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Education-Career Planning and Middle School Counselors

In this article, the authors emphasize a comprehensive and developmental view of education-career planning, with special emphasis on middle schools. Research findings that underscore the need for effective education-career planning are presented, followed by the variables and data that are salient for planning. The article includes a framework for education-career planning systems in middle schools.

The salience of middle school students' educational and career planning is supported by career theory (e.g., Brown & Trusty, 2005; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005), by the ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association, 2003), and by recent longitudinal research (e.g., Adelman, 1999; Trusty, 2004). Effective education-career planning systems in middle schools help students become intentional in their educational and career development. Middle school counselors are instrumental in designing and implementing these systems.

Resources such as career theory identify numerous variables (e.g., self-concept, self-awareness, decision-making styles, educational experiences, temperament, personality, environments) that play into education-career planning. Thus, middle school counselors are likely uncertain regarding which variables are most important. Uncertainty also exists at other educational levels (i.e., elementary school, high school) and in academia. For these reasons, we rely most heavily on the empirical data that show the magnitude of variables' influences on the long-term educational and career development of young people. Longitudinal, national research data (Adelman, 1999; Rosenbaum, 1998; Trusty, 2004; Trusty & Niles, 2003, 2004b) show that the choices middle school students make—and particularly academic choices—have a strong bearing on their educational and career development for decades to come. Particular student behaviors and student environments also have influences.

Because we take a long-term, developmental view of education-career development and planning, we

believe that education-career planning in middle schools is most appropriately viewed in relation to elementary school, high school, and postsecondary education. Thus, our focus is on research data that are longitudinal; and our aim is to provide an education-career planning framework for middle school that is both (a) supported by outcome research and (b) practically useful for middle school counselors and students at this critical developmental juncture.

Our choice of the terminology *education-career planning* is entirely intentional, and it is born out of the longitudinal and comprehensive perspective on career development (see Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; McDaniels & Gysbers, 1992; Stone & Bradley, 1994). That is, we see education-career planning from a life-career perspective, and we see career development—and likewise career planning—as encompassing education, work, and leisure. Thus, the educational and occupational components of planning are intrinsically bonded, and education-career planning includes academic and nonacademic activities within schools and outside schools. For instance, we believe that students' extracurricular activities, hobbies, civic participation, and cultural experiences should be part of education-career planning—and this should receive particular attention from middle school counselors. This longitudinal and comprehensive view of education-career planning is supported by recent longitudinal research (e.g., Adelman, 1999; Trusty, 2004).

THE NEED FOR EFFECTIVE EDUCATION-CAREER PLANNING

Wirt et al. (2002) and Wirt et al. (2004) compiled educational data spanning the past 3 decades; and these data reveal the longitudinal, developmental context for education-career planning. These data show steady and dramatic increases in the percentages of high school students who plan to pursue college degrees and professional occupations. There also have been steady and dramatic increases in the percentages of high school graduates who enter

postsecondary education immediately after high school. In 2000, for example, 66% of female high school graduates and 60% of male graduates entered college immediately after high school.

Data presented by Rasinski, Ingels, Rock, Pollack, and Wu (1993) show school counselors' and teachers' contributions to these trends. Rasinski et al. noted a dramatic increase from 1980 to 1990 in the percentage of students who were advised to attend college after high school. For example, the percentage of Latino students who were advised by school counselors to go to college was 32% in 1980 and 67% in 1990. Increases for other racial-ethnic groups, socioeconomic status (SES) groups, and achievement groups were similarly dramatic.

Longitudinal studies of U.S. young people (Adelman, 1999; Rosenbaum, 1998; Trusty, 2004; Trusty & Niles, 2003, 2004b) reveal that almost half of those who pursue bachelor's or associate's degrees after high school do not attain degrees within 8 to 10 years. This finding is alarming. That is, school counselors and teachers are increasingly advising students to attend college; more and more students are planning to attend college; more and more students are actually attending college after high school; yet, almost half of students are not successful.

This state of affairs begs the question: Why are so many students educationally unsuccessful? Research (Adelman, 1999; Rosenbaum, 1998; Trusty, 2004; Trusty & Niles, 2003, 2004b) consistently points to the answer, namely, that many students are not academically prepared for the postsecondary work they pursue. Although there have been large increases in the percentage of high school graduates attending college, there have been only modest increases in the percentage of students taking the more academically intensive courses in high school (Wirt et al., 2002, 2004). And students' paths to academically intensive courses in high school start in middle school and elementary school.

Thus, it seems that education-career planning is woefully inadequate for a large portion of U.S. students, and all students in all schools need effective planning. If students do not plan and behave in ways consistent with their postsecondary educational goals, or if they have no goals, then the negative consequences fall to students. Rosenbaum (Rosenbaum, 1998, 2001; Rosenbaum & Person, 2003) has researched and written about the *college-for-all* norm in schools. Research (Rosenbaum, 1998; Trusty, 2004; Trusty & Niles, 2003, 2004b) shows that having high postsecondary expectations is not enough. Plans for college require increased effort in middle school and high school. Rosenbaum asserts that when school counselors, teachers, and parents encourage students' high expectations with-

out encouraging increased effort, they promote the idea that school is unimportant to college success. Also, encouraging unwarranted high postsecondary expectations keeps students from examining realistic educational and occupational alternatives, such as apprenticeship programs, certificate programs, or on-the-job training. The solution to these problems is effective education-career planning.

EDUCATION-CAREER PLANNING VARIABLES AND DATA

The Importance of Course-Taking

Longitudinal, national studies (Adelman, 1999; Trusty, 2004; Trusty & Niles, 2003, 2004b) show that the variables that make the most difference in students' success in college are the courses that students take in high school. The courses that make the biggest difference are high school math and science courses. For example, Trusty and Niles (2003) found that when students add any one high school unit in intensive math (i.e., Algebra 2, trigonometry, pre-calculus, calculus), they more than double their likelihood of attaining the bachelor's degree they are pursuing. These are profound and enduring effects, and these influences extend above and beyond the effects of early ability. That is, Trusty and Niles (2003) found these strong effects while controlling for eighth-grade math ability. Also, the strong effects of intensive math and science course-taking are present across various demographic groups, including racial-ethnic groups (i.e., Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, White non-Latinos), genders, and SES groups (Trusty, 2004; Trusty & Deil-Amen, 2005). The major focus of these studies was on bachelor's degree attainment, and one might reasonably assume that the situation differs for associate's degree attainment. Rosenbaum (1998), however, found that effort and achievement in high school influence associate's degree attainment even more strongly than bachelor's degree attainment.

The trajectory toward intensive high school math and science starts in elementary school and crystallizes in middle school. Many (perhaps most) middle schools now offer high school Algebra 1 in the eighth grade. Schools commonly offer pre-algebra (or introductory algebra, elementary algebra) in the seventh grade; and many schools offer accelerated math courses in the sixth grade and earlier. Once students enter a lower or slower math "track" in elementary school or middle school, it is difficult to move to a higher or faster track. Trusty and Niles (2003) noted the severe negative consequences for underachieving students. In one example, a middle school uses prior math achievement as the criterion for placement into math courses or sections. A particular student in this school is capable of excelling

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in math, but her achievement in class does not reflect her ability level. The student is placed in lower-level math courses throughout middle school and the stage is set for her further wasting her talent in high school and beyond. This example highlights the importance of middle school counselor-teacher-parent-student collaboration in education-career planning, a topic that is elaborated subsequently in this article. Math teachers, in particular, can likely correctly identify students who are not achieving to their ability levels.

Tracking practices in schools also affect the *opportunity-to-learn* for students other than underachieving students. If, for example, placement into particular middle school courses is based on aptitude test scores or on students' behavior, then some students are likely systematically discriminated against (denied opportunity). And if tracking affects opportunity-to-learn, then it restricts options available to students and it negatively affects education-career planning.

Although education-career planning is strongly influenced by broader systemic issues in schools, a thorough discussion of school counselor leadership and advocacy roles in promoting opportunity-to-learn for all students is beyond the scope of this article. Thus, we refer the reader to the following resources in this area: Lee, Burkam, Chow-Hoy, Smerdon, and Gevertz (1998) and Lee, Croninger, and Smith (1997) for empirical support of the constrained curriculum hypotheses (all students taking intensive courses); and ASCA (2003), Brown and Trusty (2005), and the National Center for Transforming School Counseling (2005) regarding school counselors' leadership and advocacy toward positive systemic change and opportunity-to-learn for all students.

The Importance of Broad School Engagement

Trusty (2004) developed the Long-Term Educational Development (LTED) model using national longitudinal data. This study showed that students' participation in school-sponsored extracurricular activities had a positive influence on later success in college. The groups for whom this effect was strongest were Latinos and African Americans. Additionally, students' good school attendance (not skipping school or classes) was positively related to college degree completion. Thus, students' behavioral engagement in the broader school environment is productive in their long-term educational and career development. In fact, the LTED model is in many ways a model of engagement/disengagement. When students are engaged academically through taking more intensive courses, and engaged by regularly attending school and participating in school activities, students are likely engaged more in their

postsecondary education and their career development.

Middle school seems to be a crucial developmental point for school engagement. Trusty and Dooley-Dickey (1993) studied fourth-grade through eighth-grade students' valuing of and belonging with school (school affiliation, school engagement). Results revealed that as students progress through the middle school years, they become significantly more disengaged from school. Findings of Trusty and Dooley-Dickey suggest that students' negative school experiences in the elementary school years (e.g., low achievement, being retained) seem to suddenly have a negative effect on school engagement in the middle school years.

Education-career planning is a systematic means for helping all middle school students become engaged in school, both academically and socially. Some students will naturally be engaged in school. Many, however, will need help and encouragement. For all middle school students, education-career planning can be a formal means by which students become intentional in their educational and career development.

The Importance of Planning Being a Collaborative Effort

Collaboration is crucial to education-career planning in middle schools. According to Amatea, Daniels, Bringman, and Vandiver (2004), counselor-teacher-parent-student collaboration in making educational decisions has gained favor as an innovative practice in schools. Such collaboration is called for in the ASCA National Model (2003), and it makes sense that those who hold a stake in students' futures be involved in planning.

In an ideal world, the middle school counselor, teachers, parents, and the student would meet together for each individual student's education-career plan. In most schools, however, this is not practical. Thankfully, effective collaboration can come in multiple forms. For example, an eighth grader comes to the school counselor early in the school year with the desire to drop Algebra 1. The counselor accesses the student's education-career plan filed in the counselor's office, noticing in the plan that the student and parent expect the student to attain at least a bachelor's degree, likely in some area of the health sciences; and Algebra 1 in the eighth grade is indicated in the plan. The counselor tactfully reminds the student that the parent will need to approve any change in the plan. The counselor meets briefly with the seventh-grade math teacher who informs the counselor that the student is capable and adequately prepared for Algebra 1. The counselor e-mails the parent and informs the parent of the situation. The next day, the school

counselor follows up with the student, who informs the counselor that the parent made it clear how the current math placement and education-career plan are consistent with educational and career goals.

With regard to parent-child interactions in the area of career development, research evidence (e.g., Kotrlik & Harrison, 1989; Peterson, Stivers, & Peters, 1986; Trusty & Pirtle, 1998) shows that there is no generation gap. That is, children see their parents/guardians as useful resources and they seek their help. For example, Kotrlik and Harrison found that students perceive parents to have more career development influence than teachers, counselors, school administrators, friends, or people working in the field.

Parents can help their children in important ways. Trusty (2004) found two parenting variables that had significant effects on students' postsecondary educational success: (a) the expectations that parents held for their children's postsecondary education, and (b) parents' home-based involvement in their children's education. Home-based involvement is the degree to which parents discuss educational and career-related matters with their children. Thus, parents' engagement makes a long-term difference in the lives of their children. Again, education-career planning is a systematic way to involve parents in their children's educational and career development.

Teachers are also important in education-career planning. The teacher's role is one of key resource professional because teachers have vital knowledge of students' academic and nonacademic behavior. Teachers can enhance the collaborative effort by sharing their knowledge and leadership with parents, counselors, and students. Amatea et al. (2004) believe that in order to be collaborative, educators should *work with*, not *do to* or *do for* students and their families. In their classrooms, teachers are central decision-makers, problem solvers, and experts. In career planning, they often are relieved to find themselves in the resource-person role. Teachers have tremendous power inside the classroom, but with it comes a great deal of vulnerability. Because of their extensive control in the classroom, they often are blamed when students do not progress as expected (Erchul & Martens, 2002). A key factor in establishing collaborative relationships with teachers is to give full recognition to their vulnerability when collaborating with students and parents. If teachers' role can be established as one of supporter with a sound knowledge base rather than as expert and decision-maker, there is a greater likelihood of their guidance being accepted; and teachers will feel less pressure to have the perfect answer (Hazler, 1998).

The Importance of Data in Career Planning

Useful data are needed for middle school students to

make informed decisions and for education-career planning to be effective. From an education-career development perspective, we conceptualize the term *data* very broadly. For example, through collaborative efforts, parents and teachers provide rich and useful planning data; school-wide testing and evaluation processes provide data; products from students' schoolwork are data; data result from well-planned guidance lessons and units; individual counseling sessions often produce useful data for planning; and data come from formal career assessments. Data resulting from both informal assessments (e.g., guidance-based worksheets, collaborations with parents) and formal assessments (e.g., interest inventories, achievement tests) are useful to students' development (Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2005). Trusty and Niles (2004a) noted that assessment data help counselors learn about students' needs, characteristics, and education-career progress; and most importantly, data help students learn about themselves and the career development process.

School counselors can use *education-career portfolios* as a means for collecting and organizing these data (see Trusty & Niles, 2004a). Education-career portfolios include products from classroom guidance activities, samples of academic class-work, results from formal educational and career assessments, and so forth. At first glance, maintaining an education-career portfolio for every student seems burdensome for school counselors, but this is not a difficult or time-consuming task. For example, if data resulting from a guidance activity are to go in students' portfolios, the counselor simply brings the portfolios to the lesson and students insert the product into the portfolio. Portfolios follow students across transitions from grade to grade and from school to school. These education-career portfolios become a main data source for education-career planning.

A useful guide as to what data may be needed to inform education-career planning is the ASCA standards, competencies, and indicators (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). These also are contained in the ASCA National Model (2003). These standards, competencies, and indicators are a broad set of life-career skills for students at all levels (elementary, middle, secondary). Data resulting from the activities and interventions connected to the ASCA standards can be organized via education-career portfolios and then used for developing education-career plans. Middle school counselors and other school counselors can use the framework presented subsequently in this article to help them focus on the most important education-career planning variables (e.g., course-taking, extracurricular activities).

School counselors can use the Developmental Crosswalking Tool contained in the ASCA National

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Model (2003) to appropriately sequence activities and interventions within middle school and among elementary, middle, and high school. Appropriate, developmental sequencing of guidance curricula will require that all school counselors at all levels collaborate to produce a well-articulated set of learning experiences for students. Education-career planning systems should be closely connected to guidance curricula.

In addition to the ASCA National Model, Trusty and Niles (2004a) provided a matrix of the various types of career assessment data (e.g., achievement, self-awareness, decision-making) and the relative priority of these areas at school levels (elementary school, middle school, high school). It is salient that middle school counselors work closely with elementary school counselors and high school counselors to ensure that data are optimally informative for counselors, students, teachers, and parents.

A FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATION-CAREER PLANNING IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

We now present a general framework through which middle school counselors can develop education-career planning systems (products and processes). This framework is presented in Table 1, and it is based on several sources: (a) the outcome research presented previously in this article (e.g., Adelman, 1999; Trusty, 2004); (b) career-planning tasks presented by Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2005); (c) a general education-career planning framework by Brown and Trusty (2005); (d) the career assessment priority matrix presented by Trusty and Niles (2004a); and (e) the ASCA National Model (2003).

School counselors should note that education-career planning products and processes will and should differ markedly across and within middle schools depending on the characteristics of students and their families. For example, students from higher SES families will naturally have more education and career development resources and opportunities than students from lower SES families. Counselors, therefore, should tailor their education-career planning systems to meet the needs of their particular populations of students.

Note in Table 1 that the right column indicates the priority of the data or variables in the

left column. If middle school counselors do not have comprehensive school counseling programs or if they are burdened with noncounseling duties at their schools, they may want to choose those areas of education-career planning that are indicated as essential. The authors assigned the three levels of priority based on empirical evidence. Although all the data/variables listed in Table 1 are important to effective education-career planning, some are essen-

tial for planning in middle school.

From this framework, middle school counselors could develop several products (e.g., forms, templates) for use in their particular schools. For example, counselors would likely want a separate form for courses planned for high school. If the school counseling program in the middle school is currently a comprehensive one, much of the student data may be readily available or forthcoming. The major portion of student data can be developed through guidance lessons and units. Parents could provide data while attending parent-teacher organization meetings, during conferences with teachers or counselors, during parent-nights at the school, or via mail or e-mail. Teachers could provide data via teacher team meetings, through advising processes, or through brief surveys or checklists.

Middle school parents, teachers, counselors, and students would all sign appropriate parts of the plan. Thus, the plan becomes a collaborative agreement, like a contract. Parents, students, teachers, and counselors would all have copies of the student data portion of the education-career plan. Because of the nature of teacher and counselor data, it may or may not be appropriate to share with parents or students. For example, it may not be productive to share teachers' perceived environmental obstacles with parents.

MAKING EDUCATION-CAREER PLANNING WORK FOR STUDENTS

School counselors at all levels often have viewed education-career planning as an activity that is separate from their many other responsibilities. For education-career planning to work for students, it should be an integral, connected part of the school counseling program. Education-career planning not only works better when it is an integral part of the counseling program, it also works smarter. That is, education-career planning is a much easier school counselor task when it is interconnected to various components of the program; and the most important connections are to the guidance curriculum, to academic and career interventions, and to events and programs.

Authors (e.g., Brown & Trusty, 2005; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000) suggest that when counselors are responsible for large numbers of students, classroom guidance is a useful delivery method for helping students in their planning. Even in schools where student-to-counselor ratios are relatively low, guidance lessons and units can contribute greatly to education-career planning systems. In an example, school counselors are planning a guidance unit for sixth graders focusing on setting academic goals (see Indicator A:B2.1 in ASCA, 2003). This unit is

Table 1. Education-Career Planning Framework for Middle School

Data/Variable	Priority
<i>Student Data</i>	
• The student's self-knowledge	*
▪ Strengths, personal resources, ability self-estimates	**
♦ Academic strengths	
♦ Nonacademic strengths	
▪ Obstacles, needs, ability self-estimates	**
♦ Academic obstacles	
♦ Nonacademic obstacles	
▪ Career interests	*
♦ Holland type	
♦ High-interest occupations	
▪ Values	*
• The student's educational and occupational exploration	***
♦ Areas the student explored	
♦ Areas the student desires to explore	
• The student's current long-range career goals (or possible goals)	***
• Education, training, or certification steps required for the student to accomplish current long-range career goals	***
• The student's educational experiences	***
▪ Courses completed, grades	***
▪ Educational experiences outside school	***
• The student's educational plans	***
▪ Courses planned	***
▪ Plans for educational experiences outside school	***
▪ Postsecondary education plans	***
• The student's extracurricular experiences	***
• The student's planned extracurricular experiences	***
• The student's leisure experiences	**
• The student's planned leisure experiences	**
<i>Parent Data</i>	
• Postsecondary educational level the parent expects the child to achieve	**
• School and career areas the parent discusses regularly with child	**
• Occupations for which child has expressed interest	**
• The child's strengths	**
• The child's obstacles	**
• Specific ways the parent can help with the child's education-career planning	***
<i>Teacher/Counselor Data</i>	
• Perceptions of the student's actual achievement (performance in classes) as compared to his or her academic aptitude (potential, ability)	**
• The student's personal strengths	**
• The student's personal obstacles**	**
• Particular resources in the student's environment (family, community, school, peers)	**
• Particular obstacles in the student's environment (family, community, school, peers)	**
• Postsecondary educational expectations for the student	**
* = important for education-career planning.	
** = highly informative for education-career planning.	
*** = essential for education-career planning.	

designed to contribute to the *educational plans* component of the students' education-career plans (see Table 1). In the last lesson in the unit, students complete this portion of the plan in class using materials resulting from the guidance unit and materials in their portfolios (e.g., assessment data, products

from previous guidance units).

Various academic or career interventions can contribute to education-career planning. For example, one academic intervention that is particularly efficacious in improving student achievement is peer tutoring; and gains have been demonstrated both

for students being tutored and for students providing the tutoring (see Brown & Trusty, 2005). Tutors can likely provide rich data on students' academic, career, and personal-social development. These data can be used to inform students' planning.

Education-career planning also can be connected with events and programs. For example, it seems natural to connect planning and guidance lessons to an event such as middle school career day. Actually, most student tasks, activities, and learning experiences have the potential to produce data that can be used in education-career planning.

Education-career planning is easier for school counselors and better for students when it is integrated within the entire school. When teachers, for example, are systematically involved as resource people in students' education-career planning, there are multiple benefits: (a) Communication among teachers, students, counselors, and parents is enhanced; (b) responsibility for planning is shared by all; and (c) all involved have better and richer data for informing planning.

If education-career planning is an integrated, collaborative effort involving teachers, parents, students, and counselors, buy-in and effort will be required of all involved, including administrators. Therefore, school counselors should be careful to lay a solid groundwork before developing and implementing a comprehensive education-career planning system. Also, education-career planning at the middle school should articulate well with planning processes at the high school. Ideally, students get a solid introduction to education-career planning in the elementary school; planning becomes increasingly specific and involved through middle school, resulting in appropriate plans for high school. The plans that students bring to high school become a solid base for yet more involved and specific education-career plans.

If school personnel (e.g., administrators, teachers) do not buy in to collaborative education-career planning, school counselors still can help students develop effective education-career plans, and perhaps parents can be involved in their children's planning efforts. However, planning would be more effective with the collaboration of teachers and administrators, and it might take parents' actions to help these school personnel see the benefits of collaborative efforts. In any school, it is likely that school counselors will need to engage in advocacy to establish and maintain effective education-career planning processes; and advocating for effective education-career planning systems is advocating for all the students, their families, and their school. ■

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