

# School Counselor Involvement and College Degree Attainment: A Quantitative Conundrum

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## ABSTRACT

One of the most salient protectors of individual and family economic growth both is achievement in the area of education. Higher education in particular can serve as a mediator for those who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or other roadblocks to success. In the United States school counselors provide substantial assistance to students regarding academic planning. In this study, data collected from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) reviewed participants ( $N = 12,144$ ) who sought assistance from school counselors in an attempt to identify factors salient to college degree attainment. Data were analyzed using Logistic Regression in an effort to determine whether school counselor involvement resulted in the prediction of successful achievement of postsecondary education. Results were mixed, suggesting the need for further research in this area.

**Keywords:** *Education Attainment, School Counselors, SES, college degree attainment*

## INTRODUCTION

### School counselor involvement and college degree attainment: A quantitative conundrum.

One of the most salient protectors of individual and family economic growth both in the United States and, indeed, the world, is achievement in the area of education, and in particular post-secondary education. (Pong, 1998; Powell & Downey, 1997; Delaney, Harmon, & Redmond, 2011). Discussion going on in the United States at this particular juncture is the notion that higher education can help to mediate the roadblocks people face who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, poor schools, difficult family environments, lack of history of success in school, and those who may not be motivated to achieve in the area of education. While a cultural context is framed within the view of the Western notion of individual achievement by higher education, and measured by educational and economic success, the idea of achievement in whatever form is a universal goal, regardless of the context. Given the relative global uncertainty about the economy in many nations, it is still very much true that wherever people are seeking to advance, higher education is one of the best predictors of the likelihood of success across the world (Horn & Berger, 2004). Understanding which factors contribute to the success of students is critical so that scarce resources are not invested in programs and policies that bear little success in helping students to attain postsecondary education.

Helping professionals in schools are in a unique position to help bridge the success gap between students of lower socioeconomic status, hereafter SES, and those who came from high SES homes. Knowing and applying the factors that contribute to educational achievement is critical for secondary and postsecondary counselors to help students meet their educational goals. Academic counselors work in concert with other support systems to ensure student success as they are unable to mediate all the contributors to student attrition due to the high student to counselor ratio in secondary and postsecondary institutions (American School Counselor Association, 2003). Factors for baccalaureate degree attainment begin as early as middle school, and they remain constant in predicting postsecondary educational attainment years later (Trusty, 2004). Research for the effect of counseling interventions for specific populations is needed. While there is plenty of evidence to suggest that postsecondary education is an important vehicle for status attainment in the world, the specific programs, interventions, dispositions, and motivators for students remains less

clear. In fact, in the United States in 2012, less than 26% of its population (NCES, 2012) has a post-secondary education level equivalent to a baccalaureate degree, and in the rest of the world, that number fluctuates as well, but even in the most advanced nations when it comes to postsecondary education, that number is hovers around 50% of the population; however, defining completion varies by type of educational attainment and degree. (Miller, Warren, & Owen, 2011). Even with access to postsecondary education becoming financially prohibitive relatively speaking compared to a generation earlier in the United States, college enrollments remain at or near the historical high mark, indicating little slowing in the perceived value of postsecondary education. Moreover, given the need for some form of high-level training to attain a quality job in most of the world today, national governments, including that of the United States Department of Education, are seeking ways to increase the number of students enrolled in higher education, and, more importantly, increasing the likelihood of success for those students who do choose to enroll in higher education programs. United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, has promoted the idea that some form of postsecondary education, in his view, is necessary for all citizens. Academic researchers, Trusty (2004), have suggested further research should focus on the use and effect of individual planning on long-term educational achievement, and the goal of the present study is to determine outcome data for the use of school counseling services in predicting postsecondary education, defined here by the attainment of a baccalaureate degree.

School counselors are the main source of academic planning information and resources in high schools in the United States, and because school counselors are charged with, among other tasks, providing college planning, career guidance, college information, academic readiness, preparation for standardized testing, and an limitless pantheon of related pro-academic services to students, they are perhaps in the best position to lay the foundation for helping students to attain the skills necessary to find success in postsecondary education. The research question investigated here is what effect does academic and personal counseling have on college degree attainment in the United States.

## Background

Completing a degree program, or even graduating from high school, takes a certain amount of initiative on the part of the student, and credit is to be given where it is due. The research also indicates that other personnel help to guide students along the path to their overall goals. Helping professionals in the schools play a key role in helping students to achieve their graduation, but more than that, they are charged with the task of aiding students in their selection of which college to attend, the major of study to choose, and the career options available to them at the completion of their degree.

The model of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), serves as a framework to unify school counseling services to deliver guidance and counseling to students in a consistent fashion across the United States. The model was developed in response to administrators, teachers, parents, and others being unaware of what school counselors do. ASCA states "The ASCA National Model supports the school's overall mission by promoting academic achievement, career planning and personal/social development" (ASCA, 2003). ASCA's mission continues in the college years in that ASCA's three areas of emphasis are aligned with the goals of many of the student retention programs discussed the persistence literature.

Studies on the ASCA model's use and effectiveness illustrate that its comprehensive scope is useful even though the model is applied inconsistently. For instance, Foster, Young, and Hermann (2005) studied the ASCA model's application and found school counselors to devote most of their time and resources to the academic counseling component of their positions but that the respondents to their survey thought they did not address career development and personal/social development in as complete a fashion as they perceived necessary by the National Standards for School Counseling Programs (NSSCP, 2001), the standards from which the ASCA model was developed. The authors note, however, that a limitation of their study was that it sampled only National Certified Counselors (NCC), a non-representative demographic, as most school counselors are not NCC credentialed.

To be effective counselors for students, Trusty and Brown (2005) suggest school counselors develop advocacy competencies to define their role and delineate their activities. The authors explained that counselors need to develop competency in family empowerment, social advocacy, resource development, systems change, assessment, collaboration, organization, and problem solving, among other areas. Trusty and Brown devised a model for achieving advocacy dispositions which concern following through on what is recommended by the ASCA model.

Advocacy is important as school counselors often influence students in their future plans, and they often serve as bridge personnel between students' secondary education and higher education. Dickey and Satcher (1994) found that school counselors often are not aware of the postsecondary educational options for students with learning disabilities, a disturbing finding because colleges and universities are increasingly accessible to the population of students with learning disabilities. Mills-Novoa (1999) suggested that students of color also may feel disenfranchised on campus, and to remedy the situation, college counselors can play a pivotal role in helping students of color to negotiate the barriers of high majority campuses. While institutional programs address the needs of unique campuses, the overall

trend continues to evidence a separation of educational delivery between the primary, secondary, and postsecondary systems of education in the United States.

The separation of interventions by the type of institution is not unusual given the generally parochial nature of the way that education is structured in the United States. The ASCA model, and the state models that simulate it, sought to decrease the substantial differences between guidance delivery programs across the United States, and even the individual schools within districts. In addition, the variables that make the biggest difference for whether or not a person ultimately graduates from college is somewhat of a moving target in the sense that there are a number of qualitative issues that influence whether or not a student persists or not, and those variables are quite individual. For this reason, it is complicated to determine exactly what it is that makes the biggest difference. Some college admissions officers in the United States have determined that it is something called "grit," (Hoover, 2012), while others prefer to quantify those college success variables in very obvious predictable formulations based upon grade point average and standardized test scores, the best predictor of college degree attainment (Adelman, 2006). Trusty (2004) called for implementation of a long-term educational development (LTED) model to remedy the problem of the compartmentalized educational structure currently in place. Indeed, most of the literature on education focused on specific populations or categories (middle, high, college), which is a problem because, as Trusty argues, education is a life-long process victimized by the present structure of education. This project aimed to add clarity to the role of school counseling professionals in the attainment of a baccalaureate degree.

## METHODS

Data were collected from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS). The NELS is one of many comprehensive studies sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), USA, to address the need for large-scale nationally representative data on educational characteristics and achievement in the United States. The NELS was developed to study the "educational, vocational and personal characteristics of students at various stages in their educational careers and the personal, familial, social, institutional, and cultural factors that may influence that development" (NCES, 2002). The NELS is one of three completed longitudinal surveys conducted by the United States National Center for Education Statistics.

### Participants

Participants were 12,144 members interviewed in the fourth follow-up of the NELS:88 base year, twelve years following the beginning of the study. The participants represented students from intact and single-parent families, high, middle, and low SES groups, both genders, and each of the race/ethnicity categories delineated by NCES, African-American, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, White, and Native American in the United States. To control for statistical significance based upon large samples, statistical weighting was applied to compensate for the effect, and to increase the likelihood that the findings are valid in the representation of a realistic portrait of the population under study.

### Variables

Counselor involvement was measured using items selected from the NELS where students were asked about academically related counseling received in high school as well as the frequency of visits to college counselors, academic advisors, and financial aid advisors. Questions for this construct were taken directly from the NELS analysis variables by the researcher to develop the measure of counselor involvement. Specifically, the questions representing the frequency of academic and personal counseling constituted the overall variable of counselor involvement. Although this is a broad measure of counseling, it is the best estimate available in the NELS for information regarding the level of involvement of counseling professionals for college students. The construct aims to determine the effect of institutional support personnel in helping students to attain their degrees. Socioeconomic Status was used as a control variable in order to test the effects of the variables under study. Research indicates that socioeconomic status (SES) is the best predictor of academic attainment, and that low-SES forecasts low attainment (Ginther & Pollack, 2004). In this study, SES is characterized by the economic, social and physical environments in which individuals live and work, as well as by demographic and educational factors. For the purpose of this study, measures of SES included five equally weighted, standardized components: father's education, mother's education, family income, father's occupation, and mother's occupation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). The dependent variable is a dichotomous variable indicating degree attainment or no degree attainment by eight years following graduation from high school in the United States.

Logistic regression analyses were computed to address the research questions and to determine the degree to which the predictor variables contribute to the outcome. The dependent variable, degree attainment, was coded as a "0" or a "1" to indicate degree completion or not. Logistic regression tests multiple independent variables against a discrete dependent variable (Kirk, 1995). The regression technique tests each variable and the combined variables on degree attainment.

## RESULTS

Counselor involvement did not contribute to postsecondary degree attainment in the sample in the study. The variables selected for counselor involvement from NELS consisted of items related to whether students sought information or counseling from their high school counselor concerning academic or personal matters. The academic counseling factor contained questions about the number and duration of counseling sessions devoted to selecting courses, seeking information about postsecondary education, and information regarding preparation for college such as what courses to take and information regarding the ACT/SAT exams and financial aid. The personal counseling factor was comprised of questions related to the amount and duration of counseling for personal reasons. An interesting finding is that personal counseling had a significant negative association with postsecondary degree completion. That is, students who saw a high school counselor for personal reasons were less likely to graduate college. Counselor involvement did not influence postsecondary degree attainment in the positive direction. The academic counseling and personal counseling variables that comprised the counselor involvement factor had a neutral relationship for academic counseling and a significant negative relationship for personal counseling ( $p < .001$ ).

## DISCUSSION

While there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that school counselors, college counselors, and other influential people can make a substantial difference in the likelihood of students matriculating through college degree graduation, the present study indicates that it remains a challenge to quantify what it is that counselors do. Indeed, capturing counseling outcome research, particularly in the absence of research like the present study, where counselor influence is tested years after the counselor engagement, is difficult because there is little research published on the subject from a quantitative methodology not only because it is difficult to find a sample for such a study, it is also true that studies that do not find promotion of counseling services are less likely to be published in the counseling literature. The findings of this particular research were that academic counseling did not have any substantial effect toward degree attainment, and personal counseling had a significant negative relationship to college degree attainment. The findings are not too surprising in that personal counseling would lead to a decrease in the likelihood of college degree attainment because students who have personal problems of a nature so severe that they need to seek counseling are likely to continue to have problems later in life that decrease the chances of graduating from college, as supported by the findings in this study.

The particular challenge of understanding the influence of school counselors on college degree attainment is that quantitative studies are limited because of the problem of finding from a counseling view particular data points associated with college degree attainment. Indeed, large-scale data sets such as that used in this study find that the strongest predictors of success in college degree attainment largely cluster around the academic areas, and, in particular, the taking of high-level courses, in math and science, which is a measurement easier to capture because transcript analysis can be correlated with college degree attainment in a way that is less challenging than quantifying matters of a more interpersonal nature related to personal counseling or even academic counseling for personal reasons. The limitations of the study are clear. It is limited to the frequency counts of seeing a school counselor for personal reasons or academic reasons where the academic reasons for seeking school counseling tend to be for low performance in academic areas. Students who do well in school generally do not see school counselors for reasons related to deficits either in a personal or academic sense, and because of this, there is some selection bias in the sample because students who do well in school would not necessarily be singled out for counseling because of academic deficits: i.e., they would not have seen the school counselor at all, and so would not have been in the sample.

Policymakers have been able to shape the direction of the curriculum of schools for acknowledging the research related to high-level course taking and college degree success. Indeed, many school counselors recommend, and districts require, students take high-level courses in the areas of algebra, geometry, and calculus, along with biology, chemistry, and physics. In addition, most school districts in the United States require four years of English and writing skills along with courses in history, government, and economics. School counselors are in a unique position to shape the future direction of students in their schools, and while outcome data related to personal counseling is dubious when it comes to predicting college degree attainment, the services are particularly necessary because they do contribute to the likelihood that students will graduate from high school, an important variable alone. Finally, the present study indicates the difficulty of trying to quantify counseling outcomes because there is plenty of research both qualitative and anecdotal that suggests that school counselors do make a positive influence for students, and it is a particular challenge of the counseling profession though, making the case that counselors can quantify empirically the effect the counseling has over the course of years for students' academic, personal, and career aspirations.

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