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ABSTRACT

College and Career Readiness (CCR) programming during early high school years assists students with planning for effective post-school transitions. Group interventions that address CCR for early high school students permit school counselors, career counselors, career specialists, or teachers to engage with a large number of students at one time and facilitate peer-to-peer learning. In this article, CCR group interventions that are supported by research and address the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy's (NOSCA) eight components of College and Career Readiness Counseling are presented, along with strategies to evaluate the efficacy of CCR interventions.

Recent public high school graduation rates in the United States are reported to be 85%, with marked differences in these rates by race: Asian/Pacific Islanders, 91%; Whites, 89%; Latinos, 80%; African Americans, 78%; and American Indians/Alaska Natives, 72% (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). Figures from October 2018 from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) indicate that among high school graduates within the age group of 16–24 years, 69.1% are enrolled in colleges or universities. Among high school dropouts between the ages of 16–24 years, 47.2% were working or looking for work (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

Many high school students, especially those who experience systemic barriers due to lower socioeconomic status, race, immigration status, or disability, may not see the value of remaining in school. When students do graduate from high school, they may have an unclear idea of career paths available to them. The American Institutes for Research: The College and Career Readiness and Success Center (2019) notes that "by 2020, 65% of all jobs will require some postsecondary education or training" (para 1), highlighting the importance of successful postsecondary planning. Indicators of pay and unemployment clearly demonstrate the value of postsecondary education. The median weekly wages in the United States in 2017 for those with less than a high school diploma were 509.00, USD compared to 712.00 USD for those with a high school diploma, 836.00 USD for those with an associate degree, and 1173.00 USD for those with a college degree (Torpey, 2018). Further, unemployment rates for those with less than a high school diploma were the highest compared to high school graduates, and graduates of associate degree and bachelor's degree programs (Torpey, 2018).

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Through comprehensive school counseling programs and guided by college and career readiness standards for every student (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2014), school counselors can provide career interventions via classroom curriculum and group work to address college and career readiness (CCR) in students. This paper will address effective interventions that are aligned with the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy's (NOSCA) components of CCR. Career counselors, school counselors, and other professionals working with early high school students are likely to benefit from this resource.

Career interventions are deemed important at every level of schooling, including elementary, middle, and high school (ASCA, 2017). However, (The College Board NOSCA, 2010), identifies the early high school years (9th and 10th grade) as a crucial window of time for focused CCR interventions. Poynton and Lapan (2017) research indicated that high school sophomores who set a goal to attend college upon graduating from high school were more likely to attend college than high school sophomores who did not declare such an intention. Similarly, Robinson and Roksa (2016) reported a higher likelihood for applying to college for students who discuss college with their school counselors during 10th grade and continue these discussions in subsequent years.

In this article, CCR group interventions supported by research and based on NOSCA's (The College Board NOSCA, 2010) eight components of College and Career Readiness Counseling during early high school are presented. The group interventions may be offered in the career domain within the framework of a comprehensive school counseling program recommended by ASCA (2019). Group interventions that address CCR for early high school students permit school counselors, career counselors, career specialists, or teachers to engage with a large number of students at one time and provide opportunities for students to learn from each other.

Group Work to Facilitate College and Career Readiness in Early High School

ASCA (2019) recommends that school counselors spend 80% of their time delivering direct services (instruction, appraisal, advising, and counseling) and indirect services (referral, collaboration, consulting) to students. Of the direct services, appraisal and advising are focused on the career domain, with school counselors being charged with helping students assess their abilities, interests, skills, and achievement, as well as using these findings to map out future career paths. ASCA's (n.d.) most recent data from 2016–2017 shows a high student-to-school counselor ratio of 455:1, necessitating that direct services be delivered by school counselors through large group curricula and small group work with less delivery taking place one-on-one with students.

Beyond the impracticality of offering extensive individual services to students in high school, Perusse et al. (2009) noted that group work provides students with meaningful student-to-student connections that foster learning and development. The power of group discussion and sharing personal stories is valuable in enhancing career decision-making and adaptability (Kuijpers et al., 2011). Group work in schools specifically focused on career development is valuable as it provides a space for students to express themselves as well as expedite their construction of career-life stories in preparation for transition into their professional lives (Hayes, 2001). Additionally, CCR services are important to students from minority groups or disadvantaged backgrounds, but these students may be dissatisfied with

the quality or extent of services they receive from school counselors in this area, as reported by Parker and Ray (2017) in their study with Latino students. Finnerty et al. (2019) noted that it is crucial for school counselors to provide post-high school planning with first-generation college-going students or first-in-family students (FIFs) as these students may face systemic barriers and may be unable to find support in their homes. Finnerty et al. (2019) recommend that school counselors would be more effective in providing postgraduate planning for FIFs if they worked from a "developmental, preventative model, with significant school counseling core curriculum work" (p. 101).

Many school counselors may not be adequately trained or experienced to deliver CCR curriculum in classrooms or with large groups. To address this training issue, Ohrt et al. (2016) proposed a five-part model to train future school counselors to deliver large group developmental curriculum consisting of "(a) background, (b) planning, (c) organization, (d) implementation, and (e) practice" (p. 100). Essential group leadership tasks when leading groups in schools include "maintaining discipline, keeping the group on task, enforcing group rules, protecting group members, encouraging full participation, and moving the group towards stated objectives" (Greenberg, 2003, p. 114).

Specific College and Career Readiness Interventions for Early High School Students

In this article, we chose to focus on the eight NOSCA components (The College Board NOSCA, 2010) for CCR counseling because the eight components flow in a sequential manner and they provide a framework with clearly articulated goals that school counselors may easily adopt to offer career curriculum. We provide specific career interventions targeting early high school students for each of the NOSCA components, utilizing the goals proposed by The College Board NOSCA (2010). Wherever possible, we provide empirical research supporting the importance of specific components, process and psychoeducational group interventions, and resources school counselors can use to support their students' achievement of the goal of each component. The eight components of CCR Counseling are: (1) College Aspirations, (2) Academic Planning for College and Career Readiness, (3) Enrichment and Extracurricular Engagement, (4) College and Career Exploration and Selection Processes, (5) College and Career Assessments, (6) College Affordability Planning, (7) College and Career Admission Processes, and (8) Transition from High School Graduation to College Enrollment (The College Board NOSCA, 2010, p. 1).

College Aspirations

Goal: Build a college-going culture based on early college awareness by nurturing in students the confidence to aspire to college and the resilience to overcome challenges along the way. Maintain high expectations by providing adequate supports, building social capital and conveying the conviction that all students can succeed in college (The College Board NOSCA, 2010, p. 3).

For students in well-resourced districts with college-educated parents, college is often a given. However, students in under-resourced regions may find it difficult to imagine a future beyond what they see in their immediate environment. Researchers emphasize that

creating a college-going culture should begin early and should be supported by all members of the school community (Knight-Manuel et al., 2019; McKillip et al., 2012). Discussions about CCR should happen frequently and at every level of high school.

Martinez et al. (2017) studied the effects of a CCR classroom intervention aimed at enhancing knowledge about college readiness, access aspirations, and self-efficacy among ninth grade students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The curriculum, *Preparing for Post-High School Education: Motivated, Informed, and Ready* (PPHSE:MIR), included a proactive, classroom-based program that lasted five weeks. School counselors delivered the program's eight modules, which consisted of (1) introductions, (2) knowing students' setting and style, (3) knowing students' specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time bound goals, (4) reading between the lines, (5) exploring careers that lead to majors, (6) holistic reviews, (7) pathways to college, and (8) affordability planning. Each lesson incorporated a review of the preceding lesson as well as interactive exercises and assignments. A control group consisted of students who received individualized college and career readiness learning was included in the study. The researchers compared the postsecondary education-going (PEG) knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy of the students in each group using the PEG-K (postsecondary education-going knowledge scale), PEG-AA (postsecondary education-going access aspirations), and the CCSRI (College and Career Readiness Self-Efficacy Inventory). They found that the PPHSE:MIR group curriculum was more effective in enhancing students' knowledge and self-efficacy related to postsecondary education as compared to individualized learning.

Academic Planning for College and Career Readiness

> **Goal**: *Advance students' planning, preparation, participation and performance in a rigorous academic program that connects to their college and career aspirations and goals* (The College Board NOSCA, 2010, p. 3).

This is an area where the career, academic, and social-emotional domains of school counseling are closely aligned. Through group and individual advising, school counselors can assist students in early high school with choosing courses that will help them enter into programs and professions to which they aspire. However, in order to do so, students need to have some ideas of future directions, along with a sense of self-efficacy that they are capable of achieving their goals.

Mason and Duba (2011) discuss the utility of reality therapy in encouraging students to make career choices that meet their needs and goals for the future. School counselors can administer the *Choice Theory Career Rating Scale for Children and Adolescents* (Mason & Duba, 2009) to students in order to facilitate their individual evaluation of personal wants and needs for their futures. Mason and Duba (2011) encourage school counselors to engage students in discussions within small or large group settings to discuss how they can choose post-graduate plans that suit those needs. School counselors should utilize tenets of reality therapy in those discussions to encourage students to consider their wants and needs when making career decisions.

Enrichment and Extracurricular Engagement

> **Goal**: *Ensure equitable exposure to a wide range of extracurricular and enrichment opportunities that build leadership, nurture talents and interests, and increase engagement with school* (The College Board NOSCA, 2010, p. 3)

High school students who have little exposure to a range of occupations and career paths may foreclose or commit to a decision without exploring alternatives (Marcia, 1966) on a particular occupation, or may be unmotivated to remain in school and drop out. Thus, interventions that allow students to explore career paths through extracurricular or external activities such as job shadowing or internships are recommended. Researchers have reported a positive association between engagement in extracurricular activities and clarity in career decision-making. In a study with 312 high school participants over a 3-year period, Denault et al. (2019) reported that students who participated in extracurricular activities were more likely to engage in vocational exploration during the following year, and subsequently experienced a decrease in career indecision.

Although there is a gap in the literature that provides guidance to school counselors who want to use group interventions to promote extracurricular involvement, we suggest hosting involvement fairs where a school's extracurricular activities are represented. All early high school students would be encouraged to attend, and the school counselors, teachers, or administrators could follow-up with interested participants using small group discussions.

Additionally, school counselors could build strong networks of job shadowing or internship sites within the community and beyond. School counselors can assist with arranging in-person or online discussion groups during which students process thoughts, emotions, and learning regarding their extracurricular experiences. In rural and isolated areas, communication and collaboration platforms such as Zoom, Skype, or Microsoft Teams may be utilized for students to engage in authentic work exploration. Technology may also be used to facilitate engagement in extracurricular activities for students who have little access to these resources. We suggest that school counselors work with the school technology staff and with businesses to utilize school-approved group work technology platforms with robust student safety mechanisms to create interactive activities and projects that allow students to connect with others within and outside of their school and to practice transferable skills to college and career (i.e. communication skills, problem-solving abilities, research skills).

College and Career Exploration and Selection Processes

> **Goal**: *Provide early and ongoing exposure to experiences and information necessary to make informed decisions when selecting a college or career that connects to academic preparation and future aspirations* (The College Board NOSCA, 2010, p. 3).

Making informed decisions regarding colleges and careers can be challenging for high school students who may experience a period of indecision. Chiesa et al. (2016) developed a six-session program designed to address career indecision with 280 Italian high school students. Session content was as follows: Session 1 – focus on self, including strengths, skills resources and weaknesses; Session 2 – values as they relate to work; Session 3 –

Identification of one or more areas of work interest; Session 4 – Searching for information about requirements for potential careers; Session 5 – Comparison of the match between self and the chosen career requirements; Session 6 – Formulation of career goals and plans (p. 213). Pre- and post-assessments indicated an increase in participants' career decision-making self-efficacy and subsequent career exploration. However, participants did not experience a decrease in career choice anxiety (Chiesa et al., 2016).

From the early days of career counseling, quantitative assessments such as the Self-Directed Search (SDS, Holland & Messer, 2013) have been used in career counseling. While quantitative assessments of interests, aptitudes, and values lend themselves easily to administration in larger groups, they often fall short with students' understanding and interpretation of assessment results. Narrative and constructivist approaches to career counseling have been suggested as an alternative to quantitative career assessments (Harless & Stoltz, 2018; Savickas, 2012) or as a complementary intervention (McMahon & Watson, 2012). Challenges still remain in adapting qualitative techniques such as the Integrative Structured Interview (ISI, McMahon & Watson, 2012) to a group intervention that can be used in schools. While qualitative career assessments show promise, more studies to empirically demonstrate their efficacy are recommended (McMahon et al., 2019).

College and Career Assessments

Goal: *Promote preparation, participation, and performance in college and career assessments by all students* (The College Board NOSCA, 2010, p. 3).

College admission tests such as the SAT (The College Board, n.d.) and ACT (ACT Inc, 2020) are high-stakes tests that are used by a large number of colleges to determine admission and financial aid. Another test is the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) which helps determine what career paths are open to students in the military (Military.com, 2020). Students in well-resourced districts tend to perform better on these types of tests than those from under-resourced districts. Students who are unfamiliar with the format and timing of such tests, or those who experience test anxiety are unlikely to perform well on them. There are numerous test preparation programs that are offered to test takers, typically at a cost. This raises equity and access issues for students who are unable to pay for these types of programs.

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC, 2017b) provides activities and handouts for school counselors to prepare early high school students for standardized testing. The College Board (n.d.) and ACT Inc (2020) offer free study materials for students to use (NACAC, 2017a), which are helpful to orient students to these types of assessments. Khan Academy (2019) is a nonprofit organization that offers free online lessons and preparation for standardized tests. Creating outreach efforts for parents that focus on their role in the college and career assessment process is important, such as teaching parents how to obtain test fee waivers and free study materials (The College Board NOSCA, 2010).

Offering preparation programs to all students in a school is recommended, as is encouraging all students to take the practice version of these tests in the year before they actually have to take it. This is something that can easily be done by offering in-person and online group test preparation groups in schools, in which students learn about the format of the

test and the types of questions, undergo practice drills, and learn test-taking strategies. NACAC (2017a) encourages the use of small group work to provide students an opportunity to practice sample test questions in a group competition format. The value of this exercise is enhanced through post-activity group processing to discuss the importance of practice tests and to discuss other aspects of the college application process (NACAC, 2017a).

College Affordability Planning

Goal: Provide students and families with comprehensive information about college costs, options for paying for college, and the financial aid and scholarship processes and eligibility requirements, so they are able to plan for and afford a college education (The College Board NOSCA, 2010, p. 3).

Understanding the cost of college can be overwhelming for students and their parents or guardians, especially given differences in costs between in-state and out-of-state institutions, and public and private institutions. The complexities of financial aid, including filling out forms such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) can be a barrier for many. Warnock (2016) showed that parents' faulty or unrealistic perceptions of paying for college of African American, Hispanic, low-income, and first-generation students could explain the under-representation of students from these groups at universities (p. 517). For example, Warnock (2016) reported that "low-income and less-educated parents are more likely to believe there is no way to get money for college. Low-income and less-educated parents are also more likely to believe that their child will be able to earn enough money for college ... " (p. 518). Providing financial literacy training to students and their parents is an essential aspect of college and career readiness.

NACAC (2017a) provides a Financial Aid True/False Quiz activity that school counselors can use in small group activities in order to create knowledge and awareness of how to pay for post-secondary education and to foster group discussion and engagement with the information. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education provides school counselors with a financial aid toolkit with a range of resources to help explain ways to pay for college (Federal Student Aid: An Office of U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). School counselors can use resources such as *Financial Aid Basics: What Students and Families Need to Know* from NACAC (2019) and *College Preparation Checklist* from Federal Student Aid (Federal Student Aid: An Office of U.S. Department of Education, 2016) in small group discussions. The latter resource provides a To-Do list for every year of high school, with tasks for students and their parents.

College and Career Admission Processes

Goal: Ensure that students and families have an early and ongoing understanding of the college and career application and admission processes so they can find the postsecondary options that are the best fit with their aspirations and interests (The College Board NOSCA, 2010, p. 3).

Programs such as Upward Bound (U.S. Department of Education, Programs, 2018b) and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs [GEAR UP] (U.S.

Department of Education, Programs, 2018a) are focused on helping low-income and first-generation college students understand the college and career application process, and to provide support throughout every phase from thinking about college to actually applying. Martinez et al. (2018) reported that 41% of students who attend college actually undermatch or select colleges that are less selective relative to their academic credentials. A recent study of students in Upward Bound programs utilized a program called *Find the Fit*, which focused on helping students apply to four or more colleges with the goal of enrolling in the most selective or prestigious college with stringent admission requirements (Martinez et al., 2018). A comparison of a treatment group and a control group showed that students in the former were nine percent more likely to report that they applied to four or more colleges than the latter group (Martinez et al., 2018).

Additionally, Radcliffe and Bos (2013) suggest that schools work with college representatives who can discuss the admission process, entrance requirements, tuition, and financial aid options during the lunch hour of college campus tours for high school students. It is important that each presentation include the same topics in order to assist early high school students in understanding complex college and career information.

Transition from High School Graduation to College Enrollment

> **Goal**: *Connect students to school and community resources to help the students overcome barriers and ensure the successful transition from high school to college.* (The College Board NOSCA, 2010, p. 3).

Although academic factors play a role in student persistence during the first year of college, nonacademic factors such as social support and social involvement are also critical (Nitza et al., 2011). Maree (2019) examined the effects of group career construction counseling in South African students in 11th grade. Although this participant study included students who are older than the population covered in this article, this evidence-based group intervention was found to support participants' enhanced ability to manage career-related transitions, such as graduating from high school, choosing a college major, and beginning their careers. Further, the intervention strengthened participants' overall career adaptability and motivation to work toward their future (Maree, 2019). Overall, Maree's (2019) work provides evidence that group career construction counseling benefits many areas of CCR and should be utilized by school counselors when implementing group CCR interventions in their schools.

Evaluation Strategies

Guided by ASCA's seminal question, "How are students different as a result of what school counselors do?" (ASCA, 2019, para 1), gathering data regarding the effectiveness of CCR interventions is essential. School counseling group interventions that aim to address CCR must be informed by data so that enhancements could be made in areas that are not effectively meeting the needs of students.

School counselors or those delivering CCR interventions should track outcomes against each of the eight The College Board NOSCA (2010) components discussed above. Relevant quantitative and qualitative data may be collected and analyzed from participating students,

their parents, and teachers measuring students understanding of CCR concepts, as well as with objective data such as test scores and number of applications submitted to colleges or post-secondary institutions. Three types of data that school counselors might collect (ASCA, 2019) are related to participation (who participated?), mind-sets and behaviors (what did they learn?), and outcomes (what were the effects?).

School counselors wishing to use a quantitative assessment tool may consider The College and Career Readiness Counseling Support Scales [CCRCS] Lapan et al. (2017). This instrument consists of 23 items with five subscales: Creating Direction, Applying, Social-Emotional Development, Financing Education, and College and Career Planning. Designed to be administered to students, each item requires two responses, the first regarding the frequency with which a particular CCR activity was conducted with students (6-point Likert scale ranging from never to more than six times), and the second regarding the helpfulness of the activity (5-point Likert scale ranging from not helpful to extremely helpful). Specific instruments such as the CCRCS can help school counselors gauge the impact of programming on the CCR of their students. Qualitative evaluation methods may be used instead of scales or in addition to them. The following questions can help illuminate strengths and areas for improvement in future CCR groups: What did you learn in this group that was most helpful? Least helpful? What three things did you learn that you are likely to use as you consider your college and career options?

Conclusion

CCR programming during early high school years assists students to plan for post-school transitions more effectively, and such programming can be further targeted to meet individual student needs in the last two years of high school. CCR interventions that begin at the 11th or 12th grades may be too late to have a sustained impact on future planning for high school students.

School counselors wishing to address CCR could plan group interventions supported by research to address The College Board NOSCA's (2010) eight components of CCR. Delivering CCR interventions in group formats permits a larger number of students and parents to engage in learning and discussion around these topics and groups provide opportunities for peer interaction and learning. We recommend that school counselors begin this work early in high school to help students plan for their futures in a rapidly changing world of work. It is important that school counselors evaluate their group career interventions regularly so that they are in a continuous program improvement cycle. We recommend that researchers continue to study the efficacy of CCR group interventions so that evidence-based practice in this crucial area continues to expand.

Notes on Contributors

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