However, in addition to the specific administrative decisions, counselors perceived administrators’ failure to consult with counselors before making decisions that would ultimately impact their work was the most troubling aspect.
According to the counselors, administrative decisions regarding graduation requirements impacted their scheduling and college planning attempts. This appeared to be particularly problematic when graduation requirements were not aligned with college admissions requirements. Heather described how she perceived this to be an uphill battle:

We fight an uphill battle here too, speaking of graduation requirements. I hope somebody else brought this up too. We are constantly battling these 21 minimum requirements, there are: 3 math, 3 science, etc. The mentality of our students is that once they get there, they’re done. They don't need anymore… So, even our top students, we are constantly trying to get them to challenge themselves in an AP course, even though it is above and beyond the call of duty, a fourth year of math, a fourth science. And then they get support from home too to drop it. So we fight a battle there, too, you know getting our students out of that mentality. And we fight our teachers on it too.

Although counselors recognized that these requirements were established by the school district, they expressed their irritation at trying to encourage a student to take more classes than she/he might need. Debbie described how minimal graduation requirements facilitate students’ failure to take advanced classes in favor of early release:

Well, the school tries to keep the kids fully scheduled in their senior year, because there are things they can learn. Now I know they only need three math credits to graduate, but four would be better. The problem is that you do this, but then they want out. Because they don't need the courses for graduation, their eyes are on working, they want to make money. For
example, one of my students, a very responsible girl, her mother wrote a note and said, we are poor, she wants to go to work, etc. So she is going to get excused after four periods of school and get out early when she could have taken a few more courses.

Counselors felt that if school districts were genuinely interested in encouraging more students to enroll in college, they might start with aligning the curriculum to match college requirements. In this respect, Olivia said, “With scheduling, there is no one thinking about college. They don’t care. They have this ‘everyone go to college’ attitude, but they don’t want to give them the tools to get there.” Instead, it appears that these graduation requirements add yet another challenge to counselors’ attempts to encourage and prepare students for postsecondary education because counselors find themselves trying to convince students to take more classes than necessary to pursue higher education.

Administrative decisions regarding school improvement plans, which are often a result of education reform efforts, were also described as an element of an urban school setting that limits counselors’ ability to assist their students. More specifically, counselors referred to the ways in which schools and districts fail to include counselors in the decision-making process and exclude guidance departments from improvement projects.

One school improvement initiative that counselors believed particularly pertained to their work was school restructuring. In many of the schools represented in this study, restructuring plans included breaking the school down into small learning communities or academies. In these cases, counselors felt they had no role in the restructuring process. Ana detailed how this decision has the effect to impact her work directly:
They didn't do that this year, although we spent quite a lot of time coming up with a plan that would work in what was a very difficult job to try to get us affiliated with the learning community. And try to get all the students to sign. And it was difficult for us, it caused some friction within our group, but we finally came up with something that we could live with. They wouldn't do it, the administration wouldn't do it, because they claimed that it would be better to wait until next year when half of the school is in clusters, and it would be easier. But that is denying us the opportunity to bond with this group, in a new idea that's all about bonding and relationships. So we are left out of the very thing we should be in on. By the way, that has a lot to do with the fact that we are not valued. It is like our role isn’t seen for what it is, and it's not valued. Otherwise I am sure that wouldn't have happened. I mean when you see that the counselor plays a major role in, and looking at emotional piece, and if you are creating small learning communities to give the students an affiliation with a group, then to me it is obvious that the counselor needs to be a part of that. The counselor is the one who stays with the student [for] four years. Now that's going to be so in the small learning community, but that's new and so we should be, there are many reasons why we should be a part of that. So we got left out.

In Ana’s opinion, the mere absence of counselors’ role in the restructuring efforts was problematic.
On the other hand, when school improvement plans included changing the counseling role or an aspect of the guidance department, counselors reported that their voices were left out of the decision-making process even when it impacted their work. In Olivia’s case, the guidance department found themselves advocating for a school restructuring decision to be modified because, as a result of counselors’ exclusion from the decision-making process, the decision was shortsighted.

What they did at the end of last year, which was kind of crazy, is they decided they were gonna go to small learning communities. They decided that the counselors were gonna rearrange their whole caseload. We wanted to keep all of our kids, but the powers that be didn’t want us to…he decided that the counselors should go along with the small learning communities. None of us liked the idea. He said one person, one community, whatever. So he wanted us to rearrange our whole caseload from last year. And we all wanted our seniors… Because I would best know my own seniors. If I gave them to somebody else, it wouldn’t be fair to the seniors; it wouldn’t be fair to the counselor, because they wouldn’t know them. I know my kids, what we’ve been talking about for 4 years, and where to steer them and I know who to talk to. I’m not saying every last kid, but in general. Well, we kept the seniors but that wasn’t easy to get. We really, we practically all ganged up on him. Frankly, I was surprised that he said ok. If you don’t ask us those kinds of things, I don’t understand how you can make those decisions.
In Olivia’s case, she and her colleagues argued with the administration to retain their seniors; however, the administrators’ original intention was to reassign their entire caseload. This example illustrates counselors need to be involved in such decisions that ultimately affect them and their students.

Admittedly, the counselors expressed awareness that school improvement plans rarely include elements of change that are applicable to counselors. However, by and large, the counselors in this study felt that there was much room for improvement in the guidance departments and expressed a desire to be more involved in school improvement plans.

In the examples of graduation requirements and school improvement plans, counselors expressed irritation with the ways in which these decisions impacted their work with students. However, they also shared their dissatisfaction with the degree of consultation that takes place prior to such decisions. Karen had this to say about a preliminary finding from this study, which suggested school policies have the potential to undermine school counselors’ work:

One of the big reasons for how school policies hinder us in some cases is because they are developed and implemented without our input. We’re left out of the decision-making completely. So we never get to participate and say, “the reality is when you work with seniors this and this and this is what happens.” And that kind of compounds the effect of a policy.

Counselors shared numerous examples of situations in which they were not consulted regarding policies they are positioned to implement or enforce.
Although counselors reported not feeling included in decision-making, there were examples of times in which counselors voiced their opinions about administrative decisions, but were overruled. For example, Ana described how her administrators attempted to implement a policy she felt was not practical:

For instance, last year at the end of the year the math department decided that students couldn't go on to the next level if they pass a course unless they also pass an exit exam. And they make this a rule during a year, which we told them wasn't enforceable because you can't bring on a new rule like that during the year. They insisted on it, and put kids back to repeat a course, even if they pass if they didn't pass the exit exam. And now, a month into the year they rescinded a policy, we suspect because a parent challenged it. And many times in a department, the counselors have more experience than the administrators because the administrators are new, and when we try to tell them that the policies are not enforceable, they don't listen. And they go out and try to establish a policy, and then when they try to enforce it doesn't work. We don't get enough respect and we don't get enough support sometimes for what we are doing with this student. So that will undermine what we are trying to accomplish.

In another example, Olivia pointed out how master schedules are typically created with little regard for counselor opinion:

Scheduling is one big headache. They limit the classes so that our hands are tied. They offer AP English and AP History at the same time. The master schedule, they don’t ask guidance counselors what they think, they
just do it. You never hear, for the nine years that I’ve been here we’ve had four different schedulers, how do you think we should do the schedule, what periods do you think we should run? Special classes that should be included. They eliminate classes as they go along and expect counselors to adjust students’ schedules accordingly.

In this case, and in other examples offered by the counselors, administration failed to consult with counselors on decisions that directly impacted their daily responsibilities. Counselors’ dissatisfaction with this shared much in common with their concerns for individual policies described earlier in this section.

Counselors felt that by not consulting with them on decisions that impacted them, they were ultimately not treated as professionals. Only one respondent in this study offered an example of the way in which being included impacted her sense of professionalism. Gloria, who felt she had been included in school reform efforts, said it left her feeling like a professional:

The only time I felt like a professional in this system since I have been hired here was when I came out of that school counselor institute, and I was so moved that I actually volunteered to write an article for the newsletter. I felt so revved up, I felt so validated, because there were professionals there from the Department of Labor, State Department of Education, and from the High School Reform Team. And I said, “Wow, these people are really talking about issues, high school reform, they realize these kids need help.”
In this case, high school reform issues were being discussed at a school counselor institute. Part of Gloria’s reaction was to the consideration of counselors in school reform efforts, which is rarely the case according to this study’s key informants.

Counselors’ dissatisfaction with administrative decisions, particularly as they relate to their day-to-day work was evident during each of my conversations, with the exception of Gloria, whose work at a pilot school made her a part of the administration and thus a member of decision-making teams. Their level of frustration was elevated as they discussed the ways in which administrative decisions ultimately challenge their work with all students.

The challenges of working in an urban school, with special attention to school structures, were described by counselors through examples of school policies and practices and administrative decisions. Although the counselors recognized that in many cases policies and decisions reflected mandates from the school district, their concerns remained the same. According to the counselors, regardless of the level of “school setting,” whether it is school district or individual school, these policies and decisions that ultimately impact counselors’ work should be considered to some degree in consultation with counselors.

_Urban School Settings: Multiple Demands on Counselors’ Time_

The experience of having numerous expectations placed on them as counselors was a common topic during the interviews and reflects a reality of an urban school setting. This finding was blatantly obvious as I visited each school and watched the counselors in action while I waited in the common office area or accompanied them through part of their day. Counselors talked about the multiple demands placed on their
time in terms of playing many roles and experiencing constant interruptions. Both of these topics revealed counselors’ concern for meeting all of their students’ needs.

**Playing Multiple Roles**

When I asked the key informants to define their roles as school counselors, responses ranged tremendously. Among the answers, counselors listed the following responsibilities: attendance, personal counseling, emergency response, registering students, summer and night school programming, transcript evaluation, special education meetings, scheduling, student advocacy, suspension hearings and follow-up, test administration, career placement, collaboration with parole officers and Department of Social Services, data entry, lunchroom monitor, life and study skills teacher, academic advising, agency referrals, and college counseling. This list is not exhaustive of counselors’ responsibilities; however, it reflects, to some degree, the range of roles counselors assume. This myriad of responsibilities appears to change day-by-day, school-by-school, and counselor-by-counselor.

According to many of the counselors, they “wear so many hats” that it is difficult to describe their role in any one word:

Information provider and a lot of other things…Friend, and like I said before, social worker, nurse, doctor, priest, everything…my job and my role…chief cook and bottle washer, a little bit of everything. You know at times we’re mom and at times we’re advocates, at times we’re counselors, at times we pick up the pieces, I think we do a little bit of everything. Because I'll tell you, like I said before, they come in with so many
problems. They really, really do. There are problems that people in other
districts just have no idea that they exist.
In Linda’s response, it was clear that her role is extended to whatever a student may need
at any given time. Similarly, Gloria described a few of the specific parts she plays as a
school counselor:
  I field questions from parents, intervene in fights, help boys who are
crying, everything. I tell them that if they're pissed off at a teacher, to
come down here and vent, not to do it in the classroom. I try to teach new
behavior skills. Also, I have been spending night after night after night
here working on these transcripts because I am the only counselor.
Counselors were hard pressed to articulate their role in one or more words. They simply
felt that they responded to such a myriad of things that everyday was completely
different.
  Counselors expressed feeling overworked, which meant that they were not able to
do all that is expected of them. Counselors described taking their work home with them,
staying late into the night, and attending conferences on weekends and in the summer.
However, the concern was primarily for the amount of time it takes to complete any one
task successfully in addition to all of their responsibilities. Gladys described some of the
expectations she felt had been placed on her in addition to numerous other tasks:
  But they expect a lot of you, and it is a lot of paperwork, because we have
such a transient population, and they want us to do counseling, but we also
have to track down the kids that aren't coming to school, track down the
kids who are coming in late to school, find out why they're not coming to
school, track down kids who have like two, three, and four deficiencies and talk with them about this, talk with students who are going to make up school or what they will do. There's just a myriad of things that we have to do.

Counselors also felt that the demands precluded them from implementing new initiatives because of their multiple responsibilities. Olivia said:

I try to do my best. Although there are too many demands, there is too high a caseload and too many demands to be taken care of. We are too reactive, absolutely. And we have a developmental guidance curriculum that we are supposed to be implementing which is the bane of our existence, too. Because then we are expected to make time to go to class to be able to do these presentations, which turns out to be another demand added onto a very busy schedule.

As a result, counselors reported that they often don’t find the time to engage in developmental guidance programs or other new initiatives that might potentially assist them in their work. Counselors often felt that there were just too many things going on at one time. As Abby described it, “it just seems overwhelming sometimes how many things are coming down the pike.”

**Constant Interruptions**

When counselors talked about the multiple demands placed on them, they often referred to constant interruptions. The participants explained that one reason they experience difficulty in accomplishing any one task is the number of interruptions to their day. I witnessed this finding first hand during my interviews with the counselors. During
each of my interviews, the key informant’s phone rang on average 8-10 times. Only one of the interviews was free of any interruptions or knocking on the door. While other counselors described their need to constantly multitask, Ana saw this as an issue of interruptions:

These interruptions are very typical of our day. It is impossible to do anything here as serious as it might be without getting interrupted. Which, by the way, is one of the big issues, I don't know whether this happens so much in the suburban schools, but we are constantly interrupted by everything. The door, the phone, we now have voicemail, email...well at least voicemail keeps us from necessarily having to pick up, but it is still another duty. Vice principals calling us, teachers calling us, sending students out of class.

This sentiment absolutely was true during my interviews with counselors. Counselors felt that some of these interruptions included requests that other people might handle such as a teacher wanting to use a counselors’ phone, a student needing a copy of her schedule, or a college admissions representative requesting a copy of a student transcript. In most of these examples, the counselors expressed a desire for administrative assistance that might respond to such requests. Unfortunately, in all of the schools represented in this study, secretarial help was limited and counselors found themselves taking on many administrative tasks.

A different type of interruption that also inhibits counselors from carrying out their jobs involves administrators’ priorities. Counselors described numerous examples of
instances in which an administrator required the counselors to attend to a task despite their own priorities. Olivia shared a frustrating example of this interruption:

For example on Monday we were given a list of kids because all of a sudden the administrators decided they were opening up a new section of a class and all these kids had to be moved. So they give you all these things and it takes away from everything else. They want you to drop everything and do what they want you to do. So, now everything you had planned, too bad. I can't even say to them, “well I'll do three of them today, but I have to get to the rest of them tomorrow.” It doesn't even matter. And the principal is not one for listening.

Andrea agreed with and described how administrators’ requests compound the numerous other tasks she manages:

A lot of times you’re in the middle of doing something and then we’re called on to do menial tasks. You know you’re in the middle of something and a form has to be filled out. Or something, attendance needs to be checked out. Or a parent comes in and, the assistant principal wants to see you right now.

Both of these counselors articulated the frustrations felt by many counselors. Whether he interruption is an emergency or a phone call, the number of them greatly decreases their ability to function in their work.

As a result of the multiple demands and constant interruptions, counselors reported that multitasking is an essential requirement of the job. According to Olivia, she is adept at juggling many responsibilities:
So even though I planned something, we’re interrupted. I know that sounds crazy, but it’s also why I like it cause there are so many different things going on at the same time. So for me, there’s no problem juggling so many things. For somebody who can’t handle juggling more than two or three things, you’re not gonna make it here. You really aren’t. There’s just too many things going on at the same time…But, I don’t normally shut my door. I didn’t even take lunch usually. I eat as I go along. And that’s how I live. But it’s okay. It’s what I do.

This mention of multiple responsibilities felt overwhelming to the counselors. They all described the ways in which they attempted to manage these expectations. However, the counselors felt that this aspect of the job, regardless of the extent to which they manage it, limits counselors’ effectiveness and ability to reach all of their students.

**Urban School Settings: Negative Perceptions of Counselors**

Another characteristic of urban school settings that counselors commented on involved the negative perceptions of counselors. Counselors felt strongly that the perceptions of counselors were very poor and often misinformed. In this regard, the counselors brought up misperceptions of the role of the counselor and the lack of support for counselors.

**Misperceptions of Counselors**

Counselors’ belief that there was little regard for counselors was common throughout the interviews. This lack of regard was perceived to come primarily from school staff and administrators. It seems as though counselors felt that their colleagues
have uninformed perceptions about counselors’ responsibilities. Gladys felt the overall perception of counselors was very poor.

I'll tell you in two sentences, that we do nothing, and that we're really not worth the money that we're getting paid. I think they still have that old perception that we sit at our desks, read the paper, get coffee, and drink coffee.

Counselors described feeling as though because they don’t have 30 students in front of them, as teachers do, they are perceived as having nothing to do.

Counselors believed these misperceptions result from people’s lack of familiarity with what counselors do. Ana agreed and felt that a lack of understanding was behind these perceptions:

I think it is a lack of understanding of our role. They don't really understand what we do. They think we are in here pushing papers around. And believe it or not, they still think we have a cushy job. I don't know how they could possibly think that with the demands that we have, but nobody seems to realize that we have this huge load of kids who come and go, whose needs are very diverse and difficult to meet at times, and there is very little recognition for what we do. Basically they think we are very lucky because we have a phone, we have an office, we can close the door and we can drink coffee. And it is the same foolish stuff that was going on when I came here over 20 years ago. And these ideas continue to go on.

Olivia picked this theme out of the preliminary findings as most important to her:
The one thing that I picked up was, and it’s probably true with suburban as well, is that a lot of people don’t have a clue what we’re doing. They have no clue, teachers or administration. I mean even the administrators don’t have a clue. They don’t understand how much you have to do in a day.

Counselors offered many thoughts as to why their colleagues might not be aware of the multiple demands placed on them. However, the common speculation was that negative perceptions of counselors were a consequence of a lack of understanding about what counselors’ responsibilities entail.

Counselors also believed that some of these misconceptions persisted after years of ineffective counselors who earned a bad reputation. Linda explained that how the history of poor reputation is difficult to counter:

Over the years, guidance counselors have gotten such a bad reputation; teachers leaving the classroom, not wanting to do any work, and there have been some who leave and put their feet up on the desk and do virtually nothing. So when somebody comes in, or you say, "I'm a guidance counselor" [They say], “Do you go out and read the newspaper all day?” I don't. And I think in this building, we have all worked hard to revamp the guidance office, to give it a new face, show them what we do, and get students to come back.

Like Linda, Andrea feels the history of counselors remain:

The perceptions of counselors is that we’re tired of teaching in the classroom so we want to just sit back and do nothing all day. That is the
perception. Historically that was what guidance counselors here did when I first started working here. And you can ask anyone in the department. In order to counter this history, Heather described her effort to be more professional by referring to herself as a school counselor rather than a guidance counselor.

My degree is as a school counselor, so it drives me crazy. Because I'm the school counselor who provides the academic component and the social component, you know…we comply to social work services…But I just think that term is so old and it's just, and it's not meaningful to the role of school counselor. I think it means an eighty-give year old, gray-haired, bunned woman behind the desk, so I always sign my things “school counselor.”

Although the participants agreed that there were many ineffective counselors who were in the position for the wrong reasons, they felt the history, combined with less committed counselors contributed to misperceptions about what counselors do. Ultimately, despite counselors’ hard work and large workload, the counselors believe negative perceptions of counselors persist.

**Lack of Support for Counselors**

Counselors additionally felt that the perceptions of counselors influenced administrators’ support for them. This finding surfaced during the first round of interviews; however, counselors further reinforced it during the second round of interviews when they were asked to identify which of the preliminary findings they felt reflected their overall experience.
All of the participants in this study felt their supervisors did not understand what they were doing, which made it unlikely that they were supported in their work. Ana described how a lack of administrative support in reference to student complaints was demoralizing:

We don't get enough respect and we don't get enough support sometimes for what we are doing with this student. So that will undermine what we are trying to accomplish. For instance a student will go down to the board level or even our administrative level and will complain that we have led them astray, which isn't so. They are covering up for their own lack of work ethic, let's say, and rather than the administrator saying I'll look into it and get back to it, they act as if what the student is saying is true. And that is very demoralizing. It used to be that we would be called down to the meeting, and then we would be told the student is here saying that they didn't receive this information. And then we could say, “Look, this is how we started, and this year we met already once for the graduation contract, twice to fill out the SAT application, so that fact that the student didn't take the SAT was very unfortunate and a great concern for me because that will preclude him from applying to a four year university,” and then they'll go, “oh.”

In this example, the public display of disrespect, combined with the lack of appreciation for the work the counselor had done was disheartening.
Counselors additionally provided examples of administrators’ decisions that reflected a lack of support for counselors. For Judy, personnel decisions made by administrators have the effect of making her feel undervalued:

I think there are so many other priorities right now that guidance is the least. Here I don't know that it is valued that much. Because number one we would have more counselors I think. I think there would have been more - I know at [another school] there are more counselors and two social workers - we don't have that.

The participants also felt that recent layoffs of school counselors further reveal administrators’ failure to understand the important role counselors’ play for students. For example, even though Karen admitted that she felt respected, she still felt somewhat devalued relative to teachers:

I think she values us being there as part of the school, but I don't think we are as important to her as the teachers…I see it as, when it comes to cuts, she would rather cut a counselor…So, if someone has to go…because I think there is some downtime here, and they see you in that downtime. They don't see you swamped.

In both of these examples, similar to administrative decisions, counselors felt that they were not a priority of the administration and were rarely regarded as professionals.

As with other aspects of this study, there was one counselor who did feel supported by her administrator. In Gloria’s case, she described that her administrator’s support was the single driving force behind her desire to do a good job:
He values my opinion and he respects my professional opinion and because of that, I don't mind working hard because I know my results are going to be valued. Whereas at my other sites, I didn't get that. Not even from my department chair. Never mind the principal. I didn't even feel valued as a counselor by my department chair...I don't have any other counselors in the department but I don't feel alone because I know he's principal always there. And he has actually said that he will support me even when I'm wrong. You can't get anything better than that…I don't have many resources. I don't have heat in my office but what I do is make sure that I take it home with me and do it at home. I don't have another counselor but I have the ability to make the decision as to what's most important for me to do that day because my boss won't come down on me. Whereas at other placements, people would not respect the fact that I made that decision.

Again, in Gloria’s case, her work at a pilot school meant that her school was site managed and the administrative structure was quite different. For example, Gloria expressed that she is quite involved in the decision-making in her school. However, this quote reflects the importance of administrative support for counselors’ motivation.

In many of their comments, counselors described their feeling devalued in their school. When they discussed negative perceptions of counselors and the lack of support for counselors, they appeared frustrated by this reality in an urban school setting.
Urban School Settings: Potential Outcomes

As a result of dysfunctional school structures, multiple demands placed on counselors, and low perceptions that counselors feel pervade their school buildings, participants described three adverse outcomes: (a) the inability to build relationships with students; (b) the need to perform professional triage; and (c) attempts to create their own methods to reach students. Regarding professional triage and creating methods, counselors described their efforts to mitigate the potential negative consequences of working in an urban school setting.

Relationship Building

Counselors routinely expressed that an unfortunate consequence of dysfunctional school structures and limited counselor-student interaction was the inability to build relationships with their students. In many examples it was clear that counselors established relationships with their students in spite of the school practices and the lack of structure in place described earlier; however, the counselors believed that these cases were too rare considering the number of students who needed their help.

Counselors felt that policies that limited their time with students, the lack of structure in place, and the multiple demands placed on them resulted in a lack of time for building relationships. For example, Andrea described how she ends up neglecting some students because of her multiple responsibilities and high caseload:

I think it is too much because you really don’t have the time, I think having three hundred is too many because you can’t form those relationships. Like I have two senior homerooms and I form relationships with them because I am making sure everyone is going to graduate if they
pass everything this year, so you form those relationships. But then like
my ninth graders are neglected because I’m spending all my time with the
seniors right now and some time with the juniors making sure that they’re
not failing. I mean you can handle it. You can handle whatever you’re
given. But I think it could be lower, I think it should be lower so that we
can have the more personal relationship.

Andrea’s words captured her colleagues’ sentiments when she stressed how hard it is to
build relationships with her students as a result of demanding caseloads.

Many of the job responsibilities that have been presented in this chapter rely on
counselors to provide students some degree of personal attention in effort to build
relationships with them. For example, counselors described the importance of building
relationships with students in order to be effective in postsecondary planning. Ana shared
a poignant example of the importance of investing time to build relationships with
students:

It is hard to build the rapport when you are just calling them about tasks,
and you not getting the chance to really know who they are. And I will
give you an example. I was working with a senior the other day, who has
been my counselee for four years, and we were talking about the fact that
he wants to be an auto mechanic, and the schools were he could go. I
pulled out a description of the program that offers Toyota training in auto
mechanics and General Motors training, which got us talking about cars.
And I spent a good 20 minutes talking to him about cars. The woman next
door could hear me, she is not a counselor, she is the transcript secretary.
And when I got up to go out after he left, she said “wow, you talked to him about cars for 20 minutes.” I said “yes, you know what, that is the best conversation I have had with him in 4 years, and that built more rapport than I have built over the last 3 years in 20 minutes.” I could tell that there was a breakthrough, in the way that he was looking at me and I was looking at him. But, it does not happen frequently because I am pressed for time.

In this case, Ana described how her ability to connect with that student relied on her ability to spend time with him and understand his goals.

Aside from directly facilitating counselors’ work, Karen and Abby pointed out two additional reasons that building relationships is critical to student success. Karen felt that new state mandates might soon require counselors know their students better:

I think building relationships is extremely important because of the state regulations that are going to require that every student have a planning portfolio…with the No Child Left Behind, all low funded schools are now going to have more counselors than in the past. But given those expectations on us I think it's going to be important for people to understand what our role is, and if I'm going to be responsible for helping a student do planning for a portfolio I have to be able to spend time with them during the school day and right now there is no time for that.

Abby believes that building relationships has the potential to serve students once they enroll in college, thus placing more importance on her ability to make time for students:
But I do hope that they learn from their relationship with their counselor here that there are people, there aren’t guidance counselors in college but there are college counselors, there are people to help. There will be mentoring, tutoring, and all sorts of other things that they can take advantage of.

These two examples reveal the need for counselors’ ability to build relationships with their students. Unfortunately, the counselors in this study explained that they encounter difficulty in building such relationships as a result of their school settings.

**Professional Triage**

As a consequence of the numerous expectations on counselors’ time, the participants described performing a sort of “professional triage” with their students. In other words, counselors reported that they prioritize their time in order to respond to those students who are most critical first. Unfortunately, this professional triage means that some things are sacrificed. According to Judy, time with some students falls by the wayside:

> I feel like as I said before, that I’m putting out fires and doing paperwork. Then, relationship, compassion, and helping are absent…When students come, it’s like having little Chihuahuas biting at your heels, because they feel they are bothering you because you’re in the middle of all this work, but yet you really want to give them attention because what they have to say has value.
Although counselors realized that some things were being sacrificed, they felt powerless to change anything. They felt that they were always responding to crises and were unable to attend to all the calls for help.

According to the counselors, certain groups of students are sacrificed in order to attend to pressing issues. One group of students that gets sacrificed, according to some of the counselors, are the high achieving students. Gladys expressed her concern for this group of students:

And I think a lot of times the kids who do well, and who do come everyday, they're like floundering around, they are on their own. And we're really focusing in on the kids who are not doing what they're supposed to be doing. That's how I feel sometimes. It's just backwards. You know that they're high achieving students bright enough to get through the day on their own, and they very much know that there are certain requirements that you have to meet in order to go from one grade to another. And it seems that we just never counsel these kids. We don't counsel them enough. It's the kids who always get into trouble. The kids who need counseling because the vice principal said that he swore at a teacher, or he cut the teacher's class. We're always dealing with the negative - that's what I think.

Along similar lines, it seems as though counselors respond to older students first. According to Debbie, the ninth graders suffer the most in this regard:

It is with your freshmen and sophomores, who come from sometimes appalling backgrounds that you are going to lose. You just know you are
going to lose them. And you lose them, because you don’t have the time for them. You take care of your load from the top down. Then, the freshmen don’t get taken over. That’s it. And half of them are gone next year. And I know that is a very cynical way of looking at it, it’s appalling, but that’s what happens.

Counselors reported feeling terrible about those students that they are not able to reach. Because of counselors’ commitment to their students, they choose to sacrifice other aspects of their work to the degree that they are able. For Linda, she sacrifices the paperwork:

I sacrifice a lot of the paperwork, and I take it home; not always, but I’ll sacrifice some of the paperwork…Yes, absolutely. If I can’t take them [students] home, then I’ll take it [paperwork] home, or I’ll stay an extra hour. I mean, I’d rather stay an extra hour here and get it done, and leave at 4:30, than to tell a student, “You’re in crisis? See you tomorrow. I don’t have the time.”

As a lead counselor, Abby agreed that there is demand for paperwork in the job, however, like Linda, she described making a conscious choice to prioritize students as much as possible, “The urgent stuff gets to them and all of it gets pulled aside if a kid comes first.”

During the second round of interviews, when counselors reviewed the preliminary findings of this study, the participants were fond of the term “professional triage.” They absolutely expressed frustration that their work is conducted in this matter, but they felt the term was true to their experiences.
Creating Their Own Structures

In spite of school policies and practices that limit counselor-student interaction and the absence of structures in place to facilitate counselors’ efforts, participants reported creative attempts to reach students, relay college information, and do preventative counseling and outreach. It seems as though the counselors found themselves working around dysfunctional school structures in order to make a solid effort to reach their students.

Entering classrooms and developing curriculum for classroom use is one approach counselors used to create time to meet with students. For example, in order to increase counselors’ time with students, the counselors from Warren High School reached a compromise with the principal to enter English classes. The guidance department created and implemented a curriculum that covers life skills, study skills, career exploration, and college planning. The curriculum reflects the elements of a developmental guidance program. According to Andrea, by going into classrooms, she is able to reach students who would otherwise not reach out to her:

And I think by going into classes and having students be able to put a face to the voice and a face to the name, being able to come down here and have access to us is really helpful. But in classes, I spend a lot of time with the kids that don’t ask a question, you know. Asking them, “well what do you want to do? What do you want to talk about doing?” Maybe there’s something that I know about that you’re interested in that we could talk about or whatever. So you’re kind of trying to draw them out. And then you know, try to get those kids to start coming down and ask questions.
By entering classrooms, counselors are able to share information with more students at one time, rather than individually. However, not all of the counselors have begun to use classrooms as a means to reach students.

Counselors also develop their own collaborations with teachers in order to get around policies limiting their time with students. Debbie explained how important these informal collaborations are to her work:

Last year, we worked with seniors in a certain teacher’s class. But now, that teacher is gone, so now, one of the problems is that we have a change in staff. We were very close to the teacher last year, so it worked. So, now I have to cope with the new teacher and she is sort of getting used to her job, so who knows. I mean, and everyone, everybody is very territorial about how much they give up.

Counselors’ relationships with teachers allow them to use classroom time to connect with students. However, it appears that these informal collaborations are subject to change when there is personnel turnover.

Whether it is through classroom teacher collaborations or curriculum used in classes, the counselors have, in many cases, taken the initiative to create their own methods to reach students in spite of the consequences described. Some counselors are still in the process of creating these systems, but reported during the second interview that they would like more opportunities to hear how counselors are responding to limited time with students and to share curriculum ideas.

According to the eleven participants, the urban school settings in which they work potentially undermine counselors’ efforts to meet their students’ needs. School structures
that enforce problematic school policies and impose administrative decisions without regard for the influence on counselors, result in extra work on the part of counselors. Furthermore, the multiple responsibilities placed on counselors, combined with negative perceptions of these professionals force counselors to work in substandard environments, which is not conducive to helping students.

**Complex College Planning Process**

It should come as no surprise to those familiar with the college access and retention literature that the urban counselors in this study described the college planning process as multifaceted relative to their counterparts at suburban or wealthier school districts. Although some of these findings are less shocking than others, the counselors’ perceptions as to how these issues impact their work is quite interesting. It appears that the college planning process is made more complex in an urban environment due to student and family issues. As a result of student and family issues, counselors experience outcomes that they perceive as markedly different from suburban counselors in terms of the following four areas: expanded degree of influence; need for early college planning efforts; potential to be enabling; and heightened concerns for retention. These perceived outcomes are discussed following a description of how the counselors believe student and family issues foster a complex college counseling experience.

**Complex College Planning Process: Student Issues**

When the counselors discussed the college counseling aspect of their work, they uniformly pointed out those student issues that made this process difficult. Six topics related to student issues emerged: (a) expectations; (b) college knowledge; (c) academic and language skills; (d) apathy; and (e) personal issues. While the counselors in this study
were quick to point out that they realize some of these elements may be present in suburban schools, they felt that they are constantly hit with these issues, in ways unlikely elsewhere. Although it will be discussed later in the findings section of this study, it is worth mentioning here that the counselors felt these student issues also constituted what the counselors loved most about their work. Also noteworthy is that when counselors discuss the student issues that complicate college counseling, they are quick to note that there are those exceptions within their groups of students, often referred to as the ‘unusual ones,’ due to the small number of students who do not fit the characteristics the counselors described.

**Expectations**

Students’ expectations for postsecondary education were of critical concern for the counselors in this study. Counselors believed that their students held low postsecondary expectations, unrealistic professional aspirations, and little understanding of educational requirements. For starters, the counselors described the ways in which their students held very low expectations for higher education. In some cases, counselors felt their students did not believe they were qualified to go to college. According to Olivia, “A lot of students don’t know. They either don’t think they’re smart enough or don’t know how to get into school. We help them a lot with that. We help them with their choices.” In such cases, counselors felt students’ low expectations were not warranted.

According to counselors, students often need reinforcement that they are indeed qualified. Linda shared a conversation in which her student, who did not believe her that he was college material, was convinced after attending a college fair:
I think a lot of students, even though you tell them they can go to college, they don’t believe you. That’s why I think the college fairs are so important, because it’s almost like they hear what you say, but when it’s coming from somebody from a college, I hear, “Hey Miss, you were right. I really can go to college. So and so told me, from this particular college, that I can do this, this, and this. Hey, Miss, I can go to college.” And I don’t get offended, because I think sometimes they think “Yeah, Miss, you just say that because you just want to make sure we get there.” When the college rep says the same thing, it’s more meaningful.

Apparently counselors find creative ways to encourage students to consider applying to college when their own encouragement is insufficient.

Aside from those students who feel they are not qualified for college, counselors explained that they encounter students who do not aspire to attend college. Regardless of the possible reasons, students are resistant to the idea of college. Judy expressed how she responds to student resistance:

And you still get an awful, I think we get a lot of kids, I don't know if the other counselors say this, who say this, “I don't want to go to college.” So then it is our challenge to really talk them out of that, to explain how important it is. “You have to go to college. You certainly have to go to something after high school.”

Counselors believed that as a result of low expectations, they often find themselves trying to convince students to consider applying to college.
Students’ unrealistic professional goals were also cited as student expectations that complicated college counseling. This finding, consistent across all five schools and eleven counselors, refers to counselors’ belief that many of their students do not hold realistic professional goals, which influences their postsecondary plans in one of two ways: students feel their goals do not require higher education or students do not realize the amount or type of education required for such fields. Abby described her early college planning with ninth graders and their early career goals:

It has been my experience that ninth graders come in, and when you say, “What would you like to do after high school? What are your plans for life? What would you like to be when you grow up?” You get absolutely nothing, a big blank stare and a shrug of the shoulders. Or you get, “I want to go to Yale and be a brain surgeon.” Or you get “I want to play football in the NFL or basketball in the NBA.” We kind of expect those things. But really, seldom is there a kid who says, I want to be an accountant and I know the three colleges that I'd like to apply to that have excellent programs in finance. You don't get that too often.

Although Ana similarly recognized that ninth graders might lack the maturity for a more thoughtful expectation, she described how, despite their age, this was still discouraging:

I remember being very frustrated when doing course selection with the ninth graders because a lot of students told me they wanted to be professional sports players. And then I would say, “Well, you are interested in basketball? No. Are you on the team? No. Are you playing on your own? No.” And so in fact, once I explored whether they were serious
about this, it was just something they just threw out. Now those were the ninth graders so they are very young and they don't have the maturity perhaps to think about their occupational choice. But still that was very frustrating because a huge number, I'd say between ten and twelve percent were just throwing professional player out there. Although these examples depict young students holding unrealistic expectations, upper class students seem to hold equally unrealistic expectations in relation to the amount and type of education required for some of their plans. Ana detailed one of her experiences trying to educate a student in this regard:

Another thing is that a lot of kids will throw out occupations that require many years of study, like medicine for instance. It seems to be very easy to say...I want to be a doctor. And then I will pause and say, “OK, you have set a very high goal, do you know what it takes to get there? No.” And then we will go step by step on, “you are going to go to college, you want to prepare to go to medical school. And then after that there is going to be an internship in residency, have you thought about that? No, not really.” So I think some students who haven't been very serious about their planning will throw out something that is totally unrealistic.

These examples were common among the counselors when they spoke of students in all grades. According to the counselors in this study, students who have not thought about or articulated their own goals often held aspirations for professions that they had thought very little about.
**College Knowledge**

Concern for the amount of college knowledge possessed by their students also surfaced during the interviews. In the counselors’ views, their students’ limited knowledge about college and the college planning process meant that counselors spend a great deal of their time educating students about basic postsecondary education facts. Judy describes her primary goal as educating students about their opportunities, “I think they just don’t have enough information because they also have no concept of what it is all about and, really, it is a difficult situation because we at least want them to know what their opportunities are.” All of the counselors in this study agreed that their students have too little of an understanding of “what college is all about.” In this regard counselors referred to everything from entrance requirements to the benefits of a college education. Gloria summed up the sentiments of her colleagues when she offered this statement about her students’ college knowledge:

> I think, primarily, they don't know the game of college. They don't see what a college education does for adults. I don't think they have enough role models in their lives who have been through college, who know how to talk the culture and the climate of college to them. So therefore it is like a student who has never ridden on a train and is asked to write about a train. So we have to educate them I believe, at a very young age, probably in middle school, as to what a college is all about. So they know the terminology, the expectations, the rewards, the negative consequences of not going, the positive consequences of going, the sacrifices...and they know what they might have available to them as disadvantaged and
minority students that nobody perhaps has informed them because their parents are working overtime, they might have one parent, they might even not have a parent, they might be living with brothers, sisters.

This concern that students have not fully internalized the benefits of securing a college degree was pervasive throughout my discussions with counselors.

Familiarity with college seems to include basic information about what to expect living on a college campus. Abby recalled an example of a student who was headed off to college without basic supplies for college:

The people came from this scholarship program last Friday and told us that one of our kids who won the scholarship last June … was assigned a mentor. The mentor called him up, and asked him if he had bought everything that he needed to go off to the dorm. And the student didn’t have a clue that he needed to buy sheets, towels, and things like that, even though it turned out that the university, of course, had sent a list, this is what you will need to bring, but I don’t know, he hadn’t…the mentor was horrified that the kid was about to show up on campus with no sheets and no towels. And these are the kinds of things that, no one in this kid’s world, he’s from Bosnia I think, would know that… that college knowledge.

Whether it was basic information about what to bring to college or a concept of what college might actually be like, it was clear from the key informants that their students require a lot of encouragement and education about higher education. Andrea reiterated
the attitude of her colleagues when she described how critical it was to provide basic information to her students:

My role is to educate them and expand their ideas about different careers, different job opportunities, different colleges, and different programs. Information is so important. Our goal is teach them about higher ed, college, or a technical school or whatever, but they don’t really have the knowledge of what a technical school is. When I do the assembly, I have a sheet that I give them that has a glossary of different terms: scholarship, grant, the difference between a technical school and a community college, or a Bachelors degree and Masters Degree. Even just that basic information, they’re not aware what a BS is or a BA or an MSW and those kinds of things. So we are, a lot of times, just big information providers.

In some cases, counselors share their own college experiences. This was especially true for Andrea, who felt that as black woman who lived near many of her students, her students could relate to her and her accomplishments:

I think another thing is that, because I’m black, a lot of students see me… and I explain to them you know, I was born and raised right here, I had to take out loans to go to college too. See, you can do this, you can achieve things. And a lot of our kids haven’t had contact with this college experience, or people that have been successful. A lot of Latino students haven’t. I think that they see that I’ve achieved different things and I’ve accomplished different things and they can somewhat relate. So I think that has an influence on some.
Counselors described various techniques that they used to inculcate college knowledge in their students. At times it is personal, and at other times, they rely on the relationships they have with students.

Counselors cited numerous examples of their students’ limited understanding of college and the impact it has on them as professionals.

**Academic and Language Skills**

Students’ academic and language skills also present unique challenges to the college planning process, according to the counselors. Students’ academic skills include their basic skills as well as their performance on SAT’s and other standardized tests. Karen noted how, in her opinion, students’ low skills influenced the college choice process:

Their low skills…Absolutely, I think they are limited where they go and who will take them because of their skills. Although, [local college] just started this College Readiness program that starts in September and goes until December, and then kids could probably enroll in January after they have built up their skills. So, that's all the students who did not necessarily meet the academic requirements…they go in September and that's good, and that helps, and that gives them structure and support.

However, Karen also pointed out that those types of programs are hard to find and at times quite competitive. Students’ academic skills often mean low SAT scores, which obviously limits to some degree where students will be accepted to college.

Along similar lines, the counselors believed students’ language skills also made the college planning process a challenge for numerous reasons. First, students for whom
English is not their first language struggle with the exams necessary for college admission. Debbie described the ways in which these students are at a disadvantage to begin with:

…English is their second language. So consequently, right off the bat, they are buffalaoed on their SATs, they don't do well on those kind of tests because they just don't have the internal tree to hang everything on. When it is not your first language, it is hard.

Also, on the topic of tests, counselors pointed out that while some colleges accept the ELPT, other require the TOEFL, which is quite expensive for their students.

Furthermore, students’ recent immigrant status also puts them at a disadvantage due to their limited language skills. Ana explained how students new to this country are not prepared to attend postsecondary education without the assistance of transitional programs:

Because we are a high school, a lot of these kids arrive in grades 9-12, and the later they arrive in their school program, the harder it becomes to provide them with what they need to prepare for college. So then that means that a lot of times we are looking at transitional programs in college, where they can continue to develop their English skills in an ESL program to prepare for either the 2 year or 4 year college experience, but at a higher level of challenge, whether it be English or other academic challenges…For instance, I have a student that's coming later…She really wants to study law in the long term, but she came to this country in the 11th grade. ESL is the primary push. She went to summer school to try to
enrich her preparation, but there are rules that we have to live with in the preparation in ESL. Then when she graduates from here, she'll go to a 2 year program and continue in ESL, and then she is looking at what are the steps to get her to where she wants to go ultimately to prepare to become a lawyer.

It seems as though sometimes counselors’ hands are tied when it comes to providing their students with the best opportunities.

On a different note, counselors from one school, where there is no designated bilingual counselor, work with students and families with whom they are unable to communicate. According to Andrea, “nine out of ten parents who come in to see me don’t speak English, so I’m hunting for an interpreter.” Likewise, when it comes to students, counselors also rely on an interpreter. Heather experiences this with students who speak both Spanish and Bosnian at her school:

Remember too that I have students and I can't speak to them because I don't speak Spanish. I always have someone I can rely on to translate for me. Sometimes it's a student…we did have a wonderful family resource aid who has just moved, but I can always get somebody in to translate and Bosnian as well. We have one faculty member who speaks Bosnian. So it's a challenge, but I understand a lot more Spanish, but I can't speak it. It's frustrating; I really need to go take a conversational Spanish class.

Counselors from this same school agreed that the absence of a designated bilingual counselor presented additional challenges for them with regard to language.
Apathy

Student apathy refers to the counselors’ concern that many of their students are not particularly motivated to pursue higher education. Counselors interpreted low motivation as students’ inability to follow up on things necessary for college and disregard for deadlines. Although it was understood by the counselors that student apathy is inextricably bound to the other topics cited in this section, counselors described the ways in which this compounded the difficulty they faced in the college planning process. Counselors felt there is often apathy on the students’ part, which prevents them from following up on things. For example, Ana recalled how a student failed to follow up on an appointment to discuss graduation:

I had a girl who was here a period or two ago. I sent her four appointments for her senior contract, and she had not come. And I had to call her class to get her once, and then I had been upstairs on Friday to get her out of class and she wasn't there. So we also don't get the cooperation from the students that we need because they don't take their graduation as seriously as they should. There's, unfortunately, quite a lot of apathy.

Gladys described a similar frustration with those students who don’t follow through:

The kids who say all right Miss, I'm going to focus on it tonight, and I'll bring it in to you tomorrow. And I give them an appointment slip to see me, and they don't come and see me the next day I have to track them down, and I'm taking time away from those students who did do what they were supposed to do, and did bring me in their applications and recommendation sheets that I have to fill out. But it's those kids who
sometimes - and you always have the kids that don't follow through - and you always have the kids that ‘yes’ you to death, and they just don't do anything. So I think that's really the hardest.

Many of the counselors in this study felt that students’ failure to take the initiative in many instances only made their work harder, reporting that they spend significant time hunting students down and following up with them.

Students’ inability to follow up, specifically on necessary prerequisites for college enrollment, was particularly troubling for counselors. For example, in the following quote Ana described her frustration with students who failed to take the SAT, despite her planning with them:

Last Friday was the deadline for the SAT, which we are working to get them signed up for. The application is difficult for them; getting them to complete the SAT application, etc. We have fee waivers, because our students are very needy. So we give them the fee waiver, make sure they get signed up. And then even at that, we don't have as many students take the SAT, when they are supposed to, as we should because they don't always make it to the test on the day of the test. It makes it very hard.

Abby shared a similar frustration:

We get kids signed up for the SAT, which can be a challenge also. I just found out about one of my students who I helped fill out the application, Friday was the deadline for signing up for the test. She left here with it in her hand, all she had to do was put a stamp on it and put it in a mailbox, and she didn't. So now we have to get it back, change the dates, erase the
bubble, change it to another date, change the labels, plus she can’t take it until the next test.

Both Abby and Ana found this frustrating, not because of the work it required of them, but because of the implications it had for students’ likelihood of being accepted to college.

It seems that student low levels of motivation influences students’ ability to complete college applications and other such requirements for college. As a result of what counselors perceive as student apathy, counselors have to add another dimension to their work, motivating students to want to go to college. Because the students’ aspirations for postsecondary education appeared to be low, counselors carry the additional burden of encouraging those aspirations. Judy described the difficulty she faces in trying to get students to complete a college application:

It's very difficult. It's very difficult to get them to apply - a lot of what doesn't happen here is because of their lack of knowledge, not because they wouldn't want to work if they knew there were all these things out there. You know, for instance, you can tell them, you need to get good grades if you want to go on to college, but they have no idea what that is even like, so it's sort of this nebulous goal that they are working towards, which doesn't mean anything, so -- it's like, if you can't tell me why I should do it, or show me why I should do it, why should I do it?

Many of the counselors echoed this experience and specifically how, at times, they are countering years of low expectations set for students.
**Personal Issues**

Another variable that counselors encounter when they attempt to encourage college attendance with their students is the amount of personal “baggage” students bring with them to school. Counselors were well aware of the amount of stress their students carry daily with them to school and the impact of this on college planning. Olivia pointed out how difficult it can be for a student to get through a normal school day:

A lot of them come in with not only a chip on their shoulder, but a redwood on their shoulder. I mean some of them just to come to school every day and try to get through the day, and some of the problems that they're leaving behind are just unbelievable, and I give them a lot of credit for persevering and trying to make it through the day. But when you've got problems at home, it's difficult. If you've got a mother who's an alcoholic and a father who's a drug dealer beating the mother up, how do you come into school and really think clearly. You can't think clearly. You can't focus in on what the teacher is talking about. It's really hard. I know how I feel if I have a bad day. Sometimes I can't focus right.

Andrea described just a few of the things on students’ minds when they come to school:

We have a lot of students with kids. We have students who are married. We have a lot of Jehovah Witnesses, where education, after high school – that's it, you don’t go. So, a lot of different things come into play. Some kids just have a lot of responsibilities. After school they’re picking up younger siblings, and in the morning they’re dropping them off at school or at the bus stop. Mom is working 3-11 so the student is the parent. So
going away to college or going to college is not even in their thoughts. Right now they are worried about day care. You know, ‘am I going to be able to get to school on time.’ These are very big things. We have a chunk of students too who are living on their own. And then you have the other group that is in the care of the county.

However, knowing this personal information about a student relies on counselors’ ability to build relationships with their students. This relationship then results in counselors’ increased capacity to see the big picture with students and assist them more holistically.

The myriad of responsibilities students bring with them to school force counselors to prioritize how they service them. Uniformly, counselors felt their students’ personal needs often pushed college planning aside in order to address more pressing issues. For example, Andrea felt that in a conversation with a student about college plans she learned more about the student, which turned the conversation towards getting him support services:

And that’s the other thing about personalizing and being able to talk to kids individually. Cause you end up talking to a kid and you realize, wow, this kid lives practically alone. Mom is never home, it is just him and his little brother. And they’re fending for themselves. College probably isn’t what I want to be shoving down this kid’s throat, but let’s get him some support systems. That’s not driven home enough.

While some of the personal issues students bring to school do not preclude counselors from addressing postsecondary education planning, it often restricts the choices students make about college or the variables counselors need to consider in the process. For
example, counselors described that knowing a student was also a teen parent meant that they needed to look at schools close to home or those that provide housing for teen parents and their babies. Regardless of the issue brought by the student, the amount and severity of student issues absolutely added a new dimension to the college planning process for urban counselors.

Other Factors

In addition to individual issues that students bring, there are also larger societal influences that contribute to the complex nature of college planning in an urban high school. In interviews with counselors, they brought up issues that suburban counselors may never face, or witness in smaller degrees. For example, in schools with large immigrant populations, counselors often are positioned to assist students without United States citizenship, which absolutely affects their ability to pay for college. Heather recalled how sometimes even this information is difficult to come across:

If they don't have the proper documentation they cannot apply for financial aid. And sometimes you run into this...clearly the only time you are going to ask or discuss that, I don't ask for it, is when we go into the FAFSA discussions and that sometimes is shared with us at that point. And then you ask what you think is appropriate, and they don’t know if they should tell you and it’s, it’s hard. Yeah. We had one young lady without her papers and I had no idea, she'd been here since kindergarten, so it never even dawned on me.
In addition to citizenship issues, urban schools experience urban realities such as safety issues or gang presence. Debbie described the kinds of things students encounter when attending an urban school:

We’ve got an awful lot of juvenile delinquents; we have an awful lot of kids who have been in trouble with the law, or in gangs. We have all the ills of the inner city here. I think we do a pretty good job of keeping this school safe. We haven't had any major incidences in a long while. We, I don't want to say discipline is lax, because it is not, but we do have a lot of disrespectful incidents, that kind of thing, but that's going to happen all over too.

These two examples, citizenship issues and urban school realities, seemed to counselors to require another layer of knowledge for their work with students.

These sub-themes are not exhaustive of the student issues that counselors believed to contribute to the complexity of the college planning process; however, these are the issues most brought up by counselors, as influencing their experiences with college counseling.

*Complex College Planning Process: Family Limitations*

My conversations with counselors revealed that they perceive families’ limited experiences with higher education and the process of applying to college as instrumental in students’ development of low expectations, apathy, and college knowledge. The key informants in this study shared experiences they have had with families, which they feel hinder the college application process for their students. More specifically, counselors suggested family knowledge and experience, family economics, and family support had
the potential to influence the college planning process in a negative way for students. As a result, counselors are responsible for educating parents as well as students, thereby adding yet another dimension to their jobs.

**Knowledge and Experience**

Counselors believed their students’ families lacked experience with postsecondary education, which limited their ability to help their children through the process. According to counselors, students’ lack of information is frequently attributed to family. In this quote, Andrea described how being the first in the family to attend college influences students’ educational aspirations:

Background influences. The biggest influence is that most or a lot of the kids that I see, they’re the first in their family to graduate from high school. So they have no frame of reference to higher education or what it’s all about. I have one student who, I was sitting with, she is a senior, she’s never gotten anything but A’s and she’s in a program called the A-Plus Program which is a computer systems program. She can actually walk out of here and get a $35,000 job. She just she said to me, “I don’t want to be in that program anymore.” I asked her “What are you going to do next year?” And she said, “I’m gonna work.” And, you know, so now all the motors are running and I said, “Well, you know, you have the opportunity academically to get a lot of merit scholarships, academic money from colleges if the price is a concern.” So, I’m still working on getting her to do that. I did get her to take her SATs so we’ll see…There’s no one in the family that they’ve seen go on to college and get a degree and whatnot. So
that’s the most difficult part of it. Or that’s the thing that keeps them down the most...So I would probably say the biggest influence on them not going to college is just the family.

As Andrea expressed, counselors compensate for this lack of family experience by encouraging students to consider options they would not have thought of otherwise and providing alternative options.

Counselors also describe taking on the additional role of educating parents. According to Abby, her job includes “working with the families as well as the kids too, because they are learning right along with the student about the whole process.” In addition to educating parents about the college planning process, some counselors revealed their need to educate parents how to support their student. Gladys conveyed how important it was for parents to help their students prepare for the SAT. She described telling parents that they should make sure their children eat a good breakfast, get plenty of sleep and arrive at the test site early.

However, despite efforts to educate the parents, counselors continue to struggle with this. Debbie expressed how their efforts often go underutilized:

We also have information nights for parents to come in. The thing is that the parents who already know quite a bit are the parents who come. And the parents who don't know anything are the parents we can't reach. So, then you go over all of this anyway.

Olivia echoes this concern, but described how this is not specific to the college planning process:
I don't think the parents are as involved, quite frankly. And we have financial aid nights, we have open houses, we have conference days, we have all kinds of things going on. And out of 1300 kids you get 100 parents at each event. And last year at our financial aid night we had maybe 10 parents out of 250. So either they don't have the time to get involved or they don't want to get involved, I don't know which.

It seems as though counselors make numerous attempts to educate parents and provide them with the same types of information they are trying to convey to students. Counselors told me about the creative techniques they use to educate parents. In one school, the counselors talked the principal into having a college fair the same night as the high school open house. Although the counselors realized that only a small portion of parents would attend, they were hopeful that those parents would benefit from meeting with and talking to admissions counselors. Regardless of the means, counselors’ accounts of their outreach to parents appeared to be just as creative as their efforts to educate their students.

**Economics**

Counselors believed economics also played a role in families’ support for postsecondary education. For one, counselors felt that there was a significant amount of pressure on students to work. Andrea spoke of how this influence is detrimental to students’ goals:

They don’t have people at home that are talking to them about what you’re gonna do. At home it is, Where are you gonna work? You need to get a
job. So, I would probably say the biggest influence on them not going to college is just the family.

As a result of this pressure on students due to family finances, counselors relayed concern that their students’ need to work prevented them from taking advantage of programs that would otherwise assist them in planning for college. It seems as though students’ work schedules are a deterrent to staying after school for tutoring, participation in college enrichment programs, or even meeting with their counselor.

On the other hand, counselors also felt finances influenced family support for postsecondary education when it came to financial aid. It seems as though counselors believed parents often are unaware of the opportunities for financial aid and are convinced they can’t afford college for their children. Abby described how she counters families and students’ concerns about this:

Everyone is very nervous about financial aid. They say, “We can't afford college.” So that's a whole education process, that sometimes in this country it is better when you don't have a lot of money and that there is an awful lot of financial aid out there, and that you'll probably qualify for a very nice package. So financial aid is a big concern to them.

Like Abby, many of the counselors detailed their experiences with parents, especially as it related to the financial aspects of college.

Due to families’ limited economic means, counselors are often positioned to spend extra time with students looking for ways to meet the remaining financial need once financial aid has been taken into account. In this quote, Ana how she spends a great deal of time helping students meet the expected family contribution:
Well, that is another very important factor, because college costs are very expensive. And a lot of these students who come from countries where this isn't so, are not prepared to meet the academic costs that institutions in this country levy. For one thing they have to be informed of their choices, and what the costs will be, and that means that we do much more of the work that might ordinarily be done by families or by the support network that isn't present for some of our urban students. So I think that is a very big difference where the suburban students may already have parents who are familiar with the system or a different kind of support system that could provide the help, our students rely a lot on us to do it.

We work a lot with our students on earning scholarships.

As a result of their students’ low-income status, college planning becomes more elaborate due to the added pressure of students to work, limited experience with financial aid, and increased financial need.

**Support**

Somewhat related to the previous two topics, counselors also described the ways in which they perceived students’ families’ inability to support them. One example, shared by more than one counselor, was in reference to financial aid. Counselors reported that on occasion parents are reluctant to share financial documents necessary for financial aid. The counselors in this study added that in many instances, this is due to their discomfort with sharing such documents. Judy expressed this lack of trust and how it affected her:
When it is time to do financial aid and they require parent’s information, there are a lot of issues with trust. A lot of parents do not want their tax forms coming into school. So I meet with parents. I’ve met with many parents, but I think sometimes kids rely on me for stuff that I can’t provide. You know, family information and that kind of thing. And it does become like you’re pushing. I had a couple of kids whose parents refused to give them any information. These are kids who really wanted to go to school and you know you can’t get any financial aid without some sort of information. So that takes its toll also. That gets very frustrating. You know, to watch these highly motivated kids kind of floundering around.

However, there have been instances where family disagreements prevent parents from providing such documents. Linda, who felt completely helpless in a situation in which a parent’s anger precluded them from helping their child, shared this example:

There was a young woman who wanted, obviously, to go to college. She was living with her mom, and then, this was probably a year or two ago, decided she wanted to live with her dad. Her dad was remarried. Mom was very angry at that. So when it came time to fill out the college application, we needed a financial statement from mom. She refused…We had one of the other guidance counselors call, who used to be a college rep at [local community college] and he explained, this is the process…Do you know that woman said “It is her problem.” Would not give the papers to her…But they were able to work around it. And you go home sometimes, very heart broken, to think how can a parent not want the best for their
child, and yet they're children themselves...So you're dealing with, a
family, you're dealing with everything.

In the counselors’ view, the parents wanted to support their students, but they were
unfamiliar with the process, were overwhelmed with job responsibilities, and experienced
language barriers, all of which challenged their involvement in the college planning
process.

In conversations with counselors, I was surprised to hear how many of them had
developed relationships with their students’ families. Apparently, the better counselors
knew the families, the better they were able to encourage their participation in the college
planning process.

**Complex College Planning Process: Potential Outcomes**

When counselors commented on their experiences with college counseling, they
explained that as a result of student and family issues the college planning process was
complex. During interviews, the key informants provided an account of how college
counseling with urban students resulted in four potential outcomes: (a) expanded degree
of influence; (b) need for early college planning efforts; (c) potential to enable students;
and (d) heightened concern for retention. Counselors’ opinions regarding these outcomes
are detailed in this final section of the theme on complex college counseling.

**Expanded Degree of Influence**

As a result of students’ limited experience with higher education, combined with
the absence of support from family or community, counselors felt they had strong
influence on students’ decisions. Counselors’ awareness that they were compensating for
a process that might otherwise be addressed by students’ families was evident in each of
my interviews. According to many key informants, greater influence is placed on their role as college counselors due to the student’s lack of confidence and the family’s inexperience with the process. Ana summed it up when she said, “We have to do some of the job that suburban kids get at home and in their community, so this is very time consuming.” Likewise, Debbie detailed how she specifically perceives her role in terms of filling a gap:

Personally, I have a lot of influence. A lot. First of all, because I am filling a gap where there is nothing, OK? I have more influence than I would have in [local suburb] because their parents are all experienced with colleges and they have their ideas and they know everything. These kids come to me and we are like lamps to them because they haven't got the foggiest idea. We are their only resource, so it is my responsibility to help them, to assess them, to give them the best advice I can under the circumstances. To get them into the right place where they are going to have success.

When counselors commented on the degree of influence they have on students with regard to college plans, they identified the pressure that accompanies it. Although counselors recognized their students’ need for someone to assist them, counselors felt the pressure of that role at times. Heather articulated this concern:

I think the counselors are probably the biggest person in their life that has any experience with this. Sometimes I think I have too much influence, in fact. I have to keep reminding them that these are financial decisions that you are making for them.
As a result, counselors described this expanded degree of influence they have over students as “pressure.” Gloria feels that it can “be an overwhelming job at times” as a result of the pressure on counselors to provide for their students.

The counselors also reported that this degree of influence is also a product of years of building relationships with their students. Gladys recalled how relationships aid her in encouraging students to apply to college:

But they usually - by the time they’re juniors and seniors - they have confidence in me that I'm doing it for their well being, and I'm not just doing it for the state of being mean or trying to get them to do something that they don't want to do. But as far as the influence, I tell everybody to apply and they do.

All of the counselors agreed that the relationships they build with students strengthen their influence on students in positive ways.

On the other hand, counselors reported feeling reluctant at times to appear too influential in the students’ decision-making process. Gladys explained why she refrains from this:

But I never tell students that they can't go anywhere. Never, ever, ever. I don't think that's my place, and if the student wants to apply to Harvard – well, then you know what, that's your right to apply there. Let them decide whether or not you can go there.

More specifically, counselors reported feeling hesitant about attempting to advise a student in any one direction for fear of being wrong. Abby offered her opinion on this matter:
So as for directing students to something, you know. For me, I sit with each student to say, “OK, Here are your strengths…this is what you want, this is what you have.” Trying to get the two things to come closer together. We all know that you also have a student who has barely passed Algebra I, and wants to go to Yale. Here I am, want to go to Yale, pre-med, be a doctor, be a brain surgeon. And none of us, I hope none of us, I certainly don’t ever want to discourage a kid, because that will just be the kid who gets into Yale and makes it through and then goes through the rest of life saying, “My counselor told me I couldn’t go to college.” Those words will never come out of my mouth. I think every superintendent of schools we’ve ever had has stood up on some podium and said, “My counselor told me I’d never amount to anything.”

This concern for being perceived in a negative light prevents counselors from being too persuasive at times. However, the counselors felt that this was a challenge since students rely heavily on counselors’ opinion in lieu of parental guidance and experience.

*Early College Planning*

As a result of low educational aspirations and students’ limited college knowledge, counselors felt there was a huge need for early college planning. This effort is in part an attempt at getting students to plan their curriculum according to their postsecondary plans and to increase their educational aspirations. Counselors felt that unlike students from the suburbs, their students typically began college planning much later. Heather articulated this difference in terms of the range of students she works with:
But in any event, if you asked suburban kids, the college planning starts from the minute they are born. Whereas for our students, there certainly are cases...I've had a valedictorian all the way to a student whose brother was killed, so you know there clearly are those planning highs and lows. But the college planning part of it happens, unfortunately, when they enter here in their freshman year, as opposed to at birth in a suburb. So we have to start in their freshman year, I don’t overwhelm them with where are they going, what are they going to do, but I always talk, about gateway courses. What are colleges looking for? You know math, the sciences, the languages. That's the kind of conversations I start with so we start getting the terms in the back of their heads.

All of the key informants reported that their work includes early college planning with ninth graders; however, they added that this work often takes a back seat to seniors’ college planning needs.

Another aspect of early college planning includes attempts to inculcate life and study skills. Karen described her efforts to instill the importance of doing well in high school so that they are qualified for college as seniors:

We do a ninth grade orientation program where we will talk to students about the classes they carry, the importance of doing well, and we cover study skills too. And then we talk to them about what is needed for promotion, and for continuation of their four-year course sequence.

Counselors believed that by talking with ninth graders about college, they would be better positioned to take the right courses, participate in appropriate programs, and be better
prepared when they entered their junior year and began to think more seriously about college.

Potential to Enable Students

When counselors described their increased role in college counseling, concern for the potential to enable students in their effort to overcompensate for the absence in families and communities surfaced. They felt that although they were inclined to offer whatever support was necessary to increase their students’ chances for college enrollment, they worried that this may actually be a disservice to students. Olivia expressed her frustration for how her schools’ policies impact students once they get to college:

I don't know if it's the schools’ choice or whatever, but it's part of our counseling here at Monroe High School. We do all that. All the postage, all the fee waivers, everything else. We take care of everything, that's the way it's done. I don't know who chose to do it that way. We did the same thing with fee waivers for SATs. They get fee waivers and then we mail their SAT off. I don't see why we should mail the SAT. In that respect, I feel that we aren't teaching the kids responsibility. When you get to college, there's nobody like this, which is not helping them in the long run, in my opinion. I think it's just enabling them…And that's not the way it should be. In that respect we're not doing our students justice, by handing everything to them. I don't mind postage for the college application, cause basically there's a lot of confidential information in there. We don't send things off separately which is good because then, the schools don't get
things piecemeal. But when we do everything for them, they don't have to get applications, they don't have to get scholarship information…We tell them how to fill it out. We practically fill it out for them. When they have to do their own essays, when they have to budget their own time in college they have trouble. Then the colleges say students are not prepared for college. Well, no they're not prepared when we're doing everything for them.

Abby also worried about enabling students and described a time she actually refrained from assisting a student too much in an effort to place some responsibility on the student:

Sometimes, with inner city kids, I worry we coddle them too much. Like the example I just gave of the girl who didn’t mail the SAT application despite having it all filled out. I could have mailed it, and all I am thinking to myself is, why didn’t I just say give me the envelope, I will mail it for you. But I said, “Here Jennifer, you mail this today.” Went through the whole thing, “Be sure you check the mailbox that you put it in, make sure the pick up because it has to be postmarked today.” “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I’ll take it to the post office,” but she didn’t. And so, would that be enabling, if I mailed it for her? Because next year in college, who knows.

Who is gonna do that kind of stuff for her?

In this example, Abby described feeling conflicted as to whether the student would have been better off. Many of the counselors in this study recalled similar dilemmas. However, the counselors admit that at times they do more than they should because they know they
can’t count on students getting the encouragement at home or taking the initiative to secure their own materials.

**Heightened Concern for Retention**

Despite challenges to college planning, counselors made valiant efforts to increase the college-going rate of their students. These efforts included consideration for where their students would be most successful. Because of counselors’ awareness of their students’ unfamiliarity with postsecondary education, limited academic and language skills, and lack of family support, counselors expressed significant concern for their students’ success in college. Counselors unanimously brought up their concern for retention during the interviews. This final, potential outcome of the complex college planning process was perhaps the most prevalent among the counselors.

Counselors concern for their students’ potential for success in college often shaped their college counseling approach. Counselors at one school had recently learned some statistics on retention that were particularly troubling for them. Abby shared her shock in hearing statistics regarding some of the top students:

I don't know if anyone else told you this, but one of the local insurance companies had this scholarship program…And their first class just graduated. And they did a study, and I was horrified to hear, and those are top students, those are the cream of our crop, you have to be in the top 25% of your class to even apply for this scholarship. And I was horrified to hear that they have a 35% graduation rate in four years. They expect to have something like a 46% graduation rate in 5 years, and they hope to have 100% graduation rate in 6 years. And that is the cream of our crop.
And they mentioned that they provide a mentor to help the kid through their freshman year. But there were students who had a 1.3 in their freshmen year. And that is our top, top, top students. That really worries me a lot.

This concern that the top students from counselors’ schools were at-risk for not persisting in college worried counselors. They worried about their own role in pushing student into postsecondary education when perhaps they are not prepared.

In a similar vein, counselors described how concerns for retention are often in reference to the financial implications of not persisting in college. In this quote, Debbie relayed her thoughts on some of her students’ chances for success and its’ implications:

Our top 25 kids usually get a free ride. But you know a good, a fairly good solid student who comes from a poverty background is going to have a tremendous adjustment when he goes away to college. His chances of doing well in his freshman year are just about nil. He is going to be hanging on by the skin of his teeth. Even the better students, this is true.

And if the student took out big loans, and then drops out after his freshman year, what have we done to him? He's got loans he can't pay. He's got no education. We are pushing him into the underground economy.

Abby expressed a similar opinion relative to financial responsibility:

And the other thing that we really worry about is that kids are committed to taking a student loan. You take a student loan, you don't make it in college, you still have to pay back that loan, and without a college degree.
You only stay for a semester, you still got a lot of money to pay back.

And our kids get big packages, big loans, part of their package is a loan.

And I don't like to think about that.

The concern for students’ future finances was evident in their comments regarding students’ likelihood for college success.

It seemed that counselors take on a personal responsibility when it comes to advising students about college. Abby expressed her worry about pushing kids into something they are not ready for:

I would feel badly that we've pushed a kid into something that maybe we felt in our hearts they weren't ready for, a prestigious four-year college.

And that really it would be better for them to start in a community college and feel their way. Some of the community colleges have wonderful programs. One of our local community colleges has a commitment that if you get a two-year degree from them, an associate's degree, you are automatically admitted to [local state university]. And I feel much better about that.

It was apparent that counselors concern for their students’ success influenced their work with them. When these counselors discussed issues relative to the retention of their students, counselors often became emotional.

All of the counselors agreed that information regarding their students’ standing at particular colleges would be helpful information for them. Ana become quite excited when she began to express her desire to have such information on retention:
And it is dangerous to think that they should just go ahead and apply and go to college, because even the ones that look prepared are not ending up doing very well. And this is really, we don't have any statistics to know what the success rate is in college for our kids, and this is a major problem. This hasn't been gathered, and even if it were available it might, it may not be looked at in this kind of detail. I'm really excited so I am getting garbled, because these points are so important, it means a lot to our work, but we don't have the statistical information that we need to work. So we don't know how many are successful, and even if the data were in place, I don't trust that we would get the proper review of the data.

According to Ana, information on their students from individual schools would be useful; however, her skepticism stems from district wide data collection that rarely tells the whole story.

Counselors cited that information regarding students’ status in college would be useful in their college planning efforts with future students. Olivia felt that such information would enable her to motivate students who otherwise might not apply to college. Ana suggested that in the best of circumstances feedback would enable them to measure counselors’ own efforts:

Well, in the best of circumstances now, we would sit down with reps from the college, we would have a meeting to discuss what it was that happened, we would get some information from the college on whether it was in specific academic areas more than others, whether they were part of the transitional program during the summer or not, so that we could
gauge exactly where the problem happened, and whether the students used the supports that were available or not. So, to try to identify what was the problem. Was it a lack of identifying the fact that this kid needed a summer transitional program? Or did they begin in a pre-medicine program that included a lot of math and science. And then to try to review the preparation they had at our high school to see whether our program is working appropriately or not… Whether their choice of college was inappropriate. Then maybe we might do different things in the college process, by talking to them about the fact that they chose a large university where they were very anonymous and they really needed a smaller setting where they could get more individual attention.

Some counselors described efforts to bring students back once they were enrolled in college to assist them with their current students’ college planning. However, the counselors felt that often the information they need is from those students who are not successful, which often means they are not returning to the high school for visits.

Feedback on students’ preparation for college was also cited as useful for curriculum purposes. For example, Judy recalled an instance in which a college gave her feedback on specific course preparation:

Last year I went to [local] College…they told us that in the future starting next September the students were going to have to have four years of math – high school math. In the past I haven't said too much about that. But I was able to give the math department that information. So, they also said that they liked students if they have had pre-calc or calculus …So, I need
to get the word out that the standards are raising. There is a committee right now looking at the high school requirements in the school district and in the state, so that requirements may actually be bumped up a notch.

Other counselors echoed this interest in using students’ academic experiences in colleges as a means to provide feedback to teachers or curriculum committees.

Despite a desire for this type of information, counselors felt it was hard to come by. In general, the counselors wished they were able to follow up on students to gather this information directly from them. However, according to Debbie, this is difficult:

I wish we could follow up in a better way on the students…the mobile population would make this quite difficult… telephones numbers are disconnected, everybody's moved. However, we send a lot of kids to local colleges…We could go to those colleges and say, “OK you took how many students this year, how many are still there, what happened to them?”

All of the counselors in this study agreed that they gather information informally from students who return to the high school once they have graduated. However, as already reported, counselors felt those students who have not done well are unlikely to return to the high school and they are the ones from whom counselors would like to hear.

Counselors recognized the legal restrictions to gathering such information; however they added that at times schools have given them updates on students. Simply put, counselors described a desire for a formal process of gathering this information that would improve their ability to address college planning with future students.
Counselors’ perceptions that their college counseling efforts are more complex relative to suburban counselors was a major finding in this study. It was clear through my interviews that concern for student and family issues required counselors to address college planning in a very comprehensive way. The counselors’ recognition of the need to extend their role as a result of the needs of their students and their families was evident throughout each round of interviews. Counselors routinely used stories to share their experiences with their students. Again, many of the outcomes associated with the complex college counseling aspect of counselors’ jobs ultimately surfaced in regard to other findings from this study. However, counselors’ expanded degree of influence, need for early college planning, the potential to enable students, and the heightened concern for retention fit most closely with this theme.

Accountability

The fourth major theme describes counselors’ feelings regarding accountability systems. The key informants expressed that the limited systems in place to assess their work are problematic and that they are not being held accountable for those aspects of the job they deemed most important. When issues of accountability surfaced in the interviews, counselors’ comments fell within two primary categories: (a) flawed accountability systems and (b) overlooked priorities. As a result of ambiguous or missing accountability systems, counselors found themselves responding by advocating for their professional work and creating their own personal and professional accountability systems. These outcomes reflect counselors’ response to missing accountability structures; however, they did increase counselors’ workload.
Accountability: Flawed Systems

Counselors reported that there was very little in place with regard to accountability and that the existing systems in place for counselors were inapplicable. Inherent in counselors’ perceptions that current accountability measures were flawed, were concerns with the following topics: (a) focus on quantitative measures; (b) imperfect evaluation systems; (c) emphasis on paperwork; and (d) uninformed standards.

Focus on Quantitative Measures

Counselors routinely articulated their frustration with their perception of the strict focus on quantitative means to measure their work. It seemed as though counselors felt school and district administrators “look for test scores only” and too often numbers are what they are “living and dying by.” Furthermore, counselors in general worried that there was little emphasis on the students’ emotional health when quantitative data is overemphasized.

The key informants in this study felt that numbers and statistics rarely told the stories of what happens in schools. According to Abby, too much emphasis is placed on statistics and too little emphasis is on placed on counselors’ interactions with students:

It isn’t in the statistics…that’s what people look at, how many kids got into college? How many applications got filled out? How many scholarship applications? I just feel like I’m here everyday working so hard, making a difference for kids or at least directing kids to other places that can make a difference for them. And there are people who are looking at me saying that the counselors are not doing a very good job. No, everybody is here working really hard, doing a very good job, very
committed, but when it all comes out in the wash, the Board of Education and others say, “Why didn’t more kids get into college?” So that is it...that’s the story in two pieces. I’m not sure how to reconcile those two pieces. We have to do more. We have to do better…but the counselors are working their little butts off.

Counselors were quite vocal about their belief that despite their long hours, hard work, and dedication to their work, the perception was that counselors were not effective.

Counselors also believed that accountability systems that rely on quantitative data and statistics fail to take into account the realities of counselor work. Andrea felt quantitative measurements missed an important aspect of her work:

I should say my principal is about numbers, data, statistics, whatever you can put on paper just to say I serviced this many kids this week or I did that many kids that week. That kind of thing. And the counseling stuff is kind of, you know, that comes if there is time left over.

As a result of not being accountable for the quality of their interactions with students, the counselors worried students would miss out. Gladys articulated this concern for the emphasis on that which is quantifiable:

We have the district telling us how we have to perform in our jobs. In other words, they’re telling us that we should have a curriculum that we follow, but there’s so much politics to it all, and I think a lot of it has to do with how well we look on paper, not how well we’re helping the students and trying to get these students to succeed.
Counselors felt that because they worked in underperforming schools, district-wide expectations on schools place much emphasis on school performance and rarely take into account the counseling element in schools.

**Imperfect Evaluation Systems**

Another topic of concern about faulty accountability systems surfaced in counselors’ comments regarding evaluations, one of the only formal measures of accountability in their schools. The key informants reported that if an evaluation was in fact completed (in many cases counselors were not evaluated regularly), the evaluation tool was designed for teachers and many of the questions were geared towards teacher functions. In fact, four counselors from one school complained that their evaluation tool was designed specifically for teachers. “The evaluation tool is teacher driven but they kind of adapt it to the counselors. They were supposed to do a formal one but we have never seen it,” offered Heather.

Aside from the tools used to evaluate counselors, the participants expressed frustration that the person responsible for counselor evaluations rarely had experience as a counselor. In each of the schools, the counselors reported that a Vice Principal was responsible for their evaluations; however, they added that none of their vice principals had any experience in school counseling.

In a similar vein, the counselors from one district described their frustration with the citywide Director of Guidance, who also had no experience as a school counselor. Although this person does not conduct counselors’ evaluations, counselors do feel accountable to this person. Debbie described the challenge of having a director with no school counseling experience:
We have somebody, who I love dearly, who is the director and who was never a counselor, never a counselor. How would you know what being counselor is like? Or how to help their experience if you haven't been a counselor? I don't care where.

With the exception of two schools, the lead counselor was regarded as extremely helpful and in many cases made up for the Director of Guidance’s deficiencies. Ana felt strongly about this particular finding:

One good thing, and I notice you have it in here that having a lead counselor aids us in our work. It really does. It would be an even greater advantage to have a Director of Guidance that’s a true director of guidance who has school counseling as a background. And can represent us for our issues, which we don’t have. But thankfully we have a lead counselor. So sometimes lead counselors compensate.

It seemed as though the lead counselors, who are still responsible for a reduced caseload of students, are best positioned to advocate for the counselors in schools and districtwide. However, it seemed as though even their power was limited and, because they are not considered supervisors, they are not responsible for counselors’ evaluations.

Evaluations were the only accountability measurement that counselors identified as formal assessments of their performance. However, the counselors were dissatisfied with the tools used for evaluation and the persons who are expected to evaluate them.

**Emphasis on Paperwork**

Counselors felt that the paperwork required of them was often what they felt most accountable for. The amount of time counselors spent attending to paperwork was a sore
spot among the counselors in this study. Andrea articulated this frustration with regard to her professional training: “Although I have my masters in counseling, I am too often accountable for clerical tasks and that bugs me.” In Gladys’ second school of her career, she noticed a significant difference in the expectations for paperwork, “Here, I find that the principal expects you to do a lot of paperwork, too much.” The preliminary finding that referenced an emphasis on paperwork elicited much support and comments from the counselors. It appears that when it comes to standards for accountability, counselors believed paperwork was a key element.

Counselors further felt that the significant amount of paperwork expected of them took time away from what they perceived to be more pressing needs. In Andrea’s opinion, making time to meet with parents should take priority over paperwork:

Sometimes there are parents waiting but you have some paperwork that needs to be done. And my thing is, if there are parents waiting, I need to deal with them. They’re taking time out of work or whatever and it is not that common that parents come. So, when I see them, I make time for them. And sometimes we’re hindered by not being able to deal with people immediately because there are other menial things to do. I call them menial tasks… Paperwork, paperwork, paperwork, paperwork.

Debbie added this comment about the demands of paperwork:

I do think we spend too much time on paperwork. Because the paperwork needs to be done so then when you’re ordering your things to do a lot of the things that you want or might think are more important have to be put behind all these other paperwork things.
While all of the counselors agreed that some amount of paperwork was expected in all professions, their concern was that too often it was seen as a priority, rather than secondary, to meeting with students or parents.

This overwhelming frustration with the amount of paperwork expected of counselors, surfaced numerous times throughout this study. It has been placed here in the context of accountability because counselors expressed it primarily as hindering their ability to address other aspects of their job. However, counselors additionally expressed dissatisfaction with paperwork in regard to their professional preparation as a counselor.

Uninformed Expectations

Counselors’ comments about flawed accountability systems also included their perceptions that too often they are held accountable for things that are incompatible with the realities of their work. In this respect, participants reported that people who set standards for counselors often fail to understand counselors’ daily experiences. Consequently, these people impose systems of accountability that misrepresent counselors’ efforts.

Information and reports requested by school departments was one example provided by the counselors as problematic. For example, Debbie described a districtwide accountability system to monitor senior student intentions that was inherently flawed:

One of our supervisors from downtown has devised this system where she wants to know what all the seniors are doing. She wants to keep track of all these things. We have been given this list of students so we’ll keep track. In a way, it’s not a bad idea at all. In others it’s ridiculous. Like I can’t get her to take some of these students off the list even though they’re
adults and I’m not dealing with them. They’re gone. But they remain on my list like I did something wrong. This kid hasn’t been in school for two years. I can’t get his name taken off the list.

In this case, Debbie was held accountable for students she had not seen or worked with in two years.

Aside from school officials, counselors expressed great frustration with accountability measures put into place by people who are misinformed of the realities of working with urban youth. This was especially true with regard to the use of college applications as a standard unit of measurement by those who have little experience with the college planning process. This particularly troubled the key informants because they were aware of limitations with such standards. The counselors from the Eastland Public School System provided the best example of this concern. Prior to my first round of interviews, the mayor of Eastland announced that he wanted to increase the number of Eastland students applying to four-year colleges by twenty-five percent. The counselors from Eastland were disturbed by this declaration for several reasons. For starters, the counselors felt people who make such statements often fail to understand the realities of college planning with urban students. Debbie described her frustration with the mayor’s declaration:

We have a mayor who has come out and said that during his term, they are going to increase the applications and acceptance of Eastland graduates by 40% or something. I love when people talk about things they know nothing about and this is so dumb.
This comment also reflects counselors’ frustration with the mayor’s failure to talk with counselors from Eastland about what some of the challenges are in increasing the college application rates prior to establishing his objective.

Furthermore, counselors felt that they mayor’s statement contributed to the negative stigma associated with applying to a two-year or community college. Heather provided several reasons why stressing four-year schools could be problematic for her students:

The mayor has asked for a percentage increase in the applications to four-year colleges. I’m not sure I necessarily agree with that because clearly cost of the college is an issue for students. Most are paying this on their own. And the obstacles that they’ve overcome you know, it can be so broad. It can be from being a parent themselves to emancipated students to overcoming a language barrier. We have 60 some nations represented here, so it’s just the magnitude of it. So when you get someone whose got that motivation in front of them, there’s nothing better than getting them to that finish line, you know…whatever that is. That’s why personally, I’m the product of a two-year college, so I get offended when someone says it has to be a four-year college.

The mayor’s statement elicited a similar response from Ana:

It turns out that the mayor of our city has proposed increasing the four-year college rate, the number of students applying to a four-year college, by 25%, without taking any of the points into account that I have been talking to you about. In fact, our college rate is already fairly
good, I think, and really a lot of our students should be thinking about
two-year community colleges or other technical or training programs
because they don’t have the skills yet to go directly to a four-year
university. And it is dangerous to think that they should just go ahead and
apply and go there, because even the ones that look prepared are not
ending up doing very well.

Although counselors felt that many of their students could attend four-year colleges, they
felt that the mayor’s focus on four-year colleges was based on a lack of information and
experience with urban students and the college planning process.

Counselors’ irritation with statements such as the mayor’s also seemed to be
fueled by their genuine concern for students’ future success, not the plan itself. In other
words, counselors described how efforts to increase student applications are meaningless
when those students fail to enroll in the fall, can’t afford the tuition, or do not persist once
enrolled in said four-year college. Abby articulated this concern:

We do feel pressure to get more kids in college and to get more kids to
four-year colleges. The mayor wants us to get more kids into four-year
colleges, and we are worried about that because we don’t just want to get
them in, we want to make sure they are successful.

Furthermore, as Heather pointed out, if increasing college acceptance rates is the goal, the
counselors felt the resources needed to accomplish this should accompany the objective:

If that’s the mayor’s objective, then his objective should be aligned with
what they are doing in the suburban environment. And I’m sorry; it’s the
only way we’re going to play on a level playing field.
Counselors would rather the goals included attention to students’ likelihood for success at the college or university and provide more resources for their students. Still, counselors would like two-year schools to be included in the goals for students, rather than simply eliminated as a potential goal.

When I spoke with the counselors from Eastland during the second interview, their frustration with the mayor’s objective continued. Apparently the mayor had formed a task force to develop collaborations between schools and universities; however, the counselors remained skeptical, as they had never been asked how the school district might go about increasing the college acceptance rate of their students.

Although this example of the mayor’s initiative is specific to Eastland, the counselors shared other examples of expectations for college application rates that failed to consider the aspects described above. In the other schools, counselors reported district-wide goals that seemed similarly limited. In general, the counselors felt that if they are to be held accountable, they would rather be held accountable for standards that will ultimately help students, but this requires that they have some input regarding the standards.

According to the key informants in this study, current systems of accountability are problematic. Too often the standards in place to measure counselor effectiveness focus on quantitative data, rely on teacher-centered evaluations, are directed at paperwork, and come from people who are not experienced with the role of urban school counseling. The degree to which these examples existed varied by school, however in each school, accountability systems appeared to be flawed with regard to counselors’ work.
Accountability: Overlooked Priorities

In addition to comments regarding flawed accountability systems, counselors discussed the challenges of measuring those aspects of the work that they deem critical. In this regard, counselors commented on (a) incorrect accountability measures and (b) complexities involved in measuring counselors’ work. By and large, counselors felt that they were not being held accountable for those aspects of their jobs that they felt were most important. Counselors felt this was especially problematic as some elements of their work that they are rarely held accountable for, such as relationship building, are absolutely critical for many other aspects of their jobs. Furthermore, counselors explained that the reality appears to be that the work done by counselors is typically difficult to measure in quantitative ways, such as by standardized tests and attendance data.

Incorrect Accountability Measures

Very often counselors feel that they are not held accountable for the aspects of the jobs that they feel are critical. In this regard, poor accountability systems get in the way of counselors’ ability to attend to more pressing things. When counselors commented on the aspects of their jobs that they perceived were missing from standards of accountability, they mentioned relationship building, outreach to parents, and mental health counseling.

Attending to priorities such as paperwork, scheduling, and other tasks previously mentioned, for which counselors feel they are typically held accountable, inhibits counselors from assisting their very needy students. According to Gladys, counselors should be held accountable to students’ personal needs more than they currently are:
I don't think - the district may see it - but I don't think that the Superintendent can see this. He should go into the schools and just see how we operate just for a week instead of sitting in his high office and just looking at statistics on paper. He should come in and really see what's going on. And he will see that there is a lot of work going on - trying to get these kids to come into school everyday. But when you've got problems at home, it's difficult. If you've got a mother who's an alcoholic and a father who's a drug dealer beating the mother up, how do you come into school and really think clearly. You can't think clearly. You can't focus in on what the teacher is talking about. It's really hard.

In many cases, counselors expressed frustration with the number of things that stand in their way of helping those students that often need attention. Whether it is proctoring an exam, producing a report, or verifying students’ graduation status, counselors felt these types of activities were too often used to hold counselors accountable.

On the other hand, rarely do counselors feel they are accountable for connecting a student to a social service agency, encouraging a student to consider postsecondary education, or calling parents about a student’s academic success. Olivia described an element of her job that she feels accountable for:

I have to make sure the kids are passing the classes that they need. If they're not, I always call home after the first progress report. But that's me. They don't tell me I have to call home. Certain things like that, I feel like I have to do.
In counselors’ descriptions about how they spend their days, it is clear that they find ways to prioritize students despite being held accountable for other aspects of their work.

**Difficulty in Measuring Counselor Work**

The difficulty in measuring many aspects of counselor work was defined by counselors as one reason behind faulty accountability systems. Counselors were fully aware that those aspects that they felt made a significant difference in students’ lives were often difficult to identify and even harder to measure.

One reason assessing counselors’ work is complex is due to the ambiguous nature of their job. Abby suggested that the challenge of explaining what she does in her role as an urban school counselor directly impacts accountability:

> You know, sometimes it’s hard to answer the question, “what are you doing?” It’s so complicated, so complex, and so different for every student. And that, sometimes I think that no one could even comprehend what goes on in the guidance counselor’s life in a year…And so much of our work is not concrete. I guess that’s what the problem is. Everyone wants the statistic, the concrete statistics. And much of what we do that is important is not that way. It’s that one hug in the morning. It’s that one bit of encouragement. You know that may not result in that kid filling out one more college application but may result in that kid making a decision down the road 20 years from now because you made a difference. That one thing or a series of things.

Gladys agreed that articulating counselors’ work could be difficult due to their range of experiences:
And to say what we actually do, and put it on paper, I think it’s impossible. I think it’s impossible, because you know what…everyday is different. And if you plan your day, it will never go that way, because there’s always a crisis or something going on. So every day in guidance is different — never dull.

Apparently, the diversity of counselors’ experience makes holding counselors accountable to specific standards difficult. Due to a lack of clearly defined roles and their need to take on multiple tasks, defining standards by which to measure counselors’ effectiveness is complicated.

The fact that much of counselor work with students is intangible presents an additional challenge to accountability systems. As described in the focus on numbers finding, counselor work is not easily quantifiable. More importantly, the aspects of their work counselors deem critical is particularly hard to operationalize. For example, counselors have stated that they can log how many times they see a student; however, it is difficult to identify student outcomes from that meeting. Along these lines, it is difficult for counselors to measure their impact because they recognize that much effort goes into helping a student. Judy articulated this concern with the limitations of data collection:

Well because you know, when you do collect data and try to prove that it was your input it’s very tangible. It’s not really like I can say 50% of our graduating class went somewhere, compared to 38% because we had senior plans and we met with them, because I really don’t know if that’s the case. And what we do is so intangible.
Although very few of the counselors reported collecting such data, those that have tried have encountered this obstacle in attempting to identify counselor impact.

It was understood among the key informants that the work of the counselor is hard to measure. Both the challenge of identifying counselor impact and pinpointing their daily responsibilities seemed to compound the possibility of appropriately assessing counselor effectiveness. Counselors felt that their work with students is rarely used as a standard of accountability; however, they are unsure how one might measure what this aspect of their work regardless.

**Accountability: Potential Outcomes**

Again, counselors offered their perspectives on the potential outcomes of insufficient and misguided accountability measures. In this case, counselors described how their frustrations with the standards to which they were accountable brought about a desire to advocate for themselves professionally and a need to establish their own personal and professional accountability systems.

**Professional Advocacy**

As a result of flawed accountability systems, counselors believed that they were responsible for advocating for their own work. Furthermore, because there is a lack of understanding of counselors’ work, combined with the absence of tangible representation of their efforts, the key informants described their responses in terms of additional layers of work. In this regard, counselors reported a few of the ways in which they try to educate their colleagues about their work with students and illustrate the work they do in their schools.
One method counselors have used to bring attention to their profession is participation on school committees. Heather described her voluntary participation on numerous committees as an attempt to bring awareness of the guidance department to the rest of the school community:

I think sometimes, you know, the perception is that we are glorified secretaries with an occasional tissue in our office and you know, it's not the case. That needs to be improved. I've tried to do that from a professional standpoint. I just was on our accreditation process for the last two years. I was on the steering committee and I chaired a committee and I'm also chairing the small learning committee that was just appointed last week or a couple of weeks ago for our high school and that will happen over the next five years. God only knows where I find the time…but I do that because I think that it's important that the community and the staff...I think it's important that we get out there and show that we can have an impact. I think it is helping. I know from my own personal standpoint, it's really helped me. But it’s important to do too.

Similarly, Judy described her efforts at getting counselors’ needs on the agenda of the union as a means to improve people’s perceptions of counselors:

I talked to the union person. I said, “I'm really a low maintenance person, I like working with people and I get a long with people and all that…but you need to know that this caseload is impossible and it's unfair,” and then he sent a letter to all the members saying do you want us to negotiate something next year and let me know. I haven’t heard anything yet.
In both of these examples, the counselors felt that their participation in school-wide gatherings would serve an additional purpose that included informing their colleagues of their role in schools.

Counselors’ work in classrooms was also described as a means to advocate for their work. By going into classrooms, the counselors felt that teachers were able to witness the relationships they built with students plus they were able to see their work first hand. According to Karen, counselors must take the initiative to create this culture among staff:

If you are going to create a culture and environment that people understand, that doesn't happen when you sit in your office and wait for it. You need to get out and show people what we are doing and we need to create this culture of accountability for ourselves.

In this quote, Karen articulated her need to take the initiative to advocate for the school counselors in her school. Taking a guidance curriculum into classrooms seems to be one way in which counselors take this initiative.

In addition to entering classrooms, some counselors invite their colleagues into their own professional space. For example, at Warren High School, the counselors decided to host an open house for their school. Andrea described this as an effort to educate their colleagues outside of the guidance department:

Tomorrow the guidance department, we're going to open up the guidance department during the lunch periods so teachers can come down and kind of familiarize themselves with what we do. Because they think we sit in here with our doors closed, and we don't want to see kids, making coffee
all day, sitting around with our feet up, and I said tomorrow we're kind of having a very informal…come have a cookie, and some coffee, you can talk and ask, and see what we actually do. See what we’ve done in our offices, etc.

The counselors from Warren High School were hopeful that such efforts would additionally improve counselor-teacher relationships, thereby providing new opportunities for collaboration in the classroom. During my visits to schools, I witnessed similar efforts to inform staff and students about counselor roles and efforts. In one school, where the counselors are responsible for monitoring attendance, flyers on the wall indicated the absentee rate, which has decreased from 40% to 18% in three years. In three of the schools, the guidance offices were lined with the roles of the school counselor, as prescribed by the American School Counselor Association.

The degree to which counselors chose to engage in professional advocacy varied by high school and by individual counselor. For example, despite efforts toward professional advocacy in her school, Linda described resentment towards investing energy in such a practice:

I shouldn't have to tell you what I do, but you know what I'm going to be the bigger person, to prove to you that I can be…part of me agrees that we should go into the classroom and part of me says to [lead counselor], you know what, we need to make this a functioning guidance office. See, I'm not into impressing the superintendent or anyone across the street [in the administrative office building]. So I'm not going to look for ways to put up
my flag and say hey look at us. My job performance should tell them…
because once you put out your flag and say look at me, the focus is off the
child and onto me. So if I just do my job and you notice because a kid
goes home, somebody says something to the principal, the principal says
something to the superintendent, and that's how you get respect, by doing
your job.

It was clear that counselors felt professional advocacy was necessary; however, for some
it presented yet another concern for evaluation and assessment of their efforts.

Professional advocacy, described by the counselors as bringing awareness to the
work of school counselors, was a result of missing accountability structures. However, as
I have stated previously, the examples provided in this section are relevant to the aspects
of the other four themes from this study. In particular, however, counselors’ inclination to
engage in professional advocacy was clearly referenced in response to the findings
presented elsewhere in this study, such as negative perceptions of counselors.

**Personal and Professional Accountability**

In the absence of accountability systems that make sense for counselors,
counselors described informal systems they have created for themselves, both personally
and professionally. It was less clear if counselors developed these personal accountability
systems consciously, in response to the absence of appropriate accountability standards,
or if this was more of an unconscious act.

When counselors described their feelings about their work, they often referenced
a standard that they have set for themselves. This was previously described in the
under-preparedness professional development finding in which Judy described not wanting to take too many personal days for professional development because of a personal expectation she had set for herself. The participants shared similar expectations that they have set for themselves in their work. For example, Abby felt she is most accountable to her students’ needs:

I always say, you know, I don’t care who the superintendent of schools is.
I don’t really even care who the principal is. I’m good at flying under the radar and I always have been and I think that’s a mark of a good counselor. So I do what I have to do to make those people happy but still do what I have to do to make myself feel that I’m doing a good job. The only thing that matters is that I come to work everyday and there’re kids at the door. That’s the only thing that matters. If there are kids at my door, then I’m doing my job.

Gloria elicited a similar response, “I feel I have an ethical, moral professional responsibility to give every kid as much as I possibly can.” In both of these statements, the emphasis seems to be on providing for students rather than on paperwork or on documenting students’ actions.

In addition to personal accountability systems, the counselors described individual standards they instituted to define their work, due in part to faulty accountability systems, as well as the difficulty in measuring counselor work. For some of the counselors in this study, individual initiative to document their work served as an accountability system. Andrea described her effort to document her work in place of a better measurement:
And that’s the problem with guidance. You can’t measure what we do. So, we log every time we meet with a kid. We choose to do this so that we can say, “This is why we’re needed here.” We monitor everything. We jot everything down. You met with a parent or you met with a kid, you write it down.

Karen recalled similar attempts:

We do a lot of logging. We document how many home visits we do, how many students we see in the course of a month. We log our time because you have to know what you are doing. It’s like gathering data to prove that you work. Gathering data for what we do is so hard because what we do is so intangible.

Counselors’ interest in logging their daily activities seems to include an attempt to quantify their work. However, as stated previously, there is much of their work that is difficult to report in numbers.

Comments from the interviews which reference counselors’ strong desire for all of their students to leave high school with a plan reflect another standard they have created for themselves. When discussing their work with students, each of the counselors in this study stressed the importance they place on ensuring their students have a post-graduation plan in place whether it is postsecondary education, military training, or employment. Abby explained the emphasis she puts on a plan that involves a certificate of some sort:

I want to make sure that everybody has some direction after high school, even if it isn’t college. But you can’t just have a high school diploma. If
it’s the military, and college after that, or some kind of training program after that. It’s got to be at least a certificate program. But you can’t just leave high school and think I’m gonna work. And, although my philosophy does include that if you have to do that, at least you are going to go to college part time. Everybody can take one class at a community college. At the very least, I want to see that you are signed up to take one class at a community college next year.

Karen described a similar goal she has for herself:

What I try to do is ensure all my students have a plan. My main purpose is that they are not going to leave here without a plan in place. I don't care as much what that plan is, whether it is go to work somewhere, go to college, but at least they have a plan, and that's my main goal.

By ensuring that all students have a postsecondary plan, counselors feel they have reached all students to some degree. Therefore, they can rely on this as a standard for their work.

Finally, some counselors reported “results-based” programs as effective accountability systems. At Cook High School, the counselors are currently implementing a “results-based” system. Karen described this recent initiative:

We just implemented a results-based guidance program this past year. It is a results-based developmental guidance program where you, as a department, decide on two or three goals, and then you pretty much write all your activities to accomplish those goals. So that it is results-based. So, you can say, at the end of the year, did we accomplish our goals, and what
were the results of those activities towards accomplishing those goals? So, it's a good...it's a very accountable way to find out if the activities that you are doing are actually accomplishing the goals that you wanted to accomplish for the student's goals. We broke it down into functions; attendance, scheduling and counseling.

Although not in place at her high school, Gloria agrees that this is a good model:

I think that’s where the profession needs to go - results based. I guess we just have to keep track of all of the things that we do in order to convince people that we are needed. But it’s like therapy some people don’t think it’s necessary. They feel that just growth into adulthood is going to mean that you are going to be a mature person. It doesn’t work like that.

The school that is experimenting with “results based” program also brought in a consultant to assist them with the program. In this case, the counselors were resourceful in identifying an effective process for which they can be held accountable.

Responding to absent or flawed accountability measures, counselors have established their own standard for their work with students, both personally and professionally. By giving priority to students over paperwork, logging their daily activities, and ensuring all students have a postsecondary plan, counselors reported attempts at creating alternative measures for their own standards of accountability.

Current accountability measures lack relevance to counselor work. The counselors in this study articulated the problems with current systems of accountability. It seems that current accountability systems fail to take into account the unique aspects of counselor
work and, as a result, counselors find themselves investing in professional advocacy and creating their own personal and professional accountability standards.

**Vocational Commitment**

Through conversations with the key informants it became abundantly clear that the participants were incredibly committed to their work. This commitment drives their work and, combined with their personal convictions and appreciation of their work, sustains them. Through the stories they share about their students or the pleasure they feel from their students’ success, the key informants communicated the pride they take in their work. The data reflecting counselors’ vocational commitment to their work have been grouped into three categories: (a) job appreciation; (b) sustaining factors; and (c) personal convictions. These sub-themes reflect counselors’ devotion to their work in spite of the challenges described by the other major findings presented in this study. Evidently, the key informants’ vocational commitment is partially explained by the overlap between counselors’ personal and professional lives.

**Vocational Commitment: Job Appreciation**

For the most part each of the eleven participants became a school counselor because of a desire to help people, which also lead them to an urban environment where they perceived the needs to be greater. Despite the challenges to their work, which they described in the previous four major themes, counselors readily discussed the aspects of their jobs that they appreciated the most. In this respect counselors reported that the work conducted with students and the ability to feel good about that work were paramount.
The Students

One of the most popular responses to a question regarding counselors’ fondness for their jobs was that they loved working with the kids. The counselors’ desire to help others certainly guided them into the field of counseling; however, their interests in working with kids lead them to the school setting. The choice to work with students was reflected in counselors’ comments, which stressed their pleasure in working with and having relationships with students. It seemed as though the counselors took great pleasure from spending time with their students. Debbie, who is beginning to think about retirement, stated, “When I retire, I will need to find some way to get my kid fix because I know it is what I will miss the most.”

In many cases, the counselors’ desire to help students enabled them to overlook the school issues described earlier. For instance, Judy felt that her focus was on students when she took her job at her school:

When I first came here people said to me, “You've got be crazy wanting to go to that school.” Everybody's eyeballs were bugging out at me. There are so many problems and all this other stuff. My thought was, “I'm helping students.” I don't care what everybody else is doing. And that is my mode of operation. I just feel that I'm here to help them and to help parents and to help teachers.

This focus on students, in spite of administrative or other demands for their time, also emerged in the counselors’ comments previously recorded in the other four major findings. For example, a counselor’s desire to prioritize time with students despite pressing paperwork further supports her primary interest in working with students.
Counselors also valued the opportunity to work with a diverse group of students. Ana felt that working with students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds was particularly exciting:

Well, we have a very diverse population, and that is one of the things that I like best about working in this school. We have so many different nationalities, of the country of origin of our students, and it changes over the years…So, this diversity enriches our population a lot. They each present different challenges, but it is something that makes our load very interesting and varying to work with. I like the fact that we have so many nationalities and countries represented and different languages represented, because it teaches our kids how to live in a very diverse community, and I think that is the reality of the world. So that's one of the things that I think is very unique and rich about our school.

All of the schools represented in this study were racially and ethnically diverse, a factor which appeared to draw counselors to an urban setting. Other counselors reported the opportunity to learn about various cultures as an advantage to working with such a diverse group of students.

It is not surprising that counselors would find working with their students a positive aspect of their work. However, their comments suggest that their commitments to their students make it possible for them withstand the drawbacks of their work.

Feeling Good About Work

In addition to the opportunity to work with students, counselors expressed that having a job where they felt they were able to make a difference in a student’s life was
particularly meaningful. All of the key informants felt that they were there to help people and, if there weren’t a desire to help others, “there would be no point in being here.” When counselors described going above and beyond what they felt was expected of them, they added that it was all part of their reason for being there: to help the students. Along these lines Andrea felt that helping a student brought her back day after day:

I mean, I come here for the kids, because you know you can help someone, it may not be 15 today but someone you reached out to or that you got to, you feel you were able to do something for, I was able to get an application or a kid or you know, let them register for the SATs. You’re in it cause your heart’s in it, you want to help them when you can, you get the counseling stuff in and if you can’t do that, you do something else. I know I come in here everyday because I’m here for the kids, at some point you’re going to help somebody, even if it’s a little tiny bit.

Abby shared a similar belief:

My life's work would have to be something that I saw as helping or in one of the helping professions. And that's definitely still there. It has to be. Not that I haven't ever screwed up for some kids or have this nagging feeling that I really missed something with that kid, or could have done more for that kid…I really do feel that my career has been making a difference one kid at a time. That's the only way you can do it. You miss some but the one's that in front of you is the one that you're trying to do something for.
And help that kid through all the self-realizations and the self-actualizations and finding what's really within him or her.

Counselors routinely described that the potential impact they could have on students’ lives contributed to their love of the job. Interestingly, the one counselor in this study who had recently retired, Gladys, actually returned as a counselor for one more year because she knew she would miss the opportunity to help others.

This desire to engage in a profession that was personally fulfilling was identified by some of the women as a “calling.” Linda’s perceives her work in schools as a vocation:

This is a vocation and I really enjoy it. I really enjoy coming to school.
This is not work for me. It’s my job, it’s my vocation. Do I get tired? Yes.
Do I sometimes go, “Oohhh geez, do I really want to go?” Yes. But once you’re here it’s different, the day flies. I don’t run on batteries, I do get tired, and I get discouraged like everybody else. I really do, but when you sit there and a student comes in to say hello and they are having a good day, you sit back and say that’s why I’m here.

Although other counselors did not use the term vocation, they articulated their desire to work in a place where they could make a difference in students’ lives. The key informants also reported that it is critical that they stay genuine in their work. For Linda, this was a promise she made prior to entering the profession:

And I promised myself that when I graduated from school, if I ever became complacent, or I ever started realizing that I didn't like what I did, or that the students were getting to me to the point where now I was taking
out my frustration on them, or that this was not for me, that I would leave. It just wouldn't be fair to them. This is too important. You can impact their lives in a positive or negative way in a split second; just by the way you greet them. This is a vocation. I could not keep up, number one, you can't keep up a lie. You can't. I couldn't do what I did if I didn't believe in what I am doing, and enjoy it. It's just too much energy. Flies have short legs, as my father would always say. So if I'm lying about loving my job, eventually I'm not going to do it, or I'll do it poorly. And then I'll see less of my students, and my desk will be perfect.

This sentiment was echoed by many of the counselors. Evidently, these women realized that a lack of appreciation for the importance of their work could be detrimental to the students with whom they work.

During both rounds of interviews, counselors explained their devotion to their work in terms of their ability to help students and engage in a profession that serves others. In their comments, counselors referenced those aspects of their work that made coming to work each day enjoyable.

**Vocational Commitment: Rewards and Nourishment**

With the exception of vocational commitment, the other major themes depict challenging elements of counselors’ experiences and the adverse outcomes of these experiences. However, during our conversations, the key informants routinely described aspects of their work that reward them, sustain them, and encourage them to remain committed to students in spite of the challenges. Expressions of students’ gratitude, students’ success stories, and the importance of collegial support stood out as factors
impacting their commitments. It seems as though rewards in the form of student success stories and students’ gratitude reinforce counselors’ efforts, while collegial support assists counselors in overcoming the difficult aspects of the work.

Students’ Gratitude

Amidst the criticisms and the concerns about their work, the key informants expressed their appreciation for the students and the gratitude they have received from the students and families with whom they work. Expressions of appreciation from their students seem to provide reinforcement for the counselors in this study. The key informants shared numerous examples of their appreciation for grateful students. For Gladys, this gratitude was sufficient enough to keep her in urban schools:

I wouldn't want to be a counselor anywhere else but in an urban setting, because I think these kids are just great. They're sincere. And they're just so thankful when you take an interest in them, and you try and help them. It's very rewarding. In fact, I had encountered a friend who worked for a private school, and I spoke to him one day, and he said “I can't tell you how bored I am…with my mahogany walls, and my mahogany desk, and the best computer…my desk is clear – there are no cases on my desk.” So, for me, I'll take this any day, my computer stand where my knees hit the desk, the chairs are so bad that my back hurts, I could use a back brace. But I'll take it all anyway. The kids are great. They're just so thankful.

In Gladys’ comments, the disadvantages of working in an urban school setting were well worth it in terms of the pleasure she takes in helping urban students.
Other examples of students’ gratitude towards counselors were associated with college planning. Because many of the students are first generation college attendees, counselors believed their students were especially grateful for counselors’ help with college planning. However, as Gladys suggests in this next quote, counselors are quick to give the students the credit they are due:

And when they do get accepted, they would thank me. It had nothing to do with me. But they thought it was because of me that they got accepted to college, and I would try to tell them it’s not me, it was your transcript that was a mirror of you. Your mirror looked good, and you were accepted.

In cases such as this, the key informants felt as though their efforts to motivate students to consider college are often why students are most grateful. Regardless of the reason students express their gratitude for assistance with the college planning process, the counselors felt that their work was appreciated, which seemed to make all the difference.

In addition to the college planning process, counselors reported feeling rewarded for their efforts when students graduated from high school. As all of the counselors pointed out, many of their students are among the first in their family to graduate from high school and, therefore, graduation is a momentous occasion. Due in part to the excitement students and their families feel, counselors admitted to the pride they feel when their students cross the stage at graduation. Gladys summed up her colleagues’ sentiments when she shared that the frustrations in the job disappear during these moments:

No one really sees what we do. I just think that if someone came in and spent a week with us, they would say, “Oh my God why did you ever go
into guidance?” But you know it's rewarding to see them graduate from high school, and see them cross the stage, and you call out their name, and before they go and get their diploma, they give you a hug and say “thank you Miss.” So there's my reward right there. Something was done right.

Likewise, Heather expressed her excitement at this time:

And believe me when you see these parents at graduation they are so thrilled to pieces. And it all gives once they are graduating. For those that are hanging by the skin of their teeth to get to graduation day and for the top of the ones too, it is the best reward. Seeing the parents thrilled...

there's nothing like it.

The enthusiasm in counselors’ voices when they shared these stories revealed that these were momentous occasions for counselors as well.

Students’ expressions of gratitude were not limited to academic accomplishments. Counselors shared additional examples such as connecting students to social service agencies and enrichment programs that prompted similar responses. In all of these situations, counselors felt there was significant reinforcement in feeling appreciated by their students.

*Success Stories*

When the key informants shared their experiences, they often used their students’ stories as a means to describe their experiences. This was particularly true when counselors reflected on their students’ success stories. Evidently, students’ individual accomplishments nourish counselors when the demands of their jobs can be overwhelming. The success stories that the key informants referenced during the
interviews encompass students’ achievements as well as the achievements of school staff. It appeared that the highs associated with these stories often carry counselors for quite a while.

Like students’ gratitude, many of the success stories shared by counselors were in reference to college acceptance. It was apparent that when a student was accepted to college, the counselors’ excitement was contagious. For example, Heather described this when one of her students was accepted to an Ivy League institution:

Our valedictorian, who is a student of mine, got into Brown University.

It was such a big deal and it is a big deal. Oh my God! It feels incredible and I’m so thrilled for Brown because they had their eyes wide open.

They really got a gem. They really did. You know she might not meet everything that the traditional Brown student would meet but boy she’ll exceed their expectations. I called everybody because I think it’s a testament to everybody. I think it’s a testament to the whole department.

As Heather stated, this excitement and reinforcement often extends to the entire department. Although this example includes acceptance to a competitive university, counselors shared equal excitement regarding students’ to community colleges. Apparently, student success was not solely defined by acceptance to a top school, but rather was defined by a student’s ability to put a plan in place for himself.

Counselors additionally take pleasure in students’ academic accomplishments. Whether it was increased attendance or improved attitude, counselors felt like students’ progress reinforced their own efforts. Andrea shared an example of the positive rewards she received from one student’s accomplishments:
You have that one day, like yesterday, I had a student who is in special education and his mom came in for the IEP meeting. He’s getting two special ed. classes and he’s in an inclusion room and this kid is getting all A’s and his mom is saying he comes home and he sits down and he does homework, and I’m saying to myself, this is the first IEP meeting that I’ve been to that’s been this positive, there’s been other positive ones but to have this mom come in and be a part of it and she’s expressing all those wonderful things. That one incident made my day yesterday. I was like “YES!”

In both of these examples, the key informants shared their excitement for their students and the impact that student success has on them. The sheer delight counselors took in talking about their students’ achievements was written all over their face when they shared their students’ stories. For example, when Debbie discussed the outside programs she secures for her students, her pleasure was obvious when she declared, “Oh, it is heaven to get my kids involved in something like that.”

From talking with the counselors, it became clear that these success stories, regardless of their frequency, carry counselors quite a distance in their work. In Heather’s case, the excitement around her students’ acceptance to Brown University would extend for days:

One thing could carry you. Everybody was on such a high, you know, and that’s such a cool thing…because we don’t get it very often. So it is strange that a suburban counselor might see that we do this. See that we cherish and treasure this acceptance, but that they may think oh, you know, no big deal.
According to the key informants in this study, there are certainly lows in the job, so these high points are especially important.

Although the counselors reported taking great pride in their students’ academic and social accomplishments, they also realized that in some cases, the rewards are delayed. In this respect, Linda believed that her efforts are the same regardless of the timing of the outcome:

I have the drive and the desire to do as much as I can to help every student that I see, not knowing if they are going to remember my words of wisdom three or four years down the road. But you know if you plant the seed and if they choose to water it, great, and if they don't, well then I did my job. I have to be able to say everyday, I've done the best I can. Am I neurotic about it? No, but I mean you have to make sure you have given them your best shot.

This belief that some of their efforts may take some time to take effect with their students was mentioned by several of the counselors. Students who returned to the high school once enrolled in college often revealed to counselors that their efforts do take time to surface. Apparently, many students returned to thank their counselors and share their postsecondary success with their counselors. In either case, it seemed that the counselors remained optimistic that their encouragement would be useful for students at another time in their lives.

Students’ individual accomplishments appeared to play an important role in providing rewards for counselors. Whether the accomplishment occurs while the student is enrolled in the counselor’s school or later in life did not seem to matter. Simply put, the
counselors in this study felt that when their students succeeded, where success is relative, counselors felt reinforced for their efforts.

**Collegial Support**

In addition to feeling appreciated by students as a result of expressions of gratitude or student success, counselors felt that support from their colleagues in the guidance department provided encouragement necessary to persist in their work. This was specifically true among the counselors from the two schools represented by more than one key informant in this study. For example, Debbie described how nightly phone calls to one of her fellow counselors have been going on for years:

I will miss that when I retire, my colleagues. I really like the people. You like the people you work with. We do, we help each other. We buck each other up. Ana and I have been dear friends for 25 years. We have huge telephone bills because it's long distance to talk but we have to process everything. There's no time during the school day. Days will go by and I don't see Ana and she's just in the other suite down there. She calls me, I call her almost every night and, God, if something is going on we're on the phone for two hours. Everything has to be looked at from all these different sides and that's the way you process something.

In Debbie’s case, collegial support meant friendship and an opportunity to process their professional experiences. Likewise, Abby believed that second to the students, her colleagues were critical to her ability to persist in a job that presented so many challenges:
My relationship with my colleagues, too, is important, which is less than the kids though. What keeps me here is us working as a team, joining forces to do the best we can for the population at large. And me as lead counselor, really making sure that each one of them is being an important person in the lives of their students.

As lead counselor, Abby felt the team approach is critical when working with their students. In both of these comments, the counselors articulated the need to collaborate in their work in order to maintain their commitment.

The importance of collegial support was also evident in comments made by key informants who did not feel supported by colleagues. For example, Gloria, who was the only school counselor in her small, pilot school, felt that because she often feels alone in her position, she seeks support from a counselor from a nearby pilot school. However, as she described in this next quote, when one of her students died suddenly she wished for additional support:

When [student] died, nobody was there for me. And I needed it. The temporary social worker that was there to help the students eventually said, “How are you doing Gloria?” That’s all he had to say because I was not doing well. And my son had called because he knows the road that this is and he called a couple of times that week saying, “How are you doing Ma?” Nobody thinks that I need it. Yes, well I did.

As Gloria described her need for support following her student’s death, she revealed a void in collegial support that would have otherwise made a difference.
Comments regarding the important role of colleagues permeated the interviews. Previously, I described that counselors rely on one another as a result of under-preparedness in order to learn from one another. However, in respect to nourishment, the importance of colleagues surfaced yet again. The importance of having colleagues available to process information as well as provide support appeared to be critical to the counselors in this study.

Students’ expressions of gratitude and personal accomplishments both served as rewards for counselors in a job that otherwise provided little incentive. These rewards additionally provide counselors with the sustenance necessary to persist in their positions. Furthermore, those counselors who felt supported by their colleagues described the importance that played in helping them maintain their commitment to work in an environment that is otherwise troubling.

Vocational Commitment: Personal Convictions

The third topic discussed by counselors, which revealed their commitment to their work, is their personal convictions. During the second round of interviews, counselors responded to questions regarding how they felt about their work with comments about their personal convictions. It quickly became evident that counselors’ personal convictions fueled their work in schools that are often unsupportive and overwhelming. Counselors acknowledged personal experiences and social justice interests as the personal convictions that promote their work. Additionally, counselors shared their perceptions regarding the ways in which their personal lives overlapped with their professional lives.
Personal Experiences

For some counselors, their personal convictions are a result of their own experiences. In the case of the eleven key informants who participated in this study, personal experiences included racial background, spiritual beliefs, and personal loss. In all of the counselors’ examples, it was unclear if these personal experiences brought them to their work, sustained them in their work, or if there was any such distinction between the two.

Personal backgrounds appeared to influence counselors’ interest in their work. The counselors of color in this study described their commitment in terms of connections to students with similar backgrounds. For Ana, her own experience as an immigrant from Cuba to the United States impacted her professional commitment:

Well, I think for me particularly, being back to Eastland, the place where I entered the United States, having come from another country and now working with a great many students that were/are in the same situation that I was, that that's why I am here. And why I chose to be here. I still find it so rewarding to work with a new arrival. I just think that the reward of being able to help someone who is brand new to the system is something very satisfying to me and that's all because of my own personal background and my identification that I know what it's like. I went through that to. And I have a commitment, knowing what it was like for me, to be here for them.

Similarly, Andrea felt that her experience as a black woman influenced her desire to work as an urban high school counselor:
Because ninety-five percent of these kids look like me, and have the potential to be where I am, to do what I've done. I was fortunate to have the parents that I had, and I want to see more minority students, if you will, succeed. And I think a lot of times if they see someone who looks like them, has been to the same places they've been...I have 3 or four kids who live down the street from me, you know kids that I see every day and it's kind of like, “Wow, you know, I can do that too.”

Both of these women described a sense of responsibility for students with whom they share similar personal backgrounds.

Counselors’ spiritual beliefs also appeared to influence their personal convictions.

Linda describes how her belief in God influences her daily work:

I come from a Christian background and what I believe is that God created us with a plan, each of us has a plan, it's up to us to find out what that plan is, and attempt to fulfill it as best as we can. That is why I am here. I'm not ashamed to say that I say prayers in the morning and ask God for guidance and strength. And I believe I accomplish a lot because I do pray.

Like Linda, Judy describes her spirituality as a force behind her work:

I am a spiritual person and I feel there is value in a community and that we all really need to help each other. Some of us have more strengths than others, some of us need more help at certain times than others, but we all should be able to do something, and I think I have that compassion to give to students. I think I can help these students because of my beliefs.
In these examples, these two counselors stated that their personal spiritual beliefs guide their professional lives.

The key informants also shared experiences in their personal lives, which had an effect on their desire to work with their students and sustained their commitments to their work. For example, one of the key informants changed careers several years ago following a personal loss in order to pursue a more meaningful career. Her mother’s sudden death instigated this change for Heather:

Eight years ago my mother died suddenly. I was working as a secretary in the Board of Education just because it worked with my kid's schedule; they were much younger. That's when it hit me over the head, I said, “I don't want to die and not know that I didn't give something back or maybe I could help some way.” And then I thought, you know, I love kids, I love talking to people. It seemed to be my strength and I thought, you know, I'm going to check this out. And sure enough, here I am…And you know I think, I know I've made a difference in maybe 10 people's lives or I hope it's more than that. You just have to love what you do because it is not for the money.

Similarly, Judy described difficulties that her family faced which influences her work:

My son has had learning problems, so especially when boys come in and they're restless and they can't sit down, there's a whole lot that I think I can understand and advocate for them... Also, my sister has had a lot of emotional problems and I see her struggle and I know it could be me but
it's her so I think I have a lot of compassion for people who have the kind of struggles she has, and that's not uncommon in this population. In both of these comments, counselors described how personal experiences impacted their professional work.

During the interviews, the key informants were very open about personal aspects of their lives. Their honesty and recognition of the influence these personal aspects have on their work suggest that counselors take their positions quite personally.

**Social Justice Interests**

As discussed previously, counselors described their desire to help others as a critical reason behind why they loved their work. In a similar manner, the key informants reported that their affinity for making the world a better place through helping students came from personal convictions. In this respect counselors’ comments reflected a social justice mission they carried out in their personal and professional lives.

In some cases, counselors were very articulate about their commitment to social justice and the ways in which that inspired them. Gloria was very clear about her desire to fight inequalities:

I'm not into SUVs or where I'm taking my next vacation or redoing my house. That's not what I'm about. I volunteer. I'm involved with implementing an NGO [non-governmental organization] for Mali in Africa. So I like to do the big picture. I can't get involved in the nitty gritty stuff. My big house or my possessions. I can't do it. I wish I could, it might be easier. Why do I do this? Because I'm trying to make a difference on a bigger scale. Because [student] is a black male and the likelihood of
him ending up in jail is greater than the likelihood of his getting out of high school.

Whether the key informants defined their mission as social justice or not, comments reflected an interest in improving their world through educational opportunity.

Evidently, the origins of the counselors’ social justice interests played a large part in the development of their mission. For example, Olivia described how her family instilled social justice values in her at a young age:

I always liked working with the underdog. I taught in other school systems and I had the low level kids in History and Spanish. And I kind of liked them because you could see that you were, it may take a long time, but you could see that you were doing something…When I was young, my father would tutor other people and sometimes he charged and sometimes he wouldn't. He was a teacher. So, he was always helping somebody. So I think I got it from that. I never thought of it but I really think I do. I think because I guess through example whatever, you help somebody, somebody will end up helping you along the way sometimes and that's not even why you do it, you just do it.

Andrea described a similar value inculcated in her childhood:

I was always taught you bring someone up behind you. When you achieve in life, there should be someone coming up behind you and I consider these kids as someone behind me coming up to reach their potential. I think about if I didn't have the parents that I had, and go to private school, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now, because I didn't have anybody to
push me to do anything, I mean just my parents there wasn't anyone back
then in school who was doing that, and I think for a lot of different
reasons, private school, I guess they assumed you knew everything. I think
that it's just important.

Comments like these, which describe the development of their values, surfaced when the
key informants discussed early intentions to become a teacher or a counselor.

Apparently, many of these counselors knew quite early that their mission in life included
some element of serving others.

Interviews with the eleven urban counselors revealed that these key informants
bring personal convictions to their work. Driven by experiences such as personal
background, spirituality, personal loss, and social justice interests, the counselors
reflected on and shared very personal elements of their lives. In many cases, the key
informants were quick to identify their personal convictions, while with others they
needed time to consider this possibility. In some cases, the key informants reported that
they had never given much thought to the personal convictions they bring to their work.
Nonetheless, they experienced little difficulty identifying those aspects of the personal
lives that might guide them in their work.

The key informants provided some examples of how their personal convictions
emerge in their interactions with students. The best example of this was shared by
Andrea, who pointed out that because of her personal commitment to her students, which
she identified was influenced by her black identity, she often responds to kids in ways
that are more personal than professional:
I think in some ways, I probably try to do things that fall under my professional duties that are also personal. I think they go hand and hand and I think sometimes I am going to step outside of my professionalism to do some butt kicking if you will, and that kind of takes a little away from professionalism and brings in my personal stuff, but I think that obviously you have to be professional in what you are doing. I know for me personally I take it outside sometimes, outside of that and make it a little more personal. If I see a kid whose really just into some stuff that he really shouldn't be into then I'm going to grab him like he's my kid brother and ‘kick his butt’ about it and it may not be the most professional thing but it's my way of getting my point across and it works. I think that I try not to do it too much where they see me too much as their buddy hanging out so you have to maintain that professionalism. They go hand and hand. I wouldn't be able to separate the two.

Although not all of the counselors were able to identify the ways in which this overlap between their personal and professional lives occurred, they agreed that if their personal lives didn’t overlap with their professional lives, they wouldn’t be in their positions.

In addition to identifying those factors that guide counselors’ personal convictions, the key informants reported no difference between their personal and professional selves. Based on a hunch regarding counselor commitment from interview one data, I inserted questions during interview two to garner counselors’ perspectives on the differences between their personal and professional lives. However, it was quickly apparent that counselors do not perceive any such difference. According to Heather, “I
conduct myself the same in my personal life as I do here in my professional life and many of the roles I take on in my personal life, such as peacekeeper, are the same in my professional life.” By and large, all of the counselors expressed their “professional selves” and “personal selves” are one and the same.

Counselors’ comments regarding their personal convictions reflect their commitment to their work as school counselors. It speaks to the counselors’ values and the ways in which their personal and professional lives overlap. The key informants’ personal experiences and dedication to social justice issues permeate their interactions with students and the ways they approach their work.

This fifth major finding, vocational commitment, provides a context to understand counselors’ ability to endure the challenges described in the other four major themes. Counselors’ exceptional commitment to their work and the students with whom they worked was a constant theme running through the interviews. In addition to the stories they shared, the pictures on their walls and the obvious pride they took from their work provided additional support for this finding. This theme takes into consideration, in particular, the people behind the work and the ways in which counselors’ personal lives and professional lives overlap.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of chapter four was to present the findings from this study of urban high school counselors and their experiences with college planning. Two-part qualitative interviews conducted with urban high school counselors produced five major themes: (a) counselor under-preparedness; (b) urban school settings; (c) complex college planning process; (d) accountability; and (d) counselor commitment. Each theme and its associated
sub-themes were discussed bringing to life the factors that enhance and challenge the
counselor’s ability to influence college planning with her students. Chapter five will offer
conclusions and implications of the study results as well as suggestions for future
research.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The goal of this research study was to examine urban high school counselors’ perceptions of their ability to address college access and retention. Based on a need to identify innovative ways to improve college access and retention and on my belief that urban high school counselors are critically positioned to improve their students’ chances for postsecondary success, this study sought to provide an account of urban high school counselors’ experiences. Using a two-part semi-structured interview, data were collected from eleven key informants and organized into five major themes. Based on the findings from this study, I have drawn three conclusions relevant to the research questions set forth at the inception of this study. This chapter first reviews the key findings from the study with a brief description of each. Then the conclusions of this study will be presented in light of social capital theory, which I proposed would clarify the crucial role urban high school counselors play in promoting social mobility. This chapter also provides a discussion of the implications of this research and suggestions for future research investigations in this area.

The qualitative interviews produced an abundance of rich data. Though described in detail in Chapter Four, these data are briefly discussed here to provide a context for the
conclusions drawn. The two-part interview provided an opportunity for two levels of data to be gathered. The first round of interviews produced a set of preliminary findings of counselors’ experiences and was sent to the participants prior to the second round of interviews. The second round of interviews provided data on how counselors make sense of their experiences. The combined data revealed five major themes: a) counselor under-preparedness; (b) challenging urban school settings; (c) complex college planning; (d) inappropriate accountability measures, and (e) vocational commitment.

The first theme, under-preparedness, refers to counselors’ perceptions that graduate education and training as well as professional development have failed to prepare them for the realities of work as urban high school counselors and the subsequent importance of learning on the job. In light of this, the key informants believed that insufficient graduate education and professional development resulted in confusion among new counselors at the beginning of their professional careers and increased reliance on their colleagues for support.

The second theme, challenging urban school settings, describes the implicit ways in which school structures undermined counselors’ abilities to do their job. More specifically, caseload assignments, multiple demands on counselors’ time, and negative perceptions of counselors inhibited their work with students. Consequently, the key informants described engaging in professional triage, missing out on opportunities to build relationships with students, and developing creative ways to reach students in attempts to manage otherwise debilitating school settings.

The third theme, complex college planning, explains the ways in which urban student and family issues rendered the college counseling process more complex relative
to non-urban settings. In this regard, the key informants perceived their role in this process to be markedly different from other counselors in terms of the following four areas: an expanded degree of influence, the need for early college planning efforts, the potential to be enabling, and heightened concerns about retention.

The fourth theme, inappropriate accountability measures, relates to counselors’ experiences with the absence of appropriate accountability measures. As a result of ambiguous or missing accountability systems, the key informants reported attempts to advocate for their professional work and to create their own personal and professional accountability practices.

The fifth and final major theme, vocational commitment, details the personal convictions that counselors possess which enables them to persist despite organizational and professional impediments. In this case, a strong desire to work with students, students’ success stories and gratitude, and counselors’ personal convictions contributed to their sustained commitment. Although research data were organized into these five major themes, there was much overlap among these topics.

**Research Questions**

Based on these five major themes, the conclusions of this study are organized in terms of the questions used to guide this research. The research questions were: a) How do urban high school counselors perceive their ability to influence college access and retention? b) What informal and formal practices do counselors feel enable or challenge them to focus on this issue? and c) How do school counselors view their preparation for addressing issues of access and retention? The findings reveal that urban high school counselors do believe they have the ability to influence college access and retention
among their students. However, the findings additionally suggest that the presence of informal and formal school practices, a lack of formal preparation for their work, and inappropriate professional development restrain their ability to exert this influence. These restraints ultimately limit the quality and quantity of relationships counselors form with their students. Although counselors are positioned and able to influence their students’ likelihood for college enrollment, there are multiple factors that greatly impede their ability to do so. These factors restrict counselors from developing strong ties with their students and from acquiring sufficient information and networks, both of which are critical for college access and retention influence. As a result, urban youth are disadvantaged. In the following section, the research questions will be answered. Social capital theory will explain why counselors’ actions are critical for their students’ postsecondary success based on the role of social capital in facilitating social mobility.

**How Do Urban High School Counselors Perceive Their Ability to Influence College Access and Retention?**

Interviews with the key informants reveal that urban high school counselors perceive themselves as able to influence the college-going behaviors of their students. Due to the role they play as college counselors, the key informants felt they were positioned to have significant influence over the decision-making of their students. More specifically, the relationships between counselors and students were critical to their ability to exert this influence. The fact that counselors perceived their influence to impact college access and retention can be explained in terms of social capital theory. A stated assumption of this study was that social mobility among urban high school students, as a result of postsecondary enrollment and graduation, is influenced by relationships with
their high school counselors. More specifically, the properties that constitute social
capital, which include information sharing, norms and effective sanctions, and
obligations and trustworthiness illustrate how school counselors’ experiences addressing
college access and retention are essential to the postsecondary success of their students.

The property of social capital previously identified as most relevant to this study
is information sharing because of its potential to facilitate action. This property suggests
that social capital is fostered when a relationship involves the sharing of information or
resources. Counselors’ experiences sharing information with their students regarding
their educational plans occurred with the goal of facilitating action, namely
postsecondary success. The emphasis that counselors placed on sharing information
through college planning with their students is explained by the importance of
information sharing in the transmission of social capital. For example, the key
informants’ remarks regarding how demanding the college planning process is in urban
schools because of students’ and families’ limited experience with the college planning
process supports this claim. Counselors described their experiences providing
information to their students and their families with the hopes of facilitating college
enrollment and retention.

The type of information shared by counselors varied based on students’ individual
needs and can be classified as different forms of social capital. For example, the key
informants reported that they shared information regarding specific academic or social
support programs, school and non-school resources, and social service agencies, all of
which have the potential to contribute to students’ social capital. However, specific to
postsecondary enrollment, the eleven key informants in this study described their work
with college planning as distributing information and resources regarding planning for higher education. There were several examples of this. The key informants felt that their academic advising role, which included explaining high school requirements and scheduling, was an example of sharing information with the goal of improved student preparation for postsecondary education. Another example is the key informants’ desire for retention information regarding their former students. In this instance, the key informants saw themselves as conduits of information by being to gather data about their graduates’ postsecondary education experiences and share this data with current students. Another useful example of counselors’ role as information providers was the key informants’ appreciation for professional development programs directed at meeting the needs of urban students. For example, Abby’s comment about the usefulness of training regarding NCAA eligibility demonstrates this point. She appreciated an opportunity to learn information that she felt would be useful to pass on to her students for successful qualification for NCAA athletics. In all of these examples, counselors’ experiences with the college planning process consisted of imparting information to facilitate future action among their students, specifically, postsecondary education enrollment and success.

The establishment of norms and effective sanctions, Coleman’s (1988) second property of social capital, also describes counselors’ actions which have the ability to influence college access and retention. This property suggests that social capital is fostered when one actor sets a norm or expectation for another with the hopes of influencing a desired outcome. Counselors’ attempts to instill high educational aspirations and college knowledge and preparation were a consequence of their hope for student postsecondary success. Further, counselors described their efforts to influence the
schools’ college-going culture through counselor-implemented systems and programs designed to reach all students and through messages about the importance of planning for postsecondary education. For example, efforts to implement guidance curricula, establish routine classroom visits, and encourage all students to have a post high school plan all reveal attempts made by counselors to establish college-going norms for the school community.

Counselor interest in contributing to a school culture that promotes higher education also illustrates their efforts to set norms and expectations for the transmission of social capital. Counselors spent significant amounts of their time advocating for academic standards and contributing to college-bound cultures with the intention of facilitating postsecondary interest. The key informants in this study attempted to set high curriculum standards for their students. For example, the key informants were frustrated with curricula that set low expectations for students with regard to college requirements or allowed them to leave school early rather than take additional classes. Efforts to contribute to a college-bound culture surfaced in comments regarding college visits and time in the day for college planning. For example, Andrea’s argument with her principal regarding the importance of inviting college admissions’ representatives to the school during the school hours, rather than restricting their visits to after school, revealed her intentions to contribute to a college-bound school culture. In this example, Andrea’s actions reflect the importance of providing information for all students rather than the select few who choose to or who are able to stay after school. These examples of the counselors’ influence on the culture and structures in their schools reflect measures that
ultimately reach all students, rather than the few students that counselors might otherwise reach directly.

The final property of social capital that helps to explain counselors’ belief that they impact their students’ decisions about higher education is trustworthiness and obligations. Social capital theory stipulates that a high degree of trust needs to exist in a relationship in order for the transmission of social capital through information sharing or expectation setting to occur. Indeed, it is this aspect of social capital that is the crux of counselors’ ability to influence college access and retention. The quality of relationships counselors foster with students governs their ability, or inability, to influence college access and retention.

When counselors are able to form quality relationships with students, they are best positioned to influence postsecondary enrollment. The importance of strong ties between counselors and their students as the central ingredient for influencing college access and retention is warranted given the importance of relational ties in the transmission of social capital. Social capital is intangible; rather, it exists in the relations between two individuals that result in action. These relationships “make possible the flow and exchange of resources and support” (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 266). Therefore, the relationships are, in fact, the production sites for social capital. Thus, the ability for information sharing and the setting of norms and expectations to facilitate educational attainment rests on the presence of a trusting relationship. This was the case for the key informants in this study. For example, trust and strong ties with their students was essential for counselors to assist students with personal issues. However, this trust also ultimately enabled them to efficiently address college planning. This was evident in the
key informants’ remarks describing their need to understand students’ personal situations such as parenting or homelessness, in order to attend to their most pressing needs and ultimately help them plan for postsecondary education. Likewise, quality relationships are also critical for counselors to set meaningful norms and expectations. For example, the key informants felt that their ability to encourage students who wouldn’t otherwise apply to college depended on a trusting relationship. It was when trust was present that the key informants felt they were most successful encouraging students’ otherwise low educational expectations.

Previous research has acknowledged the importance of trusting relationships in the transmission of social capital. For instance, Stanton-Salazar (2001) found that school agents are positioned to foster educational attainment among Mexican youth when caring relations exist between the school agent and the student. In his book, *Manufacturing Hope and Despair* (2001), Stanton-Salazar claimed that when students are embedded in complex organizational structures, certain ties “gain salience and positive influence when the fundamentals of trust and social support are set into motion” (p. 189). These points resemble the key informants’ testimonies stressing the importance of relationships between students and themselves in fostering college access and retention.

Social capital theory has partially explained why counselors’ abilities to share information and establish norms and expectations in the presence of a trusting relationship enhances their students’ chances for college access and retention. However, there are two additional aspects of social capital theory that explain why counselors’ actions are critical for the production of social capital. First, a basic element of social capital is its ability to provide benefits or access to information that would otherwise be
unavailable to an individual. This dimension of social capital was reflected in the key informants’ references to their increased degree of influence over their students’ decisions as a consequence of the absence of other assistance with college planning. Consequently, counselors’ attempts at parental outreach, early college planning initiatives, and motivational talks all constitute efforts to compensate for the low levels of social capital that they perceive in students’ homes and community. Therefore, counselors were, in fact, providing something to their students that, in the counselors’ absence, may not be otherwise available.

Social capital formation can also occur as a byproduct of activities engaged in for other purposes. This aspect of social capital further supports counselors’ potential for transmitting social capital to their students. This point was illustrated in the key informants’ comments about building relations with students through non-college planning activities such as clerical tasks or mental health counseling. Although the counselors admitted that they avoided long-term counseling with their students due to time constraints, conversations about students’ personal issues provided opportunities to build relationships which ultimately led to postsecondary education influence. For example, Ana’s twenty-minute conversation with a student about cars depicted her ability to connect with a student with whom she had otherwise been unable to connect in four years. Furthermore, the importance counselors placed on student caseload assignments illustrates a means for social capital to be built through non-college planning activities such as scheduling. Thus, social capital transmission is fostered when the relationship is ongoing and trust has time to develop even when it is a byproduct of another activity.
The properties of social capital, as cited by Coleman (1988), provide a context from which to understand why counselors’ actions are so critical in facilitating educational attainment. In trusting relationships, counselors are positioned to influence social mobility via postsecondary education through information sharing and the establishment of norms and expectations.

**What Informal and Formal Practices Do Counselors Feel Enable or Challenge Them to Focus on College Access and Retention?**

Although counselors are positioned to impact college access and retention among their students, organizational structures impact the degree to which they are able to exert this influence. Counselors encounter numerous formal and informal practices, which ultimately challenge their ability to build relationships with their students and to transmit social capital. Formal policies include caseload assignments, inappropriate accountability structures, and the multiple demands on counselors’ time. Informal practices include the negative perceptions of counselors in their schools and the lack of support counselors receive from administrators. These practices hinder counselors’ abilities to influence postsecondary planning. As a result, counselors are limited in their ability to transmit social capital and serve as institutional agents for their students. The findings from Chapter Four and the properties of social capital identify how organizational constraints inhibit counselors’ efforts to transmit social capital.

Transmission of social capital in schools depends on both the physical presence of counselors and the attention given by the counselors to their students. However, trusting relationships are critical for this transmission of social capital to occur. Therefore, policies and practices that inhibit counselors from being accessible to students or forming
sustainable relationships are problematic. Unfortunately, findings indicate that counselors encounter numerous school structures that limit their abilities to build relationships with students and thus convey social capital.

Examples of formal school policies that directly impede counselors’ efforts emerged in this study. First, counselors’ capacity to share information with their students regarding postsecondary planning is critical for student success. Unfortunately, school policies, such as job descriptions that overwhelm counselors with multiple demands or hold them accountable only for lower priority tasks ultimately prevented counselors from carrying out college planning activities. Second, counselors are positioned to establish norms and contribute to a college-bound culture. However, the key informants were rarely involved in decision-making at their schools, which prevented them from voicing their opinion about curriculum and school policies that set the tone for student standards. This is particularly disturbing given the potential for these policies to impact the greatest numbers of students. Third, counselors’ abilities to develop relationships with their students enhance their capacities to foster postsecondary educational aspirations and planning. Sadly, counselors find little time to foster these relationships when school policies prevent them from meeting with students and haphazard caseload assignments preclude counselors from building sustainable relationships with the same students year after year. These are just a few of the school policies that inhibit counselors’ abilities to perform the acts associated with influencing college access and retention. These examples demonstrate that school environments and structures mediate the degree to which counselors are able to transmit social capital by limiting opportunities for counselors to build relationships with their students and contribute to the overall school
culture. Stanton-Salazar (2001) similarly claimed that enduring relationships only survive when school agents are able to withstand the social order in which they work.

Informal practices also influence counselors’ abilities to foster relationships with students. While formal policies directly inhibit counselors’ efforts, informal practices send indirect messages to counselors regarding their value at the school. The negative perceptions of counselors by their colleagues and the lack of support from administration can be equally problematic. These practices can certainly impact counselors’ personal and professional esteem; however, it may also have implications for how they are perceived by students. Stanton-Salazar (2001) found that organizational arrangements inhibit help-seeking behavior among urban students because they interpret their teachers and counselors as too busy. As a result, schools potentially create obstacles for students to bring counselors and teachers into their social network. In the case of this study, school policies that contributed to large caseloads and overwhelming counselor schedules limited time for students and made students feel as though counselors were not accessible.

The importance of organizational structure in influencing college access has also been cited by McDonough (1997), who found that school structures limit opportunity, especially for low-income and first-generation students and students of color. In her study of four California high schools, McDonough (1997) found that high school organizational arrangements and processes define and determine individual students’ educational aspirations. She further suggested that different school structures provide differential access for students with regard to social capital.
The comments made by the one key informant who worked in a small, pilot school reveal the importance of school structures. Gloria’s lack of concern for her school’s policies, along with the presence of an advisory, which is specifically designed to facilitate college planning, suggests that school structure indeed makes a difference in counselors’ ability to address college planning. Also, this counselor felt supported by her administrator and included in the overall decision-making in the school, both of which explain why her responses regarding urban school settings were different. Because this key informant felt her school structure and administrator contributed to her ability to develop relationships with students and instill the importance of postsecondary education, it appears that school policies, practices, and structures have the potential to be beneficial to counselors’ work.

Both formal and informal school practices challenge urban school counselors’ attempts to focus on college access and retention by inhibiting counselors’ abilities to transmit social capital. Many of the formal and informal policies described by the key informants, such as accountability systems, absence of structures to facilitate college planning during the school day, and caseload assignments can be changed. Policies that inhibit counselors from forming caring relationships, establishing norms, and sharing information, all of which are critical for the transmission of social capital, need to be reevaluated.

How Do School Counselors View Their Preparation for Addressing Issues of College Access and Retention?

Urban school policies are not the only factor inhibiting counselors’ abilities to enhance college aspirations and enrollment. The findings from this study reveal that
counselors’ abilities to meet the college planning needs of their students are additionally compromised by inadequate preparation and support. Counselors have the capacity to transmit social capital to students through information sharing and setting norms and expectations; however, the degree to which they are able to perform this rests on their possession of appropriate information for sharing. In other words, although counselors are positioned to impact college access and retention among their students, inadequate graduate education programs and insufficient professional development opportunities limited counselors’ acquisition of information and networking necessary for their students’ success. The key informants reported that courses in urban education and college planning were missing from their professional training. Furthermore, graduate education programs in school counseling concentrated on clinical counseling skills whereas the key informants rarely had time to conduct individual counseling. As a result, there was a huge gap between the realities of the counselors’ work and their preparation, particularly with regard to urban students’ needs. However, graduate training programs are not the only culprit responsible for failing to prepare urban school counselors. The results of this study revealed that professional development was too often geared towards teachers or suburban counselors and rarely met the specific needs of urban high school counselors. In fact, counselors rarely attended college-sponsored professional development due to logistical challenges and a perceived lack of worth. Consequently, counselor training was lacking, specifically in regard to postsecondary planning.

Given the importance placed on information rich networks for the transmission of social capital, it seems more than reasonable to hope that counselors working with urban students, already facing obstacles in pursuit of higher education, would be well armed
with sufficient information and preparation. Thus far, social capital theory has been used
to explain counselors’ potential to share information with students; however, the
counselors’ own acquisition of capital has not been addressed. School counselors’
capacity to transmit social capital is governed to some degree by their own levels of
capital, or, in this case, possession of appropriate skills and information to be shared with
students. Graduate education, professional development, and networking all constitute
opportunities for counselors to attain useful information and skills to be used with
students. For example, Abby’s statement on the usefulness of the NCAA training reveals
her role as a conduit for sharing that information with students. Unfortunately, inadequate
graduate education, insufficient professional development, and limited opportunities for
networking restrict counselors’ capacity to acquire such information and skills. For
example, the key informants reported that opportunities to network with admissions
counselors were scarce due to logistical challenges. Compared to private school college
counselors, who spend much of their time networking with admissions staff, urban
counselors rarely have or make time for such networking. In fact, as Gloria and other key
informants indicated, multiple demands on their time limited attendance at college open
houses, which are prime opportunities for networking with admissions staffs.
Additionally, logistical challenges to professional development participation limit the
type and extent of information gathered and potentially shared by counselors. For
example, counselors rarely visited colleges that were not local, which means their
knowledge was primarily limited to local schools. In sum, failure to equip urban high
school counselors with the information and networking opportunities for planning with
urban students is a failure to prepare urban youth for college access.
Based on the interview data, the three research questions conceived at the inception of this research have been answered. Urban high school counselors believe in their ability to influence and support college access and retention; however, formal and informal school policies and inappropriate preparation impede counselors from being genuinely accessible and resourceful for all students. The degree to which counselors are able to share information and set norms and expectations regarding higher education rests on their capacity to form trusting relationships with their students and gather appropriate information and skills, which is currently limited. In terms of social capital theory, urban high school counselors’ failures to form relationships, the production site of social capital, and possess their own critical capital to be shared with students, results in urban students’ limited opportunities for social capital acquisition. However, this claim raises a new question regarding how counselors’ relative success influencing college access and retention occurs in spite of organizational constraints and weak preparation. The answer lies in the final point taken from the research findings: counselors’ commitment to their vocation.

Counselor Commitment to the Profession

Although this research did not begin with a research question regarding counselors’ commitment to their professional work, this theme emerged from the preliminary findings and revealed that commitment played a role in counselor ability to withstand barriers to their work. As a result, questions during the second round of interviews elicited responses regarding counselor commitment. That counselors would have some degree of success influencing their students’ propensity for college access and success is partially explained by the personal convictions that characterize their
professional identities. The following section describes counselors’ commitment to the profession and examines why this aspect of counselors’ abilities to influence college access and retention cannot be fully explained by our current understanding of social capital theory.

This study revealed that urban high school counselors are extremely committed to their jobs and the students with whom they work. Data suggest that counselors see their work as a vocation. In this sense, they described their motivation in terms of serving others, their rewards in terms of student gratitude, and their impetus to do this work in terms of personal convictions. Counselor sense of mission mitigated the degree to which school policies and structures and inadequate preparation undermined their efforts to influence their students’ chances for success. Furthermore, the rewards the key informants reaped from their work and their desire to engage in a helping profession fueled their commitment and carried them through the low points in their work. Student success stories and expressions of gratitude served as incentives for the key informants. For example, Heather’s testimony that her student’s acceptance to Brown University put her on an “all time high” illustrates this point. Moreover, counselors’ interest in a profession that fulfilled their own personal need to serve others also contributed to their commitment. These aspects of urban high school counselors’ experiences depict a commitment to the profession that ultimately played a significant role in the key informants’ efforts to influence college access and retention.

Exactly why vocational commitment is sufficient enough to enable counselors to withstand the logistical challenges they face in their work is uncertain. At first glance it seems as though the social capital property, obligations, might explain this phenomenon;
however, it falls short of explaining counselors’ capacity for continuous social capital transmission in spite of formidable challenges. The third property of social capital, obligations, describes one actor’s investment in a relationship with the hopes of receiving something in return, which ideally comes in some form of capital and is useful for personal advancement or growth. More precisely, each actor in this social exchange expects an exchange of resources to take place at some point. This typical exchange is depicted in figure one. In the context of this study, a student has the potential to inherit social capital in the form of educational attainment as a result of a relationship with his high school counselor. Through information sharing, establishment of norms, and trusting relationships, the student receives information or resources to enable him to access postsecondary education. Consequently, this exchange establishes an expectation that the student is obligated to provide something to the counselor that would enhance the counselor’s capital. This is where social capital fails to fully account for counselors’ role in this exchange.

![Figure 1. Typical sequence of events in the social capital property, obligations.](image)

The central difference between traditional social capital theories, which stipulate that both actors engage in an exchange with the potential to facilitate action, and the
school counselors’ exchanges with students, is that the commodity shared with students is returned to counselors in a very different medium. Data from this study suggest that counselors treat student success stories, expressions of gratitude, and opportunities for personal fulfillment as signs of professional efficacy, which counselors value as capital.

That counselors’ reinforcement of their own professional efficacy would translate into sustained professional commitment supports previous research linking low levels of professional burnout with high levels of professional efficacy (Greenglass, 2001). Furthermore, counselors’ perception of students’ success stories and gratitude and love for their work as sustaining them resembles previous research on exceptional urban teachers. In her survey of teachers working in inner city schools, Nieto (2003) found that teachers who continue to teach do it because they love teaching their students and continue to hope for their students’ success despite the obstacles they face. One might argue that, in fact, counselors’ persistence in dysfunctional school environments results simply from feeling as though they contributed to the larger societal good. However, it seems unlikely that such a motivation would be sustainable in light of the powerful organizational forces described by the key informants in their work.

The other difference from traditional social capital theory is counselors’ use of their acquired capital. Rather than use their capital solely for their own advancement, counselors reinvest this returned capital in their vocational commitment to continue helping other students. In other words, counselors’ return on their investment is reinforcement for their professional efforts, which they value as capital and reinvest in their future students. Similar to a bank repository, counselors’ vocational investment in one student yields student success or gratitude, which then returns to the counselor in the

272
form of capital, which is stored and re-circulated in future students’ successes. This is illustrated in figure two. Therefore, counselors’ reproduction of capital sustains their vocational commitment rather than promoting their own individual advancement.

Although it could be argued that the real incentive for counselors, or other such actors, is the need to maintain their job and/or salary, the potential for counselors to go above and beyond what is expected of them in light of the institutional forces and lack of appreciation for their work implies otherwise. Therefore, counselors’ vocational commitments motivate them to re-circulate the capital they receive in their social exchanges with students as investments in future students’ successes. This is quite different from the concept of obligations, which suggests each actor uses the social capital for some form of personal mobility; however, it does rest on similar principles of exchange.

Figure 2. Flow of capital in a student-counselor relationship.

Based on the findings from interview data, social capital theory helps explain why urban high school counselors’ actions are critical to influence college access and retention among urban youth. This was borne from the value of social capital to promote social mobility via postsecondary attainment. Examples of counselors’ involvements in
sharing information, establishing norms and expectations, and building trust in relationships reveal the specific counselors’ actions which affected their students’ likelihood for postsecondary education. However, two barriers faced by counselors in their efforts to promote their students’ chances for postsecondary success have been identified: informal and formal school practices and preparation for their profession. These barriers prevented counselors from developing meaningful relationships, which are instrumental to information sharing and establishing norms and expectations. Consequently, counselors’ actual abilities to exert influence over college access and retention among their students was compromised and limited to a small number of students. Furthermore, counselors were specifically restricted from affecting school culture and structures due to their exclusion from school-wide decision-making. However, where social capital theory failed to fully explain counselors’ actions was in terms of their vocational commitment. Rather than relying on the concept of obligations in the transmission of social capital, an alternative model of exchange between counselors and students was proposed. This proposed exchange suggests that counselors’ return on their capital is a sense of professional efficacy, which counselors value as capital and then store and re-circulate for future students.

Given counselors’ potential to improve the educational attainment of their students, it appears that efforts to improve college access and retention of urban students need to concentrate on those organizational barriers that inhibit urban high school counselors’ potential to build relationships with their students to ensure the exchange of capital. This exchange of capital will promote individual students’ success and ensure counselors’ continued ability to transmit social capital in spite of organizational and
professional challenges. Furthermore, given the counselors’ commitment to their work, college access and retention initiatives that circumvent the role of the high school counselor will ultimately result in a waste of human potential.

**Research Implications**

This study has the potential to appeal to both K-12 and higher education audiences and offers numerous areas for potential reform. The findings gleaned from this research also have implications for educational policymakers and non-governmental organizations who are interested in how urban high school counselors may be targeted for intervention to improve the college access and retention of urban students. The higher education community will benefit from counselors’ experiences to add to the current understanding of college access and retention for underrepresented students, to discover how curriculum and programmatic changes might be implemented in counselor education training programs, and to identify information useful for admissions programs. Additionally, this study has implications for K-12 educational practices and reform efforts. Finally, this study reveals potential consequences for school counselors and the school counseling community. The following section details how research implications reveal areas for reform in research and practice, which will improve counselors’ capacities to transmit social capital to their students.

**Educational Policy**

This study has unique relevance to educational policy, particularly at a time when college access for underrepresented minorities and low-income students remains low. Because of the potential for policy to drive practice, policymakers need to consider the
critical role counselors play with regard to urban students, and uncover ways to enhance counselors’ and schools’ capacities to transmit social capital through college planning efforts.

The findings from this study suggest at least four potential areas for policy changes. First, policymakers need to increase the ability of urban school districts to increase college access for underrepresented youth by attending to the challenges urban counselors face in their work, specifically with regard to relationship building. One step to accomplish this would be to reduce caseloads for those counselors working in urban school settings. Counselors’ ability to form relationships with students to support their transition to postsecondary education will ultimately make a difference to students’ chances for college access and retention. However, large caseloads, hidden caseloads as a result of student mobility, and demanding caseloads all inhibit counselors’ capacity to develop quality relationships. Although the ASCA suggested caseload for school counselors is 250:1, the urban counselors who participated in this study reported higher caseloads. In fact, in high poverty cities, counselor caseloads are closer to 400 students per counselor and the findings from this study suggest high student mobility increases this estimate. Additionally, the state in which one works may influence one’s perception of an excessively heavy caseload of students as the ratio of counselor to students is in sometimes a function of state law. The three states represented in this study, however, did not have such guidelines. In such places, counselor caseloads are typically determined at the district level, with only guidance from professional organizations. Reasonable school counselor caseloads should be bargained for during teacher union contract negotiations as are class sizes. A second approach to supporting counselors’ capacity for relationship
building includes reducing counselor responsibilities that pull them from time with students, particularly those that can be completed by administrative staff. For example, the key informants from this study participated in administrative duties such as lunchroom duty, test proctoring, and classroom coverage, which took time away from students. Therefore, urban schools need to be equipped with adequate administrative and supervisory staff to cover the operational functions of the school. Budget cuts that force urban schools to cut staff invariably result in increased administrative assignments for school counselors simply because they are not responsible for a classroom of students. By decreasing counselor caseload and minimizing non-guidance related tasks, urban students will have greater access to counselors thereby increasing opportunities for social capital transmission.

Also, this research has implications for non-governmental organizations and advocacy groups that campaign for urban school support to increase postsecondary education enrollment, such as Pathways to College or the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). Advocacy groups need to expand their goals to include strategies to enhance schools counselors’ efforts and professional development. To date, these organizations limit their objectives to curriculum alignment, teacher training, tracking systems, enrichment programs, and college partnerships. The findings from this study uncover a potential area for new interventions: urban high school counselors who are positioned to increase college access and have not been targeted by policy efforts so far. A second focus for non-governmental agencies should include professional development for counselors. Given the suburban bias perceived by counselors in current professional development sponsored by non-school agencies, there
is a need for organizations, such as The College Board, to provide opportunities specific to urban counselors. However, these organizations should take into consideration the logistical challenges to participation reported by counselors in their planning efforts. Professional development offered by college access and retention organizations will have the effect of providing counselors with postsecondary education information, which will ultimately strengthen their ability to share information with students, thus increasing counselors’ capacity to transmit social capital.

The third policy implication of this research involves current national educational policy. School counselors are critical to the success of urban students and need to be included in federal policy goals and plans. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) specifically requires the help and support of school counselors in two of its goals. Goal Four, which states, “All children will be educated in learning environments that are safe, drug free, and conducive to learning” has relevance to school counselors who contribute to the learning environment in schools. Goal Five, which states, “All students will graduate from high school” has direct implications for school counselors who are responsible for academic advising and planning. However, the standards set forth in NCLB and the resources made available to schools to meet these standards fail to mention school counselors. Given the potential for counselors to play a critical role in student success, national policies such as NCLB must emphasize the recruitment, the training, and support of school counselors. For example, if all students are required to have individualized plans, which is a goal of some federal policies, then schools need to hire a sufficient number of counselors to develop these plans for their students and resources must exist for the implementation of such plans. This is particularly critical in
urban schools where students face difficulty in reaching many of the standards set by national policy. Ultimately, the greater the role counselors play in their school’s reform efforts, the larger impact they can have on the college culture of the school.

The fourth area for policy relevance relates to the key informants’ comments regarding their students’ retention in college. Counselors’ concern for their graduates’ status and belief that information on their status would aid them in their work suggests a need to better connect school counselors to their graduates. This can be achieved through statewide tracking programs, which track students beyond high school and into the labor market, which could be implemented to benefit both state and local school officials. In addition to the counselors’ need for this information, there are incentives for state officials to implement tracking systems that follow students through college and into the labor market. Concerns for labor market outcomes of limited college access and retention might be addressed by such a system. The state of Florida has implemented such a system that tracks students K-20 as part of a larger accountability system. Although this is a new initiative, the importance of gathering information for practitioners is stressed in its mission. Counselors’ actions in addressing college access, which simultaneously influence retention, indicate that counselors need more information on their graduates’ experiences in order to pass on such information in the form of college counseling to their current students. Approaches to educating counselors regarding high school factors that have been found to influence retention would likely be welcomed by counselors. Moreover, providing information to counselors regarding their graduates’ postsecondary status will simultaneously provide counselors with a sense of professional efficacy, which will help foster their continued vocational commitment.
Higher Education

This study has particular relevance to higher education institutions on three levels: the general higher education research community, schools of education, and undergraduate admissions offices. First, one of the primary goals of this research was to provide a foundation for future research involving high school counselors in order to improve college access and retention among urban students. To date, the experiences of school counselors, and even more so urban school counselors, have been missing from the access and retention literature. Recent literature on high school factors that impact or predict college access and success has been limited to school type, curriculum, academic standards, school structures and college planning. However, these studies often conclude with remarks about the overwhelmed school counselor. The findings from this study provide specific details about what exactly contributes to the proverbial “overwhelmed counselor.” As a result, this study sets up those in the higher education research community with an interest in college access and retention among underrepresented youth with areas ripe for future research, which is discussed in detail later in this chapter. Ultimately, this research challenges the common perspective that school counselors are overwhelmed, uninterested in their students’ success, and simply unable to promote educational opportunities of their students.

Second, schools of education are common training grounds for school counselors and this research has implications for graduate program curricula and practicum experiences. The key informants of this study believed that they were ill prepared for the challenges of working in urban high schools. In this regard, two possible changes are proposed. First, graduate professional training programs in school counseling could
reevaluate their curriculum in light of the findings presented here. The key informants felt clinical counseling training in school counseling programs is overemphasized given the limited opportunities for counselors to conduct individual counseling. Recognizing that counselor education programs may be limited in what they can offer to students because of the core areas already stipulated by accrediting agencies, such as the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), and possibly by other institutional restrictions as well, elective coursework could be developed for students who have a particular interest in urban school counseling. Increasing coursework germane to urban education and postsecondary education planning issues would improve urban counselors’ readiness for their work.

Courses that address issues in urban education might prepare counselors for the possibility that their efforts might enable students, an issue that surfaced in counselors’ comments regarding college planning. Likewise, counselors should be educated on the issues that inhibit students and their families from pursuing higher education. For example, throughout the interviews, the key informants interpreted parental absences from college planning events as disinterest or uncaring. This deficit model of students’ family support held by counselors influenced how they performed their jobs. Therefore, courses that covered college access and retention literature or urban families would expand counselors’ awareness of the challenges faced by urban families. This would ultimately prevent school counselors from accepting and promoting stereotypes regarding their students’ families and encourage dialogue between counselors and parents regarding postsecondary education. Increased awareness of the challenges faced by parents will also enable counselors to modify their programs to suit family needs.
In addition to improved curriculum, graduate programs in school counseling should assess the effectiveness of their practicum and internship experiences. The key informants stressed the importance of learning on the job and claimed that their practicum were the most valued portions of graduate training. For example, an expanded practicum might include increased duration or multiple experiences with different populations of students, school environments, and grade levels. Higher education institutions have responded to the problems of failing schools by modifying teacher training programs with additional coursework and extended student-teaching responsibilities. Similar reform of school counselor programs is warranted, specifically for programs that prepare counselors who are likely to work in urban schools. This study identified the real world experiences of urban school counselors and the challenges they face. As higher education communities and schools of education consider ways to impact college access for underrepresented students, they need to reflect on the need for change in their own graduate programs. Again, by addressing counselor preparation via improved curriculum and practicum, the social capital counselors bring to their jobs is increased and results in counselors’ greater capacity to transmit social capital.

This research also has significance for college and university admissions offices with regard to relationships between admission staffs and guidance departments. In their book, *Entering the Elite* (2003) Avery, Fairbanks, and Zeckhauser stressed the importance of relationships between admission counselors and high school counselors. The authors claimed that these relationships are critical for school counselors to advocate for students directly with admissions counselors (Avery et al., 2003). Sadly, opportunities for high school counselors to build relationships with admissions counselors are limited.
in urban school settings as counselors may not be able to visit college campuses, attend college-sponsored professional development, or invite representatives to their schools. Urban counselors are at a disadvantage regarding their abilities to network with key admissions staff. Therefore, admissions staff should consider new ways to foster relationships with urban counselors as part of their larger recruitment efforts. Rich networks with college admission staffs have the potential to benefit students indirectly as counselors are the conduits for sharing information and advocating on behalf of students.

Admission staffs should be strongly encouraged to examine opportunities for counselor professional development or changes to their outreach procedures. First, the key informants’ appreciation for admissions-sponsored professional development that takes into account the unique challenges faced by urban school counselors and provides insight into the admissions process reveal ideas for useful further professional development. In addition to content, the logistical challenges to professional development participation indicate that admissions offices need to find innovative ways to educate urban counselors about their programs. For example, in key informant examples of beneficial professional development, presenters visited counselors’ high schools during scheduled professional development. In light of the multiple demands on counselors’ time and the challenges they face as a result of school policies, admission staffs need to find creative approaches to reach urban counselors and build those relationships critical for urban students’ likelihood for postsecondary success. As stated in reference to professional development sponsored by non-governmental agencies, efforts to increase counselors’ capital is ultimately an investment in counselors’ capacity to foster social capital with urban students.
The results from this study also reveal several areas of improvement needed in K-12 educational practice. First and foremost, accountability measures need to be implemented that consider the importance of fostering relationships between counselors and students. Considering the intangible nature of counseling, schools should enlist counselors’ help in determining appropriate outcomes to assess their effectiveness. For example, results-based systems provide the opportunity to identify specific aspects of counselors’ responsibilities to formulate goals such as improved attendance, classroom visits, and agency referrals. However, administrators need to support counselor implemented goals, which means limiting their own demands on counselors’ time or modifying school policies that otherwise serve the school.

Second, school districts must devise evaluation and supervisory structures that consider the unique role counselors play in schools. The current treatment of counselors as “teachers” evident in professional development topics, supervision systems, and evaluation tools needs to change. Appropriate supervision of counselors complements accountability systems when supervisors have counseling experience. The key informants in this study relied on students’ success stories and expressions of gratitude to serve as signs of professional accomplishments. This sense of accomplishment translates into a form of social capital for counselors, which sustains their commitment. Therefore, improved evaluation systems might provide additional sources of professional efficacy, thereby contributing to counselors’ vocational commitment.

Another educational practice that requires attention as a result of these findings is school reform projects. The key informants in this study felt that they were generally left
out of school improvement plans at their schools. It is time education reform initiatives include school counselors, rather than simply asking that they proctor standardized exams. These professionals are central to the functioning of schools, yet education reform rarely addresses their work. In fact, The Education Trust proposes that school counselors are advocates for social change, which suggests they should be central to school change projects. At the bare minimum, this study reflects these counselors’ desire for more, rather than less. They asked for more support, more training, and more reform; however, “more” must address appropriate aspects of their work. Education reform efforts suggest that one way to ensure that highly qualified teachers are reaching low-income students is to strengthen teacher education programs, build stronger support for teachers, and make sure low income schools get their fair share of good teachers (Wiener, 2002). Similar efforts need to be applied to counselors to ensure they are accessible to urban youth. For example, characteristics of school reform often include personal attention and restructured small learning communities, both of which emphasize the importance of relationships; however, the key informants in this study felt left out of school improvement plans. This study reveals that counselors are at the heart of these issues and are ideally suited to develop personal relationships with students and advocate for their successes. New reform efforts are called for that address strategies for improved counselor practices and increased resources for counselor development.

Along similar lines, the final research implication for educational practice includes a shift in counselors’ abilities to influence the norms and expectations of the school culture. Based on the role of norms and expectations, counselors will be best positioned to transmit social capital to students in a systemic approach when they can
influence the overall culture of the school. Educational practices that encourage counselors to set educational expectations for the overall school structure are essential given the potential for school practices, such as curriculum, school policies, and structured time for college planning, to convey messages to students about the importance of postsecondary education. School counselors must certainly be involved in decision-making when the outcomes impact their work, as in the example of caseload assignments. Although it is important that counselors reach students directly, efforts to attack this problem on the individual level are insufficient. Rather, programs and efforts that are embedded into the fabric of the school or system are more likely to have the desired effect. School districts and administrators can increase counselors’ abilities to set norms and expectations for students by including them in decision-making regarding changes in school policy. Furthermore, school districts also need to insist upon the creation of structures that imbed college planning into the curriculum and the culture of the school. Structures such as advisories provide built-in opportunities for counselors to encourage postsecondary education aspirations and implement college planning activities.

These implications for K-12 educational practice underscore the importance of counselors’ capabilities to improve students’ chances for success through changes in educational practice. To date, counselors’ contributions have not been recognized because of the current focus on academic rigor and standards. However, Stanton-Salazar (2001) pointed out that it is insufficient for educators to promote the importance of academic achievement without also considering the critical role school agents play in the lives of urban minority youth. In fact, given research indicating the impact postsecondary
planning and aspirations have on decreasing dropout rates, counselors are, in essence, impacting two outcomes through their efforts to encourage aspirations of higher educational attainment.

In sum, this research challenges the educational practices related to high school counselors in an effort to improve college access and retention. Any change to K-12 educational practice that improves counselors’ accountability, role in school reform and overall position in the school will simultaneously improve counselors’ professional efficacy and thus enable their continued transmission of social capital. Furthermore, improvements in counselors’ perspective on their professional experience and the organization in which they work will temper the potential for burnout. However, changes must first address their current role and job structures.

School Counselors

Finally, this study has implications for school counselors both individually and collectively. One implication for the key informants of this study includes the potential for job burnout. The key informants reported emotional exhaustion and frequent dissatisfaction with their jobs, which signals a high potential for burnout. Contributors to burnout include emotional exhaustion, dissatisfaction with supervision, lack of resources, high caseloads, and lack of clarity in job (Niebrugge, 1994), all of which have been described in this study. That urban counselors are so critically positioned to encourage college access and retention means that burnout among these professionals would have a negative impact on urban students’ chances for success. Fortunately, two additional features of burnout, depersonalization and the absence of a feeling of personal accomplishment, were not present in the key informants’ comments, suggesting that they
have not fully reached the point of burnout. However, there was evidence of dissatisfaction with supervision, lack of clarity of job, and some degree of job dissatisfaction, which sounds an alarm that these professionals are prone to burnout. Along similar lines, negative stereotypes of counselors reveal that their professional worth is not perceived to be the same as college counselors from private schools, who are typically revered for their knowledge and position to influence college enrollment. These symptoms of burnout can be alleviated to some degree through changes to organizational structures, such as counselor job satisfaction, structural support for counselor activities, and supervisory structures.

This research also has implications for the collective experiences of school counselors. The findings from this study reveal a lack of clarity among urban school counselors about their role. The American School Counselor Association has established guidelines, principles, and developmental guidance curricula; however, these generic approaches often have little relevance to counselors working in urban schools. A new vision of school counseling that takes into account the unique experiences and needs of urban counselors is overdue. The role of the school counselor has changed significantly over the last century and, as a result, the identity of counselors has become confused, specifically in urban schools.

The profession of urban school counselors needs to be redefined to highlight their positions to influence college access and retention. Similar calls to “reinvent” the role of teachers have been made (Lagemann, 1993). There are several choices for a new vision of school counseling. Hart and Jacobi (1992) have advocated for the elimination of mental health counseling from the school counselor role in favor of an academic advisor
and advocate role. The school counseling profession is split on this issue, with organizations such as CACREP supporting maintenance of mental health counseling in the role of the school counselor and others, such as The Education Trust, advocating for eliminating it. Urban school counselors certainly should not be held responsible for ongoing mental health counseling; however, the findings from this study suggest that engaging in a small amount of non-clinical counseling facilitates relationship building and, thus, college planning influence. On the other hand, some school change efforts have opted for teacher-led advisories to assist students with academic and college planning needs in place of traditional school counselors. Such an approach fails to take into account two key elements. First, although the key informants were not able to conduct individual counseling to the extent that they were prepared, they did admit that mini-counseling sessions enabled them to uncover larger personal issues with which students were contending. Second, given the college planning needs of urban students, which have been identified as more complex and greater than middle-class or suburban students, it seems misguided to assign the task to urban teachers who are already overwhelmed with other responsibilities. Why not combine the two approaches and encourage teachers’ involvement in the college planning process with counselors? A team approach is likely the best option to make up for low levels of social capital. However, even this structural change requires a shift in the urban school counselors’ role.

The role of the urban school counselor should be redesigned to take into account the needs of urban students and the benefits of student-counselor relationships. By redefining the role of the school counselor as more central in students’ lives and school organizations, two outcomes will occur. First, counselors will be able to have a greater
impact on the school culture, which will ultimately impact students’ chances for postsecondary education. Second, if current perceptions of counselors are negative, role clarification has the potential to change these perceptions. Both of these outcomes will ultimately improve counselors’ capacity to transmit social capital by improving their roles and positions in the overall school structure in which they work. This would allow them to have a greater impact on the school rather than simply assisting one student at a time.

Professional school counseling organizations need to publicly advocate for and support this shift in professional roles for urban counselors. This change is critical given the potential for counselor burnout and the impending national teacher shortage, which will also likely have an impact on school counselors. Because of the expertise that is associated with experience as a school counselor in lieu of adequate professional development or training, the potential loss of these professionals is disturbing.

The findings from this study have far reaching implications for higher education institutions, research, policymakers, K-12 education reform and practice, and for school counselors themselves. This account of the experiences and perceptions of urban high school counselors, the front-line professionals, has exposed holes in the process currently in place for urban youth to be successful in postsecondary education. It also identifies a tremendous resource for students in school counselors. In social capital terms, these implications suggest that policy efforts, educational practice, and professional support and preparation should be geared towards increasing counselors’ capacity to transmit social capital. This can be accomplished by increasing student access to counselors through school polices and smaller caseloads, providing ample opportunities for
counselors to acquire information to be shared with students through professional
development and networking, and changing the role and perceptions of school counselors
to improve their ability to influence school cultures. It is critical that efforts to redefine
the role of the urban school counselor be paired with changes to the organizations in
which they work. Failure to answer to both of these calls will likely result in increasingly
frustrated counselors. New approaches to creating equal access to enroll and succeed in
college are critical if American higher education is to be genuinely accessible to all
members of an increasingly diverse and global society. This is acutely important at a time
when funding for supplemental programs is limited. Therefore, it is practical and
worthwhile for policymakers, researchers, and educators to understand the barriers urban
counselors face when they attempt to influence college access and retention among
underrepresented youth.

This research sought to identify those aspects of the school counselors’
experience that might be impacted by policy or educational reform, therefore, individual
student characteristics have been excluded from consideration. Stanton-Salazar
(2001) found that Latino students’ propensity to engage in help-seeking behavior
influenced their ability to capitalize on the resources provided by teaches and counselors.
These findings are not meant to diminish the importance of students’ help-seeking
behavior, which certainly contributes to students’ chances for relationship building with
counselors. In fact, the best chances for urban students’ postsecondary success include
strong counselor commitment and high student help-seeking behavior.
**Small Steps**

There have been some steps taken in regard to the suggestions described here. Although school counselors have been relatively absent from the literature on education reform, very recent initiatives reflect the timeliness of this research. New plans by three organizations that are focusing their efforts on school counselors have the potential to improve college access: the National Association for College Admissions Counselors (NACAC), The College Board, and The Education Trust. Each of these organizations has identified school counselors as critical to improving students’ chances for academic success and is attempting to educate and empower counselors to join in the campaign to improve college access and retention.

One organization that has begun to focus on school counselors with regard to college access is the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC). NACAC’s mission is to “support and advance the work of college admission counseling professionals as they help students realize their full educational potential, with particular emphasis on the transition from secondary schools to higher education and with attention to access and equity for all students” (National Association for College Admission Counseling, p. 1). NACAC’s recent interest in developing curricula for graduate courses on college counseling is most relevant to this study. NACAC has provided sample course syllabi, which include topics such as early awareness in college planning, understanding selective college admission, counseling students with learning disabilities, and helping students through the transition to college. Although this initiative does not speak specifically to the challenges faced by counselors in urban schools, it absolutely
addresses the critical finding in this study that counselors do not feel their graduate training programs have prepared them for the college planning component of their work.

The College Board, a national nonprofit association working towards connecting “students to college success and opportunity” (College Board, p. 1), has also made an executive change that is likely to have an impact on the work of school counselors. This organization was founded in the early 1900s with the goal of helping high school students make a successful transition from high school to college. For many years this mission was accomplished through assessment for entrance into higher education, however, the organization has expanded to provide more than just entrance examinations. Today, based on The College Board’s belief that school counselors are critical to the successful transition of students from secondary to postsecondary education, close attention will be paid to better supporting professional development for counselors. According to Gaston Caperton, President of The College Board:

During my tenure at The College Board, I have become increasingly aware of the vital contribution school counselors make to education. All students, especially those who traditionally have not been seen as potential college students, need somebody to inspire them to become all that they can be, to nurture their academic and career dreams, and to help them prepare for life as adults with substantive career opportunities that require college…School counselors have a profound effect on the lives of the students they serve” (Caperton, 2003).

Based on this belief and years of a connection between The College Board and school counselors, the organization has appointed Pat Martin, a 30 year veteran teacher,
counselor, and administrator in public schools, to the position of national advocate for school counselors. In her role she will work with school counselors and counselor organizations to help counselors establish a greater voice in local, regional, and national policy. Although this appointment is not the only effort The College Board has made to support school counselors, it is a significant reflection on the growing awareness of the importance of counselors’ need for greater support and advocacy.

The Education Trust is an organization that is making efforts geared towards moving school counseling away from the periphery toward the front and center of schools. Established in 1990 by the American Association for Higher Education, the organization was established to encourage colleges and universities to support K-12 reform efforts. Now an independent non-profit organization, The Education Trust advocates for high academic achievement for all students from kindergarten through college through research, school collaborations, and national and state policy advocacy. More recently, based on a belief that school counselors are ideally situated in schools to serve as advocates to promote school-wide success for all students, The Education Trust, in conjunction with MetLife, has established the National Center for Transforming School Counseling. One component of this center is the implementation of the National School Counselor Training Initiative (NSCTI). This initiative is responsible for workshops designed to prepare school counselors to serve as leaders for access and equity for all students, to use data to create change in schools, and to work as advocates for system-wide change. The Center also works to transform school counselor preparation programs in higher education.
These potentially meaningful initiatives could not have come at a better time. Given the attention to college access and retention and education reform, this could be a turning point for the school counseling profession. However, the small steps outlined above and the findings from this study suggest more research on school counselor experiences is warranted.

**Future Research**

One of the central goals behind this study was to provide a foundation upon which to build future research regarding college access and retention from the perspective of the urban school counselor. Future research is a preliminary step to implementing much of the change described in this chapter. This study focused on a group of actors who have not yet been included in the college access and retention debate and, thus, their perceptions and perspectives are missing from the relevant literature. As a result, interesting findings emerged in this study that warrant future research.

- Given the differences in experiences between counselors from comprehensive high schools and the one counselor from a smaller pilot school, a comparative examination of specific school influences common in smaller schools is warranted. For example, an examination of factors such as counselors’ perceptions regarding college access, caseloads, advisories, school site management, and small school culture would likely produce potential ideas for future practice. However, a comparative study of pilot and comprehensive schools would need to control for students’ self-selection into pilot schools.
- Given the key informants’ interest and concern for the retention of their graduates in college and their belief that such information would aid them in future college
planning, action research would provide the opportunity to implement a model that informs counselors about their students’ postsecondary success. Results would ultimately reveal to what extent such information would benefit counselors and students alike.

• Because of the importance of counselor-student relationships in fostering social capital, a longitudinal study should be implemented to determine the potential for the long-term benefits of these relationships. Such a study would include counselors following students through college to determine if such relationships would affect students’ future success.

• Literature on “teachers as researchers” suggests involvement in research benefits their practice and provides a form of professional development (Smith et al., 2002). A similar approach might be encouraged with counselors, particularly to enhance counselors’ accountability and role clarity. Currently, urban counselors’ experiences are missing from the school counselor literature, likely as a consequence of counselors’ overworked schedules and limited knowledge and experience with research. Partnering colleges can also focus their research on counselors and implement studies that incorporate counselors as researchers.

• The key informants felt they were perceived negatively by other colleagues in education. Research might investigate the existence of such a perception and what factors contribute to it.

• Case studies of school guidance departments would likely provide a fuller understanding of counselors as members of a larger organizational context. The dynamics among counselors that surfaced within guidance departments was
beyond the scope of the current investigation. However, given the emphasis on collegial relationships as beneficial to counselors, such a study could explore the specific factors in those relationships. Furthermore, in-depth research such as this might include explorations of school cultures and how they affect school counselors.

- Specific inquiry into the relationship of tacit knowledge and college planning might provide insight into the best ways to educate, inspire, and motivate underrepresented students about postsecondary education. Counselors’ extended role in college planning and recognition of their students’ limitations with regard to college knowledge should be considered in detail.

- A quantitative look at school counselors’ experience may provide insight into the ways in which gender, race, years of experience, and personal values may influence their perceptions of their work. As this study revealed few outliers in counselors’ experiences, such a study should utilize a larger sample size and a different recruitment process to identify differences.

- Based on the claim that large, demanding caseloads compromise counselors’ abilities to foster quality relationships with students, further research needs to examine what impact smaller caseloads would make on student success.

- Future research should be conducted to identify the differences between urban and suburban counselors’ experiences. Such a study would provide insight for training programs and, perhaps, shed light on whether specific professional development programs would improve urban counselors’ preparation for their work.
This is not an exhaustive list of future research; however, it does cover those areas that emerged during the study that were beyond the scope of this study or analysis.

Chapter Summary

Chapter five summarized the key findings from the study and then presented three conclusions relevant to the research questions set forth at the inception of this study. The research questions were answered utilizing social capital theory to clarify the role of the counselor in promoting social mobility and research implications revealed areas for reform in the areas of educational policy, higher education, K-12 educational practice, and school counseling. Finally, suggestions for future research were presented.

Final Thoughts

Urban high school counselors believe they are able to influence their students’ college-going behavior. Counselors are able to exert this influence to a limited extent as a byproduct of their vocational commitment to their work and their ability to resist the social order in which they function. However, the key ingredient to counselors’ abilities to influence college access and retention is the quality of relationships they foster with their students. As a result, urban students who are otherwise facing insurmountable barriers to enrolling and succeeding in higher education, confront an additional challenge in accessing those professionals who can transmit social capital to facilitate social mobility. Ana nicely summed up the spirit of this research:

The needs are much greater in the city than in other places. It is more critical that this not happen in an urban setting. If it's happening in a suburban setting it seems to me that most kids will get to college. Here, it is all or nothing. If you don't give us support here, then these kids are
really missing out. So you need to talk to people that are on the front lines to see what it's going to take to achieve some real change.

The findings from this study reveal that urban high school counselors are critically positioned to share information and set high educational aspirations when established relationships exist. Therefore, new approaches to improving college access for underrepresented students should be aimed at supporting school counselors. Failure to promote urban high school counselors and their capacity to form strong ties with their students will likely yield high burnout rates and thus waste human potential and capital that would otherwise produce long-term benefits to students and eventually our society.

In order to capitalize on the ability and commitment of these professionals and improve postsecondary opportunities for urban youth, areas for effective and proactive reform should be identified. By concentrating our efforts on urban high school counselors, chances for improved college access and retention increase, which ultimately mitigates the degree to which economic, social, and educational poverty prevents some members of our society from pursuing higher education. As a result, individual citizens will have the equal access to our system of higher education and our increasingly diverse society will maintain its democratic principles and ability to compete globally.
REFERENCES


Collison, M. N. (1990). High school counselors are often too overburdened to advise minority students of college opportunities. The Chronicle of Higher Education.


*Keeping the options open.* (1986). New York: College Entrance Examination Board.


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD AND SITE ACCESS DOCUMENTS

Cleveland State University
College of Graduate Studies and Research
Office of Sponsored Programs and Research
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Memorandum

To: Kathryn MacCluskie
   CASAL

From: Patrick Murray,
     Graduate Assistant for Compliance,
     Institutional Review Board

Date: 3 January 2007

Re: Results of IRB Review of your project number: 27135-MAC-HS
    Co-Investigator: Kristie Cooper
    Entitled: Urban high school guidance counselors’ experiences with students’ access to and success in college

The IRB has reviewed and approved your application for the above named project, under the category noted below. Approval for use of human subjects in this research is for one year from the approval date listed below. If your study extends beyond this approval period, this office will initiate an annual review of the project. This approval expires on 12/25/2007

By accepting this decision, you agree to notify the IRB of: (1) any additions to or changes in procedures for your study that modify the subjects’ risk in any way, and (2) any events that affect that safety or well-being of subjects.

Thank you for your efforts to maintain compliance with the federal regulations for the protection of human subjects.

Approval Category:

☑ Exempt Status: Project is exempt from further review under 45 CFR 46.101 (b)(2)
☐ Expedited Review: Project approved, Expedited Category
☐ Regular IRB Approval

Date: 12/25/2006

cc: Project file
Dear Counselor,

I am a school counselor at Cleveland Heights High School, located in an inner-ring suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, and graduate student at Cleveland State University. I am writing a dissertation on the experiences of urban high school counselors and would like to invite you to participate in my study.

As a school counselor, I am fully aware of the multiple demands on your time. However, our students’ chances for enrolling and succeeding in college greatly depend on the work of school counselors, yet very little is known about our profession. This lack of research on our experiences as professionals has led me to a topic that requires your help.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will:

• Bring increased awareness to the challenging work of urban counselors
• Set the standard for counselor-focused education reform
• Contribute to the training of new counselors
• Add the voices of urban counselors to education literature that is currently saturated with suburban counselors’ experiences.

Your participation will consist of two interviews in which I will ask you questions about your experiences as an urban school counselor assisting students with college planning. Ideally, the interviews would take place at your home school, however, if you would prefer to meet off school grounds, I am more than happy to oblige.

If you are interested, you may contact me by phone, (216) 676-0971 or by email, k.l.cooper@csuohio.edu. I will follow up with you by phone as well.

Thank you for considering my request to take part in what I feel is a sorely needed study.

Kristie L. Cooper
PhD Candidate, Cleveland State University
Informed Consent Form for Urban High School Counselors

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Kristie L. Cooper, a doctoral student in Urban Education at Cleveland State University in Cleveland, Ohio. This research study will contribute to a doctoral dissertation and will be supervised by Dr. Kathryn MacCluskie at Cleveland State University.

Based on the role of school counselors in providing influence over underrepresented students’ postsecondary planning, this study proposes examining the experiences of urban high school counselors as a focus for improving access and retention among low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students. The research is particularly interested in answering these questions:

1. How do urban high school counselors perceive their ability to influence college access and retention?
2. What informal and formal practices do counselors feel enable or challenge them to focus on this issue?
3. How do school counselors view their preparation for addressing issues of college access and retention?

Should you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in two interviews. Each interview will last approximately one hour and there will be approximately one month between interviews. These interviews will take place in your home school, unless you prefer to meet elsewhere. Both interviews will be audio taped.

The voice of the high school counselor is lacking in the current college access and retention literature. The benefit of participation in this study is the satisfaction of knowing you have contributed to our profession. There are no notable risks to participating in this research.

As this report will be shared with my dissertation committee, I will take a number of precautions to protect your identity. In presenting my findings, I will not use individual names, or names of the high schools or school districts in which you work. In addition, each participant will be assigned a code number so in the event that someone was to gain access to my data, they would be unable to identify anyone by name. The list of code numbers and research files will be kept in locked file cabinets in my home.

If you choose to participate in this project, please understand that your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You are also welcome to ask questions at any time during the interview. Furthermore, should I pose a question you would rather not answer, for whatever reason, you have no obligation to answer.

If you would like a copy of the final report I submit, you can request one by letting me know at the time of the interview. If after reading the report, you wish to discuss any concerns or clarify any information I will be glad to do so. If you find any aspect of the report offensive, inaccurate, or potentially threatening to you in any way, I will remove that section of the final report. With your permission, I would like to save a copy of your interview for future research purposes.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project, you may reach me at 216-676-0971 or my advisor, Dr. Kathryn MacCluskie, at 216-523-7147.

I understand the above information and voluntarily consent to participate in this research. I understand if I have any questions about my rights as a research subject I can contact the CSU Institutional Review Board at 216-687-3630.

Signature of Participant _____________________________ Date _____________
Permission is granted for Kristie L. Cooper to enter the buildings listed below between
for purposes of data collection for her dissertation project with Cleveland State
University. Access is limited to the guidance department of each building and a tour of
the building provided by a staff member.

School District  

City

Building(s)  

High School

Dates  


Signature  

Beverly Dingle

Position  

Principal
Permission is granted for Kristie L. Cooper to enter the buildings listed below between for purposes of data collection for her dissertation project with Cleveland State University. Access is limited to the guidance department of each building and a tour of the building provided by a staff member.

School District: [Redacted] City
Building(s): [Redacted] High School


Signature: [Redacted]
Principal: [Redacted]
Permission is granted for Kristie L. Cooper to enter the buildings listed below between for purposes of data collection for her dissertation project with Cleveland State University. Access is limited to the guidance department of each building and a tour of the building provided by a staff member.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School District</th>
<th>PUBLIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building(s)</td>
<td>HIGH SCHOOL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HIGH SCHOOL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signature

Position

320
Permission is granted for Kristie L. Cooper to enter the buildings listed below between for purposes of data collection for her dissertation project with Cleveland State University. Access is limited to the guidance department of each building and a tour of the building provided by a staff member.

School District: MUNICIPAL
Building(s): ACADEMY


Signature

Principal
Permission is granted for Kristie L. Cooper to enter the buildings listed below between
for purposes of data collection for her dissertation project with Cleveland State
University. Access is limited to the guidance department of each building and a tour of
the building provided by a staff member.

School District  MUNICIPAL
Building(s)     HIGH SCHOOL


Signature

Position
## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

**Questions for interview one and the research questions to which each corresponds**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Research Question*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Questions about the Key Informant and School</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you been a school counselor?</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you begin your professional career?</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the structure of the guidance department?</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many counselors work in the school?</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many students are you responsible for?</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What percentage of your graduates go on to college?</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College Planning Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is college planning carried out in your school?</td>
<td>R2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your role in college planning?</td>
<td>R2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much of your time is spent doing college planning?</td>
<td>R2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What other responsibilities do you have as a school counselor separate from college planning?</td>
<td>R2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there anyone else in the school responsible for college planning with students?</td>
<td>R2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College Access Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much influence do you have on your students’ plans for post-secondary education?</td>
<td>R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What factors contribute to your influence?</td>
<td>R2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions for interview one and the research questions to which each corresponds

(continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Research Question*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What things limit your influence?</td>
<td>R2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How adequately prepared are you to assist your students with college planning?</td>
<td>R3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College Retention Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what degree do you think you influence your students’ chances for succeeding in college?</td>
<td>R1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What factors contribute to your influence?</td>
<td>R2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What things limit your influence?</td>
<td>R2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How prepared do you believe are you to assist your students to succeed in college?</td>
<td>R3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job Preparation Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How or where did you acquire your knowledge about college access and retention?</td>
<td>R3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe your graduate training in school counseling?</td>
<td>R3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you participate in professional development about college access and retention?</td>
<td>R3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What other methods do you employ to get information or training?</td>
<td>R3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Research Questions:

- **G** - General question to gather information about key informant and/or school.
- **R1** - How do urban high school counselors perceive their ability to influence college access and retention?
- **R2** - What informal and formal practices do counselors feel enable or challenge them to focus on this issue?
- **R3** - How do school counselors view their preparation for addressing issues of college access and retention?
Interview Guide – Interview #2

1. Was there anything in the summary of findings that seemed “way off?”

2. Were there parts of the summary about which you feel particularly strong?

3. What do these findings mean to you?

4. What is the important story here that you would like to tell?

5. What keeps you at this job?

6. Why is it important for you to do this job?

7. What do these findings mean to you professionally?

8. What do these findings mean to you personally?

9. Do you see or feel a distinction between these two lives?

10. How did you feel about this interview process?
Preliminary Findings

A. SCHOOL/ DISTRICT ISSUES
- High student caseloads and multiple demands on their time limit your ability to build relationships with students, thereby making college planning difficult.
- School/District structures and policies have the potential to hinder or help you in the college planning process.
- Professional development sponsored by the district is helpful to you when it focuses on specific elements of your job.
- School-wide professional development does not support counselors in their work with students.
- Time constraints limit the amount and types of professional development you participate in.
- You are more inclined to attend PD sponsored by local colleges, as the majority of your students attend those schools and therefore that information is most critical to your work.
- Administrative decisions reflect a lack of understanding or appreciation for counselor work.
- You have to spend too much time on paperwork.
- You often take individual initiative to meet your students’ needs.
- Having a lead counselor or director of guidance on site aids you in your work.
- There is a lack of structured support for new counselors.
- Counselors typically report to school administrators for supervisors.
- In the absence of school or district driven accountability measures for counselors, you have developed your own mechanisms to account for your work.

B. STUDENT ISSUES
- Due to the significant personal issues that students bring to school, college planning often becomes secondary.
- Students lack the expectations and knowledge of post secondary education, which places more responsibility on you in the college planning process.
- You are often filling a void left by parents and community in the college planning process, which again places more responsibility on you as a counselor in the college planning process.
- You report that a lack of parental involvement in the college planning process is harmful to students.
- You report performing a sort of “professional triage” with students, often serving the most needy first and sacrificing others in the process.
- You believe that students academic and language abilities pose additional challenges to college planning.

C. PROFESSIONAL ISSUES
- You feel you have an influence on your students PSE plans to a greater or lesser extent.
Support from your colleagues makes a big difference in your ability to assist students.

You are very concerned about how their students are managing in college.

Information on your students’ experiences in college would be useful to you; although, some worry it would add another layer of work to their job.

College planning with your students differs from suburban counselors because your role is more comprehensive.

You are primarily concerned that students have a plan for after high school.

Although there has been some improvement, there is still a great deal of devaluing and misunderstanding of counselors and their work.

You try to improve the reputation of counselors by advocating for your own work and increasing your presence in the classroom.

You often feel that although you have a master’s degree in counseling, you are often held accountable for more clerical tasks.
APPENDIX C
AUDIT TRAIL

The following audit trail outlines specific passages from interview transcripts which were used in formulating each theme generated in the study. This audit trail allows the reader to determine if the results of the study are consistent with the data collected and if there are sufficient accounts of the data and the analysis. It also enables the reader to locate each passage referenced in the body of the document to read it within its originally documented context.

The outline lists the five emergent themes that are described in detail in chapter four. Specific passages are notated by key informant name, interview number, and line(s) within the document on which they appear. The reader may refer to source documents in Appendix D to locate the passages.

I. Under-preparedness: the counselors’ perceptions that graduate education and training as well as professional development have failed to prepare them for the realities of being an urban high school counselor

A. Graduate Training
   Abby  1  150-152
   Abby  1  156-159
   Andrea  1  265-286
   Ana  1  187-194
   Ana  1  264-274
   Ana  1  279-286
   Debbie  1  285-288
   Heather  1  60-68
   Linda  1  194-199
   Olivia  1  131-137
   Olivia  1  203-206
   Olivia  1  222-230
B. Professional Development
Abby 1 103-109
Ana 1 291-302
Ana 1 307-317
Gladys 1 293-299
Gloria 1 189-193
Gloria 1 198-203
Judy 1 278-282
Judy 1 292-299
Judy 1 303-308
Karen 1 244-250
Olivia 1 235-247

C. Potential Outcomes
Abby 1 163-170
Ana 2 38-46
Debbie 1 312-323
Heather 1 73-81
Heather 1 91-98
Karen 1 254-263
Olivia 1 206-217

II. Urban School Settings: the ways urban school structures undermine counselors’ abilities to do their jobs
A. Dysfunctional School Settings
Ana 1 71-83
Ana 1 93-110
Ana 1 194-197
Ana 2 81-91
Andrea 1 188-198
Andrea 1 244-253
Debbie 1 73-78
Debbie 1 82-85
Debbie 1 132-140
Gladys 1 87-100
Gloria 1 51-55
Gloria 2 94-100
Heather 1 155-163
Karen 1 152-157
Karen 2 19-23
Linda 1 60-63
Linda 2 15-23
Olivia 1 20-34
Olivia 1 101-108
Olivia 2 14-21
B. Multiple Demands on Counselors’ Time
   Abby 1 115-116
   Ana  2 127-133
   Andrea 1 114-118
   Gladys 1 139-145
   Gloria 1 78-83
   Olivia 1 108-114
   Olivia 1 119-126

C. Negative Perceptions of Counselors
   Ana 1 234-247
   Ana 1 359-368
   Andrea 2 11-15
   Gladys 2 15-18
   Gloria 2 67-79
   Heather 2 10-15
   Judy 2 69-73
   Karen 2 13-17
   Linda 2 55-61
   Olivia 2 11-14

D. Potential Outcomes
   Abby 1 135-136
   Abby 1 329-332
   Ana 1 134-147
   Andrea 1 82-89
   Andrea 1 186-188
   Andrea 1 237-244
   Debbie 1 121-126
   Debbie 1 156-162
   Gladys 1 225-235
   Judy 1 147-151
   Karen 1 141-148
   Linda 1 109-110
   Linda 1 114-117

III. Complex College Planning Process: the ways in which urban student and family issues make the college counseling process unwieldy relative to that encountered by suburban and private school counselors

A. Student Issues
   Abby 1 179-187
   Abby 1 313-322
   Abby 2 36-41
   Ana 1 133-140
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>324-355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>145-150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>93-102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>138-145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>152-166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>253-255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>242-247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40-43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladys</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>208-216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>120-131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>233-240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42-48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>133-136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>194-201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>210-214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>157-163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>153-161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>67-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>158-167</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**B. Family Limitations**
- Abby 1 254-256
- Abby 1 258-262
- Ana 1 169-178
- Andrea 1 149-152
- Andrea 1 167-181
- Debbie 1 126-129
- Judy 1 201-210
- Linda 1 139-149
- Olivia 1 167-172

**C. Potential Outcomes**
- Abby 1 191-201
- Abby 1 253-262
- Abby 1 270-279
- Abby 1 301-307
- Abby 2 41-46
- Ana 1 232-233
- Ana 2 47-56
- Ana 2 61-75
- Debbie 1 185-192
- Debbie 1 231-238
- Debbie 1 252-256
- Gladys 1 187-194
- Heather 1 138-148
- Heather 1 224-227

331
IV. Accountability: the absence of appropriate accountability measures that exist for counselors

A. Flawed Systems
   Abby  1  290-294
   Abby  1  344-354
   Ana   2  28-33
   Ana   2  101-109
   Andrea 1  113-114
   Andrea 1  118-124
   Andrea 2  22-25
   Debbie 1  65-68
   Debbie 1  102-109
   Debbie 1  113-116
   Debbie 1  202-205
   Gladys 2  20-21
   Gladys 2  63-67
   Heather 1  120-129
   Heather 2  25-26

B. Overlooked Priorities
   Abby  2  15-24
   Gladys 1  216-225
   Gladys 2  33-37
   Judy  2  24-29
   Olivia 1  98-101

C. Potential Outcomes
   Abby  1  218-226
   Abby  2  78-84
   Andrea 2  15-21
   Andrea 2  72-75
   Gloria 2  30-34
   Heather 1  208-219
   Judy  2  35-39
   Karen  1  65-68
   Karen  1  104-108
   Karen  1  108-116
   Karen  2  69-72
   Linda  2  25-35
V. Vocational Commitment: the personal convictions counselors bring to their work that enables them to persist despite the numerous challenges

A. Job Appreciation
Abby 2 66-74
Ana 2 113-122
Andrea 2 52-59
Debbie 2 80-81
Judy 1 39-44
Linda 1 220-226
Linda 2 65-75

B. Rewards and Nourishment
Abby 2 84-88
Andrea 2 55-69
Debbie 2 15-24
Gladys 1 315-324
Gladys 2 50-59
Gloria 2 42-47
Heather 1 271-282
Heather 1 286-289
Linda 1 166-171

C. Personal Convictions
Ana 2 171-179
Andrea 1 208-233
Gloria 2 83-90
Heather 1 7-15
Heather 2 90-92
Judy 1 185-190
Judy 2 61-65
Linda 2 89-93
Olivia 1 7-15
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

KRISTIE: How long have you been a school counselor?

ABBY: Thirteen years. I taught for five years before that.

KRISTIE: What did you teach?

ABBY: I was a special ed teacher. I taught mostly English and social studies.

KRISTIE: High school?

ABBY: No, I taught in middle school and then I came to the high school when I became a counselor.

KRISTIE: Was that a difficult transition, from middle school to high school?

ABBY: A little bit. There’s more academic stuff to worry about here because the kids are down to the wire, so to speak. You know, graduation is imminent so you’ve got to have that in the back of your mind all the time. Pay attention to the requirements and deadlines and so forth. I was also coming out of the classroom so the job was altogether different.

KRISTIE: What took you out of the classroom?

ABBY: I got tired of watching students who were unable to work because they were so distracted by things outside of the classroom. Y’know? The problems at home, in the street, can’t get the things you need, etc. I thought maybe I could help if I became a counselor.

KRISTIE: Was it a good decision?

ABBY: Oh yeah. The best decision for me.

KRISTIE: Did you want to be a counselor at the middle school?

ABBY: At first I did because that’s where all my experience was so it would have been comfortable. I’m settled in here though. I wouldn’t go to the middle school now.

KRISTIE: Let’s talk a little bit about Bolton High School and your school district. How many counselors work in the school?
abby, interview 1

43  abby: we have six counselors at Bolton.

44  kristie: tell me about the structure of the guidance department.

45  abby: we’re in a bit of a transition. we’re changing over to small
learning communities. you know about those, right.

46  kristie: yes, from the bill and melinda gates foundation?

47  abby: yeah. the goal is to reorganize the counselors so they are attached
to a small school but we haven’t done that yet. right now each counselor is
assigned to certain homerooms. so it’s pretty random. we don’t have certain
alphabets or anything like that.

48  kristie: what’s the caseload size?

49  abby: about three hundred. except for me. i only have 75.

50  kristie: because you’re the lead counselor?

51  abby: yes.

52  kristie: what does the lead counselor do?

53  abby: i’m basically the department chair. i keep us organized. i run
interference with the administration. i provide resources to my counselors. stuff
like that.

54  kristie: how’d you get that position?

55  abby: the department votes on it every two years. i’ve been the lead
counselor here for nine years.

56  kristie: so you were pretty young when you started running the
department?

57  abby: yeah. young and stupid! [laughs] no, i’m kidding. an important
part of this position is being organized and i am organized. i think my colleagues
recognized that even at a young age and with limited experience.

58  kristie: are all of the counselors together in this office?

59  abby: no. we’re in two offices which are just down the hall from each
other. we’re not the only people in these offices. one of the offices also has a
principal and a registrar. the other office has the school social workers.
KRISTIE: What about the guidance structure at the district level?

ABBY: Well, each building has a lead counselor and they report to the Director of Guidance at the Board. She coordinates our K to 12 program and our professional development. You know what’s crazy though – she was never a counselor. I like her a lot but sometimes she just doesn’t get what we need.

KRISTIE: Talk a little about professional development provided to counselors in this district.

ABBY: Counselors usually get the same presentation as everyone else. Rarely is there ever a formal workshop designed just for counselors. So we sit through a lot of stuff directed toward the classroom teacher. You know, about curriculum writing and balanced literacy, stuff like that. Last year’s program was better. They had a really good workshop last year on NCAA regulations. They had somebody here from the NCAA, somebody from [nearby public university, and they had somebody else here from another university, [nearby private university], I think, who is the NCAA eligibility officer at her school. That was very helpful to me because I was in the middle of trying to straighten us out with the NCAA. This school was in a big mess with the course file not being updated. NCAA was something I didn't know anything about being from a middle school.

KRISTIE: If you don’t get adequate professional development here in the district, what other methods do you employ to get information or training?

ABBY: Mostly I just try to read the publications from ASCA and College Board, places like that. There’s just no time to do something on your own. It just seems overwhelming sometimes how many things are coming down the pike.

KRISTIE: Anything specific about college access or retention?

ABBY: College Board does a lot of research about that but it’s not usually practical.

KRISTIE: What do you mean?

ABBY: It’s great information but they don’t necessarily tell you how to use it, how to put it into practice everyday in the school.

KRISTIE: So then how or where did you acquire your knowledge about college access and retention?

ABBY: Mostly I learned what I needed to know from the other counselors who had been here longer. That probably means that I’m outdated, huh? It’s just
so difficult to fit it into the day. For all of my counselors here, there’s always a
crisis, something more important than reading an article or chatting with an
admissions rep. The urgent stuff gets to them and all of it gets pulled aside if a kid
comes first.

KRISTIE: So, how prepared are you to assist your students to succeed in
college?

ABBY: I feel like I can always find the information the kids need. If I
don’t know it, I can find it. So I guess that’s good. I’m still probably more
reactive than proactive. That’s what having better PD could do for me, help me
learn how to be proactive.

KRISTIE: What about your graduate school training? Was that adequate?

ABBY: In some ways but not as it relates to college. I think it gave me
good counseling skills but you don’t always use those as much as you think
you’re going to when you’re in the grad program. Here there is a strong focus on
personal, individual counseling though not as much as you get to do in your
graduate training program, that’s for sure.

KRISTIE: What about the practicum or internship experience?

ABBY: Becoming a high school counselor and your training, whatever
internship you did, is very helpful but it doesn’t really teach you what you need to
know. Certainly, it didn’t in my experience. Until you have your own students and
you are doing it yourself, that’s how you learn.

KRISTIE: What about any orientation for new counselors?

ABBY: Unfortunately there is no good orientation program for new
counselors, especially not new high school counselors. You learn by the seat of
your pants. You ask your colleagues, which is not always the best way. People do
make mistakes. You go to workshops like the College Board workshop for new
counselors. I found that very helpful. But, you have to do your homework. You
know I took home the College Board college handbook the first summer that I
was here, and read the first section. You have to do your homework on your own
time. Like our PD, the new staff orientation is very geared toward teachers.
There’s nothing specific for counselors. And, the new staff orientation is for
people new to the district, not new to a school. So when I came from the middle
school, I didn’t go through an orientation. I wasn’t new to the district, just to the
building. So everything I learned, I learned on the job.

KRISTIE: So, how is college planning carried out in your school?
ABBY: I try to meet with each student early, like in ninth grade to get a feel for what they’re thinking about. It has been my experience that ninth graders come in, and when you say, “What would you like to do after high school? What are your plans for life? What would you like to be when you grow up?” You get absolutely nothing, a big blank stare and a shrug of the shoulders. Or you get, “I want to go to Yale and be a brain surgeon.” Or you get “I want to play football in the NFL or basketball in the NBA.” We kind of expect those things. But really, seldom is there a kid who says, I want to be an accountant and I know the three colleges that I'd like to apply to that have excellent programs in finance. You don't get that too often.

KRISTIE: What do you do then to get them there?

ABBY: So as for directing students to something, you know. For me, I sit with each student to say, “OK, Here are your strengths…this is what you want, this is what you have.” Trying to get the two things to come closer together. We all know that you also have a student who has barely passed Algebra 1, and wants to go to Yale. Here I am, want to go to Yale, pre-med, be a doctor, be a brain surgeon. And none of us, I hope none of us, I certainly don’t ever want to discourage a kid, because that will just be the kid who gets into Yale and makes it through and then goes through the rest of life saying, “My counselor told me I couldn’t go to college.” Those words will never come out of my mouth. I think every superintendent of schools we’ve ever had has stood up on some podium and said, “My counselor told me I’d never amount to anything.”

KRISTIE: Do you think this is different for students in non-urban settings?

ABBY: I think some of it is. I think they probably have more realistic role models. I think their parents are probably doing some reality-checking. You know, a suburban parent would shoot down that professional ball player idea if it wasn’t a real possibility. If it was a possibility, then they’d be pushing that kid to get on the team and get a trainer and stuff. Urban kids don’t have those kinds of resources so the counselor has to try to fill in the gaps.

KRISTIE: How much of your time is spent doing college planning?

ABBY: Very little compared to everything else. I might call them in to work on college but we end up on other topics that are more pressing. They need help with a teacher or finding a tutor. Ultimately my first priority is to get them safely graduated from high school. If I can’t do that then they’ll never get to college. That has to come first. My priority is that I want to make sure that everybody has some direction after high school, even if it isn’t college. But you can’t just have a high school diploma. If it’s the military, and college after that, or some kind of training program after that. It’s got to be at least a certificate
program. But you can’t just leave high school and think I’m gonna work. And, although my philosophy does include that if you have to do that, at least you are going to go to college part time. Everybody can take one class at a community college. At the very least, I want to see that you are signed up to take one class at a community college next year.

KIRSTIE: Is there anyone else in the school responsible for college planning with students?

ABBY: We have a career center. An aid works there fulltime. She does a lot with the kids, like filling out the applications and getting fee waivers. A lot of the procedural and process stuff that we don’t have time to do.

KIRSTIE: Do you ever go to the career center to work with kids?

ABBY: I’d like to but it’s so hard to get out of the office. I rarely get down there.

KIRSTIE: So the career center is not near the guidance offices?

ABBY: No. It’s down by the cafeteria. That’s supposed to make it convenient for the students but it’s hard to make the time to get down there. Often I’ll call down the [para-professional] and tell her I’m sending a kid down and what they need so she can help them when they get there.

KIRSTIE: What other responsibilities do you have as a school counselor separate from college planning?

ABBY: Scheduling, crisis, the lead counselor position takes a lot of time so I do a lot of troubleshooting for the other counselors. I am often asked to consult with them on cases, brainstorm ideas, find resources. I go to a lot of meetings. Testing, we do a lot with testing, you know – achievement tests and state progress tests. Work with parents. The college stuff includes a lot of working with the families as well as the kids too, because they are learning right along with the student about the whole process. That’s time-consuming. Many of our parents didn’t go to college. They get really anxious about the money because you hear so much about the high price of college. Everyone is very nervous about financial aid. They say, “We can't afford college.” So that's a whole education process, that sometimes in this country it is better when you don't have a lot of money and that there is an awful lot of financial aid out there, and that you'll probably qualify for a very nice package. So financial aid is a big concern to them.

KIRSTIE: How much influence do you have on your students’ plans for postsecondary education?
ABBY: I’d like to think I have a lot but I just don’t know. Some of the kids come from such poor circumstances. It’s just so hard to get them to believe they can go to college. Even our top academic kids seem to struggle. I don’t know if anyone else told you this, but one of the local insurance companies had this scholarship program…And their first class just graduated. And they did a study, and I was horrified to hear, and those are top students, those are the cream of our crop, you have to be in the top 25% of your class to even apply for this scholarship. And I was horrified to hear that they have a 35% graduation rate in four years. They expect to have something like a 46% graduation rate in 5 years, and they hope to have 100% graduation rate in 6 years. And that is the cream of our crop. And they mentioned that they provide a mentor to help the kid through their freshman year. But there were students who had a 1.3 in their freshmen year. And that is our top, top, top students. That really worries me a lot.

[Phone rings and ABBY says she needs to take the call. The call lasts for about five minutes.]

KRISTIE: So what would you say limits your influence on the success of your students once they get to college?

ABBY: So many things. Things on the job, like not having enough time. These kids need so much. They have so little information and direction from outside of school that the counselor has to do so much. It’s just impossible to give them all the help they need and do everything else we have to do. But, we do feel pressure to get more kids in college and to get more kids to four-year colleges. The mayor wants us to get more kids into four-year colleges, and we are worried about that because we don’t just want to get them in, we want to make sure they are successful.

KRISTIE: What percentage of your graduates go on to college?

ABBY: Right now it’s about 80% but a large part of that percentage is two year college. I think two year college is a great step for our kids because they need that experience to get their feet wet. But, everyone wants to see kids going straight to four year. I would feel badly that we’ve pushed a kid into something that maybe we felt in our hearts they weren't ready for, a prestigious four-year college. And that really it would be better for them to start in a community college and feel their way. Some of the community colleges have wonderful programs. One of our local community colleges has a commitment that if you get a two-year degree from them, an associate's degree, you are automatically admitted to [local state university]. And I feel much better about that.

KRISTIE: To what degree do you think you influence your students’ chances for succeeding in college?
ABBY: It’s so hard to tell. You think they are ready and then you find out later they weren’t and it’s something you never even thought about. Like, the people came from this scholarship program last Friday and told us that one of our kids who won the scholarship last June was assigned a mentor. The mentor called him up, and asked him if he had bought everything that he needed to go off to the dorm. And the student didn’t have a clue that he needed to buy sheets, towels, and things like that, even though it turned out that the university, of course, had sent a list, this is what you will need to bring, but I don’t know, he hadn’t…the mentor was horrified that the kid was about to show up on campus with no sheets and no towels. And these are the kinds of things that, no one in this kid’s world, he’s from Bosnia I think, would know that….that college knowledge.

KRISTIE: So what factors contribute to your influence?

ABBY: Sometimes I think they listen to the counselor because she might be one of the few people they know who has gone to college. Or she might be one of few people in their lives saying they can go to college or do whatever they want to do. But I do hope that they learn from their relationship with their counselor here that there are people, there aren’t guidance counselors in college but there are college counselors, there are people to help. There will be mentoring, tutoring, and all sorts of other things that they can take advantage of.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?

ABBY: Again, time to get to everything they need to know. Anticipating everything they need to know. Convincing the family that the kid will be OK and that they can really do this.

KRISTIE: Tell me about the mayor’s statement about increasing the number of four year college goers.

ABBY: I’m not as bent out of shape about it as some of the others. Especially the younger counselors. I know it isn’t in the statistics…that’s what people look at, how many kids got into college? How many applications got filled out? How many scholarship applications? I just feel like I’m here everyday working so hard, making a difference for kids or at least directing kids to other places that can make a difference for them. And there are people who are looking at me saying that the counselors are not doing a very good job. No, everybody is here working really hard, doing a very good job, very committed, but when it all comes out in the wash, the Board of Education and others say, “Why didn’t more kids get into college?” So that is it…that’s the story in two pieces. I’m not sure how to reconcile those two pieces. We have to do more. We have to do better…but the counselors are working their little butts off. The mayor made this statement without talking to us about what we need. When he sees that the percentage isn’t going to go up just because he says it should, then he’ll come
around and include us in the process.

KRISTIE: So you aren’t going to change what you do because of this statement?

ABBY: Not really. I feel I’m doing the best I can right now. Until the mayor comes in here and asks what we need to do something different in order to make his dream come true, I don’t know what I can do different.

KRISTIE: What things could help you?

ABBY: More counselors. More social workers. The ability to structure my day – can we get rid of crises? That would help, if everything wasn’t a crisis then I would have time to better plan out activities and programs. More support from teachers. I need a way to access the kids. I need to borrow them out of your class for a few minutes. I need to come into your class to do a presentation. I need the principals to understand that college planning has to be a priority so they will stop asking me to do clerical things and menial tasks. Parents – I need parents to parent so I don’t have to do it.

KRISTIE: Is there anything else you’d like to share with me today?

ABBY: No. Just thank you. Thanks for being an advocate for us. This is good work to do.

KRISTIE: Thanks for taking the time to be a part of it.
KIRSTIE: So, did you have a chance to review the preliminary findings that I sent?

ABBY: Yes, I did. They were very interesting.

KIRSTIE: Was there anything in the summary of findings that seemed “way off?”

ABBY: No, not at all. It felt like you must’ve based those findings on just my interview. Everything really fit precisely with my experience.

KIRSTIE: Were there parts of the summary about which you feel particularly strong?

ABBY: You know, sometimes it’s hard to answer the question, “what are you doing?” It’s so complicated, so complex, and so different for every student. And that, sometimes I think that no one could even comprehend what goes on in the guidance counselor’s life in a year…And so much of our work is not concrete. I guess that’s what the problem is. Everyone wants the statistic, the concrete statistics. And much of what we do that is important is not that way. It’s that one hug in the morning. It’s that one bit of encouragement. You know that may not result in that kid filling out one more college application but may result in that kid making a decision down the road 20 years from now because you made a difference. That one thing or a series of things.

KIRSTIE: What do these findings mean to you?

ABBY: They mean that I’ve been heard and that I’m not alone in this struggle.

KIRSTIE: Why is it important for you to do this job?

ABBY: Because I want to. These kids can’t just get stuck with someone who just needs a job and this was all they could find. Who else is going to do this work? I do a lot for my kids. They deserve more but I do a lot, the whole guidance staff here does. We get kids signed up for the SAT, which can be a challenge also. I just found out about one of my students who I helped fill out the application, Friday was the deadline for signing up for the test. She left here with it in her hand, all she had to do was put a stamp on it and put it in a mailbox, and she didn't. So now we have to get it back, change the dates, erase the bubble, change it to another date, change the labels, plus she can’t take it until the next test. And the other thing that we really worry about is that kids are committed to taking a student loan. You take a student loan, you don't make it in college, you still have to pay back that loan, and without a college degree. You only stay for a semester,
you still got a lot of money to pay back. And our kids get big packages, big loans, part of their package is a loan. And I don't like to think about that.

KRISTIE: What is the important story here that you would like to tell?

ABBY: The kids are the important story. It's not about what I need as a counselor for me. It's about what I need to do my job for them. They have been dealt such an unfair hand. It's time someone took up for them. But in doing so, I worry that we do too much. Sometimes, with inner city kids, I worry we coddle them too much. Like the example I just gave of the girl who didn’t mail the SAT application despite having it all filled out. I could have mailed it, and all I am thinking to myself is, why didn’t I just say give me the envelope, I will mail it for you. But I said, “Here Jennifer, you mail this today.” Went through the whole thing, “Be sure you check the mailbox that you put it in, make sure the pick up because it has to be postmarked today.” “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I’ll take it to the post office,” but she didn’t. And so, would that be enabling, if I mailed it for her? Because next year in college, who knows. Who is gonna do that kind of stuff for her?

KRISTIE: What keeps you at this job?

ABBY: My life's work would have to be something that I saw as helping or in one of the helping professions. And that's definitely still there. It has to be. Not that I haven't ever screwed up for some kids or have this nagging feeling that I really missed something with that kid, or could have done more for that kid...I really do feel that my career has been making a difference one kid at a time. That's the only way you can do it. You miss some but the one's that in front of you is the one that you're trying to do something for. And help that kid through all the self-realizations and the self-actualizations and finding what's really within him or her.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you professionally?

ABBY: I always say, you know, I don’t care who the superintendent of schools is. I don’t really even care who the principal is. I’m good at flying under the radar and I always have been and I think that’s a mark of a good counselor. So I do what I have to do to make those people happy but still do what I have to do to make myself feel that I’m doing a good job. The only thing that matters is that I come to work everyday and there’re kids at the door. That’s the only thing that matters. If there are kids at my door, then I’m doing my job. My relationship with my colleagues, too, is important, which is less than the kids though. What keeps me here is us working as a team, joining forces to do the best we can for the population at large. And me as lead counselor, really making sure that each one of them is being an important person in the lives of their students. I hope someone
will read these findings. I hope you can take them to conferences and people will
listen, again, not to what I need but to what these kids deserve.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you personally?

ABBY: It’s validating to know that others who do my job have a similar
experience. It helps to know that I’m not alone and that motivates me to do more.

KRISTIE: Do you see or feel a distinction between these two lives?

ABBY: No. Who I am as a counselor is who I am as a person. There’s not
much difference. Being a counselor influences who I am at home and vice versa. I
take a lot of stuff home with me everyday and I bring a lot of home in with me.
You can’t separate the two.

KRISTIE: How did you feel about this interview process?

ABBY: I felt that it was almost therapeutic. I go for days and weeks,
maybe even months and no one asks me about my work and how I feel about it.
Sometimes you just need to vent. Sometimes you just need to talk about it to
someone who knows what you’re talking about. I really felt heard during this
process. I really felt like I was helping you do something important. It was hard at
first to commit to taking the time away from my work but now I’m glad I did it
and it wasn’t a huge time commitment.

KRISTIE: Is there anything else you would like to share?

ABBY: I don’t think so. Thank you.

KRISTIE: Thank you.
KRISTIE: How long have you been a school counselor?

ANA: Twenty-nine years.

KRISTIE: How did you begin your professional career?

ANA: I've always been a guidance counselor. I have my undergraduate degree in social work but I did my master’s in counseling. In [state] you don’t need to be a teacher first.

KRISTIE: Why did you choose school counseling over social work?

ANA: I like working with adolescents and I liked the stability of working in a school. School social workers are usually the first position in a school to get cut and counselors are a little more protected. The hours and calendar were better than might be for a community agency social worker. It was the right choice for me. Honestly, I thought social workers would do more of the crisis type of stuff in a school and the counselors would be more academic. That’s not the reality though. I do just as much stuff like that as the social workers do.

KRISTIE: Why is that?

ANA: There’s no boundary. No one says, “Counselors do that. Social workers do that.” We all just do what needs to be done to help the kids.

KRISTIE: Why aren’t there any boundaries?

ANA: I don’t know. I think the principals don’t know how we’re different. So they think either of us can do the same job. We’d probably get more done if we were a bit more organized in our job descriptions.

KRISTIE: How many social workers do you have here?

ANA: Two.

KRISTIE: Can you tell me about the structure of the rest of the guidance department?

ANA: We have four school counselors. We are in two separate offices in the building and there are two counselors in each office.

KRISTIE: Do you have any aids or paraprofessionals working with you?

ANA: No. There’s a secretary in each suite but no one else.
KRISTIE: No career or college planning center?

ANA: No. Other schools here have those but we do not.

KRISTIE: Any reason why you don’t have one?

ANA: I don’t know. It gets talked about but there are always more important things to do, to pay for. You have to have a space, a pretty big one, and a staff member, and then you have to buy all of the resources. I guess it would be quite an expense. Now we’re in the academies and I think they think that’s somehow going to allow counselors to do the work with kids that would typically be done in a college center.

KRISTIE: How many students are you responsible for?

ANA: We just started the small academy model so each counselor is assigned to one of them. We also have our seniors who are not in the academies. They’ll be the last class to graduate from the old, traditional high school structure. So, I think we each have a caseload of about 300 or 315 students. That changes so much throughout the year though. We have a lot of students who come in and out throughout the year. So, I might only have 300 at a given time but I’ve really served 500 over the course of the year. It’s like a hidden caseload.

KRISTIE: The hidden caseload. That’s very descriptive.

ANA: We carry very high loads, I think, because of the demands of our load, and the fact that one of the things our system never does is it doesn't account for the fact that we service a population with such high mobility, so they come and go. An example is I had a student here who decided he preferred the suburban school. He went there and didn't get accepted, so he returned here and had to be reentered. Then he had a problem at a soccer game and was being suspended, and he left again and tried to reenter the suburban school for a second time. They didn't accept him again, and he came back. So he reregistered twice within a month’s time, and we had to do restoring of the schedule twice. So that's...the first time, then restoring it the first, then restoring it the second, and then he was just here an hour ago wanting to discuss his schedule again. So because there is this mobility, it means we are reviewing tasks that we have already done with a lot of frequency.

KRISTIE: How has the transition into the small academies gone?

ANA: It has been difficult, of course. We’re trying to make a major change in culture and that’s hard and scary for people.
KRISTIE: Did the administration make the decision about which counselor went into which academy or did the counselors make the decisions?

ANA: They didn't do that this year, although we spent quite a lot of time coming up with a plan that would work in what was a very difficult job to try to get us affiliated with the learning community. And try to get all the students to sign. And it was difficult for us, it caused some friction within our group, but we finally came up with something that we could live with. They wouldn't do it, the administration wouldn't do it, because they claimed that it would be better to wait until next year when half of the school is in clusters, and it would be easier. But that is denying us the opportunity to bond with this group, in a new idea that's all about bonding and relationships. So we are left out of the very thing we should be in on. By the way, that has a lot to do with the fact that we are not valued. It is like our role isn't seen for what it is, and it's not valued. Otherwise I am sure that wouldn't have happened. I mean when you see that the counselor plays a major role in, and looking at emotional piece, and if you are creating small learning communities to give the students an affiliation with a group, then to me it is obvious that the counselor needs to be a part of that. The counselor is the one who stays with the student for four years. Now that's going to be so in the small learning community, but that's new and so we should be, there are many reasons why we should be a part of that. So we got left out.

KRISTIE: So initially they weren’t going to assign the counselors to the academies right away? Is that what you said?

ANA: Yes. They wanted to wait because the seniors aren’t in the academies and they wanted to wait until all the kids were in them. But then we would have had to reshuffle the younger kids again and that’s not fair.

KRISTIE: How has the transition impacted counselors other than caseload distribution?

ANA: We haven’t really changed what we do. We aren’t really sure how it’s going to be different than how the school used to be. So I think we’re just waiting and watching and then we’ll see what role we need to assume.

KRISTIE: What percentage of your graduates go on to college?

ANA: I think it’s about seventy-five percent for the last class.

KRISTIE: How is college planning carried out here?

ANA: It’s very informal because we don’t get a lot of time with the kids. Then they don’t always want to talk because they don’t know you very well or don’t trust you. It is hard to build the rapport when you are just calling them about
tasks, and you not getting the chance to really know who they are. And I will give
you an example. I was working with a senior the other day, who has been my
counsellee for four years, and we were talking about the fact that he wants to be an
auto mechanic, and the schools where he could go. I pulled out a description of
the program that offers Toyota training in auto mechanics and General Motors
training, which got us talking about cars. And I spent a good 20 minutes talking to
him about cars. The woman next door could hear me, she is not a counselor, she is
the transcript secretary. And when I got up to go out after he left, she said “wow,
you talked to him about cars for 20 minutes.” I said “yes, you know what, that is
the best conversation I have had with him in 4 years, and that built more rapport
than I have built over the last 3 years in 20 minutes.” I could tell that there was a
breakthrough, in the way that he was looking at me and I was looking at him. But,
it does not happen frequently because I am pressed for time.

KRISTIE: So you don’t have that experience with every student?

ANA: No. I mean it took us four years to get to that point. Maybe he just
figured out that cars is what he wanted to do. So, we couldn’t have had that
conversation any earlier than we did. So part of it is getting the kids to that
maturational point and then actually having the opportunity to sit with them and
plan.

KRISTIE: Do you think that is different for counselors in suburban schools?

ANA: A little I think. I think those kids have probably been thinking and
talking about career interests for most of their lives. They have people asking
them what they want to be when they grow up and telling them they will go to
college. They come to high school a little better prepared to talk realistically about
life after graduation.

KRISTIE: So, what is your role in college planning?

ANA: Well, I help kids fill out applications and I do the counselor letter.
Sometimes I help kids identify schools they are interested in. And financial aid,
well that is another very important factor, because college costs are very
expensive. And a lot of these students who come from countries where this isn't
so, are not prepared to meet the academic costs that institutions in this country
levy. For one thing they have to be informed of their choices, and what the costs
will be, and that means that we do much more of the work that might ordinarily
be done by families or by the support network that isn't present for some of our
urban students. So I think that is a very big difference where the suburban
students may already have parents who are familiar with the system or a different
kind of support system that could provide the help, our students rely a lot on us to
do it. We work a lot with our students on earning scholarships.
KRISTIE: How much of your time is spent doing college planning?
ANA: I guess not very much. We spend a lot of time putting out fires.
KRISTIE: Like what kinds of things, what other responsibilities do you have as a school counselor separate from college planning?
ANA: Too much paper work, and so that paperwork takes away from the personal counseling. What happens is, when a student comes with their concern, and it is of a personal nature, and although I want to work with him, I can see that it’s going to require multiple sessions, I draw back and make a referral to the social worker, which is unfortunate, but I have to do it. I cannot take on counseling that I see is going to be…more than short term. Very short term. I can’t take it on. When I do, then I know I am really making a commitment, and I can only do that in very select situations. And I had PPTs and SSTs constantly. The PPTs are for special ed students, and each time you need them, you have to get progress reports…which you have to arrive at the PPT informed of the student progress to be able to report what is happening in each class.
KRISTIE: What does PPT stand for?
ANA: Oh, I’m sorry. Pupil Planning Team.
KRISTIE: And, SST?
ANA: Student Success Team. They are basically the same thing only PPTs are for kids with IEPs. I have to set up the meetings, invite the team members, and then run the meetings and do follow-up.
KRISTIE: Is there anyone else in the school responsible for college planning with students?
ANA: No, just the counselor. You know and the secretary who does the transcripts but that’s not really part of the planning.
KRISTIE: How much influence do you have on your students’ plans for post-secondary education?
ANA: Sometimes we’re the only one pushing the child to think about college so I think we can be influential. If we never bring it up then maybe the child assumes we don’t believe they can do it, like everyone else.
KRISTIE: What factors contribute to your influence?
ANA: Well, I think I have the most influence with the students I know well. But, unfortunately that’s not many of them or it takes too long to get to that point and they’re suddenly seniors and haven’t done what they needed to do. Then they start listening to me and it’s too late to do everything the way it needed to be done.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?

ANA: We have to do some of the job that suburban kids get at home and in their community, so this is very time consuming. And we don’t always get the support we need from the administration that we need. We don't get enough respect and we don't get enough support sometimes for what we are doing with this student. So that will undermine what we are trying to accomplish. For instance a student will go down to the board level or even our administrative level and will complain that we have led them astray, which isn't so. They are covering up for their own lack of work ethic, let's say, and rather than the administrator saying I'll look into it and get back to it, they act as if the student is saying is true. And that is very demoralizing. It used to be that we would be called down to the meeting, and then we would be told the student is here saying that they didn't receive this information. And then we could say, “Look, this is how we started, and this year we met already once for the graduation contract, twice to fill out the SAT application, so that fact that the student didn't take the SAT was very unfortunate and a great concern for me because that will preclude him from applying to a four year university,” and then they'll go, “oh.”

KRISTIE: How adequately prepared are you to assist your students with college planning?

ANA: I think sometimes we think we’re prepared but we’re not but we don’t know it. We don’t know what we’re missing. I’m sure I could be better informed but there isn't anybody that I know of that is offering how to help the urban student make a transition to college. It is not on the agenda of the graduate school.

[Knock at the door. ANA excuses herself to talk to the secretary. Then she steps out to talk to a parent who has arrived unexpectedly. She is gone for eight minutes.]

KRISTIE: How would you describe your graduate training in school counseling?

ANA: I am thankful that my program gave me a solid grounding in counseling skills. I use that, God knows, every single day. My graduate program wasn’t even to become a school counselor. It was a generic counseling program, which did give me good grounding in counseling skills, and I am thankful for that.
preparation. There are many, many things that I have used over the years as far as that goes. But there was nothing, absolutely nothing, about the English language learner, the high dropout rate, the changing picture in the American high school, the impact of that in the community, the effect of poverty on student achievement. Those are just some of the things that come to the top of my head about the issues that weren't touched in my graduate program nor has it been ever since.

KRIStIE: What other methods do you employ to get information or training?

ANA: Don't get me wrong. I learned a lot from my graduate school training. Oh, let's see, there was one course in careers. I took a graduate course in careers and they are always looking at all those models, Holland's model for careers...and all of the different categories of a job, but that is even further removed from the reality. It gets even further into a career area than we go. I just feel that they don't give you the nuts and bolts of the job. They really don't. I got my Master's a long time ago. So, who knows, maybe it's changed, but at the time when I got my Master's, I just felt that I had a lot of good knowledge, but I felt also that it was just a learn-by-doing.

KRIStIE: What about professional development offered by the school district?

ANA: Let's see if I can remember some of the programs from last year. Ok, Reading Across the Curriculum. Yes, something that we're involved in, but you could give me a summary and that would be enough. I'd rather be in an abuse workshop. Those professional development sessions are mostly worthless. We had a wonderful one last year. That was one PD in four years that I thought was wonderful. She was great. Yeah gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, I forget the acronym. They came in and talked to the counselors and oh that was just the best information. You know, things that you think you know and you know nothing about, you know, the terms and what does that mean and, you know, these are the things you need to know, you know? They came to the school and spoke to all the guidance counselors. But usually the PD is not counselor specific.

KRIStIE: How or where did you acquire your knowledge about college access and retention?

ANA: I've been to some College Board things, workshops. Many times they don't know how to answer our questions about the ELPT [English Language Proficiency Test], or the TOEFL [Test of English as a Foreign Language], about the costs, about this or that. We usually have to dig around and talk to this one, that one and the other one to get an answer, and we have to talk to each other a lot to get the answers, because sometimes the colleges don't necessarily have the
answer or the College Board doesn’t either. It is among us that we figure it out.
Like the TOEFL is offered out of town, it costs a lot of money now. What are we
going to do for our kids? And we kind of get together and try to come up with
some solutions. No one else has these issues, so we just talk to each other. We
rely on each other a whole lot.

KRISTIE: To what degree do you think you influence your students’ chances
for succeeding in college?

ANA: It’s so hard because we have such limited time with them, only
four years and less with some. So it’s hard to prepare them for the reality they are
going to face in college. Especially if they are foreign born. Because we are a
high school, a lot of these kids arrive in grades 9-12, and the later they arrive in
their school program, the harder it becomes to provide them with what they need
to prepare for college. So then that means that a lot of times we are looking at
transitional programs in college, where they can continue to develop their English
skills in an ESL program to prepare for either the 2 year or 4 year college
experience, but at a higher level of challenge, whether it be English or other
academic challenges…For instance, I have a student that’s coming later…She
really wants to study law in the long term, but she came to this country in the 11th
grade. ESL is the primary push. She went to summer school to try to enrich her
preparation, but there are rules that we have to live with in the preparation in ESL.
Then when she graduates from here, she’ll go to a 2 year program and continue in
ESL, and then she is looking at what are the steps to get her to where she wants to
go ultimately to prepare to become a lawyer. But even the kids who have lived
here all their lives. They just don’t know what it’s going to take. I remember
being very frustrated when doing course selection with the ninth graders because
a lot of students told me they wanted to be professional sports players. And then I
Are you playing on your own? No.” And so in fact, once I explored whether they
were serious about this, it was just something they just threw out. Now those were
the ninth graders so they are very young and they don’t have the maturity perhaps
to think about their occupational choice. But still that was very frustrating because
a huge number, I’d say between ten and twelve percent were just throwing
professional player out there. Another thing is that a lot of kids will throw out
occupations that require many years of study, like medicine for instance. It seems
to be very easy to say…I want to be a doctor. And then I will pause and say, “OK,
you have set a very high goal, do you know what it takes to get there? No.” And
then we will go step by step on, “you are going to go to college, you want to
prepare to go to medical school. And then after that there is going to be an
internship in residency, have you thought about that? No, not really.” So I think
some students who haven't been very serious about their planning will throw out
something that is totally unrealistic. It’s hard to get them to see that.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?
ANA: I think it is a lack of understanding of our role. Teachers are not always helpful in allowing us to see kids. They don't really understand what we do. They think we are in here pushing papers around. And believe it or not, they still think we have a cushy job. I don't know how they could possibly think that with the demands that we have, but nobody seems to realize that we have this huge load of kids who come and go, whose needs are very diverse and difficult to meet at times, and there is very little recognition for what we do. Basically they think we are very lucky because we have a phone, we have an office, we can close the door and we can drink coffee. And it is the same foolish stuff that was going on when I came here over 20 years ago. And these ideas continue to go on.

KRISTIE: Is there anything else you want to share with me today?

ANA: The needs are much greater in the city than in other places. It is more critical that this not happen in an urban setting. If it's happening in a suburban setting it seems to me that most kids will get to college. Here, it is all or nothing. If you don't give us support here, then these kids are really missing out. So you need to talk to people that are on the front lines to see what it's going to take to achieve some real change. Thanks for trying to do that.

KRISTIE: Thank you…for helping with this and for what you do for kids.
KRISTIE: So Ana, have you had a chance to look at the preliminary findings?

ANA: I did.

KRISTIE: Was there anything in the summary of findings that seemed “way off?”

ANA: Everything seemed to be very on point. How many counselors did you talk to?

KRISTIE: Eleven.

ANA: From all different places?

KRISTIE: Three different school districts in three different states.

ANA: It’s amazing that you were able to come to conclusions that are so right on. Did anyone have a dissenting view?

KRISTIE: Only one person who felt very supported by her administrative. She is the only counselor in a small pilot school.

ANA: Yeah. I can see how her principal would need to include her more.

KRISTIE: Were there parts of the summary about which you feel particularly strong?

ANA: One good thing, and I notice you have it in here that having a lead counselor aids us in our work. It really does. It would be an even greater advantage to have a Director of Guidance that’s a true director of guidance who has school counseling as a background. And can represent us for our issues, which we don’t have. But thankfully we have a lead counselor. So sometimes lead counselors compensate.

KRISTIE: Anything else?

ANA: The parts about needing to connect with college reps. That’s so important. We have to do more of this than what we do. There is a tour, I don’t know whether you’ve been on these things, but there is a [name of state] tour, a [name of neighboring state] tour, there’s probably a Midwest tour, I’d like to go on the Midwest tour by the way because so many of our kids look at this area as one of their top areas to go to college. We have to go on these tours to find out what these institutions are like. It is hard to know from long distance. The websites make a big difference, and that has added a different dimension. I think those virtual tours on the websites; they’re wonderful. But there is no replacing
Ana, Interview 2

being on campus. Oh, and you also mention getting retention information from
the colleges. And it is dangerous to think that they should just go ahead and apply
and go to college, because even the ones that look prepared are not ending up
doing very well. And this is really, we don't have any statistics to know what the
success rate is in college for our kids, and this is a major problem. This hasn't
been gathered, and even if it were available it might, it may not be looked at in
this kind of detail. I'm really excited so I am getting garbled, because these points
are so important, it means a lot to our work, but we don't have the statistical
information that we need to work. So we don't know how many are successful,
and even if the data were in place, I don't trust that we would get the proper
review of the data. Many of our kids go off to college and they don’t do well but
we don’t know specifically why.

KRISTIE: What would help?

ANA: Well, in the best of circumstances now, we would sit down with
reps from the college, we would have a meeting to discuss what it was that
happened, we would get some information from the college on whether it was in
specific academic areas more than others, whether they were part of the
transitional program during the summer or not, so that we could gauge exactly
where the problem happened, and whether the students used the supports that
were available or not. So, to try to identify what was the problem. Was it a lack of
identifying the fact that this kid needed a summer transitional program? Or did
they begin in a pre-medicine program that included a lot of math and science. And
then to try to review the preparation they had at our high school to see whether
our program is working appropriately or not...Whether their choice of college
was inappropriate. Then maybe we might do different things in the college
process, by talking to them about the fact that they chose a large university where
they were very anonymous and they really needed a smaller setting where they
could get more individual attention.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you?

ANA: We don't get enough respect and we don't get enough support
sometimes for what we are doing with this student. So that will undermine what
we are trying to accomplish. For instance, last year at the end of the year the math
department decided that students couldn't go on to the next level if they pass a
course unless they also pass an exit exam. And they make this a rule during a
year, which we told them wasn't enforceable because you can't bring on a new
rule like that during the year. They insisted on it, and put kids back to repeat a
course, even if they pass if they didn't pass the exit exam. And now, a month into
the year they rescinded a policy, we suspect because a parent challenged it. And
many times in a department, the counselors have more experience than the
administrators because the administrators are new, and when we try to tell them
that the policies are not enforceable, they don't listen. And they go out and try to
establish a policy, and then when they try to enforce it doesn't work.

KRISTIE: What is the important story here that you would like to tell?

ANA: Just that we need our non-counselor colleagues to support us and
recognize that our work is important. We need time with the kids. We need to be
involved in decisions in the building.

KRISTIE: In what ways?

ANA: It turns out that the mayor of our city has proposed increasing the
four-year college rate, the number of students applying to a four-year college, by
25%, without taking any of the points into account that I have been talking to you
about. In fact, our college rate is already fairly good, I think, and really a lot of
our students should be thinking about two-year community colleges or other
technical or training programs because they don’t have the skills yet to go directly
to a four-year university. And it is dangerous to think that they should just go
ahead and apply and go there, because even the ones that look prepared are not
ending up doing very well.

KRISTIE: What keeps you at this job?

ANA: Well, we have a very diverse population, and that is one of the
things that I like best about working in this school. We have so many different
nationalities, of the country of origin of our students, and it changes over the
years...So, this diversity enriches our population a lot. They each present
different challenges, but it is something that makes our load very interesting and
varying to work with. I like the fact that we have so many nationalities and
countries represented and different languages represented, because it teaches our
kids how to live in a very diverse community, and I think that is the reality of the
world. So that's one of the things that I think is very unique and rich about our
school.

[There is a knock at the door and ANA says she needs to see who it is. She steps
out for eight minutes.]

ANA: I’m sorry about that. These interruptions are very typical of our
day. It is impossible to do anything here as serious as it might be without getting
interrupted. Which, by the way, is one of the big issues, I don't know whether this
happens so much in the suburban schools, but we are constantly interrupted by
everything. The door, the phone, we now have voicemail, email...well at least
voicemail keeps us from necessarily having to pick up, but it is still another duty.
Vice principals calling us, teachers calling us, sending students out of class. Last
Friday was the deadline for the SAT, which we are working to get them signed up for. The application is difficult for them; getting them to complete the SAT application, etc. We have fee waivers, because our students are very needy. So we give them the fee waiver, make sure they get signed up. And then even at that, we don't have as many students take the SAT, when they are supposed to, as we should because they don't always make it to the test on the day of the test. It makes it very hard. So that was a student who missed the deadline and wanted to know what to do.

KRISTIE: So you see a lot of missed deadlines?

ANA: I had a girl who was here a period or two ago. I sent her four appointments for her senior contract, and she had not come. And I had to call her class to get her once, and then I had been upstairs on Friday to get her out of class and she wasn't there. So we also don't get the cooperation from the students that we need because they don't take their graduation as seriously as they should. There's, unfortunately, quite a lot of apathy. They miss deadlines all the time.

KRISTIE: Why is it important for you to do this job?

ANA: It's who I am. I am a part of this community and this is my way of giving back. I can't imagine doing anything else. I really feel like I am needed, like I have to be here.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you professionally?

ANA: Realistically I don't know if this one study will make things change around me but it makes me think that maybe I can change some things. I feel empowered because I am not alone. I think of a lot of things I could do but then it comes back to the issue of time. I would like to get more involved with things like the committees the American School Counselor Association has. I'd like to try to work with them to get counselors from other city districts together to work on some of our issues. One voice won't be enough but we could put our voices together to be heard.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you personally?

ANA: Well, I think for me particularly, being back to Eastland, the place where I entered the United States, having come from another country and now working with a great many students that were/are in the same situation that I was, that that's why I am here. And why I chose to be here. I still find it so rewarding to work with a new arrival. I just think that the reward of being able to help someone who is brand new to the system is something very satisfying to me and that's all because of my own personal background and my identification that I
know what it's like. I went through that to. And I have a commitment, knowing what it was like for me, to be here for them.

KRISTIE: How did you feel about this interview process?

ANA: I think it is so great to reflect on your work. I am really glad that you are a school counselor too. Because I knew you would know what I was talking about. I know you’ve been there, done that. I think that with an administrator or a teacher asking these questions, I would have censored myself more and tried to be less critical of the system. With you, I didn’t even think to do that and I think that’s because you’re “one of us.”

KRISTIE: Thank you Ana. I appreciate your candidness.
KRISTIE: How long have you been a school counselor?

ANDREA: Just three years.

KRISTIE: How did you begin your professional career?

ANDREA: I was a science teacher, biology, for four years before I went to grad school.

KRISTIE: Why did you choose to leave the classroom?

ANDREA: I really liked the conversations I would have with kids that weren’t related to the class. Kids would hang out in my room during my planning period and I could see they just needed someone to listen to them and offer advice. I thought I might be able to do that as a counselor.

KRISTIE: And are you?

ANDREA: Somewhat. I’d like to do more of it but there are other aspects of the job that have to be done.

KRISTIE: What is the structure of the guidance department at Warren High School?

ANDREA: There are five counselors here. We’re all in the same office together. Each of the counselors is assigned to an academy.

KRISTIE: Tell me how the academies are structured.

ANDREA: Well, the ninth graders are in an academy and the tenth through twelfth graders are split between four other academies. Each academy has a career focus: Arts, International, Public Service and Computer Applications. You choose your academy at the end of ninth grade.

KRISTIE: Which academy are you assigned to?

ANDREA: I am with Computer Applications.

KRISTIE: How many students is each counselor responsible for?

ANDREA: We have about 325 or so, those of us in the four career academies. The ninth grade academy is split between our lead counselor and another woman. So, the lead counselor has around 80 and the other counselor has about 250.

KRISTIE: How did she end up with a reduced load?
ANDREA: Well, she coordinates our freshman advisory program. So, that extra duty gets her a reduced caseload.

KRISTIE: Tell me about the office set up here.

ANDREA: All the counselors share an office suite. Two of the principals are also in this space with us as well as a secretary. The main office is next door and that’s where the rest of the principals are located and the attendance office.

KRISTIE: Do you like this set up?

ANDREA: It’s always been this way for me so I don’t know if I could like it better if it was different. They’ve talked about giving each academy their own office and the principal and counselor and attendance and secretary would be together for that academy. They haven’t figured out how to create the space for that though. This way is good too because it’s like one stop shopping. If a parent comes in, pretty much everything they need is right here and we’re near the main entrance of the building.

KRISTIE: What percentage of your graduates go on to college?

ANDREA: Almost ninety percent. Something like eighty-eight or something.

KRISTIE: That is really good. To what do you attribute the high percentage?

ANDREA: Well, I think it means that the students who manage to graduate are focused and prepared to go on. But, our graduation rate is really low, less than sixty percent. So we have two populations. One who is driven and motivated not just to finish high school but also to further their education. The other half is just barely making it out of here and they aren’t even hearing anything you’ve got to say about college or tech school or whatever.

KRISTIE: How is college planning carried out in your school?

ANDREA: We go into classes if the teachers will allow us and we do assemblies. Usually we go to the English class. And I think by going into classes and having students be able to put a face to the voice and a face to the name, being able to come down here and have access to us is really helpful. But in classes, I spend a lot of time with the kids that don’t ask a question, you know. Asking them, “Well what do you want to do? What do you want to talk about doing?” Maybe there’s something that I know about that you’re interested in that we could talk about or whatever. So you’re kind of trying to draw them out. And then you know, try to get those kids to start coming down and ask questions.
KRISTIE: What is your role in college planning?

ANDREA: My role is to educate them and expand their ideas about different careers, different job opportunities, different colleges, and different programs. Information is so important. Our goal is teach them about higher ed, college, or a technical school or whatever, but they don’t really have the knowledge of what a technical school is. When I do the assembly, I have a sheet that I give them that has a glossary of different terms: scholarship, grant, the difference between a technical school and a community college, or a Bachelors degree and Masters Degree. Even just that basic information, they’re not aware what a BS is or a BA or an MSW and those kinds of things. So we are, a lot of times, just big information providers.

KRISTIE: How much of your time is spent doing college planning?

ANDREA: Not a lot. During the times of the year when I’m doing class presentations or assemblies, I spend a lot of time on college planning. But then during the other times of the year, it’s not very much. Not even everyday.

KRISTIE: What other responsibilities do you have as a school counselor separate from college planning?

ANDREA: Although I have my masters in counseling, I am too often accountable for clerical tasks and that bugs me. A lot of times you’re in the middle of doing something and then we’re called on to do menial tasks. You know you’re in the middle of something and a form has to be filled out. Or something, attendance needs to be checked out. Or a parent comes in and, the assistant principal wants to see you right now. Sometimes there are parents waiting but you have some paperwork that needs to be done. And my thing is, if there are parents waiting, I need to deal with them. They’re taking time out of work or whatever and it is not that common that parents come. So, when I see them, I make time for them. And sometimes we’re hindered by not being able to deal with people immediately because there are other menial things to do. I call them menial tasks…Paperwork, paperwork, paperwork, paperwork.

KRISTIE: Is there anyone else in the school responsible for college planning with students?

ANDREA: No. No one. Everyone looks to us to do it. It’s our job. No one else is going to step up and say, “Hey, I’ll help you out, I have some free time.” Everyone is busy and working hard, they can’t take on someone else’s job.

KRISTIE: How much influence do you have on your students’ plans for post-secondary education?
ANDREA: Sometimes I do. If the student has a little idea in their head somewhere that they might want to go to college. Then if I bring it up, they get excited because someone else thinks they can do it. I think another thing is that, because I’m black, a lot of students see me…and I explain to them you know, I was born and raised right here, I had to take out loans to go to college too. See, you can do this, you can achieve things. And a lot of our kids haven’t had contact with this college experience, or people that have been successful. A lot of Latino students haven’t. I think that they see that I’ve achieved different things and I’ve accomplished different things and they can somewhat relate. So I think that has an influence on some.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?

ANDREA: They don’t have people at home that are talking to them about what you’re gonna do. At home it is, Where are you gonna work? You need to get a job. So, I would probably say the biggest influence on them not going to college is just the family. We have a lot of students with kids. We have students who are married. We have a lot of Jehovah Witnesses, where education, after high school – that’s it, you don’t go. So, a lot of different things come into play. Some kids just have a lot of responsibilities. After school they’re picking up younger siblings, and in the morning they’re dropping them off at school or at the bus stop. Mom is working 3-11 so the student is the parent. So going away to college or going to college is not even in their thoughts. Right now they are worried about day care. You know, ‘am I going to be able to get to school on time.’ These are very big things. We have a chunk of students too who are living on their own. And then you have the other group that is in the care of the county. And that’s the other thing about personalizing and being able to talk to kids individually. Cause you end up talking to a kid and you realize, wow, this kid lives practically alone. Mom is never home, it is just him and his little brother. And they’re fending for themselves. College probably isn’t what I want to be shoving down this kid’s throat, but let’s get him some support systems. That’s not driven home enough. Background influences. The biggest influence is that most or a lot of the kids that I see, they’re the first in their family to graduate from high school. So they have no frame of reference to higher education or what it’s all about. I have one student who, I was sitting with, she is a senior, she’s never gotten anything but A’s and she’s in a program called the A-Plus Program which is a computer systems program. She can actually walk out of here and get a $35,000 job. She just she said to me, “I don’t want to be in that program anymore.” I asked her “What are you going to do next year?” And she said, “I’m gonna work.” And, you know, so now all the motors are running and I said, “Well, you know, you have the opportunity academically to get a lot of merit scholarships, academic money from colleges if the price is a concern.” So, I’m still working on getting her to do that. I did get her to take her SATs so we’ll see…There’s no one in the family that
Andrea, Interview 1

they’ve seen go on to college and get a degree and whatnot. So that’s the most
difficult part of it. Or that’s the thing that keeps them down the most…So I would
probably say the biggest influence on them not going to college is just the family.

KIRSTIE: How adequately prepared are you to assist your students with
college planning?

ANDREA: I think it is too much because you really don’t have the time, I
think having three hundred is too many because you can’t form those
relationships. As far as the college stuff is concerned, having recruiters coming
during the day is a problem. The principal definitely won’t allow this. I’ve battled
with her for three years over the issue of having them come in during the day. A
lot of times our kids don’t know about some of these schools. I try to explain that
it is so influential for a student to sit and talk to an actual person from a campus
rather than me just giving them information. But as far as being able to schedule
recruiters to come into the building it has to be after school. And my argument to
that is we have a large number of kids who have to work. We have large numbers
of kids who have to get home because of childcare or because they’re in charge of
their siblings. They have responsibilities. So after school is kind of difficult. We
battled with it and…it was really ugly.

KIRSTIE: To what degree do you think you influence your students’ chances
for succeeding in college?

ANDREA: If I can get them there, then I think they’re pretty prepared for what
they need to do to be successful.

KIRSTIE: What factors contribute to your influence?

ANDREA: Because ninety-five percent of these kids look like me, and have
the potential to be where I am, to do what I’ve done. I was fortunate to have the
parents that I had, and I want to see more minority students, if you will, succeed.
And I think a lot of times if they see someone who looks like them, has been to
the same places they’ve been…I have 3 or four kids who live down the street from
me, you know kids that I see everyday and it's kind of like, “Wow, you know, I
can do that too.” I was always taught you bring someone up behind you. When
you achieve in life, there should be someone coming up behind you and I consider
these kids as someone behind me coming up to reach their potential. I think about
if I didn't have the parents that I had, and go to private school, I wouldn't be doing
what I'm doing now, because I didn't have anybody to push me to do anything, I
mean just my parents there wasn't anyone back then in school who was doing that,
and I think for a lot of different reasons, private school, I guess they assumed you
knew everything. I think that it's just important. I think in some ways, I probably
try to do things that fall under my professional duties that are also personal. I
think they go hand and hand and I think sometimes I am going to step outside of my professionalism to do some butt kicking if you will, and that kind of takes a little away from professionalism and brings in my personal stuff, but I think that obviously you have to be professional in what you are doing. I know for me personally I take it outside sometimes, outside of that and make it a little more personal. If I see a kid whose really just into some stuff that he really shouldn't be into then I'm going to grab him like he's my kid brother and ‘kick his butt’ about it and it may not be the most professional thing but it's my way of getting my point across and it works. I think that I try not to do it too much where they see me too much as their buddy hanging out so you have to maintain that professionalism. They go hand and hand. I wouldn't be able to separate the two.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?

ANDREA: Like I have two senior homerooms and I form relationships with them because I am making sure everyone is going to graduate if they pass everything this year, so you form those relationships. But then like my ninth graders are neglected because I’m spending all my time with the seniors right now and some time with the juniors making sure that they’re not failing. I mean you can handle it. You can handle whatever you’re given. But I think it could be lower, I think it should be lower so that we can have the more personal relationship. It all goes back to the whole No Child Left Behind thing. With teaching from bell to bell and not being allowed to pull kids out of classes, not really having time to really do one-on-one or even small group conversations unless you go into a classroom…you can’t form those relationships. But you do what you have to do. I think that it is, if you want to do it right…[In my old job] I had the opportunity to sit with the kid an entire period on the computer and look at schools…see what this is like, check this out…giving them a check list of what things to look for in colleges. Guidance counselors don’t really have the time to do that or the opportunity to do that. I have 75 seniors. So it makes it really hard to do. It’s also hard to get the parents on board sometimes. And, nine out of ten parents who come in to see me don’t speak English, so I’m hunting for an interpreter.

KRISTIE: How or where did you acquire your knowledge about college access and retention?

ANDREA: Here, on the job. That’s it.

KRISTIE: How would you describe your graduate training in school counseling?

ANDREA: We get into the counseling piece of it, but unfortunately that isn’t really a big piece here without making a lot of noise, which is what we’ve been
Andrea, Interview 1

Andrea, Interview 1

Doing. I don’t think that the graduate program is really in conjunction with what
we do. It prepares you to be a counselor but it doesn’t prepare you to be in the
guidance department. I guess I would put it that way. That kind of thing. And the
counseling stuff is kind of, you know, that comes if there is time left over.
Fortunately in this department we’re all counselors, and we spend a lot of time
battling with the administration around that and getting our point out there saying,
this is why we’re here, this is why we’re needed. This is probably why I’m
teaching right now. I complain every single day. I kept saying “this is not what
it’s like in a public high school - in an inner city public high school.” People that
are sitting here that are gonna want to go off into the inner city, you’re going to be
eaten alive. But if you haven’t taught in that setting and have some experience in
that setting, going into guidance in that setting you’re going to be totally lost. It is
very difficult. I’ve worked with people who come from the “burbs” and you come
in here and you’re talking about all these wonderful trips you’ve taken and all
these great wonderful things. And I’m talking to kids who, and my issue is, some
of these kids don’t know if this is gonna be the house I’m living in when I get
home today. Or if there’s gonna be a meal today. I better eat lunch. They have
immediate issues that sometimes, if you don’t have the experience and you
haven’t been in that setting, you’re clueless. You’re totally, totally, totally
cueless.

Kristie: You’re also teaching?

Andrea: Yes, I’m teaching part-time at [local university] in the grad
program for counselors.

Kristie: How do you like that?

Andrea: I love it. I really feel like I’m giving something to our profession.
But I worry about the folks goin’ out into urban schools like this one. I have to
follow a certain curriculum and it doesn’t cover issues specific to this setting. I try
to sneak it in here and there but they really don’t have a clue what they’re going
into if they aren’t from a place like this.

Kristie: Do you participate in professional development about college
access and retention?

Andrea: I have access to a lot of research and stuff through the university
but it’s all very general. Nothing is about the urban kid, the poor kid, the Black
kid.

Kristie: What other methods do you employ to get information or training?

Andrea: Sometimes there are programs in the area from College Board or
from a college. I’ve been to a few of those.
KRISTIE: Is the administration supportive of you attending these things?

ANDREA: As long as you aren’t asking to go places a lot. They don’t want you gone every week somewhere and they don’t want the same person going all the time. They want everyone to get an opportunity to get out there. There’s a limited amount of money allotted for professional development so they try to spread it out to touch as many people as possible.

KRISTIE: Is there anything else you would like to tell me today?

ANDREA: No. Thank you.
KRISTIE: Was there anything in the preliminary findings summary that seemed “way off?”

ANDREA: No, not at all. Everything seemed really accurate and appropriate.

KRISTIE: Were there parts of the summary about which you feel particularly strong?

ANDREA: I think a part that really resonated with me was about how our non-counselor colleagues don’t support us or know what we do. The perceptions of counselors is that we’re tired of teaching in the classroom so we want to just sit back and do nothing all day. That is the perception. Historically that was what guidance counselors here did when I first started working here. And you can ask anyone in the department. Tomorrow the guidance department, we’re going to open up the guidance department during the lunch periods so teachers can come down and kind of familiarize themselves with what we do. Because they think we sit in here with our doors closed, and we don’t want to see kids, making coffee all day, sitting around with our feet up, and I said tomorrow we’re kind of having a very informal…come have a cookie, and some coffee, you can talk and ask, and see what we actually do. See what we’ve done in our offices, etc. Also, we aren’t held in high regard by the administration. I should say my principal is about numbers, data, statistics, whatever you can put on paper just to say I serviced this many kids this week or I did that many kids that week. That kind of thing. And the counseling stuff is kind of, you know, that comes if there is time left over.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you?

ANDREA: It really validates my experience as a counselor. It is an honest depiction of how I feel about this job and this place where I work.

KRISTIE: What is the important story here that you would like to tell?

ANDREA: It isn’t about us. Maybe that’s why no one has done this kind of research before. We know it’s not about us. We do what we do for kids. We do the best we can with what we have. We could do more if we had more but it’s hard to convince the people who make decisions. It’s time consuming and then they don’t appear to care so why would any of us put forth the effort? We just keep plugging along.

KRISTIE: What keeps you at this job?

ANDREA: The honest answer is that I need to work. I need a paycheck and the insurance. It’s not terribly difficult work and the work conditions are clean and comfortable. Isn’t that why we all stay on our jobs? [laughing]. I could go
work at a private school or in the suburbs but I think I would get bored there. Here I get to do a job I really like and be around a diverse group of people, people who aren’t all the same.

KRISTIE: Why is it important for you to do this job?

ANDREA: I mean, I come here for the kids, because you know you can help someone, it may not be fifteen today but someone you reached out to or that you got to, you feel you were able to do something for, I was able to get an application for a kid or you know, let them register for the SATs. You’re in it cause your heart’s in it, you want to help them when you can, you get the counseling stuff in and if you can’t do that, you do something else. I know I come in here everyday because I’m here for the kids, at some point you’re going to help somebody, even if it’s a little tiny bit. You have that one day, like yesterday, I had a student who is in special education and his mom came in for the IEP meeting. He’s getting two special ed. classes and he’s in an inclusion room and this kid is getting all A’s and his mom is saying he comes home and he sits down and he does homework, and I’m saying to myself, this is the first IEP meeting that I’ve been to that’s been this positive, there’s been other positive ones but to have this mom come in and be a part of it and she’s expressing all those wonderful things. That one incident made my day yesterday. I was like “YES!”

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you professionally?

ANDREA: One of the biggest things I hope this work will do is emphasize that we are different kinds of educators. We need different tools. Everyone’s all about data. And that’s the problem with guidance. You can’t measure what we do. So, we log every time we meet with a kid. We choose to do this so that we can say, “This is why we’re needed here.” We monitor everything. We jot everything down. You met with a parent or you met with a kid, you write it down. So I hope this will help us be recognized for the professionals that we are.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you personally?

ANDREA: Reading this stuff made me feel like we need to do something. Our kids are going to be hurt most because they have and continue to get the least. We’re here doing the best we can, like I said earlier, with what we’ve got. Maybe now is the time to get loud and demand better. I think we all would feel that way but where do you start? Who has the time? It becomes more work but it is truly our jobs. To be that advocate for our kids.

KRISTIE: Do you see or feel a distinction between your professional and personal lives?
ANDREA: No, not really. I take work home and I bring home to work. I am a counselor through and through. I think it impacts every aspect of my life. When you work with people, you can’t just walk away from them when you go home. You take a piece of them with you. Especially if they’re kids.

KRISTIE: How did you feel about this interview process?

ANDREA: I’m glad it was so easy. You really respected the amount of time I had to give and you didn’t ask for much. I was worried that this would be cumbersome and difficult but it wasn’t. It was good.
KRISTIE: How long have you been a school counselor?

DEBBIE: Eleven years.

KRISTIE: How did you begin your professional career?

DEBBIE: I was a special education teacher for ten years before I became a counselor.

KRISTIE: Why did you choose to leave the classroom?

DEBBIE: I wanted to help kids. When you are a special ed teacher, you get involved with the kids more deeply than a regular teacher does. You get to know the family more and you spend time talking about goals and plans because it is required on the IEP. So I felt like I was good at that part of things. I thought I would make a good counselor because of that experience.

KRISTIE: Is it everything you thought I would be?

DEBBIE: Oh it’s so much more than I ever expected.

KRISTIE: In what way?

DEBBIE: You never really know until you walk in someone’s shoes, you know. I think all teachers think, at some level, that being a counselor is easier than being a teacher. But, I guess they also know that at any moment a student could bring in that crisis that rocks your world. That’s why they don’t go on and get that degree. That fear. For me, I love knowing that if a kid is dealing with that kind of issue, I can help and I hope they know I’m willing to.

KRISTIE: What is the structure of the guidance department here?

DEBBIE: There are four of us here. Two in each office suite. I am the lead counselor. Usually, in this district, the lead counselor has a smaller caseload but I don’t. So, I’m really doing two jobs.

KRISTIE: Why is that?

DEBBIE: We’ve just moved into the academy model and they need to hire another counselor. But they haven’t done that yet. They can’t figure out how to do it. They want one counselor for each academy but then who gets the smaller caseload? So, I agreed to take the whole caseload for this year while they try to sort it out.

KRISTIE: Who is “they”?
DEBBIE: The administration.

KRISTIE: Building level or district level?

DEBBIE: Both.

KRISTIE: Have they asked for your input?

DEBBIE: Only to get my agreement to do it for this year.

KRISTIE: Are you worried that they won’t do anything about it?

DEBBIE: A little. The union is aware of it and there’s a letter of understanding that’s good for this year only. So, I’m hopeful they’ll take care of it and come up with a solution that will work.

KRISTIE: Will the Director of Guidance assist in getting this done?

DEBBIE: We have somebody, who I love dearly, who is the director and who was never a counselor, never a counselor. How would you know what being counselor is like? Or how to help their experience if you haven't been a counselor? I don't care where. So, she will try to help but I don’t know how that will work out.

KRISTIE: So, how many students are you responsible for?

DEBBIE: My load at any given time will go from 300 to 320. However, over a course of the year, I believe it is over 500 kids because they come and go and come back again. The population is tremendously mobile. And when you have that kind of thing, you are signing them in, signing them out, sending them to alternative schools; they are coming back from alternative schools. Really I think we have huge loads.

KRISTIE: How are the students assigned to the caseload?

DEBBIE: We don’t have any system for assigning students to counselors, it is just willynilly. We used to. When I first came we used the alphabet, you know, she had B and C. So now it is first come, first serve. They deal them out like cards, that’s it.

KRISTIE: Isn’t it done by the academy the student is in?

DEBBIE: Well yes but they assign the kids to the schools fairly randomly.
KRISTIE: The kids don’t get to choose?

DEBBIE: They get to make a request but it really depends on where there’s space available. They try to balance by grade level, gender, race, stuff like that.

KRISTIE: What percentage of your graduates go on to college?

DEBBIE: It was seventy-four percent for last year’s class.

KRISTIE: How is college planning carried out in your school?

DEBBIE: One of our supervisors from downtown has devised this system where she wants to know what all the seniors are doing. She wants to keep track of all these things. We have been given this list of students so we’ll keep track. In a way, it’s not a bad idea at all. In others it’s ridiculous. Like I can’t get her to take some of these students off the list even though they’re adults and I’m not dealing with them. They’re gone. But they remain on my list like I did something wrong. This kid hasn’t been in school for two years. I can’t get his name taken off the list.

KRISTIE: Where did this idea come from?

DEBBIE: We have a mayor who has come out and said that during his term, they are going to increase the applications and acceptance of Eastland graduates by 40% or something. I love when people talk about things they know nothing about and this is so dumb. So, the supervisor reacted by implemented this list.

KRISTIE: What is your role in college planning?

DEBBIE: I try to meet with each kid and make sure they have something in mind for what to do after graduation. Last year, we worked with seniors in a certain teacher’s class. But now, that teacher is gone, so now, one of the problems is that we have a change in staff. We were very close to the teacher last year, so it worked. So, now I have to cope with the new teacher and she is sort of getting used to her job, so who knows. I mean, and everyone, everybody is very territorial about how much they give up. We also have information nights for parents to come in. The thing is that the parents who already know quite a bit are the parents who come. And the parents who don't know anything are the parents we can't reach. So, then you go over all of this anyway. I also make sure the students get scheduled into the classes they need not just for graduation but for college acceptance too. It’s hard though because the students don’t want to take more than the minimum. Well, the school tries to keep the kids fully scheduled in their senior year, because there are things they can learn. Now I know they only need three math credits to graduate, but four would be better. The problem is that you do this, but then they want out. Because they don't need the courses for
graduation, their eyes are on working, they want to make money. For example, one of my students, a very responsible girl, her mother wrote a note and said, we are poor, she wants to go to work, etc. So she is going to get excused after four periods of school and get out early when she could have taken a few more courses.

KRISTIE: And that’s OK?

DEBBIE: If the principal says so. And if your mom screams loud enough or long enough, the principal will OK just about anything. So, you want to go home early? I know it’s a bad idea and your principal knows it’s a bad idea and your mom isn’t thinking about four years from now. She’s thinking about putting food on the table this week. In the long run it would be better for you to stay here, finish your college requirements, get a good education. Four years from now you would be in a much better place to help your family. But the families don’t think like that. It’s the whole cycle of poverty thing. What do you sacrifice right now for the possibility of a payoff in the long-run?

KRISTIE: So, how much of your time is spent doing college planning?

DEBBIE: Not very much. I never get to do any with the younger kids. It is with your freshmen and sophomores, who come from sometimes appalling backgrounds that you are going to lose. You just know you are going to lose them. And you lose them, because you don’t have the time for them. You take care of your load from the top down. Then, the freshmen don’t get taken over. That’s it. And half of them are gone next year. And I know that is a very cynical way of looking at it, it’s appalling, but that’s what happens. I have to focus on the juniors and seniors. I have to prioritize my time.

KRISTIE: What other responsibilities do you have as a school counselor separate from college planning?

DEBBIE: We have to do everything. We basically take up the slack when it’s not clear where a job belongs. We do testing and scheduling. We have to help kids in crisis or when they have to go to rehab or another facility. We have to enroll all of the new students and those who were here before and left and came back. We have to take care of email and phone calls from parents and teachers. And we schedule and run meetings, like parent meetings or intervention meetings. Just everything. Oh, and document it all to prove we did it.

KRISTIE: Is there anyone else in the school responsible for college planning with students?

DEBBIE: Gosh no. Who else would do it? If the counselors don’t do it, then nothing gets done.
KRISTIE: How much influence do you have on your students’ plans for post-secondary education?

DEBBIE: Personally, I have a lot of influence. A lot. First of all, because I am filling a gap where there is nothing, OK? I have more influence than I would have in [local suburb] because their parents are all experienced with colleges and they have their ideas and they know everything. These kids come to me and we are like lamps to them because they haven't got the foggiest idea. We are their only resource, so it is my responsibility to help them, to assess them, to give them the best advice I can under the circumstances. To get them into the right place where they are going to have success.

KRISTIE: What factors contribute to your influence?

DEBBIE: The biggest factor is just the desire to do it. Kids can tell when you really want to help them and they respond to that. Like I said just before, these kids may not have anyone else helping them or encouraging them.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?

DEBBIE: I do think we spend too much time on paperwork. Because the paperwork needs to be done so then when you’re ordering your things to do a lot of the things that you want or might think are more important have to be put behind all these other paperwork things. And I think we sometimes have to fight the influence of the family. So many families just want the kids to get out and work so they can contribute money to the family. Like I said before. And, there aren’t many role models for these kids who went to college so they think and their families think that they can’t go to college. Like it’s not allowed or something. And, of course, there’s no money and they don’t know where to get the money or that there’s even money available for them, specifically for kids like them, to go to college. Then all the while they want to complain about the system holding them down, holding them back. That’s a lot of cultural and societal influence to combat. But we do it. We try.

KRISTIE: How adequately prepared are you to assist your students with college planning?

DEBBIE: I think I have the skills to do it if I could only get the time I need with the students and get the students to want it for themselves as much as I want it for them. If I had fewer students to take care of, I could spend a lot of time with them and their parents and explain everything to them and walk them through each step. That’s what they need. So often, they don’t know where to start. They don’t know what’s out there to help them.
KRISTIE: To what degree do you think you influence your students’ chances for succeeding in college?

DEBBIE: I don’t know. I think the environment and home that the student comes from plays a big part in that because the student is around that for much longer than he is around us. Our top 25 kids usually get a free ride. But you know a good, a fairly good, solid student who comes from a poverty background is going to have a tremendous adjustment when he goes away to college. His chances of doing well in his freshman year are just about nil. He is going to be hanging on by the skin of his teeth. Even the better students, this is true. And if the student took out big loans, and then drops out after his freshman year, what have we done to him? He's got loans he can't pay. He's got no education. We are pushing him into the underground economy.

KRISTIE: What kind of environmental things limit your influence?

DEBBIE: We’ve got an awful lot of juvenile delinquents; we have an awful lot of kids who have been in trouble with the law, or in gangs. We have all the ills of the inner city here. I think we do a pretty good job of keeping this school safe. We haven't had any major incidences in a long while. We, I don't want to say discipline is lax, because it is not, but we do have a lot of disrespectful incidents, that kind of thing, but that's going to happen all over too.

KRISTIE: How prepared do you believe are you to assist your students to succeed in college?

DEBBIE: I wish we could follow up in a better way on the students…the mobile population would make this quite difficult... telephones numbers are disconnected, everybody's moved. However, we send a lot of kids to local colleges...We could go to those colleges and say, “OK you took how many students this year, how many are still there, what happened to them?” That would help us to know if we were helping students to succeed or not. Then we could evaluate our practice and know what kids need to know before they go, what parents need to know too. If we could better partner with college admission staffs and advisors, we could help with that transition. You know, we could introduce the kids to the college person and let them know that these new people will help you like I helped you. I trust them so it’s OK that you trust them. Urban kids and minority kids have a lot of trust issues so I think that would help.

KRISTIE: How or where did you acquire your knowledge about college access and retention?

DEBBIE: Mostly on the job. I read some of the journals and stuff. But the real practical stuff you learn by doing. I feel sorry for those kids in my first couple
of years when I really didn’t know what I was doing. You know, I kinda cut my teeth on them so I hope they turned out OK.

KRISTIE: Do any of them come back to visit?

DEBBIE: Occasionally. When they make it, they come back. When they’re successful, they come back to tell you or to say thank you. But that’s rare. So I wonder if they didn’t make it or if they just are too caught up in their lives to come back. I hear stories sometimes about the kids who dropped out of college but they don’t ever come back. I wish they would because maybe I could still help them. You know, go to community college or tech school or something different.

KRISTIE: How would you describe your graduate training in school counseling?

DEBBIE: Well, you know, graduate school was interesting. I enjoyed it, I think I learned a lot, and I may apply 10% of it in the Eastland School System and that’s about it, OK. And that’s the truth, that’s the way it is. I think at least it schooled me on mental illness and gave me “an eye for pathology.”

KRISTIE: So, your program focused on individual counseling?

DEBBIE: It focused on counseling. My program was essentially the same as someone training to become an agency counselor. There wasn’t one class specifically devoted to working in a school. So, I have good counseling skills but that’s not really what we do, is it?

KRISTIE: So there was no training on college planning with students?

DEBBIE: About the closest thing we got to that was career counseling. But that’s not filling out applications and applying for financial aid. Kids need that help just as much.

KRISTIE: Do you participate in other types of professional development about college access and retention?

DEBBIE: Not really. There aren’t many opportunities for that that I’m aware of.

KRISTIE: What other methods do you employ to get information or training? Anything in the school district?

DEBBIE: Citywide there is nothing. Forget about it. When you take a job with this school system, they say report to room 43. That's it. They don't tell you
You're doing, where to go, how to find anything, no. You just...when I first came here other teachers said OK, come on, let me show you where the ladies room is. That's about it, really. We counselors rely on each other a lot. There are always new things coming up and you don't know about them, and another counselor will say I'm doing this, and you'll say where did you get that? I don't know anything about that. So we learn from each other. And I just wish it was, there was some kind of directory that was better, but there is nothing like that. It's more or less off the cuff and off the top of my head. And that's not the best way to operate. We don't have the kind of information that I would like to have. It has never been compiled.

KRISTIE: Does your district have professional development days?

DEBBIE: Yes, once or twice a year.

KRISTIE: Do you learn anything from them?

DEBBIE: Usually they’re designed for teachers. We have to go to them but the material isn’t usually useful for the counselor.

KRISTIE: Have you pointed this out to anyone?

DEBBIE: Well, I’ve tried to let the Director of Guidance know that I would be willing to help plan something for counselors. But, again, she wasn’t a counselor so she doesn’t really understand why we need something different. She doesn’t really advocate for special programs for us.

KRISTIE: Is there anything else you would like to tell me today?

DEBBIE: No. I think I’ve touched on everything I think is important.
KRISTIE: So Debbie, you received the summary of findings?

DEBBIE: Yes.

KRISTIE: Was there anything that seemed “way off?”

DEBBIE: I was surprised that there wasn’t anything that didn’t seem to fit. Even things I hadn’t thought of, they weren’t surprising. I found myself going, “Oh, yeah. That’s true.”

KRISTIE: Were there parts of the summary about which you feel particularly strong?

DEBBIE: I liked reading about the counselor whose student got into Brown and everybody celebrated. Oh, it is heaven to get my kids involved in something like that. I also liked that the relationships with your colleagues was emphasized. I will miss that when I retire, my colleagues. I really like the people. You like the people you work with. We do, we help each other. We buck each other up. Ana and I have been dear friends for 25 years. We have huge telephone bills because it’s long distance to talk but we have to process everything. There’s no time during the school day. Days will go by and I don’t see Ana and she’s just in the other suite down there. She calls me, I call her almost every night and, God, if something is going on we’re on the phone for two hours. Everything has to be looked at from all these different sides and that’s the way you process something.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you?

DEBBIE: I’m not sure I thought about how the findings directly impact me. It felt good to read about other counselors who go through the same things. It helped to feel like I’m not alone. It made me a bit sad though too, to think of all the kids that the eleven of us serve. If we’re dealing with the same issues then we can assume that there are more counselors out there with the same struggles. Multiply that by the hundreds of kids we are each responsible for. So many kids are being underserved. So, I’m more concerned about how these findings will ultimately impact kids.

KRISTIE: What is the important story here that you would like to tell?

DEBBIE: What struck me the most in what I read was about the immigrant children who, well when English is their second language. So consequently, right off the bat, they are buffaloes on their SATs, they don’t do well on those kind of tests because they just don’t have the internal tree to hang everything on. When it is not your first language, it is hard. And we’re a country of immigrants but no one is concerned about these kids. They just say they should learn English.
KRISTIE: What keeps you at this job?

DEBBIE: I’m close to retirement and I’ve been doing it for so long. It’s not an easy job to so but, once you get experience, it’s manageable. After awhile you settle in and it would be harder to leave and have to learn a whole new system. I never really considered leaving this job though.

KRISTIE: Why is it important for you to do this job?

DEBBIE: These kids are so cool. They are so eclectic and smart. They are smart in ways I could never be. Like with computers and with languages. I really love to work with them. They teach me so much everyday. I hope I do as much for them as they do for me.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you professionally?

DEBBIE: You know, I’ve said before I’m close to retirement. I don’t know that I will see any significant changes in the field before I go. And usually change takes awhile to trickle down to the urban areas. I’m not sure why that is. It seems harder for us to make changes. Maybe because most urban districts are so big and there’s so much infrastructure. Individually, it means a lot to me to know someone is at least asking the questions about what we do and how we fit into the school district and what we can do for kids. I hope this is the beginning of a conversation that will continue until some change does occur for counselors and for these kids.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you personally?

DEBBIE: Again, I think that’s much the same as the last answer.

KRISTIE: Do you see or feel a distinction between your professional and personal lives?

DEBBIE: You know, I really don’t. I worry about what it will be like to retire. How do you go about not working? When I retire, I will need to find some way to get my kid fix because I know it is what I will miss the most. How do you just have a personal life? I think for our culture, American culture, so much of our selves is tied up in our professions. It’s our status, it’s our livelihood, it’s our identity. It is really hard to separate the two.

KRISTIE: How did you feel about this interview process?

DEBBIE: I enjoyed the opportunity to participate. It seems like you were able to gather a lot of information and, at least for me, the process was not time-consuming or difficult to schedule. Had I been given the choice between two
interviews or completing a survey, I would probably have chosen a survey. But now having been through this, I think the survey would have been more cumbersome and not as enjoyable.
Gladys, Interview 1

KRISTIE: How long have you been a school counselor?

GLADYS: I have been a counselor for 32 years.

KRISTIE: Close to retirement?

GLADYS: Actually, I did retire but then came back. They were having a hard time finding someone for the position and I knew I could do one more year. That I would miss helping the kids. So here I am again. This should be my last year, for real this time.

KRISTIE: How did you begin your professional career?

GLADYS: I’ve always been a guidance counselor.

KRISTIE: Never a teacher?

GLADYS: No. I have my bachelor’s in education and was certified to teach social studies but I didn’t find a job right away so I went back to school for the master's degree in counseling. When I finished that, I found this job and never taught.

KRISTIE: How many counselors are there here? What is the structure of the guidance department?

GLADYS: There are six school counselors at Cook. We share an office and there’s a secretary for us. Each of us is assigned to students by grade level and magnet program. Two counselors in each program. And we’re each on a committee for either attendance, scheduling, and counseling.

KRISTIE: Tell me more about the magnet programs.

GLADYS: There are three programs: Business, Law & Government, and the Career & Technology Center. Students have to apply to them.

KRISTIE: Did the counselors get to choose which program they are assigned to?

GLADYS: No. We’ve had the magnets for years. I can remember when they were implemented. We were just told which kids we would get. There was no discussion about what you would prefer to do. It’s just like having your caseload assigned in any other way. Because we’re all in the same office, it doesn’t matter much. If each magnet had it’s own office and the counselors went to work there, it might have mattered more.
KRISTIE: Would you prefer that the magnet had its own office?

GLADYS: Sometimes I think it might be more helpful if the counselor and the principal and everyone for a specific program were in the same place. Might make it easier to communicate about kids or make it easier when visitors come in, like when parents come in.

KRISTIE: What about the guidance structure at the district level?

GLADYS: Oh, we have so many bosses. Ultimately our department falls under the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum. Beneath her is the Director of the Student Support Department. Then within that department there is a high school supervisor. Our lead counselor reports to her and coordinates things here in the building. Each building has a lead counselor.

KRISTIE: So what is the difference between the high school supervisor and the lead counselor other than location?

GLADYS: The high school supervisor is sort of our link to the board level resources. She also helps us with professional development. Whereas the lead counselor facilitates things here in the building. She’s our link to the building level administration. She also does a lot of the data collection that comes out of our department.

KRISTIE: So, who ultimately supervises you?

GLADYS: Actually it is our principal. He does the observations and reviews each year. If there’s a problem, he might bring some of the others into it but he’s the onsite person in charge.

KRISTIE: How many students are you responsible for?

GLADYS: It varies quite a bit throughout the year with kids coming in and out but I guess it’s usually around 300.

KRISTIE: And, explain to me again how the kids are divided up.

GLADYS: Well, like I said before, we have three magnet programs here: Business, Law, and Technology. There are two counselors in each magnet. Each has two grade levels – one has ninth and tenth graders and the other has eleventh and twelfth graders. So, right now, I’m in the Business magnet and I have the juniors and seniors. To be perfectly honest, I don't like this system. At [previous school] what we did was we would follow the same class for four years. We would get them as ninth graders and work with them, and I think the advantage to that is that you get to know the kids very, very well. You get to know their parents
very well, and by the time a lot of those seniors were - a lot of those kids were seniors - the parents were calling me by my first name, and I was calling them by their first name. And they felt very comfortable talking with me, and we really got to know the student a lot better than having them for one year as we have here, and then next year they'll have a different guidance counselor. So, I just don't think there is any continuity, and I also found that the students opened up a lot more with me if they got to know me, and they knew that I was going to be their counselor for four years. By the time they were seniors, some of them were calling me Ma…Well, I think it's better if you hold on to them starting in 9th grade, and they feel a lot more comfortable with you.

KRISTIE: What percentage of your graduates go on to college?

GLADYS: We only have a graduation rate of about 60%. About 80% of them go on to college but mostly to two year schools.

KRISTIE: How is college planning carried out in your school?

GLADYS: I try to go into classes to do activities. Usually English because everyone has that class. But it’s hard to get the teachers to agree to give up their classroom time. Depending on the grade levels I have that year, I would do presentations about SATs or financial aid. Then for seniors you talk about how to do an application, write an essay and stuff.

KRISTIE: Do you feel that is successful?

GLADYS: Well only 60% of our kids even graduate. They’re struggling. It’s hard to get them to think about college when they are barely making it through high school. That’s why a lot of our kids go to two year schools. They wait to see if they graduate and if they do, then they apply to the two year school in the summer.

KRISTIE: So, what is your role in college planning?

GLADYS: I do everything. From getting the kids to think about it all the way to helping with the applications. So many of our kids don’t even have college on their radar that I spend a lot of time reprogramming them. They’ve been told for so long that it’s not an option for someone like them that it’s a struggle to convince them otherwise.

KRISTIE: How much of your time is spent doing college planning?

GLADYS: Not much. Less than an hour a day I would guess. Some days go by and I never say the word “college.”
KRISTIE: What other responsibilities do you have as a school counselor separate from college planning?

GLADYS: So many. But they expect a lot of you, and it is a lot of paperwork, because we have such a transient population, and they want us to do counseling, but we also have to track down the kids that aren't coming to school, track down the kids who are coming in late to school, find out why they're not coming to school, track down kids who have like two, three, and four deficiencies and talk with them about this, talk with students who are going to make up school or what they will do. There's just a myriad of things that we have to do.

KRISTIE: Is there anyone else in the school responsible for college planning with students?

GLADYS: No one other than the counselors.

KRISTIE: Has your school ever had a college or career center

GLADYS: No.

KRISTIE: Has it ever been discussed?

GLADYS: Not that I was ever aware of.

KRISTIE: Do many of the kids go on to pursue careers in the field that their magnet focused on?

GLADYS: I don't know. We don't keep statistics like that. Many of my kids in the Business program do talk about business careers. A lot of them want to own their own businesses. That seems to be common among the Black kids. A lot of girls want to own day cares or beauty shops. Boys want to own garages or stores.

KRISTIE: Why do you think that is so?

GLADYS: I think they think you make a lot of money if you're the owner, if you're the boss. They don't realize though that it takes a lot of money to start a business. I hope they're teaching them about that in the business classes. Also, I think they also hear a lot about racism in businesses and they don't want to work for someone and possibly experience that.

KRISTIE: How much influence do you have on your students' plans for post-secondary education?

GLADYS: I think I could have more influence if I had the students for all four years. The more you know them, the more they will listen to you. Like I said, we
have to basically reprogram them and that takes time. Convincing them that they
are smart enough and worthy enough to go to college is tough and so you have to
know them and they have to trust that you have their best interest at heart.

KRISTIE: What factors contribute to your influence?

GLADYS: Having a relationship is the key. But they usually - by the time
they’re juniors and seniors - they have confidence in me that I'm doing it for their
well being, and I'm not just doing it for the state of being mean or trying to get
them to do something that they don't want to do. But as far as the influence, I tell
everybody to apply. And they do. But I never tell students that they can't go
anywhere. Never, ever, ever. I don't think that's my place, and if the student wants
to apply to Harvard - well, then you know what, that's your right to apply there.
Let them decide whether or not you can go there.

KRISTIE: Do you think your race has any influence?

GLADYS: I think it helps with the relationship building. We don’t have any
White counselors here but I think it would be harder for them. I think Black kids
have a general mistrust of all White people and it takes awhile for a White teacher
or counselor to win them over. They have to jump through a lot of hoops with the
Black kids to get that trust. Because I am Black, I don’t typically have to do that. I
do think that there is some wariness of me though because I am educated, I am in
a position which is perceived to be powerful. But I am Black and that helps.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?

GLADYS: Sometimes they don’t follow through. The kids who say all right
Miss, I'm going to focus on it tonight, and I'll bring it in to you tomorrow. And I
give them an appointment slip to see me, and they don't come and see me the next
day I have to track them down, and I'm taking time away from those students who
did do what they were supposed to do, and did bring me in their applications and
recommendation sheets that I have to fill out. But it's those kids who sometimes –
and you always have the kids that don't follow through - and you always have the
kids that 'yes' you to death, and they just don't do anything. So I think that's really
the hardest. Sometimes it’s the other demands that take up too much time. I don't
think - the district may see it - but I don't think that the Superintendent can see
this. He should go into the schools and just see how we operate just for a week
instead of sitting in his high office and just looking at statistics on paper. He
should come in and really see what's going on. And he will see that there is a lot
of work going on - trying to get these kids to come into school everyday. But
when you've got problems at home, it's difficult. If you've got a mother who's an
alcoholic and a father who's a drug dealer beating the mother up, how do you
come into school and really think clearly. You can't think clearly. You can't focus
in on what the teacher is talking about. It's really hard. And I think a lot of times
the kids who do well, and who do come everyday, they're like floundering around, they are on their own. And we're really focusing in on the kids who are not doing what they're supposed to be doing. That's how I feel sometimes. It's just backwards. You know that they're high achieving students bright enough to get through the day on their own, and they very much know that there are certain requirements that you have to meet in order to go from one grade to another. And it seems that we just never counsel these kids. We don't counsel them enough. It's the kids who always get into trouble. The kids who need counseling because the vice principal said that he swore at a teacher, or he cut the teacher's class. We're always dealing with the negative - that's what I think.

KRISTIE: How adequately prepared are you to assist your students with college planning?

GLADYS: I think I am prepared but there are so many other pressing needs for these kids. College gets pushed to the backburner when you got to worry about safety and just graduating. Preparing for college is just a bonus if you get to it. There’s so much we have to do for them. Not just for the kids but for the parents too. Like, you have to explain to them to make their kids go to bed early the night before the SAT, and eat breakfast that morning, and get there on time. I shouldn’t have to do that. Why don’t they know those things already?

KRISTIE: To what degree do you think you influence your students’ chances for succeeding in college?

GLADYS: I feel lucky if I can get them to even think about going to college. I never get much to talking about how to stay once you get there.

KRISTIE: So, again, it’s a matter of time?

GLADYS: Yes. I think I could influence them and tell them what they need to know if I had enough time to attend to all of their needs and then get them to believe they could go to college and then actually prepare and apply for college. But because they need you to tell them everything, we never get to the retention piece.

KRISTIE: How or where did you acquire your knowledge about college access and retention?

GLADYS: Oh you learn that on the job. No one teaches you how to do it in a class or anything. You don’t even have a class about college. That would be a good idea. To have a class that talks about the options after high school and how to help students prepare for each one. Something that teaches you about what it takes to be successful in college and how you can get that info to the students and their parents. Something like that would be helpful, even as a workshop.
KRISTIE: How would you describe your graduate training in school counseling?

GLADYS: It was so long ago. I’m sure it is very different now. We were basically trained to do counseling, you know, individual counseling and career counseling. But then you get in the school setting and you never do any of those things.

KRISTIE: Do you participate in professional development about college access and retention?

GLADYS: Not lately. I’m not aware of anything. I would try to go if there was something offered.

KRISTIE: What other methods do you employ to get information or training?

GLADYS: This principal doesn’t allow everyone to go in the guidance office. In other words, there was professional development today, and a couple of people could go. She doesn’t want the whole guidance office to go. That’s what they have to do here. They have to go and bring back the information and any handouts that were given to them. It’s still not like being there. And, when you’re at the end of your career, the principal is even less likely to approve you. A lot of times too, the information that they send us about these professional development that they have out of town - it’s like $150 to stay overnight. If you have a family, it’s difficult to do that. Whereas if they came here, and they had it say at one of the local hotels – at the Marriott or a place like that - which they have had - we do go to them. But again, it’s not focused on the urban school. It’s a little different. And you say to yourself, gee, when do they talk about our situation. So the cost and trouble to get approved to go doesn’t even seem worth it if it’s not going to be applicable for us.

KRISTIE: What was the professional development about today?

GLADYS: It was about kids in crisis, like abusing drugs was one topic and cutting was another.

KRISTIE: Did you want to go?

GLADYS: I would have gone but I think it’s more important that younger counselors go, less experienced people. I’ll be retiring at the end of the year so it’s good to give those opportunities to the people who will be staying on.

KRISTIE: Is there anything else you’d like to tell me today?
GLADYS: Just that I wouldn't want to be a counselor anywhere else but in an urban setting, because I think these kids are just great. They're sincere. And they're just so thankful when you take an interest in them, and you try and help them. It's very rewarding. In fact, I had encountered a friend who worked for a private school, and I spoke to him one day, and he said “I can't tell you how bored I am…with my mahogany walls, and my mahogany desk, and the best computer…my desk is clear – there are no cases on my desk.” So, for me, I'll take this any day, my computer stand where my knees hit the desk, the chairs are so bad that my back hurts, I could use a back brace. But I'll take it all anyway. The kids are great. They're just so thankful.
KRISTIE: It’s nice to see you again. Did you receive the preliminary findings?

GLADYS: I did. It was interesting.

KRISTIE: Was there anything in the summary of findings that seemed “way off?”

GLADYS: No. Nothing at all.

KRISTIE: Were there parts of the summary about which you feel particularly strong?

GLADYS: Yes. The part about how our colleagues don’t know what we do is really so important. What do they think we do? I'll tell you in two sentences, that we do nothing, and that we're really not worth the money that we're getting paid. I think they still have that old perception that we sit at our desks, read the paper, get coffee, and drink coffee. That’s the teachers. The principals don’t understand counseling so we get whatever tasks that they don’t know what to do with. Here, I find that the principal expects you to do a lot of paperwork, too much.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you?

GLADYS: I think other counselors will find this work validating. It will be harder, though to get administrators to hear it and take it to heart. I think we were pretty critical of them, both building and district level. I worry that they might just hear this as whining. It will be interesting to see how you put all of your data together and then present it to different audiences.

KRISTIE: What is the important story here that you would like to tell?

GLADYS: The need to define what counselors do is so important. Defined by counselors not others. And to say what we actually do, and put it on paper, I think it’s impossible. I think it’s impossible, because you know what…everyday is different. And if you plan your day, it will never go that way, because there’s always a crisis or something going on. So every day in guidance is different — never dull. I just don’t know how we will ever define it so that it fits for every one of us.

KRISTIE: What keeps you at this job?

GLADYS: I love it. I really love what I do. I love the unpredictability of it. I think that I would get bored in a suburban school. Even though what these kids live with is sometimes so difficult, it is rewarding to watch them learn the problem solving skills and life skills they need. I love being a part of that with
KRISTIE: Why is it important for you to do this job?

GLADYS: No one really sees what we do. I just think that if someone came in and spent a week with us, they would say, “Oh my God why did you ever go into guidance?” But you know it's rewarding to see them graduate from high school, and see them cross the stage, and you call out their name, and before they go and get their diploma, they give you a hug and say “thank you Miss.” So there's my reward right there. Something was done right. And when they do get accepted, they would thank me. It had nothing to do with me. But they thought it was because of me that they got accepted to college, and I would try to tell them it's not me, it was your transcript that was a mirror of you. Your mirror looked good, and you were accepted.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you professionally?

GLADYS: We have the district telling us how we have to perform in our jobs. In other words, they’re telling us that we should have a curriculum that we follow, but there’s so much politics to it all, and I think a lot of it has to do with how well we look on paper, not how well we’re helping the students and trying to get these students to succeed. But no one ever asks us, those of use who work directly with the kids, what is needed and what, based on our experience would work. I’m glad that you saw the need to do that and pursued it.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you personally?

GLADYS: Today I feel valued as a professional. Here I am participating in scholarly research about my field. Someone came to talk to me because she felt what I had to say was important. That doesn’t happen often. If nothing else comes from this work, although I hope it does, I will have this feeling and I will remember it for a long time.

KRISTIE: Do you see or feel a distinction between these two lives?

GLADYS: No. I think those of us in the helping fields can’t divide our personal and professional selves. We are helpers in everything we do. It’s what draws us into the fields we’re in.

KRISTIE: How did you feel about this interview process?

GLADYS: Oh Kristie. I loved it. Like I said before, no one has ever asked me to contribute to this kind of discussion. I am really glad that I was able to participate.
KRISTIE: How long have you been a school counselor?

GLORIA: This is my fourth year.

KRISTIE: How did you begin your professional career?

GLORIA: I started as a counselor.

KRISTIE: How did you end up in counseling?

GLORIA: I always liked the idea of working in a school but I didn’t want to be a teacher. First I was going to be a school social worker because to be a counselor you had to have first been a teacher. Then, by the time I finished my Bachelor’s degree, they changed the law. So I went straight on into graduate school to get Master’s degree in counseling. When I graduated, I took a job in a private school and then I came here this year.

KRISTIE: What is the structure of the guidance department?

GLORIA: You’re looking at the guidance department. I’m the only counselor here because we are a very small school. I’m responsible for all of our kids and about eighty students from [nearby high school].

KRISTIE: Why do you have the additional kids at the other school?

GLORIA: They are doing some construction on their main building and they’ve got kids farmed out to a couple of different locations. These kids are seniors in a work-related program. They’re all attending school in the same location which is near here but they didn’t send a counselor to that location. Since I’m nearby and I only have two hundred kids here at Port, they assigned those kids to me as well.

KRISTIE: How do you make this arrangement work?

GLORIA: I go over there once a week to do typical senior year stuff with them, like credit checks and grade checks and post graduation stuff. Day to day, they don’t have a counselor. The staff tries to manage crisis stuff and they leave me notes or emails about kids they think need to see me but it’s not urgent. We’re making it work. It’s just for this year. It’s not ideal for the kids but it’s what we have to do.

KRISTIE: What percentage of your graduates go on to college?

GLORIA: Because this is the first year this school has been open, we don’t
have any statistics yet. We only have 19 of our own seniors here. I would love it if they all go to college. Wouldn’t it be cool to say, for once, that one hundred percent of your graduating class went to college? I’d love that!

KIRSTIE: How is college planning carried out in your school?

GLORIA: Well, we are very fortunate in that this school is new and the principal has initiated 20-minute advisory periods in the homeroom periods. There again these teachers really have been hand picked, and there is a wonderful climate here of cooperation. And nobody says this is your job, it is not my job. So my role is to work within the advisory structure.

KIRSTIE: What is your role in college planning?

GLORIA: I’ve been using the advisory time to work with the younger kids on defining what they want to do after graduation, interest inventories and identifying strengths. They really like that because you know those things tell you you should be a cowboy or a circus clown and they get a kick out of that. With the older kids I talk about the actual process – signing up and preparing for the SAT and filling out the forms and the FAFSA. So it’s my job to do all of that.

KIRSTIE: How much of your time is spent doing college planning?

GLORIA: We have the advisory homeroom period everyday. It’s fifty minutes long but twenty minutes is set aside for future planning. The other thirty minutes is checking the planner and homework and stuff. I do something everyday with the advisories. I kinda rotate around to the different classes or bring a few of them together in the cafeteria. I think I do a lot of college planning activities each week.

KIRSTIE: What other responsibilities do you have as a school counselor separate from college planning?

GLORIA: It can be an overwhelming job at times. I field questions from parents, intervene in fights, help boys who are crying, everything. I tell them that if they’re pissed off at a teacher, to come down here and vent, not to do it in the classroom. I try to teach new behavior skills. Also, I have been spending night after night after night here working on these transcripts because I am the only counselor. I feel I have an ethical, moral professional responsibility to give every kid as much as I possibly can.

KIRSTIE: Is there anyone else in the school responsible for college planning with students?
GLORIA: The teachers are actually quite involved here. This is a motivated staff who was especially selected to come here and the district is really pushing for this school to be a great success and a model for other places. So the teachers really push kids and they help me remind kids about deadlines. Formally they don't have to do it but we see it as a team effort and they are very helpful to me.

KRISTIE: How much influence do you have on your students’ plans for post-secondary education?

GLORIA: I think I have a lot of influence. Because there are only nineteen seniors, I think I got to know them pretty well and they know each other well and support each other. They all chose to leave their other schools and come here for their senior years and they’ve really bonded over that. They are atypical of what I would expect from urban students. They are very different from the seniors I have from the other school. Those kids don’t get to see me very often. They are in a vocational program that is essentially a dropout prevention program. Not many of them intend to go to college. Most will be happy to graduate, if they do. I don’t have much influence with them. They are the more typical urban kid who has barely gotten by and hasn’t had much support and now they’ve been moved out of their school during their senior year and they have even less support. They really would need a counselor there with them everyday in order to change their perceptions and have an influence.

KRISTIE: What factors contribute to your influence here with the seniors at Port Academy?

GLORIA: Definitely the small number of seniors and the supportive environment. The level of motivation of the kids.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?

GLORIA: I think, primarily, they don't know the game of college. They don't see what a college education does for adults. I don't think they have enough role models in their lives who have been through college, who know how to talk the culture and the climate of college to them. So therefore it is like a student who has never ridden on a train and is asked to write about a train. So we have to educate them I believe, at a very young age, probably in middle school, as to what a college is all about. So they know the terminology, the expectations, the rewards, the negative consequences of not going, the positive consequences of going, the sacrifices...and they know what they might have available to them as disadvantaged and minority students that nobody perhaps has informed them because their parents are working overtime, they might have one parent, they might even not have a parent, they might be living with brothers, sisters.

KRISTIE: How adequately prepared are you to assist your students with
GLORIA: Because I worked for three years in a private, all-girls’ school, I think I learned a lot about college. That was the primary focus of the job. So I know a lot of college reps and I know who to call. I think I am well-prepared to help kids get to college.

KRISTIE: To what degree do you think you influence your students’ chances for succeeding in college?

GLORIA: With the nineteen I have here, again, I think I am very influential. Now that we’re into the second semester, we’ve started talking about what college will be like. I have this video called “First Semester.” It’s whole program about the first semester of college. So we watch parts of it and there’s a discussion guide. It’s really good. The kids get very excited. I think it’s helping them understand. It won’t be easy but at least they’ll know what to expect and maybe they will have thought how to deal with the differences before they get there.

KRISTIE: What factors contribute to your influence?

GLORIA: Again, there are so few and I’ve worked hard to create a family type atmosphere. I don’t know if it will continue as our senior classes get larger but I hope it can. And, the kids are all so great. They really are motivated and positive. It was a great choice for each of them to come here. They got to “shed their skin” so to speak and start over in a new place. I don’t know what they were like at their old schools but there must have been a reason why they each decided to come here. I’ve talked to some of them about that. Not a lot, because I didn’t want them to think I was going to judge them based on their pasts.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?

GLORIA: Like I said before, they just don’t know stuff about college. I have learned not to assume anything. At my previous school, I could assume that the girls knew some basic stuff about college. Most of them had been on campuses and knew what college was like from siblings or friends. These kids haven’t had those experiences for the most part so I have to be very basic and start from zero. There’s a lot to cover.

KRISTIE: How prepared do you believe are you to assist your students to succeed in college?

GLORIA: I think I’m well-prepared. My previous experience taught me a lot and I was doing it as recently as last year so my knowledge is very current.

KRISTIE: How would you describe your graduate training in school
GLORIA: It was pretty good. There’s not a lot of specific information about school counseling or about schools in general. But the counseling instruction was good. And even though I don’t do a lot of actual counseling, it helps to have the background so I can anticipate problems or pick up on changes in kids.

KRISTIE: Do you participate in professional development about college access and retention?

GLORIA: Now I was invited to a reception at the Westin for [nearby private university]. And I said, “no way do I have time to be with them and lollygag around with them when my students need me.” And in reality I said, “Gloria, is [nearby private university] going to be a university for these kids?” And I said, “No, I don't think so, not right now. Maybe in four years, but not right now.” So I pick and choose what I think I need to attend based on the need of my kids.

KRISTIE: What other methods do you employ to get information or training?

GLORIA: I go to the district’s programs because I have to. But the professional development we've had has been more towards literacy and is not meaningful to me at all. There was a big literacy push, and we, as counselors have had to attend professional development days about scope and sequence about math. It is totally irrelevant and nobody seems to realize that we need help in other issues.

KRISTIE: You seem to be really excited about your job. Is there anything else you’d like to tell me today?

GLORIA: You’re right. I love my job. It helps that I’m young and the kids feel like they can relate to me. And, I’ve not experienced any burnout yet so they can sense my energy. I hope this school makes it because it’s a great place to work and a great place for kids.
KRISTIE: Did you have a chance to review the preliminary findings?

GLORIA: I just got them a couple of days ago so I really only glanced at them this morning.

KRISTIE: Oh, I’m sorry they didn’t come sooner. Do you feel okay with proceeding with the interview today?

GLORIA: Sure. Things were probably delayed because of our mail system in the district and then I probably didn’t get to my mailbox right when they came so they might have been sitting there for a day or so before I opened them. I’m sorry about that. But I did look at them this morning and I think we can do the interview.

KRISTIE: Okay. Just let me know if there’s something you don’t feel ready to answer or if you need me to explain something.

GLORIA: And, I have the findings right here so I can look at them again while we talk.

KRISTIE: That’s a good idea. Was there anything in the summary of findings that seemed “way off?”

GLORIA: No, nothing that sounded like it didn’t fit or make sense.

KRISTIE: Were there parts of the summary about which you feel particularly strong?

GLORIA: Yes. I did notice one place that talked about a school that was doing a results based program. I think that’s where the profession needs to go – results based. I guess we just have to keep track of all of the things that we do in order to convince people that we are needed. But it’s like therapy some people don’t think it’s necessary. They feel that just growth into adulthood is going to mean that you are going to be a mature person. It doesn’t work like that. And I thought the part about the importance of colleagues was interesting. I miss having other counselors around a lot. I try to stay connected to others in schools nearby but it’s hard because everyone is busy and, if you’re not right there in their faces, it’s hard to get them to commit to you. I also think I have a hard time connecting because of the situation I’m in being in the pilot school and all. I think counselors in the regular high schools don’t think I have enough to do or that I don’t work as hard as they do because our school here is smaller and maybe I don’t have as big a caseload. When [student] died, nobody was there for me. And I needed it. The temporary social worker that was there to help the students eventually said, “How are you doing Gloria?” That’s all he had to say because I was not doing well. And my son had called because he knows the road that this is and he called a couple of
times that week saying, “How are you doing Ma?” Nobody thinks that I need it. Yes, well I did. Colleagues are extremely important and sometimes we don’t realize it until you’re in a situation when you are alone in your job.

KIRSTIE: What do these findings mean to you?

GLORIA: I guess it means that maybe it’s our time as a profession. Maybe people will finally start to look at the important impact we can have not just on kids but on the entire culture of the school. I know there is a lot of reform going on in public schools right now and maybe this time we’ll be able to be a part of it.

KIRSTIE: What is the important story here that you would like to tell?

GLORIA: In this job, the kids are always the important story. In the findings, it didn’t sound like anyone was asking for anything simply to make their jobs easier. No one was being selfish. Everything that was mentioned was done so in terms of doing the best job for kids. Having the best resources and knowledge and environment to give the students the information they need.

KIRSTIE: What keeps you at this job?

GLORIA: My principal is so amazing. He values my opinion and he respects my professional opinion and because of that, I don't mind working hard because I know my results are going to be valued. Whereas at my other sites, I didn't get that. Not even from my department chair. Never mind the principal. I didn't even feel valued as a counselor by my department chair...I don't have any other counselors in the department but I don't feel alone because I know he's principal always there. And he has actually said that he will support me even when I'm wrong. You can't get anything better than that...I don't have many resources. I don't have heat in my office but what I do is make sure that I take it home with me and do it at home. I don't have another counselor but I have the ability to make the decision as to what's most important for me to do that day because my boss won't come down on me. Whereas at other placements, people would not respect the fact that I made that decision.

KIRSTIE: Why is it important for you to do this job?

GLORIA: I'm not into SUVs or where I'm taking my next vacation or redoing my house. That's not what I'm about. I volunteer. I'm involved with implementing an NGO [non-governmental organization] for Mali in Africa. So I like to do the big picture. I can't get involved in the nitty gritty stuff. My big house or my possessions. I can't do it. I wish I could, it might be easier. Why do I do this? Because I'm trying to make a difference on a bigger scale. Because [student] is a black male and the likelihood of him ending up in jail is greater than the likelihood of his getting out of high school.
KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you professionally?

GLORIA: The only time I felt like a professional in this system since I have been hired here was when I came out of that school counselor institute, and I was so moved that I actually volunteered to write an article for the newsletter. I felt so revved up, I felt so validated, because there were professionals there from the Department of Labor, State Department of Education, and from the High School Reform Team. And I said, “Wow, these people are really talking about issues, high school reform, they realize these kids need help.” I see this project as another opportunity to participate professionally.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you personally?

GLORIA: They confirm that I make a difference. One of the reasons why people work is to give back to the community. It’s one of the reasons why I do this job. Another thing the findings do for me is to confirm how important it is to reflect on one’s work and to have dialogue about the profession with colleagues. We neglect this aspect of professional development so often but it is so important. Together we can have a unified voice and it can be a loud one and maybe others will hear us.

KRISTIE: Do you see or feel a distinction between these two lives?

GLORIA: For me, no. I know people who work as counselors who can turn off their professional side when they walk out of the building each day. I can’t do that. I am the same person whether I’m here or at home. Sometimes though I feel guilty because I get in my nice car each evening and drive home to the suburbs. I don’t have to worry about the availability of dinner or heat or appropriate, loving companionship. I feel guilty because I know my kids go home each night to places that are at times unsafe or unhealthy. They are sometimes all alone or in charge of younger siblings. I know they get angry and scared and developmentally they aren’t equipped to deal with those situations. So I feel guilty about what I have and what they don’t have.

KRISTIE: How did you feel about this interview process?

GLORIA: I really value this experience. I have seriously been thinking about how I could be involved more in the profession. I’d love to coordinate some sort of committee in this district where the counselors get together and discuss the profession and work together more between buildings.

KRISTIE: What would keep you from doing that?
GLORIA: Probably just my perception that others wouldn’t want to do it. But maybe I could just send out an email and even if one or two people were interested, it would be worth it.

KRISTIE: I think it’s an exciting idea. Please let me know how it goes. You could do the next research project!

GLORIA: [laughing] I just might – maybe I will!
KRISTIE: How long have you been a school counselor?

HEATHER: Just four years.

KRISTIE: How did you begin your professional career?

HEATHER: My mother died eight years ago. I was working as a secretary in the Board of Education just because it worked with my kids’ schedule; they were much younger. That's when it hit me over the head, I said, “I don't want to die and not know that I didn't give something back or maybe I could help some way.” And then I thought, you know, I love kids, I love talking to people. It seemed to be my strength and I thought, you know, I'm going to check this out. And sure enough, here I am…And you know I think, I know I've made a difference in maybe 10 people's lives or I hope it's more than that. You just have to love what you do because it is not for the money.

KRISTIE: So, this was a good career move for you?

HEATHER: Absolutely.

KRISTIE: What did you do before working at the Board?

HEATHER: I was a stay-at-home mom. I got married while I was in college. I graduated but never went to work.

KRISTIE: What is your undergraduate degree in?

HEATHER: I have a two year degree in business. Then I got married. My husband was at the local four year college. We had gone to high school together. We got married the summer before his senior year and I was pregnant at graduation the next year. So, he went to work and I became a mom. When my kids went to school, I went to work at the Board. I was also taking classes at night to finish my bachelor’s degree in business. My mom died when I was doing that. That’s when I began to reevaluate what I really wanted to do for a career.

KRISTIE: So your students can really look to you as a role model for perseverance?

HEATHER: I hope so. I think it helps them to know that it’s not easy for everyone, even if you’re white. I think that’s what they think. That white people have a birthright to go to college. Go directly to four year college, do not pass go, do not collect $200. You know what I mean? I hope they can look to me as someone who needed to experience life to figure out where I was needed and what would really make me happy.
KRISTIE: Do you ever feel like you’re at a disadvantage because you were not a classroom teacher?

HEATHER: Sometimes. I had a lot to learn when I first started as a counselor. I had to learn all the politics of a school day. I knew some stuff because I worked in the district but not building level stuff. I learned a lot about that kind of thing during my practicum.

KRISTIE: You did your practicum in this building, right?

HEATHER: Yes.

KRISTIE: How was that?

HEATHER: I was really prepared, probably more so than some of the counselors who have even been here 25 years. I learned how to schedule a bilingual student. I learned about cultural differences, I think much more effectively than had you just had one population of students. The fact that I had that experience I think prepared me tremendously. So I lucked out. I would think for somebody else who is in grad school they don't have access to some of these systems. So, I thought I was really prepared, and above and beyond because I happened to spend a year here. I think if you get in an internship that stinks, you are in trouble.

KRISTIE: How or where did you acquire your knowledge about college access and retention?

ABBY: On the job. Just by being here and doing the job. You know as a new counselor, I initially went to a lot of the college showcases and ask questions and the lunches that they have, but there is nothing like going through the application process with the actual school. That's how you get your expertise just with experience. Experience. And I'll tell you, the counselors that I work with have been here forever so they're just a huge wealth of information and the saving grace about this department is we are all, our styles are all very different, but my God, if I ever have a problem or a question, I could go to anyone. I could go to anyone and ask, you know, how did you do this?

KRISTIE: What other methods do you employ to get information or training?

HEATHER: That’s it really. On the job. I’d love to do more, maybe go back to school. There’s just no time.

KRISTIE: Is there anything else that was valuable or, perhaps, was missing from your training as a school counselor?
HEATHER: There should be, you know, a mentor for you. There is no mentor. I just lucked out because I had [previous practicum supervisor], and I happened to be here, but there should be a mentor for those counselors, those new counselors for at least a year, you know someone you can cry to. Because you are going to make mistakes, as we all do, and I did, and still do. Cause you have so many questions you know: what can you do? How can you do this? Is this legal, is it not...not legal, but you know what I mean? Is this within the parameters of the rules?

KRISTIE: How many students are you responsible for?

HEATHER: About three hundred.

KRISTIE: How are they assigned to you?

HEATHER: We each have about ten different homerooms. There are all grade levels in each homeroom so it’s really random. They’re supposed to be changing it. We’re each going to be assigned to a small school. They haven’t done that yet. I think it will be easier to explain to people though. You know, you can just say, “I’m the counselor for the Law Careers Academy” instead of trying to list all of the homeroom numbers.

KRISTIE: What percentage of your graduates go on to college?

HEATHER: Around eighty percent. More go to two year college. But the mayor wants to change that. Did anyone tell you about the mayor’s plan?

KRISTIE: It has been mentioned. Tell me more about it.

HEATHER: The mayor has asked for a percentage increase in the applications to four-year colleges. I’m not sure I necessarily agree with that because clearly cost of the college is an issue for students. Most are paying this on their own. And the obstacles that they’ve overcome you know, it can be so broad. It can be from being a parent themselves to emancipated students to overcoming a language barrier. We have 60 some nations represented here, so it’s just the magnitude of it. So when you get someone whose got that motivation in front of them, there’s nothing better than getting them to that finish line, you know...whatever that is. That’s why personally, I’m the product of a two-year college, so I get offended when someone says it has to be a four-year college. If that’s the mayor’s objective, then his objective should be aligned with what they are doing in the suburban environment. And I’m sorry; it’s the only way we’re going to play on a level playing field.

KRISTIE: How is college planning carried out in your school? What is your role in college planning?
HEATHER: It’s so haphazard. Most of our kids don’t even think about college until they get to high school and that’s too late. But in any event, if you asked suburban kids, the college planning starts from the minute they are born. Whereas for our students, there certainly are cases...I’ve had a valedictorian all the way to a student whose brother was killed, so you know there clearly are those planning highs and lows. But the college planning part of it happens, unfortunately, when they enter here in their freshman year, as opposed to at birth in a suburb. So we have to start in their freshman year, I don’t overwhelm them with where are they going, what are they going to do, but I always talk, about gateway courses. What are colleges looking for? You know math, the sciences, the languages. That’s the kind of conversations I start with so we start getting the terms in the back of their heads.

KRISTIE: How much of your time is spent doing college planning?

HEATHER: Formally I don’t spend a lot of time on college planning but I do informally. It’s hard to say because when you talk about things like graduation requirements and credits and scheduling, that’s all college planning, indirectly. We fight an uphill battle here too, speaking of graduation requirements. I hope somebody else brought this up too. We are constantly battling these 21 minimum requirements, there are: 3 math, 3 science, etc. The mentality of our students is that once they get there, they’re done. They don’t need anymore… So, even our top students, we are constantly trying to get them to challenge themselves in an AP course, even though it is above and beyond the call of duty, a fourth year of math, a fourth science. And then they get support from home too to drop it. So we fight a battle there, too, you know getting our students out of that mentality. And we fight our teachers on it too.

KRISTIE: Is there anyone else in the school responsible for college planning with students?

HEATHER: Not really. We have an aid who helps with the career center. That’s where we keep viewbooks and applications and stuff. But it’s just us and her.

KRISTIE: Do you go to the career center to work on college planning with kids?

HEATHER: Not really. I planned to do small groups and bring juniors in to do some activities to get ready for applying and stuff but the teachers were really upset about the kids missing class so I never did it.

KRISTIE: What kind of training does the career center aid have?

HEATHER: She doesn’t have any formal training.
KRISTIE: So she’s not a counselor?
HEATHER: No. She doesn’t even have a degree of any sort.
KRISTIE: Doesn’t that seem odd? The woman helping kids go to college has never been to college?
HEATHER: I suppose. But who else is going to take that job? They won’t pay enough for a degreed person to do it. She’s great though. The kids love her and she does a good job.
KRISTIE: How did she get trained?
HEATHER: She’s been here longer than I have so I don’t really know. I think she probably just learned it as she went.
KRISTIE: Tell me what other responsibilities do you have as a school counselor separate from college planning.
HEATHER: Well, I mentioned scheduling and doing credit checks to make sure kids are going to graduate. We have to schedule new students and make sure they get settled in. We run the testing. We hold parent meetings and go to IEP meetings. Sometimes, if there are not enough subs, we might even get asked to cover a class. Or if it’s been a rowdy day with a lot of fighting and stuff, we might be asked to do hall duty or lunch duty to provide some extra presence around the kids. We basically do whatever the principals ask us. We do whatever the kids need. Sometimes I feel like a parent to some of them. I think sometimes, you know, the perception is that we are glorified secretaries with an occasional tissue in our office and you know, it's not the case. That needs to be improved. I've tried to do that from a professional standpoint. I just was on our accreditation process for the last two years. I was on the steering committee and I chaired a committee and I'm also chairing the small learning committee that was just appointed last week or a couple of weeks ago for our high school and that will happen over the next five years. God only knows where I find the time…but I do that because I think that it's important that the community and the staff...I think it's important that we get out there and show that we can have an impact. I think it is helping. I know from my own personal standpoint, it's really helped me. But it’s important to do too.
KRISTIE: How much influence do you have on your students’ plans for post-secondary education?
HEATHER: I think the counselors are probably the biggest person in their life that has any experience with this. Sometimes I think I have too much influence, in
fact. I have to keep reminding them that these are financial decisions that you are making for them.

KRISTIE: You seem very aware of the financial obligation of college. Tell me about that as it relates to your students.

HEATHER: We have a number of students who are not U.S. citizens and college can be a huge thing for them financially. If they don't have the proper documentation they cannot apply for financial aid. And sometimes you run into this...clearly the only time you are going to ask or discuss that, I don't ask for it, is when we go into the FAFSA discussions and that sometimes is shared with us at that point. And then you ask what you think is appropriate, and they don't know if they should tell you and it's, it's hard. Yeah. We had one young lady without her papers and I had no idea, she'd been here since kindergarten, so it never even dawned on me.

KRISTIE: What do you do when that happens?

HEATHER: Usually I try to get them to consider two year college first because it's less expensive. Try to get them to get those requirements out of the way and then transfer to the four year school to finish. Then they don't have to take out so many loans. If the student has language barriers or has just recently come to this country, two year college is a great option for them because it really helps make that transition. Two year schools, at least the ones in this area, are really nurturing.

KRISTIE: How adequately prepared are you to assist your students with college planning?

HEATHER: Oh jeez. How prepared can anyone be? You don't get any formal training in school and you have to learn on the job. So your preparedness is only as good as the counselors who came before you. But thank God for them because otherwise you'd know nothing. I think I know a lot about college and how to get there but my knowledge presumes some basic knowledge on the kids’ part. But every kid is different and so you never know what they know and don’t know. Just when you think you have it figured out, someone throws you a curveball. Is it different in suburban schools? I don't know because I've never been there but I bet it is. I bet those kids know more because they have seen people in their families and communities go to college and they kind of learn some stuff by osmosis or exposure or something.

KRISTIE: How prepared do you believe are you to assist your students to succeed in college?
HEATHER: About the same. I think we’re just so happy to see them graduate that we don’t necessarily think far beyond that. And believe me when you see these parents at graduation they are so thrilled to pieces. And it all gives once they are graduating. For those that are hanging by the skin of their teeth to get to graduation day and for the top of the ones too, it is the best reward. Seeing the parents thrilled...there's nothing like it. Or if they get into college, we’re so thrilled, I don’t think we think about the retention piece. Our valedictorian, who is a student of mine, got into Brown University. It was such a big deal and it is a big deal. Oh my God! It feels incredible and I’m so thrilled for Brown because they had their eyes wide open. They really got a gem. They really did. You know she might not meet everything that the traditional Brown student would meet but boy she’ll exceed their expectations. I called everybody because I think it’s a testament to everybody. I think it’s a testament to the whole department.

KRISTIE: It sounds like an event like that validates your work.

HEATHER: One thing could carry you. Everybody was on such a high, you know, and that’s such a cool thing...because we don’t get it very often. So it is strange that a suburban counselor might see that we do this. See that we cherish and treasure this acceptance, but that they may think oh, you know, no big deal.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence with students?

HEATHER: I think we don’t have enough time with students. It’s hard to get to them because we don’t have study halls and we have to take them out of class. I think there’s a perception that what we do with kids isn’t as important as what teachers do in the classrooms. So it’s just hard to get to the kids.

KRISTIE: Is there anything else you’d like to share with me today?

HEATHER: I just think what you’re doing is so good. I think it will help people see that we need help in a lot of areas so I’m glad I could be a part of this.

KRISTIE: Thank you. I appreciate your willingness to participate.
KRISTIE: Did you get the summary of findings?

HEATHER: Yes, I did. I made some notes on it so I would remember what I wanted to talk about today.

KRISTIE: Was there anything in the summary of findings that seemed “way off?”

HEATHER: I’m still floored by people who are still calling themselves “guidance counselors.” My degree is as a school counselor, so it drives me crazy. Because I'm the school counselor who provides the academic component and the social component, you know…we comply to social work services…But I just think that term is so old and it's just, and it's not meaningful to the role of school counselor. I think it means an eighty-five year old, grey-haired, bunnaed woman behind the desk, so I always sign my things “school counselor.” I was just surprised to see that term.

KRISTIE: Yes. I know. I have tried to be sure not to use the term “guidance counselor.” But, when it came to the interviews, I had to stay true to the language of the key informants I interviewed. There are still a lot of “guidance counselors” out there. Other than that, were there parts of the summary about which you feel particularly strong?

HEATHER: The piece about evaluation. Our school is like the others I guess. The evaluation tool is teacher driven but they kind of adapt it to the counselors. They were supposed to do a formal one but we have never seen it. I think it’s really unfair to use the teacher evaluation for us. It doesn’t relate to anything we do.

KRISTIE: Anything else?

HEATHER: The student issues piece. I think that’s the biggest difference between urban and suburban areas. People like to say that things like drugs and gangs happen everywhere but it’s just not true. Our kids bring so much more to school with them and have so many more non-academic distractions.

KRISTIE: What is the important story here that you would like to tell?

HEATHER: I guess that is the important story. The issues the kids have that keep them from believing they can go to college. Or kids that want to go and believe they can go but don’t have the tools to get there, like language even. Remember too that I have students and I can't speak to them because I don't speak Spanish. I always have someone I can rely on to translate for me. Sometimes it's a student...we did have a wonderful family resource aid who has just moved, but I
can always get somebody in to translate and Bosnian as well. We have one faculty member who speaks Bosnian. So it's a challenge, but I understand a lot more Spanish, but I can't speak it. It's frustrating; I really need to go take a conversational Spanish class. Things like that don’t happen in the suburbs. And if they do, they have to resources to reduce the impact.

KRISTIE: What keeps you at this job?

HEATHER: I think there are some people that are just cut out for this place, this urban setting. I think I am one of them. I don’t want to work in the suburbs and I don’t think I’d be comfortable there. I love the challenges here and the diversity. When a student experiences success here it can be life-changing and I love thinking that I might be able to encourage that or help with it.

KRISTIE: Why is it important for you to do this job?

HEATHER: The kids need us. I think your research should show that. They rely on us much more than suburban kids rely on their counselors. Our kids don’t have many people in their lives who have gone to college or who can help them through the process. They need us here. Who else do they have? There are a fortunate few who have parents or siblings who help and a few more who manage to muddle through on their own but the majority need someone to help. Both to encourage and support them and then also to figure out the mechanics of how to apply and everything that goes with that.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you professionally?

HEATHER: Maybe it’ll shed some light on our challenges. The PC thing in education right now is to try to ensure equity and access. Maybe this can help show how our challenges prevent us from doing that and we can get some assistance. Maybe colleges will see this as an opportunity to get more involved with us and establish some pipeline programs or maybe administrators will see why we need to have more appropriate professional development. That’s what I hope this research can contribute to.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you personally?

HEATHER: Much the same as what they mean to me professionally. I would love to be able to do more for the students I work with but it’s hard to do right now. Things get in the way in the urban setting. Things are slow to change. If research like this could help remove barriers then that would improve things both professionally and personally.

KRISTIE: Do you see or feel a distinction between these two lives?
HEATHER: I conduct myself the same in my personal life as I do here in my professional life and many of the roles I take on in my personal life, such as peacekeeper, are the same in my professional life. So, no, I don’t see much of a distinction. Much of who I am is what I do.

KRISTIE: How did you feel about this interview process?

HEATHER: I enjoyed it a lot more than I expected to. I get so caught up in the day-to-day tasks that I forget how important it is to talk about your work. I think that was also somewhere in the findings - the support of colleagues being important and nurturing. And somewhere I read about how reflection is a type of professional development. I think that’s true because participating in this has really got me thinking about my practice and what more I could be doing, particularly in the area of advocacy for the profession.

KRISTIE: What do you mean by that?

HEATHER: Well, we all feel like we are so busy and we couldn’t possibly fit one more thing into the day. But I was able to fit these interviews in and that didn’t terribly disrupt me day. So, couldn’t I do something else beneficial once a month for an hour? Something that would benefit me professionally? Even if it’s just sit and read an article about college admissions. I think it would help me with my work and also help me feel like a responsible professional.

KRISTIE: I think you’ve got a good point and I hope you will follow through with those plans.
KRISTIE: How long have you been a school counselor?

JUDY: Twenty-six years.

KRISTIE: Wow! That’s impressive. Are you close to retirement?

JUDY: I could have retired two years ago with the minimum years but I want to go on to the next step to increase my retirement. And, I’m just not ready to go. I’ll definitely stay for three more years.

KRISTIE: How did you begin your professional career?

JUDY: I was a teacher for six years. I was a business teacher. I taught electives like Business Management and Keyboarding.

KRISTIE: Why did you decide to become a school counselor?

JUDY: When you only teach electives, you worry every year about your job, especially as a business teacher. So I really liked teaching but I wanted a more secure job. I liked working with kids but I didn’t want to be a math or science teacher so I did the Master’s degree for counseling.

KRISTIE: Why did you choose to teach business?

JUDY: First I was going to be a secretary. I started at the two year college and had a professor who encouraged me to transfer to the four year college and get a business degree. So, I did. I was a business major and near the end of my program I decided that I didn’t really want to work in a business setting. It was too formal for my liking. And I worried about being a woman in the field. I didn’t know what I wanted to do so I just went for it. Then when I started to do internships and those kind of experiences and figured out that I didn’t care for it. But I liked learning about the concepts. So I finished the business degree and tacked on a year and a half to get certified to teach. And my parents were thrilled. They were really nervous about me going into such a male dominated field. They were very excited that I finally chose something more traditional for a female.

KRISTIE: Did you teach at this school?

JUDY: No. I taught in a private Catholic school. When I first came here people said to me, “You’ve got be crazy wanting to go to that school.” Everybody’s eyeballs were bugging out at me. There are so many problems and all this other stuff. My thought was, “I’m helping students.” I don’t care what everybody else is doing. And that is my mode of operation. I just feel that I'm here to help them and to help parents and to help teachers.
KRISTIE: So, it was a good move for you?

JUDY: Yes, I just love it here and these kids deserve someone who really wants to be here, not just someone who needs a job.

KRISTIE: What is the structure of the guidance department here?

JUDY: There are six counselors. What else do you want to know? About our caseloads?

KRISTIE: Yes, how many students are you each responsible for? How are your caseloads determined?

JUDY: Well, we split the kids up alphabetically. So we keep them for all the years they are here. And we have probably about 325 to 350 each. Our department chair has fewer. I think she has less than 200 kids.

KRISTIE: Who supervises the counselors?

JUDY: The principal. Or do you mean at the administration building?

KRISTIE: That too. Tell me about the structure there.

JUDY: Well there is a Director of Guidance and all the building level department chairs work with her. And I think she falls under the Deputy Superintendent for Curriculum. The Director of Guidance – she’s the one who sent your letter out.

KRISTIE: Did it come directly to you from her?

JUDY: No. Our department chair brought it to one of our meetings.

KRISTIE: Are all of the counselors here in this one office?

JUDY: Yes. We’re all right here and we have the one secretary. This is a good location because we’re right here in the center of the building and it makes it easy for kids to just run in between classes.

KRISTIE: What percentage of your graduates go on to college?

JUDY: It’s around 80 percent.

KRISTIE: Do you break that down into two-year and four-year colleges?

JUDY: Yes. It’s about even, half and half. A little more to the two year
and a small percentage, like five percent, to technical or trade schools. We always have about ten percent who go to the military.

KRISTIE: How is college planning carried out in your school?

JUDY: We work a lot with the kids in honors classes. Not every school in our district offers honors classes but we do. So we work a lot with those kids to make sure they’re planning to go on after high school.

KRISTIE: What do you do with them?

JUDY: Well, we make sure they take the AP tests for the appropriate classes. We call each of them in our offices in the junior year to sign up for the ACT. We schedule an appointment for them to meet with the financial aid counselor. We work pretty individually with them.

KRISTIE: You mentioned a financial aid counselor. Who is that?

JUDY: Each high school in our district gets a representative from the River City Scholarship Program. She comes once a week to work with the kids on filling out the FAFSA and applying for loans and scholarships.

KRISTIE: OK. I’m familiar with that service. You seem to spend a lot of time with the honors students. What about the rest of your caseload?

JUDY: We do general presentations periodically where we bring a large group of kids into the auditorium and talk about college. It’s basically an invitation to get them to come in and see their counselor. A lot of kids who aren’t in honors are usually in some kind of remediation program. You know, for reading or math, or maybe English is their second language. So we work with them mostly on getting to the two year college where they can improve their skills.

KRISTIE: So, would you say you meet with every student?

JUDY: I think that’s the goal but I don’t know if any of us ever get there. Attendance is a problem. If the kid won’t even come to school, I can’t talk to him about going to college. When I do get to talk to him, it’s about how to get here and function in this setting first.

KRISTIE: What is your role in college planning?

JUDY: I really have to educate kids about their options. I think they just don’t have enough information because they also have no concept of what it is all about and, really, it is a difficult situation because we at least want them to know
what their opportunities are. They don’t even know what’s available to them. If I can at least help them understand that, then I’ve made great strides.

KRISTIE: How much of your time is spent doing college planning?

JUDY: I’ve never tried to quantify it. I probably talk to at least one kid everyday about college.

KRISTIE: What other responsibilities do you have as a school counselor separate from college planning?

JUDY: I feel like as I said before, that I’m putting out fires and doing paperwork. Then, relationship, compassion, and helping are absent…When students come, it’s like having little Chihuahuas biting at your heels, because they feel they are bothering you because you’re in the middle of all this work, but yet you really want to give them attention because what they have to say has value.

KRISTIE: What kinds of work are you doing that they feel like they are interrupting?

JUDY: I might be doing credit checks or writing letters of recommendation. And then when we have the graduation test, I’m not even in the office and they can’t find me. I’m not accessible during that time. Then, between classes, the principal wants us to go out in the hallway. You know, just to be a presence. He wants all the teachers to do this. But, that’s when it’s good for kids to pop in and ask questions or pick up forms or something. So we struggle to get him to see that we have to stay in the office.

KRISTIE: Is there anyone else in the school responsible for college planning with students?

JUDY: Well, we do have the financial aid counselor. She helps a lot with the money aspect but the guidance counselors do the rest. Our secretary is great. She’s really good at helping the kids with their ACT registration and proofreading essays. She’s been here a long time so she can answer a lot of simple questions and that helps us out a lot.

KRISTIE: How much influence do you have on your students’ plans for post-secondary education?

JUDY: I think kids kind of know what they want to do before they ever talk to me. Sometimes though they won’t bring it up until I ask if they want to go to college. So I don’t know if that’s an influence or not, or if it’s just letting them know that I want it for them too. They need that reassurance. I guess that’s influential. Otherwise they might not act on their thoughts of going to college.
KRISTIE: What factors would you say contribute to your influence?

JUDY: I think I've had some experiences that help me understand where kids are and what they’re likely to need. My son has had learning problems, so especially when boys come in and they're restless and they can't sit down, there's a whole lot that I think I can understand and advocate for them... Also, my sister has had a lot of emotional problems and I see her struggle and I know it could be me but it's her so I think I have a lot of compassion for people who have the kind of struggles she has, and that's not uncommon in this population.

KRISTIE: What things do you think limit your influence?

JUDY: It's very difficult. It's very difficult to get them to apply - a lot of what doesn't happen here is because of their lack of knowledge, not because they wouldn't want to work if they knew there were all these things out there. You know, for instance, you can tell them, you need to get good grades if you want to go on to college, but they have no idea what that is even like, so it's sort of this nebulous goal that they are working towards, which doesn't mean anything, so – it's like, if you can't tell me why I should do it, or show me why I should do it, why should I do it? Then, when it is time to do financial aid and they require parent’s information there are a lot of issues with trust. A lot of parents do not want their tax forms coming into school. So I meet with parents. I’ve met with many parents, but I think sometimes kids rely on me for stuff that I can’t provide. You know, family information and that kind of thing. And it does become like you’re pushing. I had a couple of kids whose parents refused to give them any information. These are kids who really wanted to go to school and you know you can’t get any financial aid without some sort of information. So that takes its toll also. That gets very frustrating. You know, to watch these highly motivated kids kind of floundering around. And you still get an awful, I think we get a lot of kids, I don't know if the other counselors say this, who say this, “I don't want to go to college.” So then it is our challenge to really talk them out of that, to explain how important it is. “You have to go to college. You certainly have to go to something after high school.”

KRISTIE: How adequately prepared are you to assist your students with college planning?

JUDY: It depends on what the student needs. I know a lot about our local colleges and what their process is and what kind of programs and majors they offer. But, when I get a kid who wants to go out of state, or wants to pursue a really obscure major, then I’m at a loss. I try to do the research to figure out some things to suggest but I don’t always have a lot of time to do that. So I worry that I’m shortchanging the kid and maybe I didn’t find all of the possibilities for them.
KRISTIE: To what degree do you think you influence your students’ chances for succeeding in college?

JUDY: I don’t know about that one. I don’t keep in touch with many students after they leave here. I know that our kids struggle, especially at a four year university and even more so if they live on campus. They just don’t expect the culture shock. They are mostly poor black kids and off they go to a white middle to upper middle class environment and they don’t know how to maneuver through it. They don’t know how to ask for help and they don’t trust anyone. It’s scary. And they come home. So many come home.

KRISTIE: You seemed uncertain about your ability to influence college retention. Do you feel that there are things that limit your influence?

JUDY: Obviously it’s time with the kids. We are lucky to get to the application process. I don’t have time to talk about all of the things they need to know. Other kids, you know, like private school kids, they’ve been learning this stuff all their lives just by being a part of their communities and their culture. I got a few years with these kids and they’ve got so much to overcome. I take them as far as I can.

KRISTIE: How prepared do you believe are you to assist your students to succeed in college?

JUDY: As a middle class, middle aged, white woman, I probably am not very well prepared to assist them. How do I know what they know and don’t know? They don’t know what they don’t know so they can’t tell me. I wish the colleges could tell me what they see when our kids get there. That might help me know how to better prepare them. Right now though, I don’t have that information.

KRISTIE: How or where did you acquire your knowledge about college access and retention?

JUDY: I don’t think I’ve ever had any formal training in that area. I got my guidance degree so long ago. We did a lot of career development stuff then but nothing specifically about college. And that would be completely out of date now anyway. I guess I just learned as I did it.

KRISTIE: How would you describe your graduate training in school counseling?

JUDY: At the time, it was probably appropriate. Thirty years ago, not
everybody was expected to go to college. So we helped kids figure out what job to
go into. Here we had a lot of trades and auto industry and steel mills. The training
was spot on for the needs of the population at the time.

KIRSTIE: Do you participate in professional development about college
access and retention?

JUDY: I try to go to some of the things offered by the local colleges.
Where you get to go to a breakfast or lunch and meet with the admissions reps.
But it's hard to go. The principal, I think, likes to have people in the building. I'm
taking a personal day this Friday, and I had submitted that the first day of school,
because I'm going to [nearby private university]...but you feel so...I have not
heard anything, whether I will get that day or not. They haven't sent back the
paper to me. So it gives you a double message.

KIRSTIE: But that was months ago that you submitted the request.

JUDY: Yeah, exactly. See what I mean?

KIRSTIE: And, you have to take a personal day?

JUDY: It's just easier that way. They rarely approve professional leave.
Like I said, he likes to have people in the building. When a counselor is out, you
don't get a sub so you lose a body. So you have that barrier that your boss doesn't
want you to go and then I feel bad about going too. I don't know if it's imposed by
myself or not - do you know what I'm saying. It's hard to separate that out because
your own personal code of ethics behavior, whatever - I don't know. It's just
hard...like I said, I just want an hour, just until 9:30...I'd be back here by 10:00,
but you just know that so many people are going to be around looking for me that
it's hard to take...You've just been so good. I never miss a day. You just feel so
good, but it's only 9:30 and it's in town, but - and also the expectations are that
you're here.

KIRSTIE: What about professional development in the school district?

JUDY: Our professional development is usually a complete and total
waste. And it is not intensive enough and it is not directly related to our needs.
And they just get speakers in depending on who comes to the administrators’
notice, who is offering their services. Some things get recycled, like the Job Corps
program, that's very important, and that's done on a yearly or every other year
basis, and that's very important. But not enough is done that's valuable.

KIRSTIE: Judy, I really appreciate your taking the time to meet me. I admire
your dedication to our profession.
JUDY: Oh, thanks. I really do love it. I really hope your project helps to make a difference. Good luck with it.

KRISTIE: Thank you.
KRISTIE: Was there anything in the summary of findings that seemed “way off?”

JUDY: No, not really. Everything made sense to me.

KRISTIE: Were there parts of the summary about which you feel particularly strong?

JUDY: There was a part about relationships with the colleges. Last year I went to [local] College…they told us that in the future starting next September the students were going to have to have four years of math – high school math. In the past I haven't said too much about that. But I was able to give the math department that information. So, they also said that they liked students if they had had pre-calc or calculus …So, I need to get the word out that the standards are raising. There is a committee right now looking at the high school requirements in the school district and in the state, so that requirements may actually be bumped up a notch. I think that shows how important it is to stay connected to the university community. That could have been a huge problem for our kids and we rely on [local] College because a lot of our kids go there.

KRISTIE: Anything else?

JUDY: Also the part about data and using it in our work. That’s what the administration wants us to do but it’s difficult. Well because you know, when you do collect data and try to prove that it was your input it’s very tangible. It’s not really like I can say fifty percent of our graduating class went somewhere, compared to thirty eight percent because we had senior plans and we met with them, because I really don’t know if that’s the case. And what we do is so intangible.

KRISTIE: I think the other key informants would echo that.

JUDY: And then, I have the findings here and I’m looking at my notes. Oh, of course, the caseload issue, they’re just too large and unmanageable. I talked to the union person. I said, “I’m really a low maintenance person, I like working with people and I get a long with people and all that…but you need to know that this caseload is impossible and it's unfair,” and then he sent a letter to all the members saying do you want us to negotiate something next year and let me know. I haven’t heard anything yet.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you?

JUDY: I think, for me, it mostly helped to hear that others experience the same challenges. It’s not just me or something I’m doing wrong or that I’m
inadequate in some way. It really might have something to do with the setting in which we work and maybe there’s something that can be done about it.

KRISTIE: What is the important story here that you would like to tell?

JUDY: The most important story is not the one about counselors. It’s the story about the impact these challenges have on the kids who live in urban areas. Ultimately if the counselors aren’t equipped to do the job, it’s the kids who will suffer. That’s the most important part of this.

KRISTIE: What keeps you at this job?

JUDY: I want to make a difference. I feel like I can do that here.

KRISTIE: Why is it important for you to do this job?

JUDY: I am a spiritual person and I feel there is value in a community and that we all really need to help each other. Some of us have more strengths than others, some of us need more help at certain times than others, but we all should be able to do something, and I think I have that compassion to give to students. I think I can help these students because of my beliefs.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you professionally?

JUDY: I think there are so many other priorities right now that guidance is the least. Here I don't know that it is valued that much. Because number one we would have more counselors I think. I think there would have been more - I know at [another school] there are more counselors and two social workers - we don't have that. I hope this research will help to give a voice to this. And, a collective voice at that. I think individual administrations hear their counselors voice these concerns and they think it’s just whining and complaining. What you’re doing is helping us to say, “It’s not just us here in this school but it’s a lot of places. And, guess what? They are all in places that look very similar.” So maybe the problem isn’t lazy or ill-trained counselors, maybe the problems are more systemic in nature.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you personally?

JUDY: Part of it made me pleased that I am not alone. But then when I thought more about it and it made me sad that so many kids struggle. There are so many urban areas like our and kids who live in really rural areas have many of the same issues. All those kids being underserved and not much being done about it. Hopefully your work will contribute to the advocacy necessary to make some changes.
KRISTIE: Do you see or feel a distinction between your professional and personal lives?

JUDY: I try to maintain a distinction. I try not to take work home with me. By that I don’t just mean literally taking work, like paperwork and applications, home with me. I mean trying to separate the emotional stuff too. It’s hard though. I find I think about the kids and talk about them when I’m at home with my family on the weekend. I socialize with my colleagues. Some of my parents have my cell phone number. So, try as you might, the job stays with you. I guess some people are able to separate the two but I don’t do a very good job at it.

KRISTIE: How did you feel about this interview process?

JUDY: I felt it was almost cathartic. No one ever asks about my job and how I feel about it. You know, it’s good to vent and get stuff out. I didn’t realize that I had a lot of stress about my work. I am really concerned about whether or not I’m doing right by these kids but it was hard to admit that. This setting was a safe place to admit the worry and then hear that others were also worried about the same things. So this was really good for me and I hope that it was also productive for you and your project as well.

KRISTIE: It was extremely successful for me both as a counselor and also as a researcher. Thank you for participating.
KRISTIE: How long have you been a school counselor?

KAREN: Eight years.

KRISTIE: How did you begin your professional career?

KAREN: My undergraduate degree is in communications but my master’s is in counseling. I never worked in the communications field. When I was graduating, I decided that I didn’t really want to do that. So I went to grad school and became a school counselor.

KRISTIE: You are the lead counselor at Cook High School?

KAREN: Yes. I am.

KRISTIE: What does that mean?

KAREN: It basically means I am the department chairperson. I keep things moving. I’m that link between the principals and us.

KRISTIE: How many counselors work in the school?

KAREN: There are five others. So six altogether.

KRISTIE: How many students are you responsible for?

KAREN: Personally, I have about 100 but the others have between 300 and 350 at any given time.

KRISTIE: You have a reduced load because of your lead counselor position?

KAREN: That’s right.

KRISTIE: What percentage of your graduates go on to college?

KAREN: About 80% of our graduates go on to college which doesn’t sound too bad. The bad thing is that we only have about a 60% graduation rate. Those who do graduate and go to college mostly go to two year colleges. I’d like to hope that they transfer and go on to four year college but we don’t keep track of that.

KRISTIE: Would that kind of information be helpful to you?

KAREN: Absolutely! We could really use that.

KRISTIE: How would you use it?
KAREN: We could use it to better prepare kids. If I knew our grads were likely to go to two years and then transfer, I could talk more about that experience and what needs to happen. Unfortunately, many of our kids who go to two years wait until the summer after graduation to apply so I don’t get to talk to them after they make that decision. It’s like all of a sudden they’ve graduated and it’s like, “Oh my God! What do I do now?” And they hurry up and enroll at the community college so their parents won’t put them out of the house or make them get a job.

KRISTIE: How is college planning carried out in your school?

KAREN: We do a ninth grade orientation program where we will talk to students about the classes they carry, the importance of doing well, and we cover study skills too. And then we talk to them about what is needed for promotion, and for continuation of their four-year course sequence.

KRISTIE: So that gets the ideas planted early. What do you do after ninth grade?

KAREN: What I try to do is ensure all my students have a plan. My main purpose is that they are not going to leave here without a plan in place. I don't care as much what that plan is, whether it is go to work somewhere, go to college, but at least they have a plan, and that's my main goal.

KRISTIE: So how do you implement that?

KAREN: I try to get each student into my office once a year to define the plan and check their progress toward it.

KRISTIE: And part of doing that involves planning for college?

KAREN: If that’s part of the plan. Some students just want to get through high school. Very few are thinking about college initially.

KRISTIE: Do you try to direct them toward that option?

KAREN: I make sure I discuss it with everyone. I want them all to take the appropriate courses to be ready for college and, if they decide not to go, then that’s their choice. At least they won’t be shut out because they didn’t get the right classes. Sometimes I’m the first person who has talked to them about going to college.

KRISTIE: So what is your role in college planning?
KAREN: For many students, I do everything. They don’t have anyone else
to guide them. They might not know anyone who has ever gone to college. They
might not have support from their families. So, I have to tell them what to do for
every step.

KRISTIE: How much of your time is spent doing college planning?

KAREN: I hope that every conversation I have with a student is somehow an
indirect step in college planning. Formally, I would probably say about an hour a
day is dedicated specifically to some work on college.

KRISTIE: What other responsibilities do you have as a school counselor
separate from college planning?

KAREN: We do a lot of logging. We document how many home visits we
do, how many students we see in the course of a month. We log our time because
you have to know what you are doing. It’s like gathering data to prove that you
work. Gathering data for what we do is so hard because what we do is so
intangible. We just implemented a results-based guidance program this past year.
It is a results-based developmental guidance program where you, as a department,
decide on two or three goals, and then you pretty much write all your activities to
accomplish those goals. So that it is results-based. So, you can say, at the end of
the year, did we accomplish our goals, and what were the results of those
activities towards accomplishing those goals? So, it's a good…it's a very
accountable way to find out if the activities that you are doing are actually
accomplishing the goals that you wanted to accomplish for the student's goals. We
broke it down into functions; attendance, scheduling and counseling.

KRISTIE: So what are the goals for this year?

KAREN: There’s one for each of those areas I mentioned. For attendance,
we are trying to reduce the absentee from 18% last year to 15% this year. For
counseling, we are trying to meet once each semester with each student. For
scheduling, we are committed to scheduling each student for not only graduation
requirements but also college entrance requirements.

KRISTIE: Is there anyone else in the school responsible for college planning
with students?

KAREN: No. There aren’t any specific college counselors here or any other
type of support for college stuff.

KRISTIE: How much influence do you have on your students’ plans for post-
secondary education?
KAREN: I think the counselors here are extremely influential. We might be the only people talking to these kids about really going to college. If we don’t do it, no one will. So we’re very important to them.

KRISTIE: What factors contribute to your influence?

KAREN: I think building relationships is extremely important because of the state regulations that are going to require that every student have a planning portfolio…with the No Child Left Behind, all low funded schools are now going to have more counselors than in the past. But given those expectations on us I think it's going to be important for people to understand what our role is, and if I'm going to be responsible for helping a student do planning for a portfolio I have to be able to spend time with them during the school day and right now there is no time for that.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?

KAREN: Since we can't take them out of the class, we go to homerooms. Our homeroom, used to have a twenty-minute homeroom, and now it is down to ten minutes. Really, after announcements, it's probably four. So, we can't get anything done in homeroom, and that used to be a very good way to see students. Now we have actually talked about going into the lunchroom because that a good place to meet kids. Hmmm…Their low skills…Absolutely, I think they are limited where they go and who will take them because of their skills. Although, [local college] just started this College Readiness program that starts in September and goes until December, and then kids could probably enroll in January after they have built up their skills. So, that's all the students who did not necessarily meet the academic requirements…they go in September and that's good, and that helps, and that gives them structure and support.

KRISTIE: How adequately prepared are you to assist your students with college planning?

KAREN: I’m as well prepared as any other counselor I think. As far as I know, no one gets training on how to do college planning. I think maybe I’m not as experienced or as connected as maybe suburban counselors are because they probably have more students who go to college each year. They probably get to go to more workshops too. Their districts are more likely to have money to send them to visit colleges and go to the College Board workshops.

KRISTIE: To what degree do you think you influence your students’ chances for succeeding in college?

KAREN: I don’t know. There’s so much they don’t know. You know they don’t have a realistic idea of what to expect and you have to be careful not to
scare them because then they don’t want to go. Or they think you’re somehow
saying that they won’t make it. So you don’t want to send that subtle message.

KRISTIE: So, you’re saying that you do influence them?
KAREN: Yeah, I guess so and you have to be careful to you don’t influence
them in the wrong direction.

KRISTIE: What factors contribute to your influence?
KAREN: Like I said before, I am likely the only person seriously talking to
them about going to college so they’re going to listen to me. Also, they know I’ve
been to college so they trust that I know what it’s like, how to get there, etc.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?
KAREN: I am only one person. There are many other people in the lives of
these kids who are telling them the opposite of what I am telling them. And these
are people who have known them longer and who they live with. That’s a lot to
contend with. Sometimes even their teachers are telling them they should
probably go to the military or to a technical school or just get a job. So I’m
limited because I’m just one voice.

KRISTIE: How prepared do you believe are you to assist your students to
succeed in college?
KAREN: Probably not as prepared as I could be. I don’t always know what
these kids know and don’t know about going to college. I’m not sure always what
to tell them. Just because I’m Black like most of them doesn’t mean that I’ve
experienced all that they have. I was raised knowing I would go to college. I had a
middle class family. My parents were college graduates. There’s stuff I knew just
from those experiences and I took that for granted. I can’t possibly anticipate
everything that these kids need to know but don’t. I hope that if I can get them
there, to college, that there will be someone on that end who will help keep them
there. I know there are good support programs for minority students at most
colleges so I have to trust that they can help.

KRISTIE: How or where did you acquire your knowledge about college
access and retention?
KAREN: Just by doing it. When I came to work as a counselor, I only had
my own experiences applying to college to go on. I think one of the other
counselors sort of mentored me through that first year. Nothing formal, just
someone I could go to if I had questions. But I learned by doing and every year I
learn something new.
KRISTIE: How would you describe your graduate training in school counseling?

KAREN: When I was in it, I thought it was great and I was learning so much. And I did learn a lot about counseling, how to do it, how to move clients along, how to listen and reflect. But I didn't learn how to take that knowledge and apply it in a school. Certainly I never learned about scheduling and college applications. Most of what I do everyday is not counseling but that’s what the grad school program covered.

KRISTIE: Do you participate in professional development about college access and retention?

KAREN: I've been to a couple of College Board presentations. It makes you hopeful when you go there and you come back with ideas and sparkly eyes. Then you face your reality. They weren't talking about my kids. I have so much ground to cover with my kids before I can even talk to them about the stuff I learned at the presentation. They just don’t have the background info and College Board doesn’t get that or doesn’t tell how to give them that. Oh, they are okay. I just -- I suppose if I worked at [area private school], the College Board would be the bible. It would be, what's their next breath? I mean, I…you know, I read their book about the new PSAT's, and I told my kids how to do this better, how to take the questions and do better, but it doesn't matter to me that they are changing the test because my kids don't do good anyway. So…so, you know, some of that information, I just…I don't use it in my daily work.

KRISTIE: What other methods do you employ to get information or training?

KAREN: I think you just learn what you learn because you are constantly searching for the best thing for your student and through that you, you know, I mean, you are always saying to yourself, well, what can I offer them because I want to help them and then you start investigating and working with a social worker to put together a plan…I was at something in the community one night, and was introduced to the two nuns that run a Family Learning Center right around the corner, and they deal with the whole family issue. So I learned about what they offered and them hooked one of my students up with them. That's how it happens, you know? Really. Because you are looking for something and then you hear something that your students could use.

KRISTIE: Is there anything else you would like to share with me today?

KAREN: I don’t think so. Can I email you if I think of something?

KRISTIE: Of course.
KRISTIE: Did you have a chance to look at the summary of findings?

KAREN: I did.

KRISTIE: Was there anything that seemed “way off?”

KAREN: Mmmm...no, nothing at all.

KRISTIE: Were there parts of the summary about which you feel particularly strong?

KAREN: This one, “Administrative decisions reflect a lack of understanding or appreciation for counselor work.” Our principal...I think she values us being there as part of the school, but I don't think we are as important to her as the teachers...I see it as, when it comes to cuts, she would rather cut a counselor...So, if someone has to go...because I think there is some downtime here, and they see you in that downtime. They don't see you swamped. And, here, this other one, “School/District structures and policies have the potential to hinder or help you in the college planning process.” One of the big reasons for how school policies hinder us in some cases is because they are developed and implemented without our input. We’re left out of the decision-making completely. So we never get to participate and say, “the reality is when you work with seniors this and this and this is what happens.” And that kind of compounds the effect of a policy.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you?

KAREN: I was really able to connect to the findings and find examples of almost every one of them in my school, even if I didn’t talk about them in the first interview. I find it fascinating that so many different counselors in different schools, even in different states, could have such similar experiences. It really underscores the impact things like class and SES have on the educational experience.

KRISTIE: What is the important story here that you would like to tell?

KAREN: That it’s bigger than just counselors. I read some article the other day in the newspaper that was summarizing a study about kids of color going to college. Part of the headline said something like, “Schools need to do more.” Well, duh! We know that but how and when and with what resources. It’s easy to say we need to do more but how do you make that happen? That’s the important story.

KRISTIE: What keeps you at this job?

KAREN: Well, it’s certainly not the paycheck! [laughing]. When I was
looking for a job, I wasn’t necessarily looking for an urban school. I would have
taken a job anywhere. I’m glad I landed here. It takes a certain kind of person to
work here. You can’t be easily ruffled, you know? You’ve really got to be
tolerant. Did you ever read about the idea of tolerance for ambiguity? There’s
some great stuff out there about school counselors and the need to be tolerant of
ambiguity. I think that’s even more important in this setting because there is so
much unknown. Kids come and go. Life situation changes drastically and quickly.
A counselor here has to be able to think on her feet and not get overwhelmed. I’m
good at that and I think that’s why I get along here okay.

KAREN: These kids are so special. I look in their eyes and I see what they
have to offer. I think so many people look past them or look through them like
they’re invisible. But these kids are creative and street smart. They are business
minded and they have giving hearts. We can’t neglect them. We have to nurture
them and help them to have hope. The one you overlook could have been the one
to change the world. I’m convinced that those kids are here. I think the people that
make the most difference in the world are those who have experienced hardship
and overcome obstacles. That’s why it’s important to work here.

KAREN: If you are going to create a culture and environment that people
understand, that doesn't happen when you sit in your office and wait for it. You
need to get out and show people what we are doing and we need to create this
culture of accountability for ourselves. As a profession, we need to more of that.
Several of the findings commented on various groups of people not understanding
what the counselor does. Well, whose fault is that? We have to tell them. We have
to show them. I think a lot of our challenges could be erased simply by better
communicating with our stakeholders. If we can demonstrate and articulate what
we do and how important it is, then the decision-makers couldn’t ignore us and
they would ally with us to remove the barriers. We have to initiate this work.

KAREN: In the grand scheme of things, improving the prospects for the
future of these kids will improve all of our futures. So on a personal level this
work is good for society and community.

KAREN: Obviously I hope that these findings could help change things for
me at work. I would love to see something happen that would help my kids
specifically. That would be great.
KRISTIE: Do you see or feel a distinction between these two lives?

KAREN: No. I know people say you should leave work at work but I can’t. I don’t. So much of who I am is tied to my work. I know I am completely enmeshed with this place and I’m okay with that! [laughing].

KRISTIE: How did you feel about this interview process?

KAREN: It was nice. I enjoyed talking with you. I didn’t feel like this was clinical or impersonal or anything.
KRISTIE: How long have you been a school counselor?

LINDA: Twelve years.

KRISTIE: How did you begin your professional career?

LINDA: I worked as a counselor in a mental health agency for eight years and then I switched over into the schools.

KRISTIE: Why did you decide to switch?

LINDA: I really liked working with adolescents and I liked the school calendar. In an agency, there was always the question of the budget and the possibility of getting cut. There seemed to be a little more stability in the school setting and a little less stress. A different kind of work.

KRISTIE: I’ve already been told about the academies here. Which academy are you in?

LINDA: I am the counselor in the international academy.

KRISTIE: What is special about the international academy?

LINDA: There is a strong focus on languages. Some of the core subjects are even taught in a different language. The students focus on geography, politics, religion, world events, etc. Many of them want to pursue careers in international business or politics or as an interpreter. Things like that.

KRISTIE: How many students are you responsible for?

LINDA: I have all of the students in the academy. That’s grades ten through twelve and there are about 330.

KRISTIE: What percentage of your graduates go on to college?

LINDA: It’s about ninety percent.

KRISTIE: That’s above average for an urban district. To what do you attribute this school’s success?

LINDA: I think the academies have really had an impact here. Students are very focused on a career plan. They know their teachers are supportive. Everyday they are reminded by their course of study that they are working toward a goal which likely includes college.
KRISTIE: How is college planning carried out in your school?
LINDA: Basically kids let me know if they’re planning to go to college and then I help them with the application and the transcript.
KRISTIE: Do you do anything for all students? Or all seniors?
LINDA: I try to touch base with each student and make sure they have a plan. I usually do that when I do scheduling every year. I keep notes in the file about what kind of career they want and colleges they’re thinking about. I have done class presentations but it always depends on if a teacher will allow me to come in. Teachers also get upset when you take kids out of class to talk to them about…well, about anything. Even when I do scheduling. Sometimes I get mad because if I can’t take them out of class to schedule them then how are you going to have anyone in your class next year? Maybe there is a different angle I can use, if there is a substitute in foreign language, and there isn’t an assignment for them. In the morning, I try to find out if there are any substitutes for that day. Can I pull that student from that? So you have to try to be creative. It’s just hard because teachers see their work with kids as more important than the counselors’.
KRISTIE: It sounds like you don’t spend much time doing college planning.
LINDA: That’s right. I’d like to do more but there are so many barriers and so many other things that kids need from me.
KRISTIE: Like what?
LINDA: You know, they’re failing a class or fighting with a teacher. They’re stressing about stuff at home and work. They just don’t like school and they don’t see why they’re here. Sometimes the last thing on their minds is college. They’re worried about just graduating from high school or where they’re going to sleep tonight or if anyone’s going to be at home.
KRISTIE: What kind of barriers are there?
LINDA: Well, like the teacher thing I already mentioned. Getting kids out of class to talk to them about anything, even college. And, we have so many kids. The caseload is so big and changes so much. Sometimes I just don’t have the time to put together a program or I don’t know where to start because these kids need to know so much.
KRISTIE: Can you explain that a little bit more? About how much they need to know?
LINDA: They don’t know anything about going to college. No one in their families ever went so they don’t have anyone to help them. Sometimes they might have a friend who went to college. But then they only want to go to that college. They don’t know how to do research about colleges. Or what questions to ask or what they need to know about the process. They don’t know how to fill out the forms. They don’t know what the SAT is or how to sign up or what a good score is. And they don’t follow through with anything you give them to do and you don’t have time to go running after every one of them. If the caseload was smaller, I could really handhold each senior though it but now it’s impossible to do everything they need you to do.

KRISTIE: What other responsibilities do you have as a school counselor separate from college planning?

LINDA: Well, kids just show up to talk. You know, they have a problem in a class, or with a teacher. They fight with their parent or they’re depressed. So they just come in or a teacher sends them in. But then we also have meetings and committees. We do scheduling and testing. We meet with kids who have been suspended. And we have to keep track of everything we do. So there’s a lot of logging and tending to data. I sacrifice a lot of the paperwork, and I take it home; not always, but I’ll sacrifice some of the paper work.

KRISTIE: You mean you don’t do the paperwork during the day.

LINDA: Yes, absolutely. If I can’t take them [students] home, then I’ll take it [paperwork] home, or I’ll stay an extra hour. I mean, I’d rather stay an extra hour here and get it done, and leave at 4:30, than to tell a student, “You’re in crisis? See you tomorrow. I don’t have the time.”

KRISTIE: Is there anyone else in the school responsible for college planning with students?

LINDA: No, it’s pretty much seen as the counselor’s job.

KRISTIE: How much influence do you think you have on your students’ plans for post-secondary education?

LINDA: Not much. I think many of these kids have been told all of their lives that they aren’t college material. I only get them for a couple of years. During that time I send so much time focused on other issues with them that we often don’t get to address that topic. When it does come up, it’s really hard to convince them that they can do it. How do you tell a kid that their mother is wrong? She said you couldn’t go to college and I say you can. She’s wrong. How do you do that? How do you tell a kid who doesn’t have lunch money that they
Linda, Interview 1

134   can afford to finance a college education? I honestly don’t think one person – me
135 – can change those deep-seeded beliefs.
136
137   KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?
138
139   LINDA: I have an example. There was a young woman who wanted,
140 obviously, to go to college. She was living with her mom, and then, this was
141 probably a year or two ago, decided she wanted to live with her dad. Her dad was
142 remarried. Mom was very angry at that. So when it came time to fill out the
143 college application, we needed a financial statement from mom. She refused…We
144 had one of the other guidance counselors call, who used to be a college rep at
145 [local community college] and he explained, this is the process…Do you know
146 that woman said “It is her problem.” Would not give the papers to her…But they
147 were able to work around it. And you go home sometimes, very heart broken, to
148 think how can a parent not want the best for their child, and yet they're children
149 themselves...So you're dealing with, a family, you're dealing with everything.

150   KRISTIE: So you fight against the parental influence a lot?
151
152   LINDA: I think a lot of students, even though you tell them they can go to
153 college, they don’t believe you. That’s why I think the college fairs are so
154 important, because it’s almost like they hear what you say, but when it’s coming
155 from somebody from a college, I hear, “Hey Miss, you were right. I really can go
156 to college. So and so told me, from this particular college, that I can do this, this,
157 and this. Hey, Miss, I can go to college.” And I don’t get offended, because I
158 think sometimes they think “Yeah, Miss, you just say that because you just want
159 to make sure we get there.” When the college rep says the same thing, it’s more
160 meaningful.

161   KRISTIE: Do you think it is part of your role to try to influence kids to go to
162 college even though the parents might be telling them otherwise?

163   LINDA: I have the drive and the desire to do as much as I can to help every
164 student that I see, not knowing if they are going to remember my words of
165 wisdom three or four years down the road. But you know if you plant the seed and
166 if they choose to water it, great, and if they don't, well then I did my job. I have to
167 be able to say everyday, I've done the best I can. Am I neurotic about it? No, but I
168 mean you have to make sure you have given them your best shot.

169   KRISTIE: How adequately prepared are you to assist your students with
170 college planning?

171   LINDA: I think it’s like anything else, you have to practice it to be good at
172 it. I could probably use some up-to-date training. I think I know enough for what
173 my kids require of me at this point.
KRISTIE: How or where did you acquire your knowledge about college access and retention?

LINDA: I guess I just learned it from the other counselors or as I encountered something with a particular student. You know, if someone wanted to be a nurse, I would research nursing programs in our area that they might like. Then I had that information for the next time someone asked about nursing.

KRISTIE: How would you describe your graduate training in school counseling?

LINDA: When you’re there doing the courses, you think it’s great and you’re learning all of this new stuff. You get excited to go out and use the techniques. But then you get here and it’s nothing like what you expected, especially in the city. I wish there were at least one or two classes to address the inner-city child, you know, certain agencies. If you're homeless, this is where you go. This is the court process, and this is this process. You have to learn that. You don't really get that. And I think that would be wonderful; about the court system, and truancy, and what we have to do, and how you can motivate a student or empower them.

KRISTIE: Do you participate in professional development about college access and retention?

LINDA: I haven’t. I don’t know where you would find that kind of training. Is there anyone out there doing that kind of thing for city kids? Because if it wasn’t specific to this setting, I wouldn’t want to go. I think it would be a waste of time.

KRISTIE: What other methods do you employ to get information or training?

LINDA: We do a lot of relying on each other, the counselors in this building and, sometimes, in our school district. We email each other a lot and call on the phone. Our department meets once a week and our department chair shares any information or updates she has received. Very rarely is it anything about college but we do get some information about career fairs or apprenticeships, you know, for the trades.

KRISTIE: Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about your job here?

LINDA: I love what I do. This is a vocation and I really enjoy it. I really enjoy coming to school. This is not work for me. It’s my job, it’s my vocation. Do I get tired? Yes. Do I sometimes go, “Oohhh geez, do I really want to go?” Yes. But once you’re here it’s different, the day flies. I don’t run on batteries, I do get
tired, and I get discouraged like everybody else. I really do, but when you sit there
and a student comes in to say hello and they are having a good day, you sit back
and say that’s why I’m here.

KRISTIE: Thank you Linda. I appreciate you’re help.

LINDA: You’re welcome.
KRISTIE: Did you see the summary of findings?

LINDA: Yes, I did.

KRISTIE: Was there anything in the summary of findings that seemed “way off?”

LINDA: No.

KRISTIE: Were there parts of the summary about which you feel particularly strong?

LINDA: The part about difficulty in finding time to see students or not having a systematic way of accessing students when there are no study halls in the schedule. If a student comes and is having a really rough day, and has something very private and they want to share it with me, I’ll keep them. I’ll just decide that there is no way that this student is going to learn English, Math, Science, Social Studies anyway. If mom and dad are getting a divorce, or the fact that there is no food in the house, or the fact that they witnessed something on the street, or there is a fight, or they’re afraid of a fight. Under circumstances like that, the administrator will understand. I mean I’ll deal with the fact if I get in trouble you know, but then I’ll say “I chose to do this because of what was happening” and just trust that she’ll know I made a good decision. And then there were a couple of the findings that talked about how other people in the school don’t know what we do as counselors. I shouldn't have to tell you what I do, but you know what I'm going to be the bigger person, to prove to you that I can be…part of me agrees that we should go into the classroom and part of me says to [lead counselor], you know what, we need to make this a functioning guidance office. See, I'm not into impressing the superintendent or anyone across the street [in the administrative office building]. So I'm not going to look for ways to put up my flag and say hey look at us. My job performance should tell them…because once you put out your flag and say look at me, the focus is off the child and onto me. So if I just do my job and you notice because a kid goes home, somebody says something to the principal, the principal says something to the superintendent, and that's how you get respect, by doing your job.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you?

LINDA: It is good that someone is finally asking us. We are on the front lines, so to speak. We are the ones who work directly with the kids and we see the whole picture, not just the academic or the discipline. We have to put that all together with the family and community systems. Despite that, we are rarely included or asked what is needed. These findings represent to me that maybe we will finally be included in the leadership at our schools.
Linda, Interview 2

KRISTIE: What is the important story here that you would like to tell?

LINDA: I guess what I just said is important. We see the big picture. I don’t think anyone else in the school has that perspective. So, if we don’t have what we need to do our jobs or if the school places barriers in our path, then it is going to have a serious impact on kids.

KRISTIE: What keeps you at this job?

LINDA: Over the years, guidance counselors have gotten such a bad reputation; teachers leaving the classroom, not wanting to do any work, and there have been some who leave and put their feet up on the desk and do virtually nothing. So when somebody comes in, or you say, "I'm a guidance counselor" [They say], “Do you go out and read the newspaper all day?” I don't. And I think in this building, we have all worked hard to revamp the guidance office, to give it a new face, show them what we do, and get students to come back.

KRISTIE: Why is it important for you to do this job?

LINDA: I love this job. And I promised myself that when I graduated from school, if I ever became complacent, or I ever started realizing that I didn't like what I did, or that the students were getting to me to the point where now I was taking out my frustration on them, or that this was not for me, that I would leave. It just wouldn't be fair to them. This is too important. You can impact their lives in a positive or negative way in a split second; just by the way you greet them. This is a vocation. I could not keep up, number one, you can't keep up a lie. You can't. I couldn't do what I did if I didn't believe in what I am doing, and enjoy it. It's just too much energy. Flies have short legs, as my father would always say. So if I'm lying about loving my job, eventually I'm not going to do it, or I'll do it poorly. And then I'll see less of my students, and my desk will be perfect.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you professionally?

LINDA: We've got to start to tell people about the struggles our kids go through. We can't keep overlooking the problem of our kids not having access to higher education and it's more than just knowing how to fill out an application. It's the whole way we educate these kids and the expectations we have of them, or don't have of them, throughout their educations and their lives. I think people in the suburbs don't know or don't care what these kids go through but they're quick to complain or pass judgment on them.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you personally?
LINDA: I come from a Christian background and what I believe is that God created us with a plan, each of us has a plan, it's up to us to find out what that plan is, and attempt to fulfill it as best as we can. That is why I am here. I'm not ashamed to say that I say prayers in the morning and ask God for guidance and strength. And I believe I accomplish a lot because I do pray.

KRISTIE: Do you see or feel a distinction between these two lives?

LINDA: No. We are whole beings and it’s impossible to compartmentalize aspects of our being. My work feeds me soul and my mind and in turn that impacts my home and my family. My family nourishes and supports me and that impacts my work. There’s no way I could separate that.

KRISTIE: How did you feel about this interview process?

LINDA: I was so excited to be asked to participate and I’m really glad I did. This has been refreshing and inspiring.

KRISTIE: Inspiring in what way?

LINDA: It just makes me want to work harder and help these kids even more.
KRISTIE: How long have you been a school counselor?

OLIVIA: This is my seventh year.

KRISTIE: How did you begin your professional career?

OLIVIA: I was a teacher. I always liked working with the underdog. I taught in other school systems and I had the low level kids in History and Spanish. And I kind of liked them because you could see that you were, it may take a long time, but you could see that you were doing something...When I was young, my father would tutor other people and sometimes he charged and sometimes he wouldn't. He was a teacher. So, he was always helping somebody. So I think I got it from that. I never thought of it but I really think I do. I think because I guess through example whatever, you help somebody, somebody will end up helping you along the way sometimes and that's not even why you do it, you just do it.

KRISTIE: What is the structure of the guidance department?

OLIVIA: There are six of us. Right now we divide the student body alphabetically. But that's going to change. What they did at the end of last year, which was kind of crazy, is they decided they were gonna go to small learning communities. They decided that the counselors were gonna rearrange their whole caseload. We wanted to keep all of our kids, but the powers that be didn't want us to...he decided that the counselors should go along with the small learning communities. None of us liked the idea. He said one person, one community, whatever. So he wanted us to rearrange our whole caseload from last year. And we all wanted our seniors... Because I would best know my own seniors. If I gave them to somebody else, it wouldn’t be fair to the seniors; it wouldn’t be fair to the counselor, because they wouldn’t know them. I know my kids, what we’ve been talking about for 4 years, and where to steer them and I know who to talk to. I’m not saying every last kid, but in general. Well, we kept the seniors but that wasn’t easy to get. We really, we practically all ganged up on him. Frankly, I was surprised that he said ok. If you don’t ask us those kinds of things, I don’t understand how you can make those decisions. But, next year it will change and we will go to the small communities.

KRISTIE: How many students are you responsible for?

OLIVIA: Oh, it’s about 350. Maybe a little less. You know it changes nearly everyday with kids leaving and new kids coming in. I’ve never had fewer than about 325.

KRISTIE: What percentage of your graduates go on to college?
OLIVIA: Most of our kids who go to college, go to two year college. I think altogether it’s about eighty percent who go on to either two or four year and a significant number of them are going to the two year.

KRISTIE: How is college planning carried out in your school?

OLIVIA: We try to use the classrooms as much as possible but you have to have a good relationship with the teachers to get them to give up their time. Usually the honors teachers will work with us because they see how important it is. The other teachers though. I don’t think they think the kids can go to college. They see us coming into the classroom as a waste of time. So then it gets hard to get information to those kids. Two or maybe three times a year, the principal will let us do presentations in the auditorium so the teachers can’t say anything about that. The problem there is that the kids don’t always come down. They leave class but they don’t ever find their way to the program. We’ve also got this new advisory period once a week. The seniors don’t have it but the others do. It came along with the small learning communities. We’re talking to the teachers about how we can utilize this time periodically to talk to students about all sorts of guidance issues.

KRISTIE: What is your role in college planning?

OLIVIA: My biggest role is providing information. A lot of students don’t know. They either don’t think they’re smart enough or don’t know how to get into school. We help them a lot with that. We help them with their choices. Sometimes I think we do too much for them during the actual application process. I don't know if it's the schools’ choice or whatever, but it's part of our counseling here at Monroe High School. We do all that. All the postage, all the fee waivers, everything else. We take care of everything, that's the way it's done. I don't know who chose to do it that way. We did the same thing with fee waivers for SATs. They get fee waivers and then we mail their SAT off. I don't see why we should mail the SAT. In that respect, I feel that we aren't teaching the kids responsibility. When you get to college, there's nobody like this, which is not helping them in the long run, in my opinion. I think it's just enabling them...And that's not the way it should be. In that respect we're not doing our students justice, by handing everything to them. I don't mind postage for the college application, cause basically there's a lot of confidential information in there. We don't send things off separately which is good because then, the schools don't get things piecemeal. But when we do everything for them, they don't have to get applications, they don't have to get scholarship information...We tell them how to fill it out. We practically fill it out for them. When they have to do their own essays, when they have to budget their own time in college they have trouble. Then the colleges say students are not prepared for college. Well, no they're not prepared when we're doing everything for them.
KRISTIE: How much of your time is spent doing college planning?

OLIVIA: A part of each day, I guess. It’s hard to put a percentage on it. If I tried to do that, it would be a small percentage overall.

KRISTIE: What other responsibilities do you have as a school counselor separate from college planning?

OLIVIA: I have to make sure the kids are passing the classes that they need. If they're not, I always call home after the first progress report. But that's me. They don't tell me I have to call home. Certain things like that, I feel like I have to do. Scheduling is one big headache. They limit the classes so that our hands are tied. They offer AP English and AP History at the same time. The master schedule, they don’t ask guidance counselors what they think, they just do it. You never hear, for the nine years that I’ve been here we’ve had four different schedulers, how do you think we should do the schedule, what periods do you think we should run? Special classes that should be included. They eliminate classes as they go along and expect counselors to adjust students’ schedules accordingly. For example on Monday we were given a list of kids because all of a sudden the administrators decided they were opening up a new section of a class and all these kids had to be moved. So they give you all these things and it takes away from everything else. They want you to drop everything and do what they want you to do. So, now everything you had planned, too bad. I can't even say to them, “well I'll do three of them today, but I have to get to the rest of them tomorrow.” It doesn't even matter. And the principal is not one for listening.

[There is a knock at the door. Olivia apologizes and steps out for approximately 5 minutes.]

OLIVIA: So even though I planned something, we’re interrupted. I know that sounds crazy, but it’s also why I like it cause there are so many different things going on at the same time. So for me, there’s no problem juggling so many things. For somebody who can’t handle juggling more than two or three things, you’re not gonna make it here. You really aren’t. There’s just too many things going on at the same time…But, I don’t normally shut my door. I didn’t even take lunch usually. I eat as I go along. And that’s how I live. But it’s okay. It’s what I do.

KRISTIE: You were describing the responsibilities you have besides college. Was there anything else you wanted to mention?

OLIVIA: Well, I meet with a lot of students a lot of times, but I meet with them quite frequently on clerk-like things. Their schedules, changing classes, that kind of thing. I do meet very heavily with kids on college counseling, and I don't meet half so much as I would like to with kids on emotional…that are having
emotional difficulties. We used to have, when I first started we used to a lot more of that. But as the other duties increased, that is what got pushed down the drain. We don't have time for that. We don't. No.

KRISTIE: Is there anyone else in the school responsible for college planning with students?

OLIVIA: We have a lady who does financial aid stuff. But mostly it’s just the counselors.

KRISTIE: How much influence do you have on your students’ plans for post-secondary education?

OLIVIA: I think the kids know this is what I’m here for so if you want to go to college, you should talk to your guidance counselor. Their parents can’t help them in most cases so they have to come to me. Usually, if they’ve been here all four years, they know me pretty well and we’ve talked about things and they know I will help them. If they haven’t been here very long though, it’s a little harder because we don’t have that relationship and they don’t know if they should trust me or they don’t know what my role is or how I can help them.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?

OLIVIA: A lot of them come in with not only a chip on their shoulder, but a redwood on their shoulder. I mean some of them just to come to school every day and try to get through the day, and some of the problems that they're leaving behind are just unbelievable, and I give them a lot of credit for persevering and trying to make it through the day. But when you've got problems at home, it's difficult. If you've got a mother who's an alcoholic and a father who's a drug dealer beating the mother up, how do you come into school and really think clearly. You can't think clearly. You can't focus in on what the teacher is talking about. It's really hard. I know how I feel if I have a bad day. Sometimes I can't focus right. And, I don't think the parents are as involved, quite frankly. And we have financial aid nights, we have open houses, we have conference days, we have all kinds of things going on. And out of 1300 kids you get 100 parents at each event. And last year at our financial aid night we had maybe 10 parents out of 250. So either they don't have the time to get involved or they don't want to get involved, I don't know which.

KRISTIE: How adequately prepared are you to assist your students with college planning?

OLIVIA: I think I have the knowledge I need, I just can’t always get the kids to do what needs to be done. Or I can’t get the parents to cooperate. Or I can’t get the teachers to let the kids out of class to come see me. Lots of stuff gets in the
But once I get to the kids and get them working, I think I know what I’m doing.

KRISTIE: To what degree do you think you influence your students’ chances for succeeding in college?

OLIVIA: I think we often just assume that if kids graduate from high school and they get into college that they’re going to be successful. I’d like to think that but I know it’s not true. Many of our kids don’t have a clue what college is going to be like. I don’t know that I influence them very much.

KRISTIE: What things limit your influence?

OLIVIA: Mostly time. I just don’t have time to spend on what college will be like once they get there. And I don’t want to scare them. Some of them are just barely holding on to the belief that they can go to college and if you start to talk about the realities, they get overwhelmed and won’t go. You have to kind of sneak it up on them and pump them up to believe they can do it even though it’s different than where they’re from.

KRISTIE: How or where did you acquire your knowledge about college access and retention?

OLIVIA: I’ve found that we’re teaching and we’re counseling on the job and this taught me a lot more than a bunch of classrooms. Even with Spanish, I studied in Spain and I learned a lot more in Spain in six weeks than I ever learned in the classroom. There is so much to learn because there’s nothing written down. You just have to “osmose it.” You have to get it. It is not easy to learn this stuff. If you don’t feel free to ask, ask, ask, and luckily I always did, then you’re not going to learn things because nobody...it's stuff, you can't read it. You can't buy a book and read it. You have to kind of just suck it up. So I don't know. You get information in different places. And you have to go look for it too. And you have to listen to what's going on. I was at this SAT workshop and somebody was talking at the table about something he does with minority schools, it's a federally funded program and anybody can have access to it. It had nothing to do with the SATs he just happened to be sitting there. I got his card and I had him send me the information. I can't say where I get this information. It depends, I just get it. You just do it.

KRISTIE: How would you describe your graduate training in school counseling?

OLIVIA: Because of the counseling degree that I got, I feel that it more addressed counseling. I took theories of counseling, group processing, all this
stuff which is fine and dandy, but I don't use any of that. Because I can't. I don't have time. There's not time in my schedule to do a group. I'd love to, but there's just no time in my schedule. And I don't recall any of them teaching me anything that has to do with an urban setting. I'm not saying there wasn't some reference. But it wasn't like anything was geared towards urban counseling. If anything, the type of classes I took in my recollection is more general counseling than the guidance counselor here.

OLIVIA: [Local public university] had a wonderful thing last year... where they really talked about how we could get kids in, how we could better service the kids, how we could increase their diversity, because they count on us to provide them with a lot of the students that they want to get in. Just this past Friday at our regular meeting, the admissions person from [local public university] came to talk to us about their admissions policy and the changes in their admissions policy because we were quite ticked off at her last year. We felt that kids that should have been accepted into [university] didn't, and we couldn't quite understand what was going on. Well she came in and explained to a certain extent... standards are going up, and if your kids don't get 930 on the SATs they are not getting into [university], which right away is a whole bunch of our kids. Do you know what our kids’ SATs are? Please. They want 930. That's 400/400 at least...that's high for our kids...for suburbs it is fine, but for here?

OLIVIA: I guess that’s all.

OLIVIA: You’re welcome.
KRISTIE: Was there anything in the summary of findings that seemed “way off?”

OLIVIA: No. It was actually really odd that everything resonated very strongly with me. I kept reading the statements and nodding my head because it was all so true for me.

KRISTIE: Were there parts of the summary about which you feel particularly strong?

OLIVIA: The one thing that I picked up was, and it’s probably true with suburban as well, is that a lot of people don’t have a clue what we’re doing. They have no clue, teachers or administration. I mean even the administrators don’t have a clue. They don’t understand how much you have to do in a day. With scheduling, there is no one thinking about college. They don’t care. They have this ‘everyone go to college’ attitude, but they don’t want to give them the tools to get there. Teachers see us as taking somebody out of their classroom, which, unfortunately, there is no other time to take them if they have a full schedule, no study halls, what else am I going to do? I have to take them sometime. Then, I am the rotten one who is always taking students from their work. What am I supposed to do?

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you?

OLIVIA: I am looking forward to seeing what you’re able to do with your research. I hope you will find an audience that is receptive and is situated so that they are able to make changes that will impact our ability to do our work.

KRISTIE: What is the important story here that you would like to tell?

OLIVIA: Our profession has struggled since its inception to define our role. I’m glad that groups like ASCA are working to do that. I think though as we do it we need to be mindful of the role that setting or environment plays. While our role might contain the same tasks and responsibilities as a suburban counselors do, there are different things that are emphasized. We spend different amounts of time on different things. They get to spend a lot more time working on college stuff because their kids don’t have the social issues that our do. Or maybe they don’t have to spend as much time on college stuff because those kids have college educated parents and siblings who will help them. We have to recognize that the urban setting is different, has different needs, and specific challenges that aren’t present anywhere else.

KRISTIE: What keeps you at this job?
OLIVIA: You either love a place like this or you hate it. I’ve seen the people who hate it. They get a job here as a first year teacher or counselor and they take it because they are afraid they won’t find a job any place else. They go through the motions for a year or two and, as soon as they can, they take a job in the suburbs. They are the staff members that kids complain about. They are the ones who bad mouth kids in the staff room. Then there are those of us who fall in love with this place. There’s something about these kids that sucks me in. They are beautiful and challenging and every one is different. Every day is different. Maybe that’s why I stay here. It’s unpredictable, never boring.

KRISTIE: Why is it important for you to do this job?

OLIVIA: Like I said before, some people can’t work in this environment. I can. I enjoy it. So it’s important that I do this work. I can’t stand the thought of someone coming to work with these kids who doesn’t want to be here but is here because they need the paycheck and can’t find a job elsewhere. They do so much damage. They perpetuate the myths about this place and these kids. So, even if someone offered me a lot of money to go work somewhere else, I don’t think I’d do it, I’m not here so money. This is important work.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you professionally?

OLIVIA: Maybe we can use this work to get the word out about the state of urban schools. We know there’s an access gap and us counselors know we can help close it. But, we can’t do it alone. People keep saying, “Oh, the counselors should do more.” We want to but there are systems in place that make that difficult or impossible.

KRISTIE: What do these findings mean to you personally?

OLIVIA: These kids are my heart. I have a passion for working with them. I am so blessed to have a job that I love to go to everyday. If this work can do something to help just one of them, then it’s worth it. That’s why I agreed to participate. I know what it’s like to work here and I know what I need to do a better job. It’s my responsibility to speak up and share what I know so someone can help.

KRISTIE: Do you see or feel a distinction between these two lives?

OLIVIA: No. Ah...I can’t even explain that. There’s just no distinction.

KRISTIE: How did you feel about this interview process?

OLIVIA: I feel really good about my participation. I feel like I have contributed in a positive way.