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AN EXPLANATORY MIXED-METHODS APPROACH TO TRACING "CAREER PATHWAYS" POLICY IN VIRGINIA: HOW SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS INFLUENCE IMPLEMENTATION FIDELITY

Michael Ormsmith
Virginia Commonwealth University

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Michael Isaac Ormsmith
B.S. Virginia Military Institute, 1998
M.Ed. Virginia Commonwealth University, 2010

Director: Katherine Cumings Mansfield, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership
School of Education

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Abstract

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This explanatory mixed-methods policy analysis describes how school counselors' thoughts and attitudes contribute to the implementation fidelity of the Academic and Career Plan (ACP) policy in a suburban Virginia school division. A quantitative survey investigated counselor thoughts about the policy, implementation behaviors, and counselor ideas about equity issues related to providing college and career planning services to at risk students. Counselor interviews were conducted to provide deeper insight about the street level implementation practices and beliefs of counselors. Findings reveal that counselors place substantial value in the ACP policy and think the process is useful for connecting student interests and postsecondary goals to high school programs of study. Counselors implement the ACP policy with high fidelity because the policy incorporates counselor beliefs such as integrating the career pathway model into the course selection process. Counselors report spending more time assisting higher socioeconomic groups with college planning which results in less time for supporting at risk students. Findings indicate that counselors recognize the need at risk students have for additional support during postsecondary planning but are inhibited by the demands of higher

socioeconomic groups. Finally, implications for school leaders related to improving counselor

services to at risk students are discussed.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

High school seniors confront ever-increasing competition for both jobs and college acceptance after graduation. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), in its February 2012 "Employment Projections – 2010-20" press release disclosed that:

> Occupations that typically need some type of postsecondary education for entry are projected to grow the fastest during the 2010-20 decade. Occupations classified as needing a master's degree are projected to grow by 21.7 percent, followed by doctoral or professional degree occupations at 19.9 percent, and associate's degree occupations at 18.0 percent. (p. 4)

Later the same year, the BLS reported that 68.3 percent of students graduating in 2011 were enrolled in some form of higher education (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012a). Additionally, the rapid development of sophisticated technologies and an expanding global market creates a premium for educated employees (Achieve Incorporated, 2012). The increasing demand for employees with advanced degrees means that high school students who do not take advantage of postsecondary education opportunities will experience a competitive disadvantage in the search for employment. DeWitt (2012) remarks, "No matter how a student receives his or her education, or what credentials or exit documents he or she possesses, career readiness requires that students have the academic, employability and technical skills required for employment in today's careers" (p. 17). Students, therefore, depend more than ever on a college and career focused high school program to develop the necessary skills to successfully complete a postsecondary degree.

1

Public education in the U.S. is a complex system of state and local governments coordinating to provide education services to a wide variety of students under the watchful eye of the federal government. For Hochschild (2004), public education represents a delicate balance between meeting the individual goals of students (e.g., college attendance or employment) and supporting the collective goals of the community (e.g., teaching democratic principles). Darling-Hammond (2010) speaks in support of the individual goals of public education when she opines: "Thus, the new mission of schools is to prepare students to work at jobs that do not yet exist, creating ideas and solutions for products and problems that have not yet been identified, using technologies that have not been invented" (p. 2). Ravitch (2011) shows support for Hochschild's view that schools should develop community goals when she observes, "The public schools have been the primary instrumentalities of American democracy, disseminating knowledge and skills widely and making social mobility possible" (p. 285). The common element here is that public education should focus on preparing students for what comes after high school. As students pursue individual goals such as applying to college, entering the military, or seeking employment after high school they are contributing to the community as a whole by striving to be self-sufficient members of society.

The critical mission of preparing students for "what comes after" has, in recent years, become manifest in public schools as college and career readiness programs of study. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2010), a consortium of businesses, state governments, foundations, and nonprofit organizations, describes the changing direction of education: "College and career readiness is the new direction for K–12 education. Preparing students to transition without remediation to postsecondary education or to careers that pay a living wage, or both, is the ultimate aim of federal and state education policies, initiatives and funding" (p. 6).

2

Responding to this national trend, state governments have developed college and career high school programs. DeWitt (2012) notes a recent example:

> Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell included in his 2012 budget a new "College and Workforce Readiness" proposal that raises the rigor of the standard high school diploma by requiring a CTE industry credential, licensure, competency assessment, or Virginia's Workplace Readiness Skill assessment. The governor's budget also includes a proposal to establish written agreements with a Virginia Community College specifying the pathway for students to complete an associate degree, or a one-year Uniform Certificate of General Studies from a Virginia Community College concurrently with a high school diploma. (p. 18)

Many states have taken up the call to incorporate college and career readiness skills into the high school curriculum for all students under the Career and Technical Education (CTE) umbrella. As with the Virginia plan, Kentucky recognizes the importance of CTE education for all students. The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) defines "Career readiness [as] the level of preparation a high school graduate needs in order to proceed to the next step in a chosen career, whether that is postsecondary coursework, industry certification, or entry into the workforce" (Kentucky Department of Education [KDE], 2010). The Kentucky plan incorporates four goals to facilitate college and career readiness: 1) Increase accelerated learning opportunities for all Kentucky students; 2) Provide targeted interventions for all students who are not college and career ready; 3) Increase access to and quality of college and career readiness advising; and 4) Increase the college completion rates of students entering with one or more developmental or supplemental course needs (KDE, 2010). Each of these goals is aimed at

3

giving students the best chance of success after high school by incorporating academic development with exposure to postsecondary venues and experiences.

Likewise, Texas has incorporated the college and career readiness ideals into its public education system as a series of skills students should be able to demonstrate upon graduation. From the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2009):

The Texas College and Career Readiness Standards articulate a baseline of knowledge necessary for students to successfully participate in college and function in the modern workplace. College and career readiness standards represent the next step in aligning public and higher education curriculum in order to facilitate a seamless transition between high school and college or the skilled workforce. This alignment will reduce the need for remedial education for recent high school graduates and ultimately increase the number of Texans graduating from college. (p. 1)

With the adoption of these standards, Texas recognizes that high school programs of study containing college and career knowledge provide less benefit if a student must attend remedial courses after graduation. Remediation requires additional preparation time, costs the student additional money, and delays the student's entrance into the workforce.

Kansas, along with 19 other states and the District of Columbia, has adopted the Career Cluster Pathways (CCP) model developed by the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEc) and the States' Career Clusters Initiative (National Research Center for Career and Technical Education [NRCCTE], 2012). According to the Kansas State Department of Education [KSDE] (2012), "Career cluster pathways are designed to provide a smooth transition from high school to postsecondary education (technical colleges, community colleges and universities), apprenticeship opportunities, the military, and/or

4

the workplace" (p. iii). The CCP model enhances a student's college and career readiness by creating detailed plans of study to help students determine the appropriate course sequence for maximizing postsecondary opportunities within a specific career field, or cluster. This early focus on a career planning helps students to understand how the high school experience will better prepare them for meaningful employment.

To better understand how to meet the challenge of supplying qualified students to colleges using the college and career readiness framework, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) commissioned the College and Career Readiness Initiative (CCRI) to investigate the characteristics of high school students who demonstrate persistence in postsecondary institutions (VDOE, 2010). The VDOE found that students who successfully completed college courses shared several indicators such as: taking Algebra II and Chemistry; scoring Advanced Proficient on the math and reading Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) assessments; earning an advanced diploma; participating in Advanced Placement (AP) and dual enrollment (DE) courses; participating in the Virginia Early Scholars Program (earning college credit via AP or DE experiences); and earning "college ready" scores on the SAT or ACT (VDOE, 2010). Based on these results, the VDOE is modifying the public education system to provide additional opportunities for all students to be college and career ready. The five main initiatives to improve high schools student's college and career readiness are:

1) Defining college and career ready performance expectations aligned to national and international college and career ready standards;

2) Developing elective "capstone courses" to support students who need additional instruction to meet college and career ready performance expectations before leaving high school;

5

3) Providing technical assistance and professional development to Virginia's educators to support implementation of the revised English and mathematics standards and the college and career ready performance expectations;

4) Aligning the state assessments to measure student mastery of the more rigorous mathematics and English standards adopted in 2009 and 2010. Certain high school end-of-course tests will include quantitative indicators of whether students have met or exceeded the achievement levels needed to be successful in introductory mathematics and English courses in college; and

5) Identifying accountability measures and incentives for schools to increase the percentage of students who graduate high school having demonstrated the academic and career skills needed to be successful in postsecondary education programs. (VDOE, 2010, p. 2)

These goals represent a comprehensive approach to changing the education system to align students' learning goals with college and employment expectations. These goals demonstrate that simply changing the standards is not enough to guarantee success; students and teachers need integrated support structures to develop successful programs. One such support is the use and development of an Academic and Career Plan (ACP) for each student.

In 2006, the U.S. Congress amended the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act (2006) to include, among other changes, the implementation of a "Programs of Study" requirement for all students. Programs of Study represent a, "progression of courses that align secondary and postsecondary education to adequately prepare students to succeed in postsecondary education" and "may also include postsecondary opportunities such as dual enrollment and AP courses for college credit" (Rowe & Wharff, 2011, slide 30). The

6

modifications to the Perkins Act serve as the model for altering state curriculums to meet the college and career readiness objectives. To facilitate the Programs of Study mandate, Tim Kaine, Governor of Virginia in 2007, asked the Virginia Board of Education to include in the revised Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools in Virginia [RESAPSV] (2011) a personal learning plan that matches academic and career goals with the student's high school course selection (VDOE, 2010a). An excerpt from a letter sent by Governor Kaine to the Virginia Board of Education provides an indication of the policy's intended purpose:

> I believe such a plan can help students who may be at risk of not graduating by reinforcing the expectations well ahead of their senior year. The planning process might also encourage students who are satisfied with minimum effort to reach for higher levels of achievement knowing the economic benefits of postsecondary career pathways. Additionally, it will give students opportunities to identify areas of interest and explore new things about which they may not otherwise be aware. (Wharff, ca 2010, slide 3)

Governor Kaine's comments demonstrate support for the idea that the focus of public education should be providing students with opportunities in high school to become well prepared for postsecondary options. Consequently, the Virginia Board of Education revised the *Regulations Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools* in Virginia (8 VAC-20-131-5) to include a personal learning plan that matches academic and career goals with student high school course selections (VDOE, 2010a). The resulting policy established a requirement for public schools to create an Academic and Career Plan for all seventh grade students.   The ACP legislation states: "Beginning in the middle school years, students shall be counseled on opportunities for beginning postsecondary education and opportunities for obtaining industry

7

certifications, occupational competency credentials, or professional licenses in a career and technical education field prior to high school graduation;" and that "The components of the Plan [ACP] shall include, but not be limited to, the student's program of study for high school graduation and a postsecondary career pathway based on the student's academic and career interests" (RESAPSV, 2011). An integral part of the ACP is the use of the Career Cluster Pathways to allow students time to contemplate possible career options and shape student course selections to support the identified career interest (VDOE, 2010a). Overall, Virginia's ACP introduces practices consistent with national efforts to restructure the public education system within the college and career readiness framework. However, simply establishing a new system is not enough to guarantee students derive sufficient benefits from a career focused high school programs of study.

There are a number of practices recommended to states that improve the effectiveness of college and career initiatives. Conley and McGaughy (2012) recommend that students, "need to be exploring more college and career opportunities earlier on so they can understand what content knowledge, learning skills, and cognitive strategies are necessary to succeed in a particular career pathway or college major" (p. 31). But students are not expected to conduct this type of career exploration on their own; they need someone to help them. School counselors are an essential element to students successfully building programs focused on college and career readiness. Other effective practices to assist in career exploration include giving students multiple opportunities to connect with school counselors to discuss postsecondary options (Hooker & Brand, 2010) and sponsoring counselor-led visits to postsecondary institutions (Kempner & Warford, 2009). Writing for *Educational Leadership*, Symonds (2012) notes:

High-quality career counseling should become a central component of students'

experience in middle and high school. We should expose students to a wide range of

options and then help them explore those that most excite them. Students should have

ready access to a clearly delineated set of pathways to major occupations, so that both

students and their families can know which classes and experiences would help a youth

interested in a career field gain access to it. (p. 12)

In addition to talking with students about the available options, school counselors support

students in practical ways such as: preparing financial aid applications; registering students for

standardized tests such as the PSAT, ACT, SAT and AP exams; and helping students apply to

colleges or technical schools (Conley & McGaughy, 2012). Clearly, student interactions with

school counselors play a vital role in preparing students for graduation in the current college and

career readiness environment. This relationship suggests that how a counselor implements the

ACP may have a significant impact on student postsecondary outcomes.

Purpose and Research Questions

The success of the ACP initiative depends, in large part, to how well the counselors

implement the policy on a daily basis. Understanding counselors' knowledge and attitudes about

the policy and discovering their actions as "street level" policy makers (Goldstein, 2008;

Mansfield, 2013) will shed light on the plan's ability to prepare students for postsecondary

options. It is conceivable that if counselors do not adequately understand the ACP, or have the

necessary skills or support systems to adequately implement the policy, then the resulting plan

may be haphazard or fail to accurately capture student interest. Also important is how student

factors might impact the implementation of the ACP plans. In Governor Kaine's purpose

statement he acknowledged that the academic plans should provide benefits to "at risk" students

9

as well. However, Mickelson and Everett (2008) found that under a similar high school course

plan implemented in North Carolina, at risk students (i.e., lower socioeconomic status, racial

minority, etc.) continued to experience segregation and reduced access to college preparatory and

career training opportunities during high school. Of interest in this study is determining how

counselors define their responsibility under the Virginia ACP plan to provide equitable access to

postsecondary opportunities for these at risk students. Since a poorly constructed ACP would

not be consistent with the stated goals of providing meaningful courses for students based on the

college and career readiness framework, the focus of this proposed study is to understand the

connection between the meaning-making of school counselors vis-à-vis the ACP, the role student

demographics may or may not play in policy meaning-making, and the resulting implementation

of student plans. Thus, the proposed study will address the following questions:

1. What is the nature of school counselors' understanding of and attitudes toward the

   Virginia "Career Pathways" policies generally and the Academic and Career Plan

   (ACP) specifically?

2. What is the nature of school counselors' ACP implementation practices?

3. How do student demographics influence counselors' interpretation and

   implementation of the Academic and Career Plan?

4. How do counselor ACP implementation practices coalesce or diverge from policy

   intent?

5. What relationship exists between policy intent, counselors' knowledge and

   attitudes, and counselor implementation?

Overview of Research Design

10

An explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006) is utilized where data from the quantitative phase is analyzed and interpreted using data from the qualitative phase. The quantitative phase of the study involves using an online survey of a convenience sample of middle school and high school counselors to assess the actions and beliefs of school counselors regarding the ACP policy and the implementation thereof. The qualitative phase of this study will follow the analysis of the quantitative results and will help to explain the counselor implementation actions and beliefs. The proposed plan for the exploratory phase is to address common practices and beliefs identified by the survey and to determine how counselor understandings of, and value placed on, the ACP influences implementation of the program. The qualitative phase will use semi-structured personal interviews of counselors who participated in the survey to help expand upon data collected concerning counselors' practices and beliefs via survey.

Overview of Study Context

This study will be conducted in Coal County[1], a large suburban school district located in central Virginia. The district has a student body of nearly 60,000 students; supports 38 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, and 12 high schools; has a student population of 55% White, 26% Black, and 11% Hispanic, and; has 30% of the student body is classified as economically disadvantaged (VDOE, 2012). A closer look at the data reveals that while the district poverty rates are comparable to both the national and Virginia rates, Black and Hispanic students in Coal County middle and high schools have a much higher percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged (Table 1). Like Virginia, the Coal County district met the federal student performance standards (Annual Measurable Objectives [AMO]) and the

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[1] All names of people and places at the local level are pseudonyms.

district results are consistent with the state results for the current school year for all indicators except that while the state did not meet AMO for Black student graduation rates, Coal County did not meet the graduation rates for Hispanic students (VDOE, 2012). During the 2011-2012 school year, 94% of Coal County students graduated with an Advanced or Standard diploma, slightly exceeding the Virginia average of 92% (VDOE, 2012). For graduation year 2012, 64% of Coal County students enrolled in an institution of higher education (IHE) with 44% of those choosing a four-year school and the remaining 20% selecting a two-year school (VDOE, 2012a). The national average in 2011 for total IHE enrollment is 68%, with 42% in four-year schools and 26% in two-year schools (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Finally, Coal County's student to school counselor ratio is 258 to 1 (VDOE, 2012b) and is just above the level recommended by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) of 250 to 1 (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012).

Table 1.

Percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged

			Coal County		
Race	US*	VA	All	Middle School	High School
White	9.8	12.6	8.4	16.3	9.9
Black	27.6	15.0	12.1	49.9	33.3
Hispanic	25.3	7.4	7.1	67.2	49.4

Note: Data from Virginia Department of Education (2013) fall membership reports.
* Data from Snyder & Dillow (2012).

Contributions and Intended Audience

The audience for this study is school administrators and counselors at the state, district, and local levels. As posited by this study, if the ability to fully implement the ACP policy is connected to the thoughts and actions of school counselors, then school leaders will be able to use the information from this research to guide and direct counseling programs. Incorporating knowledge gained from this study into training and counseling procedures could result in better fidelity to policy intent and implementation by street level policy actors. By improving policy implementation, school leaders can potentially cultivate postsecondary opportunities by ensuring: all students have a program of study in high school linked to employment; opportunities match student interests; students' access to opportunities are not determined solely by a counselors' perceptions of them. Finally, this study will contribute to the policy interpretation and implementation literature by demonstrating the utility of an explanatory mixed-methods approach to conducting leadership and policy studies.

Conclusion

To examine the meaning school counselors create through policy interpretation and implementation practices, this study will evaluate responses from an online survey of middle school and high school counselors to inform the selection of questions for interviews of school counselors to provide greater depth of knowledge about how counselors think and behave during policy interpretation and implementation. The literature review discusses several areas relevant to the study of preparing students for postsecondary options as well as how counselors support students throughout the process. Each topic connects to the present study through the intended application of an ACP to students and the formation of an individual learning plan throughout high school. The methods chapter describes the appropriateness of employing a mixed methods

design where greater depth of knowledge is achieved through the use of multiple data collection strategies. The results chapter examines the survey results and provides descriptive statistics detailing the counselor responses. The quantitative results are followed first by a discussion of topics from the survey used to inform the interview phase questioning and then by the presentation of counselor interview responses. The last chapter incorporates information from both data collection phases and constructs a picture of counselor beliefs and actions related to ACP policy implementation and considers several implications for educational leaders.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to explore what the research literature has to say about four issues informing this study and establish the educational context in which Academic and Career Plans are constructed. The first area discussed pertains to what it means for students to be ready for postsecondary options and the type of skills and experiences students need to be successful in the postsecondary environment. Second, a discussion of how secondary counselors support students during college and career planning with an overview of several issues related to the knowledge and skills counselors need to provide effective services. Next, the circumstances surrounding the experiences of at-risk students in public education are explored related to preparing them for postsecondary options. Finally, the literature describing education professionals as policy-makers is explored which relates counselor implementation actions to policy interpretation.

Postsecondary Readiness

College ready students must develop skills and cognitive abilities that are aligned with college expectations. In addition, students are to acquire basic levels of competence in a wide array of concepts from mathematics, science, and language. A student's exposure to these ideas and concepts derives from the courses selected during high school (Adelman, 2006; Conley, 2010). College success depends on more than high school attendance; a well-rounded approach to academics where students successfully complete rigorous courses in multiple disciplines is critical to persistence in higher education (Adelman, 2006; Levine 2002; Radunzel & Nobel, 2012). This relationship between high school courses and college success is especially prominent for minority populations (Adelman, 2006; McCormick & Lucas, 2011). Students who

15

attempt multiple Advance Placement (AP) courses or who participate in International Baccalaureate classes are exposed to college level rigor while in high school and demonstrate improved college readiness (Adelman, 2006). However, access to these higher-level college readiness courses is not evenly distributed among socioeconomic groups (Reardon, 2011). High school is the training ground where children learn how to prepare for college. Therefore, students need to exercise prudence when selecting high school courses to ensure that each course contributes to preparing them for higher education.

Many students begin preparing for college as early as the seventh or eighth grade when they first begin to hear about a place called "college". Understanding what college requires is important at this stage because this is the point when students begin to select high school courses aligned with their postsecondary personal goals (Aud et al., 2012; Conley, 2010; Savitz-Romer, 2012). A student's experience in high school, through coursework and exposure to the college culture, plays a role in preparing them for college and helps them to link what they do in high school with what college expects (Hill, 2008). Therefore, developing "college knowledge" (Conley, 2005) that includes understanding the nature of the postsecondary system and how to prepare for college is a critical process students should experience in middle and high school. Early exposure to the college culture provides an opportunity for students to test themselves against the system and make an informed decision about their postsecondary goals. Consequently, most public schools use a combination of AP courses, dual enrollment opportunities, and locally designed accelerated (e.g., "honors", "gifted", or "advanced") courses to expose students to college level academic requirements (Conley, 2010). An important benefit of this system is that students who are not college bound have time to reorganize their courses to train for a career path that matches their strengths and inclinations (Conley, 2010; Hill, 2008;

Radunzel & Nobel, 2012). Thus, the contemporary public education system improves college perseverance by allowing students to determine if college matches their skills and talents before they find themselves struggling in higher education.

The focus by public educators on standardized test scores has led many students and parents to believe that achieving a passing score on a state created standardized tests represents college and career readiness (Conley 2010; Radunzel & Nobel, 2012). The reality is that state tests often represent a basic content knowledge that is not directly related to postsecondary readiness (The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010; Radunzel & Nobel, 2012). Preparing for college or employment in contemporary America means that high school graduates possess skills and abilities recognized as important for moving past the entry level job market such as self-motivation, goal orientation, and independent learning (Lombardi, Seburn, & Conley, 2011). Since helping students achieve these desired skills is a primary concern for public education most states have adopted the Common Core State Standards in an effort to align state education standards with postsecondary expectations (Meeder & Suddreth, 2012). As part of the CCSS initiative, and to more accurately assess student progress towards college or career readiness, states are collaborating with the CCSS Initiative to create new state assessments that are a reliable indicator of college and career readiness (Jones & King, 2012; Meeder & Suddreth, 2012). Since many high school students do not take college entrance tests such as the SAT or the ACT (Aud et al., 2012; Radunzel & Nobel, 2012) the newly designed assessments will help students align their high school performance with their postsecondary goals. These redefined standards and accompanying state assessments are a critical tool that students need to accurately monitor their postsecondary preparedness and make well-informed decisions about their career path options.

17

While rigorous coursework, exposure to secondary education, and improved state assessments do contribute to preparing students for postsecondary success; students nevertheless need a detailed plan to focus their high school experience a specific career pathway. In recent years, states have begun to adopt policies that require students outside of the Perkins Act to develop a personalized program of study in order to link college and career readiness plans with high school coursework (Solberg, Phelps, Haakenson, Durham, & Timmons, 2012). Twenty-three states have passed legislation requiring students to such a plan in place before or during high school that details student considerations for academic goals, college and career readiness goals, and personal development goals (Famularo, 2012). Research conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of college and career readiness and this type of student plan is limited. However, Budge, Solberg, Phelps, Haakenson, and Durham (2010) conducted 53 focus groups in four states to ask parents, students, and teachers if preparing the learning plan was a useful activity. The three groups described the plans as "highly valuable" and indicated that the plans helped students to select more rigorous coursework, improved collaboration between stakeholders, provided access to career exploration activities, shed light on postsecondary opportunities, and improved student academic and career motivation (Budge, et al., 2010). Developing high school plans such as these represents an important goal setting process that allows students to concentrate on their interests and align their high school coursework and postsecondary intentions (Solberg et al., 2012). Finally, personalized student plans serve to keep students connected to support personnel, such as school counselors, who are fundamental to navigating students through the high school experience.

School Counselors and Postsecondary Readiness

School counselors are a significant component to preparing students for postsecondary pathways. Increasing the number of encounters students have with a school counselor has a positive effect on a student's application rate to college and career programs (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). Students who begin career planning with school counselors in middle school or early high school are more likely to select a program of study linked to a career pathway and are more likely to be better prepared for postsecondary challenges (Akos, Lambie, Milsom, & Gilbert, 2007; Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011; Trusty, Niles, & Carney, 2005). Not surprisingly, student access to school counselors during course planning is important because counselors are one of the main conduits of information related to postsecondary enrollment options and planning (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Gysbers, 2012). However, counselors routinely perform other duties such as crisis counseling, disciplinary action, and testing administration (ASCA, 2012; Bryan et al., 2011; Venezia & Kirst, 2005). Most counselors spend just 23% of their time for helping students plan college or career activities (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2011). Despite the increasing demand by students for time with counselors exclusively directed towards college planning, counselors must find a way to deliver appropriate planning services or face the prospect that students will leave high school unprepared for the postsecondary world (Adelman, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Perna et al., 2008; Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, & Swan, 2011). The importance of college and career planning to student postsecondary success means that, like many in public education, school counselors will be asked to organize delivery programs capable of providing quality services to all students with fewer resources and less time for individual attention.

Counselors must be adequately equipped to deliver college and career planning services through their professional training experience in order to successfully organize and design effective programs. Nationwide, over 600 counselor training programs are accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP). As part of a fully accredited program, CACREP stipulates that through coursework and practical experiences counseling students learn to "Understand[] current models of school counseling programs (e.g., American School Counselor Association [ASCA] National Model) and their integral relationship to the total educational program" (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2009, p. 40). The ASCA (2012) National Model addresses the need for counselors to be competent and efficient postsecondary guides with a comprehensive framework for school counseling programs. Relevant to college and career planning, the ASCA framework incorporates practices designed to take full advantage of the secondary school setting by combining individual delivery methods with group activities (ASCA, 2012). During individual encounters, "School counselors promote individual student planning by helping students develop individual learning plans, make the transition from elementary to middle, middle to high or make the transition from school to higher education or work" (ASCA, 2012, p. 86). Included in the ASCA group activities are school-wide college and career events as well as family and community meetings designed to develop support for student focus on college and career planning. For instance, "School counselors conduct planned activities outside the classroom to promote academic, career or personal/social development, such as college and career fairs, post-secondary site visits, student team building/leadership workshops, community/business tours" (ASCA, 2012, p. 85). School counseling programs that coordinate the involvement of peer and family groups during college and career planning show a

positive impact on student postsecondary choices and allow students to make the most of high school curriculum opportunities (Dahir, Burnham, & Stone, 2009; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Hill, 2008). Notwithstanding training programs accredited by national organizations, some counselors continue to report feeling unprepared by their education to deliver effective college and career planning services to students (Savitz-Romer, 2012). One possible explanation for the reported unease is that training paradigms are built upon national models designed to help all students reach postsecondary goals in a generic school setting. However, school counselors do not work in a generic national environment, they deliver services in a local setting governed by local district policies.

To provide services effectively, counselors face the challenge of implementing programs that are a combination of lessons learned during training, district policies based on state legislation, and local school practices developed over time. By providing funds and setting policies regarding the type of services available, local districts have a large influence on the counseling experience of individual students (Hill, 2008). Implementing a comprehensive (i.e., ASCA model based) counseling program is important because students derive many benefits (e.g., increased attendance, higher test scores, increased graduation rates, etc.) from counseling services based on the ASCA model (Carey, & Dimmitt, 2012). A common local roadblock to delivering student services is the student to counselor ratio. In 2011, the reported national average student to counselor ratio of 471:1 (ASCA, 2012a) was well above the 250:1 ratio recommended by the ASCA (2012). While lower student to counselor ratios are linked to improved student outcomes in areas such as attendance, graduation rates, and decreased disciplinary incidents the constraints on state and district funding prohibit many local education agencies from matching the ASCA recommended student to counselor ratios (Carey, Harrington,

Martin, & Hoffman, 2012; Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Stevenson, 2012; Hill, 2008; Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley, & Pierce, 2012; Lapan, Whitcomb, Aleman, 2012). District funding practices influence the counseling model selected, such as the traditional, clearing house, or brokering strategies (Hill, 2008), and therefore limit the number of employees as well as the expectations for each counselors ability to provide individual face-to-face counseling sessions (Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012). For example, if a district defines the counseling model along the lines of a traditional strategy fewer resources are devoted to making sure that all students have access to college and career planning material (Hill, 2008). But as part of a comprehensive model individual, or differentiated, counseling plans are used to meet the particular needs of every student (Burkard, Gillen, Martinez, & Skytte, 2012; Hill, 2008). These plans serve students by tailoring course selections to match student interests and skills while incorporating external influences (i.e., parents, peers, community) to increase the likelihood that students will be prepared for postsecondary options (Burkard et al., 2012; Carey et al., 2012; Conley & McGaughy, 2012). Without district support in personnel and resources, counselors cannot fully and effectively implement ASCA modeled counseling programs. As with counseling program models, a district's policy on college and career planning and readiness impacts counseling services provided. When districts implement counseling programs with a focus on individual student plans for college and career readiness, students realize benefits such as fewer suspensions, increased attendance rates, and an improved sense of belonging to the school (Dimmitt, & Wilkerson, 2012; Lapan et al., 2012).

Challenges to Implementing College Readiness Plans

Providing additional support to disadvantaged students. Another challenge to the comprehensive counseling model is ensuring that all students receive an adequate and equitable

22

level of services and access to postsecondary options, regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, SES or family background (ASCA, 2012; Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2014; Mansfield & Newcomb, 2014). In many secondary schools, parents from higher SES groups that have attended college tend to be the primary source of information for students concerning college and career information instead of counselors (Mckillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012). But for lower SES students whose families may not have college and career information options, school counselors are the primary source of information about postsecondary options (Mckillip et al., 2012). Counselors, therefore, bear a heavy responsibility to provide information to all students equitably and to reach out to students who may not have access to information from other sources (Mckillip et al., 2012). For students who are not in the top of their academic classes and for those students who lack high (i.e., college attendance or beyond) postsecondary goals, counselors will have to seek out the students to deliver information because the students are less likely to come looking for a counselor's assistance (Mckillip et al., 2012). Developing an equity viewpoint of student services to address the disparity in access means that counselors need to have "an orientation toward doing the right thing by students, which does not mean treating students equally regardless of their different needs" (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007 as cited by Mckillip et al., 2012, p. 7). Using an equity framework also means that counselors should spend less time with students that have the most access to postsecondary information and spend more time helping students who lack the social supports to make well developed postsecondary decisions (Mckillip et al., 2012). By using an equity viewpoint to deliver services, school counselors help close the readiness gap by providing additional individual services to students who require structural supports to achieve positive postsecondary outcomes.

23

Student factors affecting academic performance. Because academic results and performance are a major component of course planning, counselors need to consider the following student factors during course planning and selection. Counselors should also understand the challenges faced by disadvantaged students and be able to suggest practical pathways based on past student performance. In particular, employing an equity framework means that counselors are cognizant of how these issues impact at risk students and take proactive action to help these students avoid the negative experiences related to race/ethnicity, socioeconomic conditions, and gender.

Race/Ethnicity. At risk students face circumstances in public education that influence how counselors provide career and college planning services under an equity framework. Historically, Black and Hispanic students perform below White students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and mathematics assessments and while the gap has closed somewhat (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013) in recent decades the difference in achievement level is still a reality, even for students in suburban districts (Mickelson, 2009). Fewer minority students participate in rigorous courses, such as advanced placement and gifted education programs, than their counterparts while at the same time experiencing higher rates of assignment in special education programs. (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2014; Mansfield & Newcomb, 2014). Minority students, particularly Black males, also experience a higher incident rate of more severe disciplinary actions that result in out of school suspension compared to White students (Kinsler, 2011; Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2014; Mansfield & Newcomb, 2014). The time lost at school due to disciplinary action results in students suspended from school having lower test scores and lower graduation rates compared to non-suspended students (Arcia, 2006). The practice of tracking students by ability group also

24

represents an area where minority students experience reduced academic possibilities based on access to high school courses (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2014; Mansfield & Newcomb, 2014; Mansfield, Welton, & Grogan, 2014). Craver and Philipsen (2011) summarize the negative effects of tracking:

> In sum, poor and minority students are over-represented in the lower tracks [i.e., general or remedial courses] and underrepresented in the higher tracks [i.e., honors and AP courses], lower-class students seem to be negatively affected by tracking, and tracking seriously interferes with achieving equality of educational opportunity. (p. 143)

These claims are supported by a report from the College Board (2012) showing that 57% of White students participated in AP Examinations compared to only 9% of Black students and 17% of Hispanic students.

For school counselors, the impact here is that minority students face inherent challenges to academic performance related to their race/ethnicity while needing the same opportunities to participate in rigorous coursework as their counterparts in order to succeed in the postsecondary environment. The equity framework suggests that counselors must be advocates for minority students by enrolling them in higher-level courses and exposing students to courses linked to increased postsecondary readiness.

Socioeconomic class. Poverty, defined as being part of the lower socioeconomic classes, has many negative impacts on student academic achievement. When compared to their peers, many lower SES students enter public education with fewer cognitive abilities due to environmental factors associated with poverty (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2014; Mansfield & Newcomb, 2014). Berliner (2009) details several contributing out-of-school factors (OSF) and their impact on academic achievement:

This brief details six OSFs common among the poor that significantly affect the health and learning opportunities of children, and accordingly limit what schools can accomplish *on their own*: (1) low birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences on children; (2) inadequate medical, dental, and vision care, often a result of inadequate or no medical insurance; (3) food insecurity; (4) environmental pollutants; (5) family relations and family stress; and (6) neighborhood characteristics. These OSFs are related to a host of poverty-induced physical, sociological, and psychological problems that children often bring to school, ranging from neurological damage and attention disorders to excessive absenteeism, linguistic underdevelopment, and oppositional behavior. (p. 3)

These OSFs negatively influence student achievement and are not evenly distributed throughout society but are concentrated in schools serving students in poverty; schools where students are segregated by race, ethnicity, and class (Berliner, 2009). Berliner (2009) ultimately concludes that unless these OSFs are more evenly distributed throughout the student population the achievement gap between lower SES students and their more affluent counterparts will remain. School counselors need to understand this connection between SES and race and how students in poverty often begin school at an academic disadvantage. This means that lower SES students require additional opportunities and support in order to attempt to close the academic achievement gap.

Gender. Many conditions, including many forms of sexual harassment, in public education affect the performance of females in high school (Mansfield & Newcomb, 2014). Hill and Kearl (2011) found that 56% of females report experiencing some form of sexual harassment and 13% of those females described being touched in an inappropriate sexual manner. Students experiencing sexual harassment report staying home from school, avoiding school activities, and

even changing schools to avoid further incidents (Hill & Kearl, 2011). Female students even experience differential treatment by teachers that dissuade them, sometimes inadvertently, from pursuing fields related to science, mathematics, or technology (Mansfield & Newcomb, 2014). This reality could have a negative impact on female opportunities because completing higher-level coursework in mathematics (e.g., Algebra II and higher) is a strong predictor of postsecondary success and college course selection (Kowski, 2013; Mansfield & Newcomb, 2014). Not surprisingly, the gender gap for female participation in bachelor degree programs for mathematics and science persists with female degree completers representing only a third of degrees awarded (Radford, Lew, & Shaw, 2013). However, female students report taking technology related courses, in part, due to encouragement received from teachers (Downes & Looker, 2011; Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2014; Mansfield & Newcomb, 2014; Mansfield, Welton, & Grogan, 2014).   This provides an opportunity for counselors to assist teachers to encourage more females to pursue coursework in mathematics and sciences fields and to talk with female students about the benefits of mathematics and science courses to postsecondary success.

Males in public school face their own challenges to academic success as well. Across all racial groups, males are twice as likely to be suspended from school due to behavioral issues than females (Sullivan, Klingbeil, & Van Norman, 2013). Regardless of race or socioeconomic status, suspension is linked to an increased likelihood of dropping out of school (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). Not unexpectedly, male students are 40% more likely to drop out of school than their female counterparts (Lamote et al., 2012). Academically, male students generally perform better than females in mathematics but often lag behind female students in reading (Stoet & Geary, 2013). This trend may indicate that male students are prepared for studies in mathematics and science but it may also indicate that male underperformance in

27

reading and writing could impact postsecondary opportunities due to lower GPAs or repeating courses.

It is incumbent upon counselors to understand how the situations faced by male and female students are often unique to gender and how these issues can impact academic performance. Both genders face threats to school attendance, females from harassment issues and males from discipline related offenses, which could be mitigated by early counselor interactions. For females, counselors need to encourage students to attempt coursework linked to academic success, such as mathematics, while exploring careers in traditionally male occupations such as engineering or technology. For males, counselors could encourage students to be well rounded and not ignore reading or the liberal arts in favor of pursuing science and mathematics courses. Educators must prepare both genders for a wide variety of occupations to reduce the gender gap prevalent in the postsecondary career fields dominated by males, such as science, engineering, and mathematics) or females (e.g., allied health and education) (Craver and Philipsen, 2011; Radford, Lew, & Shaw, 2013).

Counselors as Policy Interpretation and Implementation

Over the past three decades, policy scholars developed the idea that policy implementation is an interpretive act (Lipsky, 1980; Mansfield, 2013). The daily action of teachers represents educational policy interpretation at the local level (Goldstein, 2008; Lipsky 1980; Spencer 2000; Spillane, 2004; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Because how teachers behave in the classroom and how they do or do not follow policy mandates represents a form of de facto policy making and interpretation through their implementation (or lack thereof) of a policy (Spillane, 2004; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). Goldstein (2008) supports this idea, "Because teachers enact public policy within the specific, particular, local context of interactions

28

with individual students, each teacher–student interaction represents a unique classroom policy encounter" (p. 451). The idea of "street-level" policy making by teachers can be extended to secondary counselors because counselors are the people directly linked to policy implementation through the creation of individual student programs of study. Therefore, the interactions local district counselors have with students and the processes counselors use to create student career plans also reflects meaning counselors derive from the Academic and Career Plan policy (Yanow, 2000). That is, if the local counselors support the *Academic and Career Plan* policy, then it is reasonable that their actions should incorporate policy suggestions such as the use of a "Academic and Career Plan" form; maintaining a focus on "after high school"; consideration of the student's goals, interests, and abilities; the involvement of parents or guardians in the planning process; and a focus on helping every student achieve success.

Conclusion

The process of preparing students for successful postsecondary opportunities is a complex series of events and choices where school counselors play a critical role. It is through counselors that most students are exposed to the world beyond public education and it is through counselors that most students establish goals for their education. Because counselors play such an important role in the future of students, understanding why counselors make decisions about implementing policies, such as the Academic and Career Plans, provides educational administrators and policymakers with valuable insights when planning and managing comprehensive counseling programs.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

This study addresses the intersection of policy implementation at the school counselor level, the policy intent as described at the state legislature and district levels, and how student demographics might influence policy interpretation and implementation fidelity. To best capture these phenomena, a mixed-methods approach is necessary. The purpose of this chapter is to explain the collection tools used in this study as well as the theoretical framework undergirding the methodology.

Philosophical Foundations

The philosophical assumptions that guide the research process provide the means to understand the methodological choices made during the inquiry process (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Accordingly, Crotty (1998) delineates four questions that should guide and inform the social science research process: 1) What methods were used?; 2) What methodology governed choices and use of methods?; 3) What theoretical perspective undergirded the methodology in question?, and; 4) What epistemology informed this theoretical perspective? (p. 2). Each of Crotty's questions are addressed in turn; beginning with the epistemology that guides the overall research process followed by the theoretical perspective that shapes the social science lens used to direct inquiry and interpret the results. A discussion of the methodology selected to address the research questions is presented ahead of an explanation of the data collection methods for this study.

Epistemology

An epistemology, as applied to social science research, is the general theory that delineates how knowledge is gained through inquiry and is formally defined as "the study of the

method and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity; broadly: the theory of knowledge" (Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged, 2002). Cresswell and Plano Clark (2011) incorporate the theory of knowledge into the "worldview" or paradigm that informs the research process. While Crotty (1998) identifies three epistemologies (i.e., Objectivism, Constructionism, and Subjectivism), Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) posit that a fourth worldview, Pragmatism, is especially suited to mixed methods designs. A Pragmatic worldview is one where research is more focused on the research question and how to find the answers than the theory behind how knowledge is created (Creswell, 2013). The Pragmatic paradigm is one that recognizes the position that one theory is sometimes insufficient to fully answer the research questions. Concordantly, this mixed methods study employed different theories of knowledge dictated by the type of data collected. During the quantitative phase of research the survey data was examined from the Postpositivist perspective with an emphasis on knowledge coming from survey responses that describe counselor implementation beliefs and actions (Crotty, 1998). The qualitative interview data was examined from a Constructivist perspective where knowledge is gained through understanding participant's responses to interview questions that illuminate the meaning and sensemaking apparent in counselor behaviors (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, the Pragmatic framework is an appropriate worldview, or theory, for this study because it allowed for the interpretation of results from the quantitative and qualitative data collection phases and provided a reasonable platform for evaluating the research questions from multiple perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is commonly described as the "lens" through which research is interpreted and evaluated (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998). Creswell and Plano Clark (2011)

31

argue that theories developed through research in the social sciences are useful for supporting the development and interpretation of mixed methods research. The central theory lens for this study derived from contemporary policy implementation research whereby policies are not evaluated according to financial benefits realized from the policy nor from the evaluation of test scores resulting from policy implementation. Rather, this study contributes to the contemporary theory of policy implementation research founded on the idea that policy research "aims to uncover how particular policies, people, and places interact to produce particular results and to accumulate knowledge about these contingencies" (Honig, 2009, p. 338). The present study employed this interpretive framework to elucidate how school counselor beliefs and actions about the ACP policy influence implementation by looking at counselor interactions within the context of a comprehensive counseling model.

The design and implementation of education policy is hardly a repeatable process that varies according to particular variables and only within a certain degree of error. Instead, policy formulation and implementation is a complex intersection of facets that are interconnected and dependent upon each other (Mansfield, 2013). Friedrich (1940) set the stage for this line of inquiry more than 70 years ago when he noted, "Public policy, to put it flatly, is a continuous process, the formulation of which is inseparable from its execution. Public policy is being formed as it is being executed, and it is likewise being executed as it is being formed" (p. 6). This interconnection means that while state legislatures may have particular ideals and goals in mind for a policy, the policy actors (i.e., counselors, teachers, and administrators) create their own implementation ideals and goals when confronted with policy mandates (Lipsky, 1980; Mansfield, 2013; Spilane et al., 2002; Yanow, 2000). Therefore, evaluating policy

implementation from the local policy actor perspective can provide a deeper understanding of how the intended policy design manifests at the "street-level."

To investigate the local point of view this study relied on the sensemaking lens prevalent in contemporary policy implementation research. Datnow & Park (2009) explain that the sensemaking theories have their earliest origins in the "mutual adaptation" perspective where research uncovered that policy outcomes ultimately depend on local people. Datnow & Park (2009) explain: "Rooted in social psychology and organizational theory, the sense-making framework presents social actors as complex meaning-makers who do not merely react to external stimuli but engage in interpretation in order to act upon their environment" (p. 350). To further elaborate on the dynamics present with in this complex process, Wieck, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005 as cited in Datnow & Park, 2009, p. 350) note:

> Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing. Viewed as a significant process of organization, sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those circumstances. (p. 409)

This illustrates that people actively construct their environment by interacting with others and use their beliefs and experiences to direct future actions. So as counselors provide college and career planning services in a comprehensive program they are engaging in sensemaking within a complex setting that shapes policy implementation in accordance with their personal understandings and beliefs. The complex nature of these interactions necessitates research methods capable of providing deeper understanding and a richer description of the multiple

33

facets related to the implementation environment (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Therefore, this mixed methods study first used quantitative survey data to capture counselor implementation actions, beliefs, and interpretations concerning the policy and then used qualitative interviews to develop a richer understanding of the counselor's sensemaking processes.

Data Collection

As described by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), an explanatory mixed methods design is one where information is collected sequentially and where data collection from subsequent phases (or strands) is informed by previous phases. In the present study, data collection focused on the understanding and value of the ACP policy as viewed through the actions and beliefs of school counselors. The mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods is critical for this study because quantitative data alone is insufficient to provide the depth of meaning created by the counselors. The quantitative survey generated a picture of counselor actions and beliefs by asking counselors to respond to questions regarding what they think about, and how they implement aspects of, the ACP by providing survey responses. While the first phase results provided descriptive quantitative data that categorizes how many counselors respond to implementation and belief questions, it could not provide the impetus for counselors selecting those particular responses. In order to examine the deeper meaning and sense-making processes counselors required an opportunity to explain the reasons for their selections through semi-structured interviews. The explanatory method is appropriate for this study because the data gathered from the quantitative survey directly informed the subsequent qualitative interview sessions and created greater depth of meaning and knowledge (Bryman, 2006; Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006).

When selecting a mixed methods design, Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) recommend four questions to consider:

1. The level of interaction between [phases];

2. The relative priority of the [phases];

3. The timing of the [phases];

4. The procedures for mixing [phases]. (p. 64)

During the discussion of mixed method designs Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) suggest that the typical explanatory design will: be interactive, give priority to the quantitative phase, employ sequential timing, and will interface during data collection. Addressing these questions for the present study demonstrates why the sequential explanatory design was appropriate to answer the research questions. First, the phases for this study were interactive because the quantitative first phase results informed the qualitative second phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). That is, the second phase interview questions were derived from responses received during the first phase. Second, the quantitative phase in this study had priority because the data collected were used to determine how the qualitative interviews were conducted. The main function of the qualitative phase was to explain and expand the results obtained in the first phase. Third, the two phases of this study had sequential timing because the results from phase were collected and a preliminary analysis performed prior to collection of phase two data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Fourth, the phases for this study are mixed during data collection. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) explain that, "This connection [between phases] occurs by using the results of the first [phase] to shape the collection of data in the second [phase] by specifying research questions, selecting participants, and developing data collection protocols or instruments" (p. 67). For the present study the phase one results were used to identify

35

participants for the phase two interviews as well as determining the questions and topics used in the qualitative interview. From the evaluation of Creswell and Plano Clark 's (2011) four questions it is clear that the present study met the requirements for utilizing the sequential explanatory method and that the method provided a beneficial structural design for conducting the research and for addressing the research questions.

Sequence

Phase one: Quantitative survey. The goal of the first phase of this study was to collect data on counselor knowledge and practices through the use of a survey of all middle school and high school counselors in Coal County who are willing to participate. To accomplish this goal, several "measurable objectives" (Sue & Ritter, 2012) were necessary:

1. Describe counselor implementation actions related to the ACP policy (*Objective 1*);

2. Assess counselor knowledge about the ACP policy and its intent (*Objective 2*);

3. Ascertain counselor beliefs about the value of the ACP to student academic and career planning (*Objective 3*);

4. Examine counselor beliefs about race and postsecondary options relating to equity and access issues (*Objective 4*); and

5. Identify how student race and socioeconomic factors contribute to counselor implementation practices (*Objective 5*).

Rationale and design. The survey instrument questions are shown in Appendix A and are categorized by survey objective. The first objective is aimed at understanding how counselors implement the ACP policy by asking if counselors engage in actions and behaviors

that are contained within the Technical Assistance Document (e.g., talking with students about personal interests when designing a program of study). The open-ended question for this objective relate to issues that counselors may encounter during the implementation of the policy such as what type of support they would like or challenges they face using the ACP processes and formats. The second objective relates to the conceptual understanding of the ACP process possessed by counselors. The survey questions included were linked to specific items described in the Technical Assistance Document (TAD) for Academic and Career Plans (VDOE, 2010a) such as what types of documents are required and who is responsible for signing the documents. The third objective asked counselors to reflect upon their experiences with the ACP process and to describe how (or if) the ACP policy is helpful to student program of study planning. The fourth objective presented statements that indicate agreement or disagreement with an equity framework consistent with the idea that at-risk students require additional resources (i.e., time, information, access) in order to make informed decisions about postsecondary options. These questions are opinion questions and do not necessarily ask counselors to relate these ideas to counseling actions. The fifth objective investigated how counselor implementation actions are linked to student factors such as race and socioeconomic status. Counselors were asked to evaluate how racial or socioeconomic factors affect the amount of counseling services provided to students. To improve response rates, questions for objectives three, four, and five were written so that the counselors are able to answer the questions using past experiences and training without needing to consult outside resources or information sources (Mertens, 2010; Mitchell & Jolley, 2010; Sue & Ritter, 2012).

  To address the objectives the present study employed a simple descriptive approach that is particularly useful for describing "the characteristics of a sample at one point in time"

37

(Mertens, 2010, p. 177). The objectives of the survey help to describe how counselors understand their role in the career planning process and how the ACP is used during this process to prepare student programs of study. Another important objective of the survey was to understand the value counselors place on the ACP policy as well as how student factors influenced counselor thoughts and actions about the process.

To improve the power of the instrument, responses to questions in the survey include multiple choice, true-false responses, open-ended responses, and Likert-type scale interval responses (Mitchell & Jolley, 2010; Sue & Ritter, 2012). The Likert-type scales for the present study used a five-point scale to provide sufficient discrimination without confusing participants or increasing non-response rates (Sue & Ritter, 2012). The instrument presented questions with responses using *fully labeled scale ratings* that have been shown to improve reliability compared to *end labeled scales* and are more successful when presented using standard scale labels as shown in Figure 1 (Sue & Ritter, 2012).

End labeled scale:
Do you wash your hands after using the restroom?

Never ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Always

Fully labeled scale:
Do you wash your hands after using the restroom?

Never   Rarely   Sometimes   Often   Always
☐   ☐   ☐   ☐   ☐

Figure 1. Examples of end labeled and fully labeled scales.

The survey instrument took the form of a web-based (GoogleDocs form) survey accessed by participants via an email message sent to every secondary counselor in Coal County using the

38

district email system. The questions were randomized from the order listed in Appendix A by using a random number function in Microsoft Excel so that questions from different objectives were distributed throughout the survey. Survey instruments of this nature are appropriate in research, such as the present study, where anonymous responses may provide more honest answers; when all targeted participants have access to the Internet and a secure email system, when the sample frame can be accessed through a single email system; and when a convenience sample is appropriate as part of a mixed methods, non-experimental design (Sue & Ritter, 2012).

Because the survey questions had not been previously used, an indication of their validity was necessary (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2012; Mertens, 2010; Mitchell & Jolley, 2010). Therefore, the first draft survey questions were presented to a class of graduate students enrolled in the School Counseling degree program at the Virginia Commonwealth University. The students were presented with the proposed questions in paper form and asked to answer the questions, if they could, and to provide comments regarding the wording and clarity of each question. The students provided written feedback indicating questions they felt were confusing or unclear and suggested corrections. The student comments were compiled and minor modifications to the first draft questions were made as necessary to improve the question wording and reduce sources of potential confusion. For example, several of the statement questions originally contained the phrase "Please respond to the following statement." However, several of the students found the repetitive nature of the statement to be distracting and asked that it be removed.

Participants. The participants of this study represent a non-probability convenience sample of the 113 middle school and high school counselors in Coal County who self-selected participation in the survey by responding to the invitation email (Sue & Ritter, 2012). Table 3

39

contains participant responses to demographic questions and shows that the majority of the 41 respondents to the survey were White (83%) and female (92%). Most participants also reported no classroom teaching experience (64%). Of those who did have teaching experience, 50% were in the classroom for fewer than five years. The majority of counselors also responded that they had been school counselors for fewer than ten years (53%) and that they did graduate from a school counseling degree program accredited by CACREP (73%).

Table 2.

Counselor Demographic Identifiers as a Percentage of Responses

Identifier	%
Race	
White	0.83
Black	0.15
Hispanic	0.02
Gender	
Female	0.92
Male	0.08
Counseling Experience (Years)	
0 – 5	0.30
6 – 10	0.23
11 – 15	0.15
16 – 20	0.20
20 +	0.13
First Time Counselors	
Yes	0.49
No	0.51
Previous Teaching Experience	
Yes	0.36
No	0.64
Previous Teaching Experience (Years)	
0 – 5	0.50
6 – 10	0.17
11 – 15	0.17
16 – 20	0.11
20 +	0.06
CACREP Degree Program Accreditation*	
Yes	0.73
No	0.12
Not Sure	0.15

* Participants were asked if their counseling degree program
was accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling &
Related Educational Programs (CACREP)

Survey administration. The invitation email sent to counselors (Appendix B) contained a brief statement about the research project and described the goal of the research as well as provided information about the optional gift card raffle for participation. The first email was followed by a reminder email (Appendix C) sent one week after the initial invitation to encourage completion of the survey. The survey remained active for two weeks, at the end of which submissions were no longer collected. After participants choose to follow the survey hyperlink included in the invitation email they were presented with the informed consent form. At this point participants were required to indicate that they had read and agreed to the informed consent statement before proceeding. Participants opting not to proceed selected "No" and the web form closed the session and directed them away from the active survey. Also, participants were able to exit the survey at any time by closing their web browser. Closing the browser window resulted in the web form discarding any information already contained in the survey. To preserve the intent of the informed consent form, acknowledging the informed consent statement was the only question that must be answered in order to submit the survey, all other questions were listed as optional by the instrument. All participants began the survey by answering questions to collect demographic information. After completing the demographic information the remaining questions were asked in a random order so that participants are not given extra information about the nature of the question that might influence responses (Mitchell & Jolley, 2010). Upon submission of the final survey question participants were asked to take part in the phase two face-to-face interviews. Finally, a "Thank You" screen appeared and participants were given the opportunity to enter the raffle by accessing another GoogleDocs form.

To preserve privacy, responses from the two surveys were not linked and information collected in the raffle survey was limited to the participant's email address. An Amazon.com gift

card was selected as the raffle prize because the only information needed to purchase the card for the winner is a valid email address. At the completion of phase one data collection the winner of the raffle was selected by assigning random numbers (via Microsoft Excel) to each phase one participant and selecting the participant whose random number was the smallest value (closest to 0). The winning participant was notified via email and Amazon.com delivered the gift card to the winning participant's email.

Phase two: Qualitative Interviews.

Rationale and design. The goal of the second phase was to provide deeper meaning and understanding to the survey responses by allowing counselors to express possible motivations for the actions and beliefs identified in the first phase. Thus adding to the overall description of the sensemaking process employed by counselors during policy implementation. Because the counselors are the last individuals to come between the policy and the students, it is important to understand how counselors interpret the policy and enact it on a daily basis in order to evaluate how the policy intent is, or is not, conveyed to students and parents. Yanow's (2000) model for interpretive policy analysis includes accessing "local knowledge" to discover the meaning different "interpretive communities" assign to a policy. To access this local knowledge, the present study used semi-structured face-to-face interviews, and drew a sample of counselors from the participants who indicated their willingness to participate in interviews during the survey phase.

The face-to-face interviews employed a semi-structured format that provided direction for the line of inquiry while allowing the researcher and counselors an opportunity to explore additional topics in a conversational atmosphere (Cresswell, 2013, Mertens, 2010). Yanow (2000) observed that, "Interpretive policy analysis explores the contrasts between policy

43

meanings as intended by policymakers−"authored texts"−and the possibly variant and even incommensurable meanings−"constructed texts"−made of them by other policy-relevant groups" (p. 9). So the use of a semi-structured interview format gives participants a chance to examine and explain their reasons for implementing the ACP policy as well as a time to explain and how they interpret the intent of the ACP policy.

The interview questions in phase two were designed to supplement the knowledge gained from the survey by asking counselors to provide explanations for the phase one results. By allowing counselors to explore their reasoning process the interviews yielded information not available on the survey instrument. The interview questions were organized to reflect data collected during the phase one survey and were asked in the order shown in Appendix C. Unlike the written survey, the conversational nature of the interview led to questions asked according to survey objectives in order to provide a logical flow for the discussion.

As with the survey questions, the interview questions were previously unused and were therefore presented to a panel of graduate students for suggestions and feedback. This time, the students selected to help with reviewing the questions were from a different class than was used for the survey questions. These students were in their second year of a School Counseling degree program at the Virginia Commonwealth University. The author presented each question to the class using Microsoft PowerPoint and provided a minute or two for the class to read the question. After which, the author stated the intent behind the question and asked if students would agree that the question asked for the intended information. The students also provided suggestions on how to reword the question to achieve the intended response. For example, the original version of Question 3 under Objective 3 read: "How important do you think the ACP is to students?" The intent of this question was to access feedback counselors may have received

from students about the planning process. When reviewed by the class a consensus developed that the stated intent was not clear from the question. After a short discussion with the class this question was changed to: "Would you please describe a time when a student gave you his/her thoughts about how important the college and career planning sessions (and the ACP form) were to their postsecondary preparation?" The change improved the question by clarifying that the response should include a personal story the counselor remembered about a student. Also, the rephrased question helped the counselor to frame a response in terms of what the student said rather than a response framed by how the counselor perceives student thoughts about the planning process.

Participants. The counselors eligible to participate in phase two were counselors who, during the phase one survey, indicated they would be willing to conduct an interview on the survey topics. The selection of counselors was a purposeful sample that represents a maximal variation approach where participants are selected to represent distinct variations within the group (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2012). Because socioeconomic status is often linked to race and ethnicity (NCES, 2013), an examination of the student populations allowed for the schools to be categorized by socioeconomic status. Table 3 shows the student body characteristics for both race and socioeconomics groups (i.e., economically disadvantaged) for each high school in Coal County. To capture maximal variation for the phase two interviews, meetings were requested from counselors serving in the following locations: one high SES high school (School F), one middle SES high school (School H), one low SES high school (School I). Because middle school counselors were part of the survey sample, meetings with middle school counselors were scheduled as well. Two middle school counselors were selected for interviews; one counselor from a school whose students will attend High School F, and one counselor from a school whose

students will attend High School I. Since the selected schools represent the extremes of both minority population and socioeconomic groups, responses from counselors at these locations provided an opportunity for exploring how contrasting student demographics might influence counselor behaviors and attitudes.

Table 3.

Coal County Schools by Minority and Socioeconomic Status

School	Total	Students Minority	Economically Disadvantaged
A	2062	26%	16%
B	1679	54%	33%
C	1890	41%	20%
D	1407	38%	20%
E	1927	37%	20%
F	1476	14%	6%
G	317	68%	60%
H	1798	31%	15%
I	1646	86%	47%
J	2120	15%	5%
K	2322	35%	20%

Note: Minority includes Black and Hispanic students.
Data from VDOE (2013) fall membership report.

Table 4 provides an overview of the counselors who volunteered for the interview phase of this study. All five participants were White women and four of the five counselors were in their first counseling position. However, only Ms. B was in her first year as a school counselor because Ms. A, Ms. C, and Ms. D explained that while they are in their first position as school

46

counselors they had been at the same school for at least two years. The demographic

information in Table 4 demonstrates that the counselors interviewed for phase two have similar

characteristics to the phase one participants.

Table 4.

Interview Participants School Assignment and Demographic Identifiers

Participant	School SES Group	Age	Identifier Years of Counseling Experience	First Time Counselor	Previous Teaching Experience	CACREP Degree Program
Ms. A	Low*	30 – 39	11 – 15	Yes	No	Not Sure
Ms. B	High	20 – 29	0 – 5	Yes	No	Yes
Ms. C	Low	30 – 39	0 – 5	Yes	No	Yes
Ms. D	Middle	50 – 59	11 – 15	Yes	Yes	No
Ms. E	High*	50 – 59	16 – 20	No	Yes	Yes

 * Indicates a middle school location.

Administration procedures. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in the school

counselor's office and the author arranged for each meeting by scheduling an appointment with

the counselor. This allowed time for the counselors to reflect on the survey topics and provided

ample time for the interviews free from outside distractions and interruptions. Each session

began with the author reading a prepared introduction from a script that included a brief

description of the purpose of the interview and review of the informed consent document. To

foster a candid discussion, counselors were encouraged to answer questions in whatever manner

seemed appropriate to them and to discuss any topic they thought was relevant. The counselors

were also reassured that there were no "right or wrong" answers and that the author was not there

to be critical of their responses but only to collect their thoughts on the subject. The interviews were recorded using an electronic audio recorder and field notes were developed. Each interview audio file was transcribed by a professional third party service and then compared to the audio recording by the author for accuracy. After the transcripts were verified, member checking was performed and a copy of the participant's transcript was emailed to each counselor along with a request to review the document for accuracy (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011; Mertens, 2010). The author also contacted the counselors by phone to ensure that what the counselors read on the transcript accurately captured their thoughts about the topic. Each counselor reported that the transcripts were accurate. Several of the counselors commented on how, because of the transcript, they intend to reduce the number of times they say "you know" or "like" during a conversation. Conversational idiosyncrasies aside, this member checking process affirmed the transcripts accurately reflect participant's thoughts and comments as recorded during the interview.

Conclusion

To develop a comprehensive picture of counselor behavior related to the ACP policy a mixed methods approach is necessary so that both the "what" (implementation actions) and the "why" (thoughts and beliefs) behind counselor actions may be explored. School administrators need to understand each of these components in order to effectively manage the counseling program and provide the best services possible to each student. The present study provides details about counselor motivations related to implementation practices, equity issues, and street level policy interpretation by examining multiple aspects of counselor behavior. In doing so, a more complete picture of how the ACP policy is enacted at the local level is developed allowing for a comprehensive evaluation of policy implementation versus policy intent.

48

FINDINGS

The quantitative results are presented first to establish a baseline for counselor responses and are discussed according to the five objectives established in the Methods chapter. Each survey objective is discussed in terms of the percentage of responses for each question and by the creation of combined indicators used to compare counselor thoughts and behaviors to the policy intent. For each objective the data coding process is presented first followed by the raw data results broken down by survey question. The survey questions listed in Appendix A are coded with a question label (e.g., Q15) that indicates the position of the question in the online survey. For ease of reporting, survey questions are referred to in the present study by the coded labels. A discussion of survey results related to the development of the interview questions follows the survey data. All of the figures in this section were created using IBM's SPSS 22 for Mac and frequency data was processed using SPSS 22 for Mac and Microsoft Excel for Mac 2011. This intermediate section provides additional information for how the survey questions were used to inform the interview process. The final section presents the counselor interview responses in support of answering the questions posed by the survey objectives.

Survey Results

Objective 1: Describe counselor implementation actions related to the ACP policy.

Data Coding. To assess counselor implementation practices, participants were asked to consider statements matching guidelines and information contained in the Technical Assistance Document. Responses were coded so that a higher rating represented closer adherence to TAD guidelines. A selection by the counselor of "Always" indicates that the counselor follows the implementation intent of the policy at each opportunity while responses of "Never" indicate

49

regular deviance from policy implementation intent. Responses were coded on a five-point scale with "Always" equal to 5.0 and "Never" equal to 1.0. Using this schema, a question with a response mean of 5.0 represents an implementation action that is performed in a manner consistent with the policy intent at every opportunity. In the present study, a question with a mean score above 3.0 indicates that counselors routinely implement the identified policy aspect in a manner consistent with the expectations of the Board of Education. As such, questions with mean scores above 3.0 are considered to match policy intent while those with mean scores below 3.0 do not. For example, counselors were asked: "When you talk with students about course selection, do you ask students about their interests, goals, and postsecondary plans?" Counselors responding with "Always", "Often", or "Sometimes" are considered to be following the TAD guidelines and thus represent counselors demonstrating implementation fidelity to the policy intent. However, participants choosing "Never" or "Rarely" indicate behaviors inconsistent with the intended implementation process and therefore have poor implementation fidelity.

Results. Responses for Objective 1 are shown in Table 5 as percentages of participants for each item along with a mean score for each question. The majority of participants (93%) reported that they do ask students about postsecondary goals and plans during course planning sessions. Additionally, most counselors report incorporating challenging courses and postsecondary options linked to student interest into the student's course plan when possible. Responses to question Q21 (M = 2.54) show that counselors feel they are not able to modify course selections more often than once per year.

Table 5.

Counselor Implementation Actions Related to the ACP Policy

ID	Question	Percent of Responses					Mean
		1	2	3	4	5	
Q7	When you talk with students about course selection, do you ask students about their interests, goals, and postsecondary plans?	.00	.02	.05	.29	.63	4.54
Q26	Do you feel that you are able to help students create a challenging course schedule based on their interests and postsecondary plans?	.00	.05	.29	.51	.15	3.76
Q27	During planning sessions with students are you able to suggest postsecondary institutions that match their academic and career goals?	.03	.13	.34	.39	.11	3.42
Q21	Are you able to modify the student's course selections based on input from students and parents more often than once a year?	.12	.41	.29	.15	.02	2.54

To create an overall *Implementation Fidelity Indicator* for Objective 1, counselor responses to each of the four questions were combined into an individual score from 1.0 to 5.0. Again, an individual counselor mean above 3.0 indicates implementation of the ACP policy components on a routine basis in a manner consistent with the policy intent. Using SPSS 22, a frequency distribution of counselor scores (Figure 2) was created and shows an overall Implementation Fidelity Indicator of 3.56 for all participants with five counselors (12.2%) reporting a score below 3.0.

51
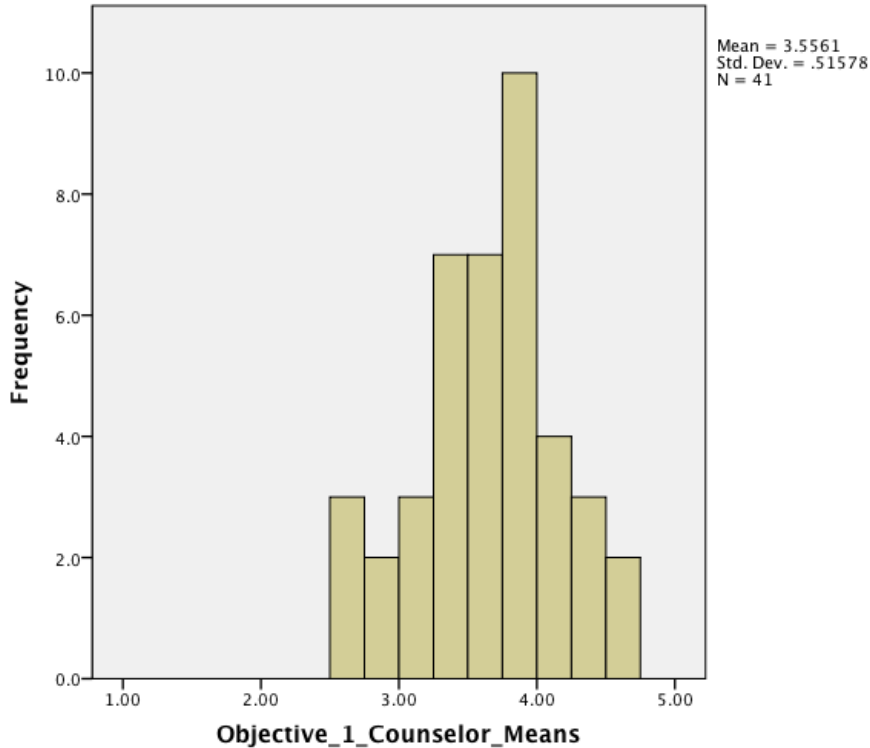
Figure 2. Counselor Implementation Fidelity Indicator

Objective 2: Assess counselor knowledge about the ACP policy and its intent.

Data Coding. Each of the questions for Objective 2 asked counselors to identify specific details addressed by the TAD such as required components of the plan, personnel responsibilities, and topics related to how student plans are updated and maintained. Because these questions are based on a right and wrong dichotomy, correct responses were coded as a 1.0 and incorrect answers were coded as 0.0. For the true/false questions, counselors selecting the third option "I don't know" on the survey also indicate a lack of knowledge about the answer. Therefore, these responses were also scored as 0.0. Counselors scoring above a 3.0 under this scheme represent participants with a good understanding of the ACP policy while counselors scoring 0.0 demonstrate no understanding of the ACP components.

52

Results. The results for Objective 2 are in Table 6 as the number of responses for each item. Almost all of the participants (95.1%) knew that a parent or guardian was the third required signature on the ACP and 82.9% of counselors knew that the ACP must include a postsecondary career pathway based on student academic and career interests. When asked to identify a required component of the ACP, just under half of the counselors (44%) selected the correct response (career pathway linked to student interests) while 56% of the counselors incorrectly identified annual updates as the required component. A majority of counselors also incorrectly identified the minimum required number of ACP updates with 73.2% of participants selecting either "False" or "I don't know" responses to question Q29.

Table 6.

Counselor Knowledge About the ACP Policy and Intent

ID	Question	Number of Responses		
		1	2	3
Q1	A completed Academic and Career Plan must be signed by the counselor, the student, and: 1) an Assistant Principal 2) a Parent or Guardian 3) the School Counseling Coordinator	0	39*	2
Q3	Which of the following is a required component of an Academic and Career Plan? 1) A postsecondary career pathway based on the student's academic and career interests. 2) The Academic and Career Plan must be updated at least one time per year in grades 9 – 12. 3) The initial Academic and Career Plan is generated by counselors in grade 9.	18*	23	0
Q29	According to new Virginia regulations, high school counselors are required, at a minimum, to update student Academic and Career Plans in 9th grade and the 11th grade. 1) True 2) False 3) I don't know	11*	12	18
Q18	A student's program of study should be linked to a career pathway that matches the student's identified interests and abilities. 1) True 2) False 3) I don't know	34*	4	3

* Indicates the correct response

Counselor *ACP Knowledge Scores* were created by determining a participant total from

0.0 to 4.0 based on the number of correct responses. Using this scheme, a score of 4.0 represents

excellent knowledge and understanding of the ACP policy while a score of 0.0 represents little to

no understanding of the policy. Figure 3 contains a frequency distribution of counselor scores

and shows that the ACP Knowledge Scores are almost evenly divided with 20 counselors scoring a 3.0 or above and 21 scoring a 2.0 or below.
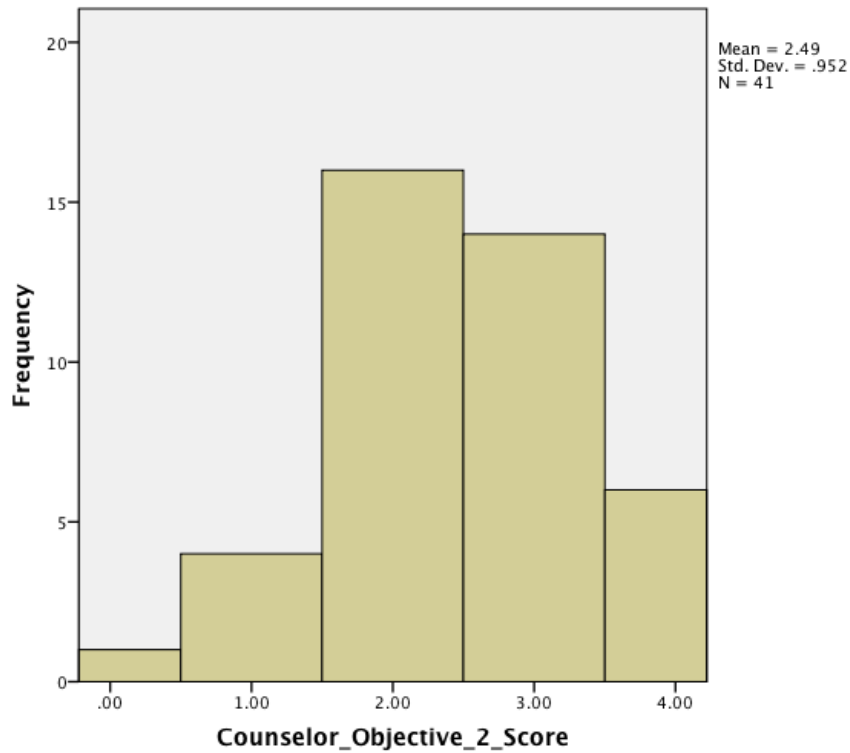
Figure 3. Counselor ACP Knowledge Scores

Objective 3: Ascertain counselor beliefs about the value of the ACP to student academic and career planning.

Data Coding. Responses to Objective 3 utilized the same coding method as Objective 1, in that responses indicating agreement such as "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" are coded as a 4.0 and 5.0, respectively. Therefore, counselor answers to these questions indicate agreement, or disagreement, with the idea that the ACP policy is useful for course planning and that counselors find the processes described by the TAD valuable in selecting courses for students. As shown in Appendix A, the questions were constructed so that agreement with an item (selecting "Agree" or

"Strongly Agree") implies a satisfaction with the policy and/or the processes addressed by the policy. For example, question Q22 asks counselors to rate their agreement with the statement: "An Academic and Career Plan is a valuable tool for organizing and planning a student's school program of study." Using this method, a response of "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" denotes that the counselors find the ACP valuable and selections of "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree" denote that counselors do not find the ACP valuable for planning a program of study. The neutral option (Neither agree or disagree), was coded as a 3.0 and therefore questions with a mean close to 3.0 could indicate either a slightly positive, slightly negative, or no opinion of the policy aspect.

  Results. The results for Objective 3 are shown in Table 7 as percentages of responses for each item along with a mean score for each question. Just over half of counselors (53%) responded that the ACP is a useful tool for organizing student programs of study. Counselors did not feel that the ACP is a useful device for describing student postsecondary goals with 42% of participants selecting "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" for question Q28. When asked to consider the intended purpose of the ACP to maximize postsecondary success (question Q17), 78% of counselors agreed that the ACP fulfills that objective. Most counselors (61%) also indicated that they think students understand how the ACP links high school with postsecondary life. For 17% of counselors, a parent signature on the ACP document indicates that parents support the suggested plan while 44% disagree with that conclusion. A majority (58%) of counselors did not agree that Administration officials support ACP development as demonstrated by providing adequate resources.

Table 7

Counselor Beliefs About the Value of the ACP to Student Academic and Career Planning

ID	Question	Coded Response					Mean
		1	2	3	4	5	
Q22	"An Academic and Career Plan is a valuable tool for organizing and planning a student's school program of study."	.10	.18	.20	.43	.10	3.25
Q28	"The Academic and Career Plan is a useful tool for accurately capturing the student's postsecondary goals or intentions."	.07	.24	.27	.37	.05	3.07
Q2	"Students understand that the Academic and Career Plan helps them to connect high school courses to their postsecondary goals."	.07	.12	.20	.44	.17	3.51
Q15	Obtaining a parent or guardian's signature on the Academic and Career Plan means that the parent/guardian fully supports the program you put together for their child.	.10	.34	.37	.17	.02	2.68
Q19	"Your school administrator(s) support the development of meaningful Academic and Career Plans by providing adequate guidance and resources to your department."	.02	.22	.34	.34	.07	3.22
Q17	The purpose of the Academic and Career Plan is to maximize student postsecondary success by setting and accomplishing goals in middle and high school.	.02	.05	.15	.56	.22	3.90
Q4	When talking with students and parents about college and career plans do you feel like you have sufficient time to help them understand financial aid and scholarship opportunities?	.15	.39	.37	.07	.02	2.44

As with Objective 1, an overall *ACP Value Rating* for Objective 3 was created by combining counselor responses to the questions in this section to derive an individual score from 1.0 to 5.0. For the present study, a counselor mean above 4.0 indicates that counselors agree with the supposition that the ACP is a valuable tool for constructing and maintain student programs of study. The frequency distribution of counselor means (Figure 4) shows an overall ACP Value Rating of 3.15 with just three participants (7%) having a rating above 4.0. The majority of counselors (63%) have an ACP Value Rating between 3.0 and 4.0 and the remaining 30% of participants have a rating below 3.0.

Mean = 3.1551
Std. Dev. = .64703
N = 41
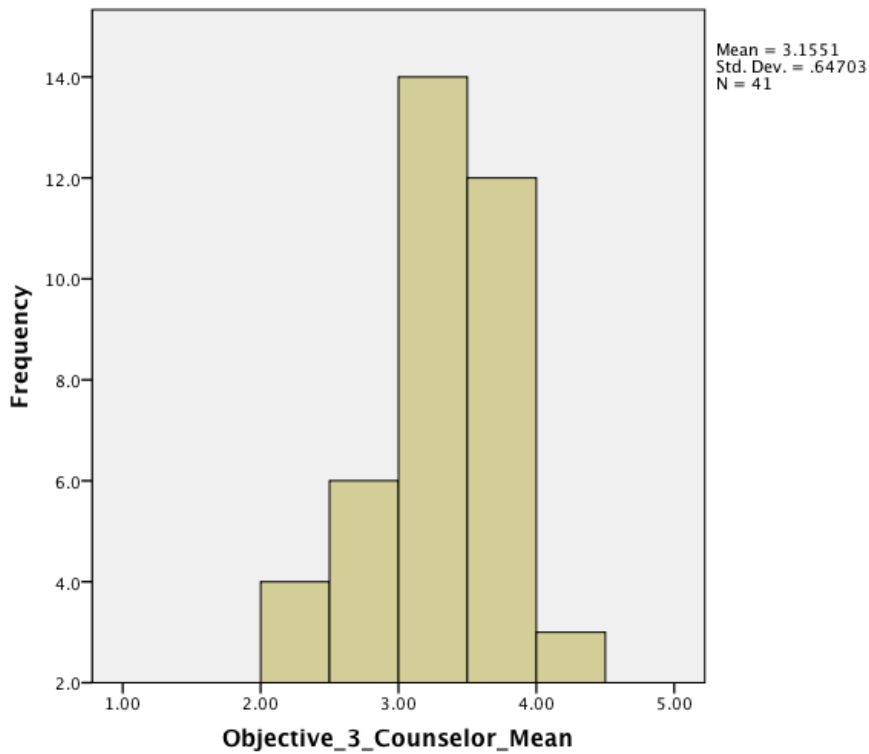
Figure 4. Counselor ACP Value Rating

Objective 4: Examine counselor beliefs about race and postsecondary options relating to equity and access issues.

Data Coding. Responses to Objective 4 followed the coding pattern established for Objectives 1 & 3, in that responses indicating agreement such as "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" are coded as a 4.0 and 5.0, respectively. Therefore, counselor answers to these questions indicate agreement, or disagreement, with the equity framework ideals that minority students and students in lower SES groups require additional structural support to be successful in the postsecondary. As shown in Appendix A, the questions were constructed so that agreement with an item (selecting "Agree" or "Strongly Agree") implies support with the equity framework model. For example, question Q12 asks counselors to rate their agreement with the statement: "Students in lower socioeconomic groups and minority students need extra support to make well informed postsecondary choices." Using this method, a response of "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" denotes that the counselors agree with the concept and support providing at risk students with additional time and resources to aid in postsecondary planning. Alternately, selections of "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree" may denote that counselors do not agree with the equity framework model or that they choose to provide services in another manner. The neutral option (Neither agree or disagree), was again coded as a 3.0 and could mean that counselors do not actively think about equity issues when delivering counseling services. Only half of the questions asked in this section included responses scored on the five-point scale. The other questions asked counselors to provide information about what different types of students choose to do in the postsecondary and what types of concerns might influence student decisions. Due to the nature of these questions, they were not coded on using the above method. Instead, frequency tables provide details about the number of counselors who share a particular opinion.

59

Results. The first set of results for Objective 4 are shown in Table 8 as percentages of responses for each item along with a mean score for each question. Counselors were asked to respond to Holcomb-McCoy's (2007) comment about treating students differently in order to do the right thing by them and the majority of respondents (68%) agreed with the statement. The majority of counselors also agreed that lower SES students need more support to make decisions (81%) and that it is part of their role as counselors to help at risk students gain admission to higher education (74%). Almost an equal number of counselors, when responding to question Q25, disagreed (34%) that higher SES students need less support to make postsecondary choices than agreed (39%) with the statement.

Table 8.

Counselor Beliefs About At Risk Students and Postsecondary Options

		Percent of Responses					
ID	Question	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
Q16	"Doing the right thing by students does not necessarily mean treating all students equally."	.05	.15	.12	.51	.17	3.61
Q12	"Students in lower socioeconomic groups and minority students need extra support to make well informed postsecondary choices."	.02	.02	.15	.54	.27	4.00
Q36	"As a school counselor, it is part of your role to help at-risk students gain admission to institutions of higher education."	.00	.02	.24	.54	.20	3.90
Q25	"Students in higher socioeconomic groups generally need less support to make postsecondary choices."	.00	.34	.27	.39	.00	3.05

60

As with Objectives 1 & 3, an overall *Equity Framework Rating* for Objective 4 was created by combining counselor responses to the questions in Table 8 to determine an individual score from 1.0 to 5.0. An individual counselor mean above 4.0 indicates that counselors agree with the equity framework concepts when providing counseling services during course planning. The frequency distribution of the participant means (Figure 5) shows an overall Equity Framework Rating of 3.64 with 14 participants (34%) having a mean above 4.0. The majority of counselors (61%) have an Equity Framework Rating between 3.0 and 4.0 while the remaining 5% of participants have a mean below 3.0.

Mean = 3.6402
Std. Dev. = .4875
N = 41
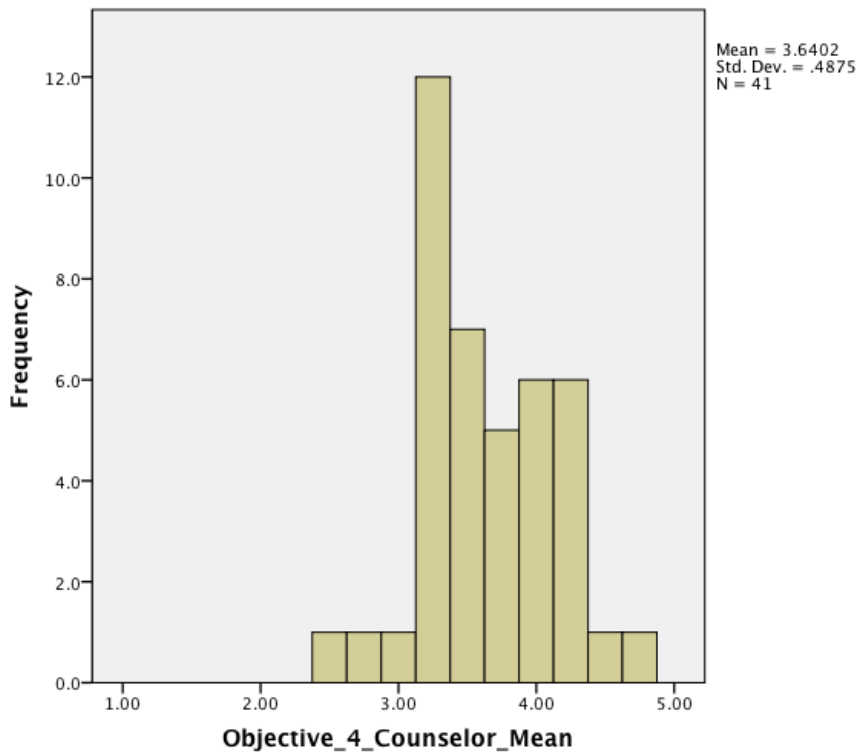
Figure 5. Counselor Equity Framework Rating

The second set of results for Objective 4 are shown in Table 9 as percentages of responses for each item. Counselors indicated that the most important factor for career planning was student interest (66%) and no counselors indicated a student's race as the most important

factor. A small majority of counselors (51%) think that fewer than three-quarters of minority and/or low SES students attend an institution of higher learning and 37% responded that they did not know what percentage attended higher education. Almost half of the counselors (49%) said that at risk students choose to attend community college while 95% of counselors said that students from high SES groups were likely to attend a traditional four-year college.

Table 9.

Counselor Beliefs About Postsecondary Choices Related to Race and SES Status

ID	Question	Responses	%
Q31	From the choices below, the most important factor when developing an Academic and Career Plan is a student's:	Academic achievement	.29
		Career interests	.66
		Financial situation	.02
		Race/Ethnicity	.00
		Family Expectations	.02
Q24	To the best of your knowledge, what percentage of students from minority and/or lower socioeconomic groups at your school choose to apply to an institution of higher education (i.e., traditional college, community college, or certificate program)?	0% - 25%	.12
		25% - 50%	.22
		50% - 75%	.17
		75% - 100%	.12
		I'm not sure	.37
Q10	In your experience, students from minority and/or lower socioeconomic groups at your school choose to attend:	Traditional College	.21
		Community College	.49
		Certificate Program	.10
		Military Service	.03
		Other	.18
Q14	In your experience, students from higher socioeconomic groups at your school choose to attend:	Traditional College	.95
		Community College	.02
		Certificate Program	.00
		Military Service	.00
		Other	.02

Objective 5: Identify how student race and socioeconomic factors contribute to counselor implementation practices.

Data Coding. Data for Objective 5 were coded to so that responses indicate which type of student receives the most counselor time or effort during the planning process. Questions Q23, Q30, and Q9 were used to create and *Equity Implementation Rating* based on the group counselors selected as requiring the most time to complete an ACP plan. Counselor responses to questions Q23 and Q30 that identified any of the Low SES responses were coded as a 1.0 while selecting any of the High SES choices resulted in a 0.0. Question Q9 coding was reversed so that a High SES selection was coded as a 1.0 because the question asked counselors to indicate which groups require the *least* amount of effort. Therefore, selecting any of the High SES groups indicated implementation time distribution consistent with the Low SES responses for questions Q23 and Q30. Combining responses from these three question produces and Equity Implementation Rating where a 3.0 indicates that counselors consistently spend more time supporting Low SES students and at risk students during course planning sessions while scores close to 0.0 indicate no change in counselor behavior based on student status.

The remaining questions for Objective 5 were coded so that selecting the responses "Strongly Agree" or "Always" were scored as 5.0 while the other end of the scale ("Strongly Disagree" or "Never") were scored as a 1.0. In this way, a mean result for a question of 4.0 or above indicates counselor agreement with the statement. For the both the "Agree/Disagree" scale the "Always/Never" scales a selection of 3.0 is the neutral response and cannot be used to accurately determine agreement or disagreement with the statement.

Results. The first set of results for Objective 5 are shown in Table 10 as percentages of responses for each item along with a mean score for each question. Responses to question Q5

indicate most (61%) counselors do not think that lower SES students are less interested in postsecondary options. Thirty-seven percent of counselors report spending more time with lower SES students who are less knowledgeable about postsecondary options and almost as many (34%) report that less knowledge is not a reason for spending more time with students. When asked about the difficulty of obtaining parent signatures, 46% of counselors say that it is hard to acquire them from lower SES parents but a majority of counselors (53%) report not having a hard time obtaining signatures from higher SES parents. Finally, most counselors (67%) do not feel that higher SES students gain more from counselor time than lower SES students.

Table 10.

Student Demographic Factors and Counselor Implementation Practices

ID	Question	Percent of Responses					Mean
		1	2	3	4	5	
Q5	"Compared to a higher socioeconomic student, I spend more time completing an Academic and Career Plan for a low socioeconomic student because they are less interested in postsecondary options."	.17	.44	.32	.07	.00	2.29
Q34	"Compared to a higher socioeconomic student, I spend more time completing an Academic and Career Plan for a low socioeconomic student because they are less knowledgeable about postsecondary options."	.02	.34	.27	.37	.00	2.98
Q6	Do you find yourself spending extra time with at-risk (i.e., lower socioeconomic status, minorities, etc.) students during counseling sessions in order to discuss the benefits of planning for postsecondary options?	.02	.15	.49	.27	.07	3.22
Q8	"Students in higher socioeconomic groups benefit more from my time with them discussing an Academic and Career Plan than lower socioeconomic students."	.29	.37	.27	.05	.02	2.15
Q11	"I have a hard time obtaining parent/guardian signatures on Academic and Career plans from students in lower socioeconomic groups."	.02	.10	.41	.34	.12	3.44
Q32	"I have a hard time obtaining parent/guardian signatures on Academic and Career plans from students in higher socioeconomic groups."	.05	.48	.43	.05	.00	2.48

The second set of results for Objective 5 are shown in Table 11 as percentages of responses for each item. When asked to compare time spent with students versus race indicators, counselors reported that they spend more time creating ACP plans for Low SES Hispanic students (42%) followed by Low SES Black students (29%). When considering time spent versus SES status and gender, counselors selected Low SES Males (46%) as the group requiring additional effort followed by Low SES Females (32%). Lastly, most counselors (68%) report spending the least amount of time helping High SES White students develop and complete an ACP.

Table 11.

Student Socioeconomic Factors and Counselor Implementation Practices

ID	Question	Choices	%
Q23	From the selections below, which race/ethnicity of students require the most effort (i.e., time or resources) to complete an Academic and Career Plan.	Low SES White	.16
		Low SES Black	.29
		Low SES Hispanic	.42
		High SES White	.00
		High SES Black	.13
		High SES Hispanic	.00
Q30	"I spend most of my time with the following type of student:" (Note: SES means socioeconomic status.)	Low SES Males	.46
		Low SES Females	.32
		High SES Males	.03
		High SES Females	.19
Q9	From the selections below, indicate which students require the least effort (i.e., time or resources) to complete an Academic and Career Plan. (Note: SES means socioeconomic status.)	Low SES White	.11
		Low SES Black	.08
		Low SES Hispanic	.03
		High SES White	.68
		High SES Black	.11
		High SES Hispanic	.00

As with Objectives 1, 3, and 4, an overall *Equity Implementation Rating* for Objective 5 was created by combining counselor responses to the questions in Table 11 to find an individual Equity Implementation Rating from 1.0 to 3.0. A counselor mean above 2.0 would indicate that counselors agree with the equity framework concepts and do, in practice, spend more time with at risk students when providing counseling services during course planning. The frequency distribution of counselor means (Figure 6) shows an overall equity implementation mean of 2.10 with 17 participants (41%) having a mean of 3.0. The majority of counselors (71%) have an equity implementation mean above 2.0 while the remaining 30% of participants have a mean below 1.0.
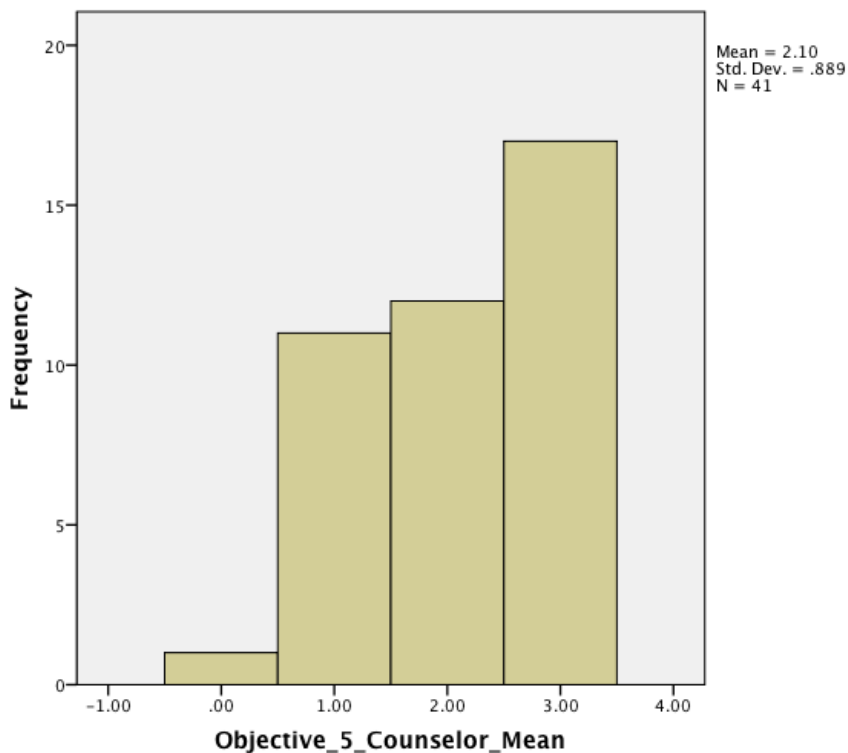
Figure 6. Counselor Equity Implementation Rating

Preliminary Analysis Used to Inform Phase Two Interviews

The explanatory design indicates that the results from phase one are used to inform data collection in phase two. Subsequently, results from phase one were analyzed and interview questions were developed to explain and supplement the survey results. Each objective from the survey yielded results where the interviews could provide important contexts and additional explanations about counselor behaviors and beliefs. Therefore, the topics identified in this section became the areas of interest for the phase two interviews.

For Objective 1, the vast majority of counselors responded that asking about student interests is important to course planning. To investigate why so many participants responded in this manner counselors were asked to explain why they think student interests and postsecondary goals are so important to course planning. For Objective 2, the number of counselors who selected "The Academic and Career Plan must be updated at least one time per year in grades 9 – 12." as their response for Q3 appears to indicate that a majority of counselors believe the plan must be updated every year. To shed light on this aspect, counselors were asked to describe under what circumstances they update an ACP. Counselors were also asked to elaborate on the role they feel parents should play in the planning process beyond the required signature on the planning form. None of the Objective 3 results had mean scores above 4.0, suggesting that many counselors do not find the ACP particularly useful in course planning. To elaborate on why the counselors responded this way, interviewees were asked to discuss in what ways the ACP is useful and in what ways it is not when course planning. For Objective 4, the answers to questions Q10 and Q14 show a disparity in college choices based on SES, so counselors were asked to describe how SES group or race might affect student postsecondary choices. Additionally, counselors were asked if their role as a counselor allows them to support at risk

68

students' efforts to gain entry into higher education. For Objective 5, the questions asked to understand implementation practices regarding spending extra time with particular groups of students indicated mixed results and many of the questions had means near 3.0 (the neutral response). Counselors were asked to provide examples of interactions they have had with at risk students when helping them complete an ACP to illuminate what actives counselors do engage in with at risk students.

Interview Results

The following results are from face-to-face interviews conducted to further develop the knowledge gained through the phase one survey. Each conversation was electronically recorded and transcripts were created from the audio. The transcripts were sent to participants and were confirmed by the counselors for accuracy as an act of member checking. The transcripts contain the original quotations presented in the present study and are in the possession of the author, maintained in a secure location. Because the interviews are derived from the survey questions the results are presented according to survey objectives to support the ultimate goal of answering the research questions. For each of the five objectives, the transcripts were coded by evaluating counselor responses for idea threads presented during the interview. The direct quotations cited in the present study are, at times, lengthy. This was an intentional choice by the author to maintain the context of the responses. Additionally, the extensive quotations serve to highlight the thoughtful nature of the counselors' responses by including the rich stories they present about their profession.

Objective 1: Describe counselor implementation actions related to the ACP policy.

To help understand the importance counselors place on finding out about student interests, participants were asked to explain how individual student interests direct the

construction of an ACP. The counselors identified three areas that connect the importance of understanding student interests to the postsecondary planning process: 1) Personal interests lead to successful performance; 2) Course selection allows for early student experiences in career pathways; and 3) Rigorous courses are necessary to achieve college goals.

Personal Interest Leads to Success. Each counselor indicated at some point during the interview that one of their roles is to find out what interests a student and to find ways to integrate those interests into a plan for the future. Ms. D said that motivation is very important to helping students succeed:

> Because I think that well, you know, if a student has a passion, which is what we try to get them to have, if they have a passion, then they can see the purpose of the courses they are taking. So whatever the student's interests might be… I just think it's because they will be more interested and they will take it [school] more seriously, and they will put more effort into it.

Often, motivation comes from a genuine interest in the career or pathway that students identify. Ms. B explained that one of her main challenges is finding a pathway that is a mixture of the interesting and the practical aspects of a student's personality:

> Even if they're doing well in math it's not – I'm not going to say well, you should be an engineer. Because I think a career is a fine balance between what you're interested in and what you're good at. And if you have one and not the other you're signing yourself up for 40 years of miserable life 40 hours a week, so I suggest interest and skill in inventories.

But sometimes students do not know what they want and it is up to the counselor to help them find a career that matches their interests and abilities. Ms. C shared how she handles students who do not know what their interests or talents are:

70

I mean, I get a fair share of "I don't knows" and then we start talking about, "Well what classes are you good at?" Or I will ask, "What would you like to do outside of school?" We can generally narrow it down to something, and then in the end if they can't narrow it down to something, a lot of them will say, "Well I don't really care what I do, I just want to make money."

Each of the counselors recognize that planning for the future has a lot to do with the present concerns and interests of the students and that finding a connection is a critical aspect of course planning.

Course selection allows for early student experiences in career pathways. For counselors, finding a student interest is just the beginning of the process. The next step is to help students experience courses in their career pathway as a means to evaluate the match between what the student wants to do and what they enjoy, or tolerate, doing. Ms. E says that today's students "Are having to learn earlier and earlier, that school is connected to work and to a career." One way students learn this lesson is by taking courses in high school that are within the career pathway where they have expressed an interest. Ms. B said that:

We can put them into classes where they're being exposed to material that they either feel like they're interested in or want to know more about to gauge whether there is an interest. Because high school is not only a place for a student to learn knowledge about the concepts, but to learn knowledge about themselves.

The trial and error process of seeing what a career might be like is a valuable lesson that counselors think students should learn before leaving high school. Ms. C describes that she feels like, "In the earlier stages of high school, we get a lot of doctors, a lot of kids that want to be doctors. And then that kind of dissipates a little as the years go on and they narrow it down to

71

something else." So the process of experiencing a career pathway is something the counselors understand to be an important part of the planning process and it allows students to match their interests and abilities to a pathway they will find rewarding.

Rigorous courses are necessary to achieve college goals. Just like investigating career pathways is important to finding the right postsecondary option, experiencing rigorous courses in high school is important to helping students understand the academic requirements of higher education. Ms. A talked about the importance of students taking college preparatory classes:

> I think a challenging course schedule based on their interest and plans is beneficial for success because I think that if they are really interested in that specific career or plan I think it'll prove that they will do well in it, or it'll prove that it's not something for them to go into.

Understanding what college courses require is the same as trying out different careers, albeit at a much smaller scale.   Counselors have the opportunity to redirect a student who is interested in a career, such as engineering, but who is not doing well in math or science. Counselors also use these courses to help determine the type of college placement. As Ms. B notes, "So to, for a course schedule to be something that's challenging for them here we can help the student find what sort of college could be a good fit for them." But even a rigorous high school course plan may not be enough to fully prepare students for the academic rigors of higher education. Ms. D explains:

> If you are in high school and you take honors courses and AP courses, you will have some idea of the rigor of course work in college. You still might be, you know, a little bit like you have to pick up the pace, but the distance you have to be college ready is going to be a lot less if you are taking the most strenuous classes.

72

Ms. E warns that even if students do take high-level classes in high school, some still find themselves unprepared for traditional college academics:

And there are some kids, who I think just developmentally are not ready to, get that rigorousness, until a little bit later on. And it just so happens that I've a 21-year [who] went to [a county specialty center] and ended up with a 3.0 from [School A], but got to Virginia State and it just didn't go well. There was learning disability and attention deficit issues and now he is at home going to [a nearby community college] and looking for a job.

However, if a student wants to attend a traditional college then rigor and perseverance are what counselors say colleges are looking for. Ms. C connected what colleges want from students with what she can do for them:

I think it's vital [taking rigorous courses]. I think it's very important because colleges, they don't just look at the GPA, they're looking at overall course selection. They look for improvement; they look for consistency over the long haul. I just think it's vital to moving on after high school. And I think that we're in a position where we can make really good schedules for the kids and give them course work that is relevant to their future goals. I mean, we have so many electives and we have so many core subjects and diversity amongst all our subject matters that we should definitely be able to give our students is a good schedule for their career goals.

Often, the opportunity to take the most rigorous courses requires consideration and planning early in a student's academic career. Ms. D explains why early plans are necessary:

If [a student says they] want a career in science or math or something like that, one of the STEM subjects, I mean you got to start taking those classes early. You cannot get to

73

Calculus by the time you are a senior. You have to have Algebra 1 as a freshman or as an 8th grader to get there, to even get there. So, you have to plan. For example, if you want to do some more difficult sciences in college, you either have to start – you could take Earth Science as a freshman, but if you did [instead], biology, chemistry, physics, then you would have room in your senior year to take an AP class. I have had students who did, biology, chemistry, physics and anatomy in the same year, then you could do maybe AP Bio or something [senior year]. So you can't get – you can't get the difficult rigorous classes that you really need to succeed in college unless you are on the right track early.

These three themes show that counselors use course planning as a vehicle for helping students find a postsecondary option based on interest and ability, realize their potential by exploring different career pathways, and attempt college level academics loads. Counselors also agree that successfully achieving postsecondary goals is unlikely if individual student interests and abilities are left out of the planning process.

Objective 2: Assess counselor knowledge about the ACP policy and its intent.

Process for modifying the ACP. During the interview, counselors were asked to, "Please explain under what circumstances, and the process you use, to contact students in order to update their ACP?" Each counselor indicated that the county requires the ACP to be updated once every year. Ms. B said, "I've been working mostly with seniors at this point in the year [first semester] and to where they are as a senior. I have met every senior personally and we look at their transcripts and their plan, it's been fun to compare the two." For all counselors the scheduling routine begins with the students in 12th grade and is followed by the lower grades in the spring. Ms. C described the basic Coal County process:

So we definitely meet with all of our students, we meet with our seniors at the beginning

of the year to figure out what their concrete plan is for after graduations, that's the first

thing. Then as scheduling starts to come about, we meet with sophomores and juniors.

And most of them, you know, since scheduling within the spring, most of the time I've

met with most all my students prior to that. But that's a time where we specifically

address future career interests and what electives they should take that pertain to that

career interest.

Ms. C clearly indicates that she makes contact with each of her students annually in order

to schedule but also includes that she is able to see most students throughout the year to discuss

other issues. Ms. D reports the same type of scheduling process, but she shared that personal

meetings in the counselor's office are not part of her practice:

We basically meet with every single student. In the past, before the last few years, we

met individually in our office with every single student on the caseload. And that's about

350 students. So in recent years we have done scheduling with ninth and 10th graders in

the forum [a group meeting area]. So they come in from their gym class and then the

counselors have tables up in the front and we have our part of the alphabet and we have

the roster for that particular gym class. So we call them up to meet with us. So you do

have less time for career exploration. With rising seniors though, we still meet with them

individually.

Ms. E discussed the process used in the middle school and it reflects the same group-

meeting trend:

Here, we talk to them in 6th grade about careers and career clusters, 7th grade is where

we start to look at the Academic and Career Plan. And we do that through groups, okay,

we do not do it individually. I've struggled with that, because I've been around long enough, where I have been in schools, where we have sat outside of English classes or math classes and done the Academic and Career plan individually with each student. And I don't know which is better to participate in a group, where lots of questions are getting answered. You are not answering the same question over and over again, but then are you getting to that one question that one particular individual has? I have had success in the group presentations. In 7th grade is also where we go in and take a look at Virginia View for the first time as a group. I have had success with students coming back and asking me questions after the larger presentation.

As a group, the counselors talked about the scheduling/updating process in the same terms and each one described the same meetings with students to complete the ACP. In general, the processes all contained the same basic formula that: 1) Plans are updated once per year; 2) Senior meetings are one-on-one; 3) Meetings with underclassmen are often accomplished in a group setting; and 4) Taking advantage of random student encounters to talk about the ACP is important.

Parental involvement in the ACP process. The counselors were asked: "What role do you feel parents play in the development of a student's Academic and Career Plan?" Each counselor, almost immediately, responded that they do play a role in the process. The role that parents play in the process was a little different for each counselor but there are three areas of note: 1) Parents tend to be more involved when their goal is college admission; 2) Parents from higher SES groups are more involved in the process; and 3) Middle school parents are not particularly involved.

College preparation focus. Many of the counselors, when asked the follow up question, "What kind of parent do you encounter most often?" indicated that the parents who are more involved tend to be the ones most focused on admission to traditional colleges. Ms. B explained that:

> Currently, with my seniors especially, I have encountered ones [parents] that have been
> on that spectrum of "I really have an idea of what I want for my child." I think early
> decision deadlines of colleges have played in a big role in that to be honest with you.
> Because some parents have hopes and dreams for their kids to go to a certain college and
> to graduate with a certain degree. And I think the early decision and action deadlines
> have really motivated parents to speak loudly to their kids, and to me, so that I also can
> speak loudly to their kids.

To facilitate college entry, parents with a college admission focus contact counselors to discuss courses the student should be taking to maintain a high GPA. Ms. C described this type of parent as follows:

> I think parents play a lot, because parents kind of have the final say. You'll get a parent
> who seems to focus a little bit more on GPA than on actual content of the courses the
> student is taking… The parent will call and say, "I want my child out of this AP course, I
> want my child out of this math course, I don't want them to have a C." And it's like
> you're trying, to kind of tell them that, "You know a C in advanced math classes may be
> better than getting a B [in] computer math, which is, not a very advanced course. But
> they just get hung up on the grades [and] they have these ideas that they think are -- so
> that can be kind of a roadblock sometimes.

77

Ms. D has a caseload comprised mostly of high performing students and she commented on her experience: "I mean I think with a lot of higher achieving students, I think that the parent is behind them, encouraging them to take the most difficult classes." While the particular reason for contact varies, the counselors all felt that it was the college admission focused parents who were most involved in, and most vocal about, the course selection process.

SES status and parent involvement. Most of the counselors agreed that there is less parental involvement from lower SES groups. Ms. B works at a high SES school (School F) and described her interaction with parents:

I have the tendency to respond more toward the involved parent and because they're the ones who want more of the plan… But there are parents who work one or two jobs, and can't [be involved]. The kid whose mom, single mom, works two jobs and isn't necessarily requesting for me to meet with their kid. I guess I need to be more proactive because that is the kid who may need [my help] because they're not getting support elsewhere. And so understanding my own limits and that every kid has a specific need and there's a need to be met, but who may need the most support. I can't just assume it's the ones who are UVA bound. I need to be meeting the needs of my senior who will graduate, but is really interested in driving a truck so what can I do to get him that education he needs to get a CDL license?

Ms. C, who works at a lower SES school, experiences similar levels of parental involvement as other counselors with lower SES parents, "With the population that I'm working with, I don't encounter the parents… Parent involvement is not that high here at [School I]." Ms. C went on to explain that even though parents are not particularly involved with the planning process, "Most of them [the parents] are supportive once you explain everything or

explain why you've made the scheduling decision you've made. All of the parents that I've spoken with… They've all been very appreciative of that and responsive [to requests for assistance], which is nice."

Ms. D expressed her ideas about parent SES status and involvement a little differently. For her, parents who went to college fit into the higher SES group and parents who did not attend college were in the lower SES groups. She explained her meaning:

I think some students have a parent who plays a positive role, if they went to college, they know the rigor, maybe they are in that profession or they know people in that profession, they can encourage – they backup what the school is saying. They can encourage students to take difficult courses. If they are not really aware of that [because they did not attend college], they might let their student off easy in the sense that [a student] may be in an honors class and [the lower SES parents] say "It's too hard" or "I don't like that teacher" or whatever and then they [the lower SES parents] are quick to write a note to the school to move [the student] down a level. And so, I think they [parents] can play a positive or a negative role.

In middle school, counselors describe having the same problem regarding contact with lower SES parents. Ms. A explained that some lower SES parents have a slightly different reason for contacting counselors to talk college and career planning:

I think the higher SES families value the opportunity to get involved and follow up on this is what our plan is. Versus the parents who are struggling, they just don't have the opportunity to, they don't have the time to sit down and think about it. I mean there are, of course, situations where that's not always the case. Parents who are struggling and say "I really want to come and talk to you." "I don't want my kid to have this same lifestyle

and we need to figure out what we can do." So I do think it's all over the board in terms of that, but I think it's more the middle and upper income families that are going to be more prone to be involved. This is what I've seen. And you know that they [high SES parents] are going to follow through I guess is another piece.

Each of these counselors admitted to spending more time with high SES parents because it is this type of parent who tends to be the most involved in the planning process. While the reasons for not interacting with lower SES parents vary, the common thread is that the counselors do not have the same amount of contact with lower SES parents as they do with higher SES parents regarding course planning.

Middle school parent contact. The two middle school counselors had very similar experiences regarding their interactions with parents and the course planning process. Each of them reported very little parental contact but for slightly different reasons. For Ms. A, the lack of contact stems from counselors not having enough time to reach parents on a regular basis. She explained:

> If we hear from the parent, then usually I feel like it's a back and forth. We know to go to them and they know to come to us. But sometimes if we don't hear from a parent I don't think we typically will go seek them out. It [the ACP] goes home and it gets signed. But I don't know how much review goes into it from the parent's end and then once we sit down with them and then, unfortunately, there is not enough time so… But typically the parents would call us to talk about their child's recommendation for a C level but they want him in an Honors level. Or somebody comes to us and says, "You know this kid needs to be moved to an Honors level now." Then that's when we'll call and talk to the parent. I don't typically think that we make contact regarding the

80

academic and career plan with a parent on the front end. It's usually them contacting us and I just think it's because of time and numbers and all that.

While Ms. A lacked time to contact parents, Ms. E reported that her parents had trouble connecting middle school with college because college was so far in the future. She explained what she meant with a story about a parent who wanted an honors math class for her student. Ms. E told the parent that the math program was altered in the county so that each student would end up in Algebra 1 by eighth grade. This change means there is not an honors math course in sixth grade. Instead, she suggested the parent place her student in honors English or Social Studies because, "Colleges are looking for your student to be in the highest level courses that they can be in and still make A's or B's." The parent's response was, "Colleges? Wow, my kid is only a 6th grader!" Ms. E said that this disconnect is why parents do not reach out to counselors in middle school but she thinks "It is prudent for us to make sure that we are guiding folks along in that direction [thinking about college] in middle school."

The interviews presented several reasons why parents are, or are not, involved in the scheduling process. Most of the counselors agreed that parental involvement exists on a spectrum from no involvement to over-involvement and that participation was based on the parents' SES attributes. Particularly, that the higher SES groups (such as college graduates) are more likely to initiate contact with the school to discuss course planning while lower SES parents rarely initiate contact with the counselors.

Objective 3: Ascertain counselor beliefs about the value of the ACP to student academic and career planning.

What counselors like about the ACP.

Connects the present to the future. The ACP provides counselors with an opportunity to talk with parents and students about planning for their academic future. For the middle school counselors, having conversations about the ACP gives students and parents a roadmap to graduation. Ms. E uses the ACP to introduce new terms and high school academic requirements:

I think it's valuable in presenting to students; "Here is what you need to look at academically." "Here are the credits that you need, understanding what a credit, a Carnegie Unit is, understanding the new technical training, understanding that you're going to have to take one of those virtual classes. It opens up those doors for students to understand that.

Ms. A also finds the ACP useful for helping to connect a student's interests with future goals:

I think it is valuable in trying to organize and plan the program of study. Again, to try and figure out what the end goal is, whether they want to go to college, whether they want to go right to work, whether they're going to go into the military or go to, like, a two year school or go to a technical program. So again, I think it's to try to look at the end goal, and then again to look at what classes would fit into their end goal to try to help them to figure out if business is really what they want so they can take some classes in high school.

Both middle school counselors agree that taking the time to explain planning for the future is helpful at that early stage. These initial meetings lay a foundation that the high school counselors build upon.

Allows for organizing and customizing programs of study. High school counselors find value in the ACP regarding course planning and making sure that students take the best classes.

Ms. C explained, "It's [the ACP] really kind of provides us checks and balances to make sure that, you know, it's another thing to help guide you on the right track throughout high school and help you know that you're taking all the right courses." Ms. D agrees that the plan is a good tool for making sure students can take the courses they want to take and for looking at how those courses will fit into the larger program of study. She said that the ACP helps parents and students plan early and to see how the program of study will all come together:

> One thing I think is probably good about it, it starts the child and the parents thinking about it early on. Like maybe if you had a really organized parent, they might even sit down with their child early on and say, "Okay, you have some interest in this, so maybe you want to be a nurse." But a counselor could help by saying, "You want to try to get that anatomy class and when would be a year you could take it?" Then parents say, "Oh, I see you have to have biology and chemistry before you can take anatomy. So you could do biology in ninth grade and then chemistry in tenth, and then anatomy in eleventh." You know what I mean? So it kind of lays out - it gets the discussion going early I guess, that's maybe a good positive thing about it.

Some of the other counselors said that what they liked about the ACP is the ability to tailor a program of study to student interests and to help them explore career options. Ms. B explained that her job would not be possible without an ACP:

> I can't imagine not having a plan because – my – one of my roles as a school counselor is to help customize their learning. So it seems pretty impossible for me to do my job well [without a plan]. I'm best at assisting and supporting a kid in their learning when I know what their potential plan could be after high school. To get them to think about what it is

they want to do. Ask them what classes they want to take; to be exposed to certain

curriculum and material - it is super important in my opinion.

High school counselors think the ACP is a good tool for keeping students on the right

track to achieve career goals by making sure students take the right courses in high school.

Talking about the plan with students also gives counselors a way to periodically check in with

students and to make adjustments if possible.

What counselors do not like about the ACP.

Student changes create challenges. While the ACP is valuable tool for making sure

students are on the right track, counselors feel that it is not as useful when students change their

mind about the future or if they fail a course. Ms. A said one of the challenges with the ACP and

planning is that: "I just think from year to year every they change, the students change can

change so much from when they are in middle school to 10th Grade in high school." As Ms. D

noted earlier, if a student wants to take a certain class, then it takes planning to make that

happen. Counselors face additional challenges if a student fails a course. Often, when students

change interests or fail a course their future possibilities are limited. Ms. C explained:

> If the student changes their mind or if they don't pass courses the first time and we're not
>
> able to make a room for electives… They're locked into these electives that relate to the
>
> courses, or to their career pathway that they've previously chosen - then the student could
>
> lose interest and just bomb the course. Which definitely has happened.

Because the ACP and course sequences are planned in such detail early in a student's

academic career, students who do experience exceptions might be stuck in a career pathway that

no longer holds interest for them.

The ACP is not electronically accessible. Another concern about the ACP is the fact that, in Coal County, all of the forms are still maintained in a paper version in a student's official file. Ms. E "Look(s) forward to when it is computerized." Ms. D explained that a computerized version would prevent paper copies from being lost in the shuffle and provide an easier method to keep track of a student's plan:

> I know they fill that form out in 8th grade in [Coal County] and it would be – you know
> there has been different talk over the years of like making it electronic and then they
> could follow them, just like in a database. Well, we take our laptops down to the forum,
> you know what I mean, you could have it pulled up on the laptop even and look at it. But
> you know the paper, just the paper gets lost, the paper is bad, because if they send the
> paper from this middle school to us and then no, they really didn't go there, it went to the
> special program at [School K], the paper is flying all over the place. It really needs to be
> linked with them better.

Counselors identified that the ACP often limits the ability to respond to changes in student situations and that they are looking for an electronic version of the paperwork to allow for a more efficient way to keep track of the student's plan.

What parents and students have to say about the ACP.

Students use it to discuss changes based on career interest. Counselors report that students do find the ACP valuable, especially when they have questions about what comes after high school. Ms. C said she knows students appreciate the process as shown because:

> The volume of requests I get [to meet about the ACP] let(s) me know how important it is
> to them to meet one-on-one. And the fact that I'll be walking in the hallways and they'll

say, "I need to see you, I need to meet with you, I have this question." And I think alone is enough to let me know that they value them.

Other counselors tell about how they used the ACP plan to help students decide on a course of action that might be outside of their current notions. Ms. B met with a student who had a particular college in mind that did not necessarily line up with her career interests. Ms. B explained how she helped the student formulate a new plan:

I had a student, I met with her really early on and she, she – her goal was Virginia Tech. She wanted to be engineering and so we looked at some other options and thankfully she had taken some classes at [School F] to prepare her for that. But we sat down. We looked at some other options because I think it's important to not just be focused on one school. And you know she went down to visit a school in Florida because this is – she wanted to do ocean engineering and so its pretty, pretty specific and so we had to kind of think outside of the box and she visited this school in Florida this past weekend and now she – they did an early admission thing. She's now set on the school in Florida because it's next to an ocean and she liked that. So and I think - I think success is one of those things where she came into my office and at that moment in time she would have defined success as "I am going to Virginia Tech to be a ocean engineer." But after thinking outside of the box and brainstorming her plans were completely changed.

Ms. D shares a story about a student who was trying to balance her interests in art with her parents' interest in medicine. She explained that she was able to help the student find a compromise:

I had this girl, you know as a Junior, and I asked her "What do you want to do when you graduate?" She said, "Well I really like art, but my mom told me I can't do anything with

art, because I can't make any money. And she wants me to do something in the medical profession." So I just told her about art therapy or occupational therapy or those types of things, you know kind of maybe look for an avenue to combine a couple of things to get her there. And then it was really interesting because she came back, that was last year - and this year she did say she was interested in the occupational therapy.

These examples illustrate how counselors were able to use the ACP framework to help students find creative solutions to career related problems. By talking with counselors, these students were able to find a better match between their career interests and their academic pursuits.

Parents want to talk about course levels and college admission. For the counselors, parent encounters often relate to course planning and center on the placement of a student in the right course level. Counselors report that parents want to know if an A or B in a lower level course is better than a B or C in a rigorous course. Counselors are united in advising that colleges want to see a student doing well, or improving, in the highest course level possible. Ms. B provided a typical encounter with parents:

This mom and dad I think, "You know I do believe that our kid has a lot of potential." And so, you know, to talk about – if she drops down from an honors course at this point we're pretty much setting – we're not going to be able to, 9 times out of 10, allow for her to be in an honors course in this particular subject because she won't be as prepared for that. And so we had to play out the next four years and plan it out. You know, if she drops to the C level then we're limiting her ability to be in honors course for sophomore year and enrollment in AP courses for junior and senior year. Okay so let's pull up UVA, on College Board; they really look at the strength of the student's schedule. And so I

87

think with freshman parents its been really important [because] what they think is a simple decision to get an A instead of a B is not necessarily a simple decision because we need to think about the long term and what this would mean.

At the middle school, parents have the same concerns. Ms. E tells about the question she fields from parents most often:

I think I have had many conversations with parents about just even the one about [whether] your child needs to take honors, the highest level of courses that you can take and still make A's or B's. Last year, I had a good many conversations with my 8th grade parents about the reality of planning and them wanting to know, especially 8th grade parents, is it better to take an honors level class and make a C, or is it better to take the comprehensive level class and make an A or a B? And colleges are still saying to us, you know, they want the highest level and still make an A or a B.

In the question over earning a higher grade in a lower level or earning a lower grade in a higher level the counselors are consistent; earning the best grade possible in the highest level possible is what colleges are looking for. Counselors report that the ACP is a useful tool for talking with parents about the fact that colleges want to see a history of rigorous courses more than a history of high grades in lower level courses.

Objective 4: Examine counselor beliefs about race and postsecondary options relating to equity and access issues.

How SES affects postsecondary choices.

Students tend to follow their parent's example. Several of the counselors indicated that the educational level of the parent(s) plays a significant role in whether or not a student chooses to participate in higher education. Ms. A explained:

Okay I think, I think that a student who is going to be interested in college oftentimes because that's what they've seen from their own parents. And to me, at first when I started doing all this it kind of blew me away that there were so many kids who are still – no one in their family went to college. And I didn't know that when I talked to them. But I truly do believe it's based on where they are in the county, what they've seen at home, what they've grown up with, and what they know.

This situation is also noted in another part of the county where the local neighborhood contains the middle to upper SES groups. Ms. D had similar experiences and thinks that it is the family culture that leads students to choose college as a career goal:

Okay, if you come from a family and your parents are saying, like your mom graduated from Virginia Tech and dad graduated from UVA and they are like "Tech is better" or "UVA is better", "Let's go to the football game, let's go to campus." You have so much exposure that you don't even know you are absorbing. You don't – you know from the day you are born, you are going to college because that's all your parents talk about. That type of thing, just it's in the talk in the family. I think the thing that's discouraging for people from lower incomes is not only – I mean, it might be – if you have a strong parent who has their dream for their child, they can definitely do it. But if you grow up in an environment where nobody even talks about it, you might not even know that's a possibility.

Ms. D thinks that students without college-educated parents should be encouraged to participate in higher education if they are reached early:

And obviously some of those kids need to be reached when they are really young, like you know, elementary school and that type of thing. You know, I think that's where

counselors can help with those younger students, you know, having different people come in and talk about careers and that type of thing.

For these counselors, exposure to the culture of higher education is a critical component of student interest. Because lower SES families often lack college experiences, fewer low SES students consider looking to college as a plausible postsecondary option.

Paying for college is an obstacle. The financial aspect of college attendance has a large impact on the postsecondary planning process for many lower SES students. The counselors explain that paying for higher education tends to be the largest concern for less affluent students. Ms. B, at a high SES school, said that for lower SES students, "I think financially that sticker price [is the first concern]. I think kids and parents see that and think that there can be no interest in that school because of the dollar sign that's attached to it." However, she explained that this attitude was not common among higher SES students except that an "Ivy League" college was not feasible compared to an in state school. Ms. C, at a low SES school, sees a similar pattern and said she often cautions students about how entering the workforce immediately after graduation affects higher education attendance:

> I think it definitely does, I think that sometimes I'm greeted with, "Well, you know, we can't really afford college because I need to work immediately after [school] to help my family." And I think one of the most worrisome situations that I get into is, you know, a student will say, "I'm going to work for a year and then I may go to college." And I just always start to stress to them: "Once you make money it's really hard to go back to not making any money." So I'd rather you work and at least take a couple of classes at a community college or something if you truly plan on an engineer education after high school.

She also noted that family situations weigh heavily on a student's decision about what to do after high school:

There's a big family focus here and I think that family can sometimes - they could either be the factor that pushes [a student] to college but they could also be the factor that holds [them] back. And, just a lot of sweet kids wanting to help out their families from a low socioeconomic status. Not realizing that it's important to their parents for those same kids to go to college too. So I think they have a lot of family struggles that can sometimes prevent them from going to college.

Ms. D talked about how she tries to help students find a way to pay for higher education and how she evaluates the options. She indicated that SES status is less important to the process than a the academic record and the availability of scholarship funding that directs her plan:

Students will bring up sometimes for example, they say, "I don't think I have the money to go to college." So depending on the student's grades and SAT scores, you could look at it and say, "Well wait a minute there might be scholarship opportunities" and "Here are some avenues you can pursue and you definitely need to see the [state financial aid] representative to find out about the financial aid portion." Whereas with another student, you might look at their grades, their SAT scores and you know say, "Well, you know the community college is very reasonably priced." So I think, it [student SES status] doesn't play a role in that you are steering – I don't think you're steering students like, like I would never say to a student, you can't go to college, you know, it would play more of a role in maybe how to get there, the avenues.

Counselors understand that SES status plays a role in whether or not students can afford to pay for higher education. They also demonstrate a willingness to help students find ways to

fund higher education through scholarships, part time work, or less expensive community college programs.

What is a counselor's role in helping at risk students attend college?

Financial assistance and resources. The first comments from counselors when responding to these questions focused on the financial assistance options counselors can identify for students. Ms. A responded, "I know that we've been able to help them financially if that was the factor, like getting the application fees waived. Getting SATs and ACT fees waived, so I think that's one way we've been able to get that barrier removed." Ms. B said that finding monetary solutions was one of the best ways she can support at risk students:

> There are some scholarships that I have been notified about for students who are lower
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> SES and so getting that information to them I think it is really important. I think you're
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> sitting and talking with them about FAFSA financial aid opportunities. Because what I
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> learn is some kids see a sticker price to a school and think this is going to be impossible
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> for my family. And so because of that they don't want to put that burden on their parents
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> so I think to lighten that burden is to say "Listen there are possibilities. Here are your
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> resources." So I think as a counselor I provide the resources and the options for that…
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> So I think financially I have a big role because that is I think the startling reality for a lot
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> of families.

But the financial piece is not her only contribution. Ms. B said she feels it is important for her to encourage students to try and achieve college admission. She explained:

> And then just, I think, encouraging kids that they can do it. Yeah, you might be the first
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> in your family, but it doesn't mean that it's impossible. And so just, I think, instilling a
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> belief in both students and parents that it's possible and there are many options for them.

Ms. C commented that helping students find ways to reduce the money needed to complete applications or take placement tests, "Is a good feeling… To be able to give to those students that are truly deserving." The financial burden may be the first obstacle counselors deal with, but counselors know there are other ways to help lower SES student find access to higher education.

Advocate for students with colleges. Ms. D said that often students benefit from someone calling the college admissions office to promote a student's acceptance. She gave this example:

You could advocate for them. So if you have a student that's kind of borderline, but you know, let's say [they] are looking at Longwood College, and you say, "Well, you know, maybe the student has the GPA, but they don't have the SAT score. You could definitely contact the college admissions officers and say, "This is quite a strong student, you know, they probably didn't have the background to get, you know, additional help in practicing for SATs and that type of thing." So probably like an advocate through the colleges and stuff would be one way.

Ms. C agrees that part of her role is to contact the college directly. As she explained:

I'm not sure if it's necessarily that I am a school counselor that this helps, but you know I freely communicate with admissions officers at colleges. Which I think the students are capable of doing too, they just may not know that they can do that. Or they may not feel confident enough to reach out and speak with them, but I can do that. I can.

Helping students find a way to defray the costs connected with applying to college is a counseling service that produces tangible results for students. Because counselors understand that students are more than their college application, they find ways to make the personal connection with colleges to promote at risk students for admission.

Objective 5: Identify how student race and socioeconomic factors contribute to counselor implementation practices.

Providing extra time to at risk students.

We should… but we don't. Each counselor, except for Ms. C at the low SES school, indicated that they felt at risk students definitely deserve additional support from the counseling department but often do not receive it due to organizational constraints. Ms. A and Ms. B indicated that they wanted to treat all of their students "equally" but also said that at risk students should receive additional resources. Through the conversation, the counselors indicated that their goal is to spend the same amount of time with everyone and to make sure that at risk students receive, at a minimum, the same services as the higher SES students. However, the counselors admitted that the reality of the situation is that they spend more time communicating with higher SES parents than with lower SES parents. Ms. A shared:

> I think that follow(ing) up with support [on] the family side sometimes gets frustrating.
> And there are cases where you are going to try our hardest with certain kids because you
> know how interested they are in trying to make things different. But I do think as a
> whole we try our hardest to be equal. And again unfortunately the whole time factor with
> how many students that we have to see. I think it's just difficult as a whole, and
> unfortunately sometimes kids do fall through the cracks and don't get as much attention.
> I think it's more the middle and upper income families that are going to be more prone to
> be involved. This is what I've seen. And you know that they're going to follow through
> I guess is another piece. But I do think again it's going to be, I think they [lower SES
> students] should get extra help. We don't want them to fall into the same situation over
> and over.

94

Ms. B agrees that she intends to provide equal, or even more, services to low SES students but finds herself dealing instead with higher SES families more often:

I do think that they're [lower SES students] deserving of my time. And I would like to be an equal opportunity counselor, but it is … The squeaky wheel gets the grease. We have a lot of parents who will call and [are] vocal if their kids are not getting what the parent deems is "their needs being met" … Socioeconomically they [the parents] are in a high SES.

These counselors want to do more for at risk students but describe situations where the higher SES parents advocate for their children more often than lower SES parents and therefore consume more of the counselor's time.

Two of the counselors, Ms. D and Ms. E, responded with exactly the same sentence, "They should, but they don't." Ms. D explained that the reason why at risk students do not receive much time is due to the organizational structures of education. She clarified:

Just by nature of the school system, but yeah I think they – I think they – I think let's just call them first-generation college. It doesn't have anything to do with the economics as much as the fact that the parents don't have the background to know… So they need more time in just the vocabulary of the whole postsecondary education. So yeah, they definitely need more time… I have had students and you know, not a ton every year, but maybe a couple every year, who actually need help in filling out the application… Certainly that would be great if you had that ability to offer to every student or you know a lot of your - a lot more of your students than a couple of year.

Ms. C was the only one to say that lower SES student's perhaps do not deserve more of her time: "I don't know if I guess overtly think that you should get more of my time." However,

like Ms. D, Ms. C does spend time with lower SES students providing support with the logistics of navigating the postsecondary application process. Ms. C explained the support she provides:

> I think that sometimes they [lower SES students] do get more of my time because we may have to sit together and fill out a form or we may have to brainstorm ways how to make, you know, things possible that I don't have to make possible for other students. Like I can give an example just this morning, I had to sit down with one of my seniors because she's using a college application waiver and we're trying to figure out how to submit her application online without inputting credit card numbers. We have to figure out how to do it, so I decide to get up and fax them the form and things like that. So it's not that she's necessarily demanding more of my time, it's just kind of how it plays out. And she is socioeconomically disadvantaged; she's a very high achieving student. So that being aside it's kind of a case-by-case basis because if I had a low achieving and a low socioeconomics status it may be a little bit more time consuming to figure out exactly what they're going to do.

These examples show that while the counselors agree, in principle, that lower SES students should receive additional support they do not receive that support because higher SES parents are more vocal and receive more attention. They also described that what support they are able to offer takes the form of assisting students through the postsecondary bureaucracy by helping complete applications or understand the processes.

Administrative support ... in theory. Counselors were asked to comment on whether or not they felt the building administrators supported the idea of providing additional support to lower SES students. The reply was that, in theory, the administration would tell them that it is a good idea but in practice that support does not materialize. Ms. D explained it this way:

I think they support it, but unless you show it with more people helping and more – you know I mean more individuals providing service. So what? I mean you can verbalize, yes, "You're right, they do need", but I don't think, unless it translates into another warm body, it doesn't matter.

Ms. E felt the same way, but added that she would be told it is her responsibility:

I think they would support it, but I think that they would give it to me to figure out how to make it so. And the reality of making it so would be a real struggle to get kids who need to be in class, out of class, when the teachers want them and then I would want them. Probably the Principal is going to lean more toward the teacher having that student. They are certainly supportive of the in-mass things that we do. But we are very cognizant of students needing to be in class as much as is possible.

The counselors describe administrators who my be sympathetic to their needs but are unable to provide practical solutions to provide lower SES students with additional counseling personnel. Whether it is the lack of additional personnel or a principal's focus on classroom time, counselors feel that the additional support from administrators is not coming any time soon.

When they can help, what do they do?

Connect the value of an education to real life. Ms. A shared a story about an emancipated teen looking for ways to make it on her own. The counselor tells how she helped the student understand how much even a little postsecondary education can help make life more manageable:

But we talked about renting an apartment and what she would get from her job at the grocery store and what she could do with that and why. If she goes to at least community college and has an Associate's degree her pay will go up. She will be more qualified for

different jobs. So I find it helpful, especially with this particular student to just lay out "How much does it cost to live in [Coal County]." And so I think that was a startling reality for her… I told her "At least go to [a nearby community college] and put this investment in." And that too, was a disaster. Trying to figure out how she could get the money for community college… We did look at military, you know, as an option to pay some school for her. But I think the numbers of what it costs to live gives, gives kids the idea "Okay it could be worth the investment in the long run".

This counselor took time to show an at risk student how important a postsecondary education is to earning potential and why it is essential to keep options open when it comes to life after high school.

Talk about the importance of passing courses. Ms. C said that an opportunity to help at risk students often occurs when she reviews the list of students with D's and F's on report cards. She brings the students in to see if she can help them turn it around. She explained why it is important to take the early high school years seriously:

I try to tell them that when you apply to a school in the fall of your senior year, they're going to be looking at the grades you got your sophomore and junior year. And they, all the students that I have spoken with and taken that perspective seem to understand what I'm saying.

She takes additional actions with students who are consistently on the D-F report, as she calls it. She noted that, "But if it's all F's that is usually a bigger issue and they may not immediately respond to what I've said and we may have to seek non-traditional ways of getting a high school diploma." By looking at the D-F report this counselor is trying to be proactive when it comes to the academic performance of her at risk students. But she is also there for the

students when the proactive approach does not work to pick up the pieces and find a way to complete high school.

Help an athlete find opportunity. Ms. D recalled a story about a student who was not very interested in attending college until the beginning of senior year when playing college football captured his attention. She explains what she did for him:

> All right, I did have a boy a couple of years ago and he wanted to play football and he wanted to play, he would have loved to play at Virginia Tech or somewhere. But I think he ended up going to Virginia State… I did spend a lot of time with him, going on the NCAA website to, you know, register for the NCAA. Spending more time in, you know, the college application. And just, kind of, a little more coaching him through and the like. "Okay do you have teacher recommendations?" "Did your coach talk to their coach?" And, you know, just stuff like that… School didn't really hold a lot of interest for him; playing football in college held more interest for him. I figured at least if he gets his foot in the door and I know colleges have a lot of support service for athletes and I even told him about that. It was like, "You have study hall and you will get these support services." So it was kind of a combination of coaching him a little bit through the steps and then also in educating him on what colleges have to offer.

Ms. D found a way for this student to combine his interest in sports with an opportunity to pursue higher education. She also made sure that the student understood that he would not be on his own and that there would be support services available in college that he could use.

This chapter demonstrates that the mixed-methods approach afforded distinct advantages over a purely quantitative study by investigating the rich details counselors provided about their thoughts and actions regarding the ACP. By going beyond the statistical data and adding

counselor narratives to the data collection process, a more complete picture of counselor implementation actions developed and important local knowledge was accessed. The final chapter explores the results obtained during both phases to investigate the intersections of the data and examine implications for educational leaders from the present study.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Knowledge gained from the survey and interview phases is reviewed to develop an understanding of how counselor beliefs and attitudes affect ACP policy implementation in Coal County. The research questions are answered by looking at the connections between the study phases and how the interviews provided additional insight into counselor behavior. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the present study's implications for educational leaders linked to providing ACP counseling services, and future research considerations. To set this discussion in appropriate context, a discussion of study limitations is presented first.

Limitations

This explanatory study has limited application to other contexts due to the nature of the sample and the socioeconomic demographics of the division. Because Coal County is a large suburban division with concerns that differ from rural and urban school systems it experiences unique organizational challenges. For example, while Coal County counselors struggle to balance the services provided to higher and lower SES students they still exceed the basic services required by the ACP policy. In contrast, a rural district may struggle with finding personnel to achieve a student counselor ratio near the ASCA recommended level in order to comply with the minimum requirements of the ACP policy. However, other large suburban divisions with similar student populations may find the observations from the present study applicable to the situation in their division. As for the sample, while the response rate for the survey was nearly 40% the vast majority of respondents (92%), and all of the interviewees, were White females. Since the distribution of counselors in most districts does not consist of all white female counselors, this sample may not represent the larger population of counselors in other

101

districts. With these limitations in mind, the following discussion and recommendations are presented in the hopes that readers from a variety of contexts can make adaptations to their particular contexts.

Counselor Understanding and Attitudes Toward the Academic and Career Plan

The survey results were mixed concerning counselor knowledge about the specific process components of the ACP. While most counselors responded correctly that parental involvement and career pathways are part of the ACP plan there appeared to be confusion about how often the plan should be updated. However, the interviews revealed that counselors might have incorrectly selected annual updates instead of updates in Grade 9 and Grade 11 on the survey because it is Coal County policy for counselors to meet with students every year to discuss scheduling. Each of the five counselors noted that since they meet yearly with their students to schedule courses they take the opportunity to ask students about the ACP. According to the survey, counselors demonstrated mixed understanding of the ACP and its components. But since the incorrect counselor knowledge manifests itself practically as counselors exceeding the state requirements it is not appropriate to conclude that counselors lack the information necessary to implement the ACP policy according to state mandates.

A large majority (78%) of survey respondents indicated that the ACP increases academic success by setting goals in high school linked to postsecondary plans. Counselors agreed with that majority during interviews and added that the ACP is very useful for having early planning conversations with students and parents. The interview participants indicated that these early discussions allowed for creating a better match between student career interests and the courses taken in high school. A smaller majority (53%) of survey participants indicated that the ACP is a useful tool for organizing a student's program of study. When interviewed, counselors explained

102

that the useful aspects of the ACP include helping students connect high school courses to postsecondary plans and the ability to customize programs of study to match student interest. However, the interviews showed that counselors found some limitations to the practicality of the ACP when dealing with students interested in changing career pathways. Interviewees described that student course alterations in the middle of a year are often impossible – Not because of the ACP process but because the number of courses and electives offered by schools is limited by budgetary constraints. Another limitation of the ACP related to the access counselors have to the plan in a paper form. The desire for electronic access is a real issue but has less to do with the ACP than it does with the internal structure of the division. However, it is clear that electronic access to the ACP would improve the usefulness of the document to counselors in general.

Overall, counselors agree the ACP process is valuable for organizing high school programs of study. The counselors demonstrate an understanding of the basic principles of the ACP and exceed the implementation aspects designated by the state. Also, the counselors think the organizational aspect of the plan benefits parents and students by linking high school with career goals. This connection helps to improve student success by organizing a program of study closely related to a student's interests and talents. While counselors identified some problems related to adapting the plan to student changes and form portability, the benefits achieved by connecting students and parents to the planning process early outweigh the logistical issues related to administering the plan.

Evaluating Counselor Implementation Practices Versus Policy Intent

Defining policy intent: The policymakers. For any policy situation there are three interpretive communities involved: the "policymakers", the "implementing agency personnel", and the "affected citizens or clients" (Yanow, 2000, p. 10). This study examined the meaning, or

sensemaking, of the counselors as the implementing personnel so describing the policy intent as envisioned by the policymakers is important if one is to compare implementation to intent. Policies exist within realms where individuals or groups are affected by the policy and where each group interacts with the policy at a different level. Yanow (2000) observes that, "Interpretive policy analysis explores the contrasts between policy meanings as intended by policymakers−"authored texts"−and the possibly variant and even incommensurable meanings−"constructed texts"−made of them by other policy-relevant groups" (p. 9). For the present study, the policymakers are identified as the Virginia Board of Education (VBOE) and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) working on behalf of the Virginia General Assembly (the state legislature). Together, these agencies represent one interpretive community and are referred to generally as the VDOE because the Board of Education uses the Department of Education to create and manage educational the policies such as the ACP.

The local school board plays a role in policy implementation because directives from the board impact counseling services and influence counselor actions (Dannow & Park, 2009; Hill, 2008). To ascertain the division's policy intent the author contacted the employee responsible for communicating district policy expectations to the counselors. The employee provided numerous documents (e.g., meeting notes, emails, and fact sheets) now in possession of the author that convey that the division's expectations for policy implementation come directly from the Technical Assistance Document. The employee, when asked during a conversation to characterize the implementation expectations said, "Well, the [TAD] is what we use. I basically provide that document to the counselors and tell them to follow its guidelines." This employee also stressed that one of the division's expectations is that the staff and counselors adhere to VDOE policies and provide services in a manner consistent with documents such as the TAD.

Via email, the employee reported that this message was, "Conveyed to the counseling supervisors in each building and, in turn, to each counselor in the division." From this investigation, there appears to be no difference in implementation expectations between the local division and the VDOE. As such, any deviations from policy intent on a counselor's part were not construed as originating from policy instructions received from the division.

The implementation intent of this policy can be summarized as a collaborative effort between students, parents, and counselors to produce a high school program of study grounded in the student's identified postsecondary goals and flexible enough to meet the students developing needs. To accomplish this vision, the VDOE published the *Technical Assistance Document for Academic and Career Plans* (TAD) for use by school divisions during implementation (Virginia Board of Education, 2010). This single document represents a wealth of information and support for implementing personnel such as school counselors. Yanow (2000) explains that, "Much of policy analysis, especially ex post implementation or evaluation analysis, requires the establishment of policy intent as a benchmark against which to assess enactment or outcomes" (p. 9). The TAD is a significant document because as an official publication developed by the VDOE it is intended to convey the General Assembly's intent for the policy. Therefore, the TAD represents the benchmark for evaluating counselor implementation actions.

The first section of the TAD establishes the intended purpose and expectations of the policymakers:

The Academic and Career Plan is designed to be a working document that maximizes student achievement by setting and accomplishing goals in middle and high school that lead to postsecondary success. The Plan [ACP] should be student-driven and maintained by school officials working cooperatively to assist the student in reaching his or her goals

in the most logical academic and career path. The Academic and Career Plan should start with the end in mind. The student, parent or guardian, and school official(s) will create a plan agreed upon and signed by all parties to ensure everyone is focused on working toward the same goals and analyze and adjust the Plan in response to new information to meet the needs of the student. (Virginia Board of Education, 2010, pp. 2-3)

The TAD also provides resources for school personnel such as web-based college (both 4-yr and 2-yr) information services, career interest planning services, links to other supporting policy documents, roles and responsibilities for stakeholders, sample ACP implementation scenarios, and example questions for student interviews at each check-in point (i.e., grades seven, nine, and eleven). Each of these resources instructs counselors how to adequately prepare an ACP for students using a variety of tools.

As described by the TAD, the required components of the ACP policy are: 1) The student's program of study for high school graduation; 2) A postsecondary career pathway based on the student's academic and career interests; 3) A signature by the student, student's parent or guardian, and school official(s) designated by the principal; 4) A copy of the Plan included in the student's record; and 5) Reviewing and updating, if necessary, before the student enters the ninth and eleventh grades. (Virginia Board of Education, 2010). According to the VDOE, school divisions that meet these minimum requirements are implementing the policy in a manner consistent with the policy intent of the legislation. To determine implementation fidelity, counselor actions are compared to the required elements and purpose statements stipulated by the TAD. Therefore, counselors who work with all students equally to develop plans with postsecondary goals in mind, who incorporate student and parent input into a logical course

sequence, and who are available to make adjustments as student needs change over time are implementing the policy in a manner consistent with the policymakers' intent.

Counselor implementation in light of policy intent. A combined counselor Equity Implementation Rating from the survey of 3.56 indicates that counselors in Coal County routinely implement the ACP plan according to the policy intent. However, because the mean score was not 4.0, survey responses signified that there are areas where implementation may fall short of expectations. Ways that policy implementation coalesce or diverge from policy intent are discussed next.

Implementation that coalesces with intent. Survey participants expressed that counselors almost always attempt to match student interests and goals to the development of an ACP document. The survey asked four questions about implementation actions and three of the questions had *Equity Implementation Ratings* above 3.0 with only the question about updating the plan more than once a year receiving a mean score below 3.0. Counselors described several practices that are consistent with the implementation intent set forth by the VDOE. The first practice is that counselors find it important to talk with students about postsecondary interests and goals when creating or updating the ACP. The second is that counselors make an effort to involve parents in the discussion when atypical situations develop in an attempt to maintain open lines of communication and ensure that the document reflects the best possible scenario for the student. Third, counselors use the ACP to help students explore the wide variety of career pathways while in high school by linking the student courses to programs of study that fall within the identified career pathway. Fourth, when college is the goal counselors encourage students and parents to attempt the high-level college preparatory courses offered. This practice not only improves the student's college application credentials it also exposes the student to

college level academic requirements before they enter higher education. Finally, counselors update the ACP more often than the policy mandates by meeting with each student once a year to discuss the next year's schedule and the ACP. Providing more contact with students allows counselors to "check-in" on the current plan and to ensure that it continues to reflect the student's postsecondary goals. The counselor practices in Coal County are therefore consistent with the policy intent of the VDOE as expressed in the TAD. In some cases implementation exceeds the minimum requirements but there are some areas where counselors struggle to meet policy intent.

Implementation that diverges from intent. The first situation where Coal County struggles with policy intent is in the ability to offer students more opportunities to modify the ACP as student interest evolves or if a student fails a required course. This problem, of course, is not due to circumstance with the counselors' control but derive from the limited resources of the division to provide additional courses. Counselors explained that a student might meet with counselors at any time during the year but that changes to the plan during the academic year are unlikely. In the worst-case scenario, a student who wishes to alter the current career pathway might wait an entire year before the schedule can be changed to a new career pathway. While this situation is unfortunate, it reinforces the counselor's observations regarding the importance of early planning so that pathway changes can be handled early in the academic program. Several counselors noted that pathway changes in the junior or senior year are extremely difficult because of the comprehensive high school model of offering a selection of courses, often only one time a year.

Another deviation from policy intent is that higher SES students and parents appear to receive the majority of counselor time and effort in Coal County. While an equity framework suggests that lower SES students need additional resources, the ACP requires that all students

receive the same level of supports from school staff. The idea of providing consistent services to lower SES students stems from the observations that many lower SES students are provided fewer, if any, counseling services in many divisions. As described by Governor Kaine, part of the intent behind the ACP is to mandate several process steps that provide a minimum level of services to students at risk for not graduating. However, each counselor interviewed noted that it is most often the higher SES parents (i.e., the "squeaky wheels") who receive a disproportionate amount of the counselor's time. Even though counselors do not explicitly choose to provide fewer services to lower SES groups, the fact that there are not as many calls home or as many face-to-face meetings with lower SES families is a de facto divergence from the equity intent goals of the ACP policy.

In general, Coal County counselor implementation actions do coalesce with the ACP policy intent as described by lawmakers and the TAD. Counselors have the recommended conversations to align student interests with career pathways and they meet with students often to ensure that the ACP is current. The counselors are directing students to take rigorous courses and to explore college and career options while in high school and they involve both parents and students in the process when possible. Although counselors are not able to provide additional support services to lower SES students as suggested by an equity framework, they are providing lower SES students an opportunity to explore postsecondary options through an ACP that is based on their personal career goals; thus meeting the minimum requirements of the policy.

How Student Demographics Influence Academic and Career Plan Implementation

The experience minorities and lower SES students have with counselors is different than students in higher SES groups. In Coal County higher SES families, according to the counselors interviewed, receive a disproportionate amount of counselor time and resources in order to

109

prepare their children for college. As a result, lower SES students receive either minimal or, occasionally, lower levels of service from the counseling staff. Additionally, when counselors meet with lower SES students they may bring different expectations about what lower SES students expect from the postsecondary.

The survey showed counselors anticipate only 21% of lower SES students attending a traditional four-year college. This may indicate that when counselors talk with lower SES students they bring a preconceived notion about the type of postsecondary options to offer for consideration. For example, the interviews revealed that many postsecondary decisions made by lower SES students depend heavily upon the affordability of traditional college. Counselors described several stories where a higher SES student's experience during a planning session was dedicated to finding a college to attend that matched particular career interests and not on how to afford admission. Conversely, counselors depicted many lower SES student planning sessions that were not about simply picking a college to attend. More often, counseling sessions with lower SES students focused on how to find alternative postsecondary options that are more affordable such as community college, directly entering the workforce, or military service. While counselors do encourage students to achieve some level of higher education they do not have many resources available to provide funding assistance for lower SES students that would make traditional college an affordable option.

Another experiential difference for lower SES students is the amount of contact they are likely to have with school counselors. While each student in Coal County talks with a counselor at least one time during the year, students with advocates at home interact more with the counselors. As described by the counselors, a great deal of time is spent talking with higher SES parents who call or visit the school to discuss postsecondary concerns. The additional time spent

110

talking with higher SES advocates directly affects the amount of time available for counselors to attend to lower SES students. As the counselors noted during interviews, they want to do more for lower SES students but are rarely able to dedicate the time to helping them.

A student's SES status does affect ACP implementation and manifests as: pre-conceived counselor expectations of lower SES students postsecondary plans; the topics discussed with counselors (e.g., traditional college versus alternate routes); lower SES students lacking the means to afford traditional college; less time with counselors talking about creating postsecondary plans. It is important to note that this study does not suggest that counselors in Coal County are purposefully denying services to lower SES students based on race or other demographic indicators. However, the counselors are constrained by having to focus on the "squeaky wheel" parents that are calling and visiting the schools. Nevertheless, counselors are not providing additional services in a manner consistent with an equity framework that would help lower SES students achieve the same postsecondary success that higher SES students experience.

There was no evidence to suggest that counselor behaviors varied according to students' race, ethnicity, or gender. When asked, the counselors said that a student's demographics did not play factor into their ACP process. Counselors indicated that academic achievement and the availability of funding is what matters to future planning, not what a student looks like. However, future research might be done to confirm this finding by taking a more deductive approach and utilizing a narrowly tailored interview protocol.

Finding Relationships Between Policy Intent, Counselors' Knowledge and Attitudes, and Policy Implementation

Counselors who have a good understanding of the ACP and find the process useful are more likely to implement the policy in a manner consistent with the policymaker's intent (Eisenhart, Cuthbert, Shrum, & Harding, 1988; Fiore, 2004). The Coal County counselors demonstrate a commitment to implementing the ACP policy according to the established guidelines as recorded by both the survey and interviews. From the survey, the relationship between implementation fidelity and counselor's knowledge and beliefs about the policy can be thought of as a combined score from responses to Objectives 1, 2, and 3. From these objectives information about counselor implementation actions, knowledge of the policy, and thoughts about the value of the ACP in course planning was gained. By combining the scores from these three objectives participants have a *Policy Relationship Score* ranging from 0.0 to 14.0. A score of 14.0 indicates the ideal policy agent that consistently implements the policy according to the stated intent, thinks the ACP and the processes are extremely useful for course planning, and who is very knowledgeable about the ACP components. The resulting Policy Relationship Score mean was determined to be 9.18 (Figure 7) for all survey participants. Additionally, the distribution in Figure 7 indicates that almost all of the survey participants have a Policy Relationship Score above the midpoint of 7.0. This can be interpreted to mean that counselors in Coal County have a good understanding of the ACP policy intent and that they consistently provide services in line with the expectations of the policymakers. This conclusion is supported by each of the counselor interviews as they described that the process used to formulate and update the ACP was applied to all students on an annual basis. For instance, none of the counselors indicated that there were some students who did not receive a yearly update or any occasions where counselors decided to omit meeting with their students. Thus, these reports are

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consistent with implementing agents who are meeting, and in the case of Coal County, exceeding the minimum requirements set forth by the policymakers.
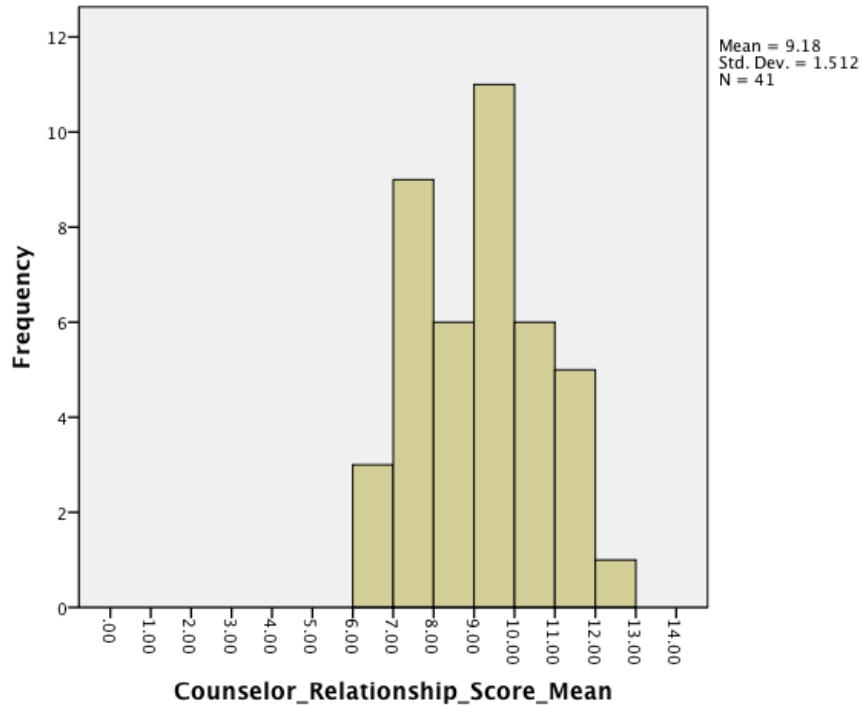

Mean = 9.18
Std. Dev. = 1.512
N = 41

Figure 7. Counselor Policy Relationship Score Distribution

Contributing to the connection between counselor attributes and policy implementation is whether or not counselors perceive a match between their role as counselor and the expectations of the policy. A significant component of the ACP policy is the early identification of a career pathway that informs the development of a personalized program of study in order to improve postsecondary success. The counselors support this aspect of the policy in both beliefs and implementation. Counselors begin the process in middle school and encourage students to evaluate the success of the plan on a yearly basis. Interviewees indicated that planning for the postsecondary at an early stage is one of the main benefits of using the ACP because it involves

parents and students in the planning process well before it is too late to change. The counselors routinely use the ACP as a roadmap with students to find the best match between interest, ability, and goals. Moreover, counselors agree with the concept that students should think about the postsecondary early because it helps to connect the present courses to the future career. By linking high school courses to career pathways, students are able to explore careers in high school and have experiences directly related to their identified pathway. Since counselors agree with the concept of early planning their ideas and actions are aligned with policy intent and this aspect of the policy is implemented with high fidelity.

Another of the stated roles for counselors in the ACP policy is that of a facilitator. Counselors are expected to be the guides for the college and career planning process and to help students navigate the complex procedure of deciding on a career pathway. The counselors are the implementing agents who coordinate the plan with students, parents, administrators, and postsecondary institutions. Counselors are then responsible for monitoring the implementation of a high school program of study that leads to a specific career cluster. Counselors accept this role and indicated that it is one area of their position that has significant meaning for them. Each of the counselors interviewed described helping students construct an ACP as a rewarding experience because they have a genuine desire to see the students successful both in high school and the postsecondary. As with the previous connection, counselors support this aspect of the ACP policy and therefore implement it with high fidelity.

The link between counselor knowledge about the program and implementation is that as counselors understand more about the plan and its intent the more likely they are to act in a manner consistent with policy intent. Counselors are exposed to several aspects of the policy in a CACREP accredited degree program such as counselor as facilitator, counselor support for all

114

students, and connecting high school to the postsecondary (ASCA, 2012) and bring those competencies to the position as school counselor. More than two-thirds of the survey respondents identified their counseling degree program as CACREP accredited as did three of the five interview participants. As a result of this training, the fundamental way counselors approach their occupation is consistent with the policy intent of the ACP initiative. Consequently, Coal County students are well served by a counseling staff committed to providing the best possible outcomes for all students.

Implications

  Reduce the student to counselor ratio. This study revealed that Coal County counselors provide college and career planning services in accordance to the letter, and spirit, of the ACP policy. Another revelation is that counselors would like to do more for lower SES students but that they usually cannot find the time to help. Counselors describe devoting a significant amount of time responding to the "squeaky wheel" parents in the community at the expense of the lower SES students. But counselors had a suggestion for how to fix this problem: more counselors. To serve the lower SES groups and provide the additional services necessary to produce successful postsecondary outcomes additional counseling personnel are needed to reduce the student to counselor ratio. While the division has a ratio close to the ASCA recommended level, counselors still report not having the time to help lower SES students on a consistent basis. And this issue is not restricted to lower SES schools because every counselor interviewed conveyed the same need for more counselors to fully reach all students. The additional personnel would decrease counselor caseloads and increase the meaningful one-on-one sessions to discuss postsecondary options with lower SES students and parents. More counselors would also provide time for counselors to help lower SES students and parents

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explore financial aid options to make traditional college a reality instead of just a dream. As the counselors explained during the interviews, helping lower SES students navigate the postsecondary world is time consuming and no amount of technology or procedures can replace the time counselors need to make sure each student receives the best possible support.

      Encourage planning for the future. The present study also highlighted the benefits of fostering a school wide culture of postsecondary awareness in both middle and high schools. Each counselor described division sponsored events designed to bring awareness to postsecondary options as a welcome aid to helping them reinforce the positive benefits of planning for the future early. Administrators and teachers can also help in this effort by talking with students regularly about their postsecondary plans. Making consistent contact with students, developing genuine relationships, and encouraging students to pursue career pathways matching their talents and abilities are all positive steps that cost very little to implement.

      Organizational changes. Counselors identified division-wide organizational changes that would support the counselors' efforts to meet the needs of all students while administering the ACP policy. First, counselors want an electronic version of an ACP so that information is readily available via computer instead of a paper form restricted to the counselor's office. Second, counselors would like to have more options regarding course selection for students who change their minds or fail courses. Students encountering these challenges are faced with limited options because schools cannot staff all courses each semester in order to provide additional options for mid-year changes. Third, counselors would benefit from having financial aid experts available in the schools at all times to assist with providing options for lower SES students. Additional personnel dedicated to helping parents and students understand the financial aspects

of college and career planning would remove some of the burden counselors experience trying to manage their caseload.

Focus on reaching lower SES students and parents. The counselors in Coal County struggle with providing adequate services to all students when the higher SES groups monopolize a large portion of counselor time. In order to change the direction of services offered to lower SES groups the counselors will need a consistent focus on the target population. To help balance counselor resources, a time log of parent contact would be helpful in determining if all of the counselors are interacting with mainly higher SES parents. If only a few counselors spend a large amount of time with higher SES parents, then the caseload should be redistributed to provide additional access to lower SES groups. However, if all counselors appear to be focused on higher SES groups then additional personnel may be indicated. Additionally, counselors should adopt the D-F report that Ms. C described as a way to maintain contact with at risk students. Making contact with students on the D-F report a priority will help counselors intervene before student course options are reduced by repeated courses. Along those lines, administrators should allow counselors more opportunities to visit students in the classroom. This extra time would be used to check in on students, provide updates regarding events and deadlines, and afford students an opportunity to schedule meetings with counselors. Finally, counselors should set aside time each day to initiate contact with lower SES parents. Counselors reported during the interviews that lower SES parents were not likely to initiate contact but were very responsive once the counselor called. Because lower SES parents are not coming to the counselors, counselors need to be the originators of contact rather than simply reacting to the "squeaky wheels" that come through the door.

117

Lessons Learned and Future Research

The lessons learned from this study are important for helping administrators understand what counselors think about this ACP policy specifically, and their role in the schools generally. As such, future research should focus on repeating both the survey and the interview process in districts with varied socioeconomic demographics and student populations. Comparing results from future studies would clarify if the problem of higher SES parents obtaining additional counselor time at the expense of lower SES students is unique to this division or if it is an issue with larger scope. The counselors in Coal County exceed the minimum requirements of the ACP by virtue of division expectations and local procedures so exploring these topics within divisions with limited resources would provide additional insight into the challenges and benefits of the policy. Specifically, uncovering if counselors in divisions without the resources to meet students every year find the same benefits and connections that the Coal County counselors expressed. Additional work could also be done to further identify issues of the students' race/ethnicity and gender. In this particular case, students' gender and race were not discussed along the same lines as socioeconomic status. It is unclear whether there are: no differences between students' experiences based on race/ethnicity and gender; counselors in Coal County purposefully take a "color blind" and "gender blind" stance, or; problems exist but are not recognized due to ignorance. Finally, the overwhelming majority of participants in this survey were white women. It would be interesting to compare this study with a case where counseling services are provided by men as well as by counselors of color.

There are a couple of questions remaining that would also benefit from further study. First, the counselors responded on the survey (Objective 5) that they spend more time helping lower SES students during counseling sessions. However, during the interviews counselors

described a different situation where higher SES students and parents receive additional time at the expense of the lower SES population. The reason for this disconnect was not discovered during the present study. Perhaps during the survey counselor responses indicated that it takes more time to complete the actual ACP form for lower SES students whereas during the interviews counselors were thinking about how much time is spent with lower SES students throughout the day. Understanding this discrepancy could provide additional insight into how to promote and maintain an equity framework within the counseling offices. And second, the conversations with counselors seemed to describe a preconceived belief that postsecondary preparation entails making students ready to attend a traditional college instead of an emphasis on all postsecondary choices. Further study is needed to understand this apparent counselor bias towards students not interested in attending college. For example, learning how a perceived district culture relating to a "college ready" student body may influence school counselors' decisions could illuminate why conversations between counselors and lower SES students tend to focus on finding ways to pay for college instead of exploring other possibilities.

Conclusion

According to the counselors in Coal County, the Academic and Career Plan policy is an effective postsecondary planning tool that supports their efforts to create programs of study that are both interesting and relevant to students. Counselors in this division are knowledgeable about the process and support the policymakers' intent by maintaining implementation practices consistent with the goals of the policy. The enduring challenge expressed by the counselors is finding a way to accommodate the needs of lower SES families to prepare them for postsecondary success without the same resources available to the higher SES students. While the solution, in the counselors' opinion, is to provide more personnel, securing the funds for the

119

additional counselors is a major policy constraint. Without a concerted effort on the part of parents, educators, counselors, and division leaders the cycle of privilege will continue and higher SES students will receive additional benefits from the ACP policy at the expense of lower SES populations.

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131

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134

Appendix A

Questions used in the quantitative survey instrument.

Note: The number in brackets is the order it appeared in the survey (e.g., [Q20] means it was the 20th question asked on the survey).

Objective 1: Describe counselor implementation actions related to the ACP policy.

1. [Q7] When you talk with students about course selection, do you ask students about their interests, goals, and postsecondary plans?
   1) Never
   2) Rarely
   3) Sometimes
   4) Often
   5) Always

2. [Q26] Do you feel that you are able to help students create a challenging course schedule based on their interests and postsecondary plans?
   1) Never
   2) Rarely
   3) Sometimes
   4) Often
   5) Always

3. [Q27] During planning sessions with students are you able to suggest postsecondary institutions that match their academic and career goals?
   1) Never
   2) Rarely
   3) Sometimes
   4) Often
   5) Always

4. [Q21] Are you able to modify the student's course selections based on input from students and parents more often than once a year?
   1) Never
   2) Rarely
   3) Sometimes
   4) Often
   5) Always

Objective 2: Assess counselor knowledge about the ACP policy and its intent.

1. [Q1] A completed Academic and Career Plan must be signed by the counselor, the student, and:

135

1) an Assistant Principal
2) a Parent or Guardian [Note: Correct Answer]
3) the School Counseling Coordinator

2. [Q3] Which of the following is a required component of an Academic and Career Plan?
   1) A postsecondary career pathway based on the student's academic and career interests. [Note: Correct Answer]
   2) The Academic and Career Plan must be updated at least one time per year in grades 9 – 12.
   3) The initial Academic and Career Plan is generated by counselors in grade 9.

3. [Q18] A student's program of study should be linked to a career pathway that matches the student's identified interests and abilities.
   1) True [Note: Correct Answer]
   2) False
   3) I don't know

4. [Q29] According to new Virginia regulations, high school counselors are required, at a minimum, to update student Academic and Career Plans in 9th grade and the 11th grade.
   1) True [Note: Correct Answer]
   2) False
   3) I don't know

5. [Q13] Briefly describe in what ways you feel unprepared to help students create a program of study based on their interests and abilities.

6. [Q20] Briefly describe in what ways you feel prepared to help students create a program of study based on their interests and abilities.

7. [Q33] What is the most challenging part of your job with regards to updating and creating college and career plans for students?

8. [Q35] If you could ask your administrators for any one thing that would help you do your job better, what would it be?

Objective 3: Ascertain counselor beliefs about the value of the ACP to student academic and career planning.

1. [Q22] "An Academic and Career Plan is a valuable tool for organizing and planning a student's school program of study."
   1) Strongly disagree
   2) Disagree

3) Neither agree or disagree
4) Agree
5) Strongly agree

2. [Q17] The purpose of the Academic and Career Plan is to maximize student postsecondary success by setting and accomplishing goals in middle and high school.
   1) Strongly disagree
   2) Disagree
   3) Neither agree or disagree
   4) Agree
   5) Strongly agree

3. [Q28] "The Academic and Career Plan is a useful tool for accurately capturing the student's postsecondary goals or intentions."
   1) Strongly disagree
   2) Disagree
   3) Neither agree or disagree
   4) Agree
   5) Strongly agree

4. [Q4] When talking with students and parents about college and career plans do you feel like you have sufficient time to help them understand financial aid and scholarship opportunities?
   1) Never
   2) Rarely
   3) Sometimes
   4) Often
   5) Always

5. [Q2] "Students understand that the Academic and Career Plan helps them to connect high school courses to their postsecondary goals."
   1) Strongly disagree
   2) Disagree
   3) Neither agree or disagree
   4) Agree
   5) Strongly agree

6. [Q15] Obtaining a parent or guardian's signature on the Academic and Career Plan means that the parent/guardian fully supports the program you put together for their child.
   1) Strongly disagree
   2) Disagree
   3) Neither agree or disagree

137

4) Agree
5) Strongly agree

7. [Q19] "Your school administrator(s) support the development of meaningful Academic and Career Plans by providing adequate guidance and resources to your department."
   1) Strongly disagree
   2) Disagree
   3) Neither agree or disagree
   4) Agree
   5) Strongly agree

Objective 4: Examine counselor beliefs about race and postsecondary options relating to equity and access issues.

1. [Q16] "Doing the right thing by students does not necessarily mean treating all students equally."
   1) Strongly disagree
   2) Disagree
   3) Neither agree or disagree
   4) Agree
   5) Strongly agree

2. [Q12] "Students in lower socioeconomic groups and minority students need extra support to make well informed postsecondary choices."
   1) Strongly disagree
   2) Disagree
   3) Neither agree or disagree
   4) Agree
   5) Strongly agree

3. [Q31] From the choices below, the most important factor when developing an Academic and Career Plan is a student's:
   1) Academic achievement
   2) Career interests
   3) Financial situation
   4) Race/Ethnicity
   5) Family Expectations

4. [Q36] "As a school counselor, it is part of your role to help at-risk students gain admission to institutions of higher education."
   1) Strongly disagree
   2) Disagree
   3) Neither agree or disagree
   4) Agree
   5) Strongly agree

5. [Q25] "Students in higher socioeconomic groups generally need less support to make postsecondary choices."
   1) Strongly disagree
   2) Disagree
   3) Neither agree or disagree
   4) Agree
   5) Strongly agree

6. [Q24] To the best of your knowledge, what percentage of students from minority and/or lower socioeconomic groups at your school choose to apply to an institution of higher education (i.e., traditional college, community college, or certificate program)?
   1) 0% - 25%
   2) 25% - 50%
   3) 50% - 75%
   4) 75% - 100%
   5) I don't know

7. [Q14] In your experience, students from higher socioeconomic groups at your school choose to attend:
   1) Traditional College
   2) Community College
   3) Certificate Program
   4) Military Service
   5) Other

8. [Q10] In your experience, students from minority and/or lower socioeconomic groups at your school choose to attend:
   1) Traditional College
   2) Community College
   3) Certificate Program
   4) Military Service
   5) Other

Objective 5: Identify how student race and socioeconomic factors contribute to counselor implementation practices.

1. [Q6] Do you find yourself spending extra time with at-risk (i.e., lower socioeconomic status, minorities, etc.) students during counseling sessions in order to discuss the benefits of planning for postsecondary options?
   1) Never
   2) Rarely
   3) Sometimes
   4) Often
   5) Always

2. [Q34] "Compared to a higher socioeconomic student, I spend more time completing an Academic and Career Plan for a low socioeconomic student because they are less knowledgeable about postsecondary options."
    1) Strongly disagree
    2) Disagree
    3) Neither agree or disagree
    4) Agree
    5) Strongly agree

3. [Q5] "Compared to a higher socioeconomic student, I spend more time completing an Academic and Career Plan for a low socioeconomic student because they are less interested in postsecondary options."
    1) Strongly disagree
    2) Disagree
    3) Neither agree or disagree
    4) Agree
    5) Strongly agree

4. [Q8] "Students in higher socioeconomic groups benefit more from my time with them discussing an Academic and Career Plan than lower socioeconomic students."
    1) Strongly disagree
    2) Disagree
    3) Neither agree or disagree
    4) Agree
    5) Strongly agree

5. [Q32] "I have a hard time obtaining parent/guardian signatures on Academic and Career plans from students in higher socioeconomic groups."
    1) Strongly disagree
    2) Disagree
    3) Neither agree or disagree
    4) Agree
    5) Strongly agree

6. [Q11] "I have a hard time obtaining parent/guardian signatures on Academic and Career plans from students in lower socioeconomic groups."
    1) Strongly disagree
    2) Disagree
    3) Neither agree or disagree
    4) Agree
    5) Strongly agree

7. [Q23] From the selections below, which race/ethnicity of students require the most effort (i.e., time or resources) to complete an Academic and Career Plan.
    1) White
    2) Black
    3) Hispanic
    4) Asian
    5) Other

8. [Q9] From the selections below, indicate which students require the least effort (i.e., time or resources) to complete an Academic and Career Plan. (Note: SES means socioeconomic status.)
    1) Low SES White
    2) Low SES Black
    3) Low SES Hispanic
    4) High SES White
    5) High SES Black
    6) High SES Hispanic

9. [Q30] "I spend most of my time with the following type of student:" (Note: SES means socioeconomic status.)
    1) Low SES Male
    2) Low SES Female
    3) High SES Male
    4) High SES Female

RECRUITMENT EMAIL #1 (INITIAL REQUEST)

Hello,

      For those of you I have not met, my name is Michael Ormsmith and I am a doctoral student at Virginia Commonwealth University, former [Information removed to maintain confidentiality]. I am conducting research for my dissertation and would appreciate your help. Your opinions on the subject of student course planning and, specifically, the new Academic and Career Plan (which is now required by Virginia for all students entering the ninth grade) are the subject of my research. The information learned from this survey will prove helpful in developing effective counseling programs.

      The link at the end of this message takes you to an online survey that should take **15 – 20 minutes** to complete. For your time, you will have the opportunity to enter your email address in a raffle for a **$100 Amazon.com** gift card. As part of this research I would also like to interview a few of you in a face-to-face meeting. If you are willing to interview with me, please indicate your agreement when the question appears in the survey.

      If you are interested in taking the survey, please click on the link at the end of the email to begin the survey. Since I understand that talking about your work environment might be uncomfortable, please know that your responses will not be associated with your name in any of the published information. There are a few other pieces of information that you will be asked to read about and accept in the informed consent statement before beginning the survey.

      If you have any questions, please contact me at **ormsmithm@vcu.edu**

      I really appreciate your time and participation.

Regards,
Michael Ormsmith, M.Ed.

Research Survey Link: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1-B_7ALRLIV1bEWqNABzjsvy8V_UDTm4gJxw_f1ltrZ0/viewform

RECRUITMENT EMAIL #2 (REMINDER)

Hello,

A week ago I asked for your help with my dissertation research. If you have already taken the survey, thank you very much! For those of you who have not responded please consider taking a few minutes to do it today. Remember, your participation in the survey allows you to enter the raffle for a **$100 Amazon.com** gift card.

Please click on the link at the end of the email to begin the survey.

Thanks again for helping me with this study!

Regards,
Michael Ormsmith, M.Ed.
ormsmithm@vcu.edu

Research Survey Link: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1-B_7ALRLIV1bEWqNABzjsvy8V_UDTm4gJxw_f1ltrZ0/viewform

Appendix D

Questions and follow up probes for the face-to-face phase two qualitative interviews.

Objective 1: Describe counselor implementation actions related to the ACP policy.

1. Please explain under what circumstances, and the process you use, to contact

    students in order to update their ACP.

    a. Probes

        1. What things interrupt contacting students?

        2. Are some students easier to find than others?

2. Why do you think it is important for a student's program of study to be linked

    with a career pathway?

    a. Probes

        1. What do students say when you ask them what they want to do?

        2. What careers do you suggest most often?

3. Would you tell me why you think (or do not think) that a challenging course

    schedule based on a student's interests and postsecondary plans is beneficial to

    student success?

    a. Probes

        1. What do students say when you ask them what they want to do?

        2. What careers do you suggest most often?

4. Please explain why you agree (or disagree) with the purpose of the Academic

    and Career Plan is to maximize student postsecondary success by setting and

    accomplishing goals in middle and high school.

    a. Probes

144

1. What type of things might be better than an ACP?

2. Are there other ways to help students accomplish goals?

Objective 2: Assess counselor knowledge about the ACP policy and its intent.

1. How do you think a student's interests and postsecondary goals fit into the process of high school course planning?

2. What role do you feel parents play in the development of a student's Academic and Career Plan?

Objective 3: Ascertain counselor beliefs about the value of the ACP to student academic and career planning.

1. Please tell me in what ways an Academic and Career Plan is a valuable tool for organizing and planning a student's school program of study.

2. Please tell me in what ways an Academic and Career Plan is not a valuable tool for organizing and planning a student's school program of study.

3. Would you please describe a time when a student gave you his/her thoughts about how important the college and career planning sessions (and the ACP form) were to their postsecondary preparation?

4. Please tell me about an encounter you had with parents where the parents talked about what they thought was important regarding college and career planning.

Objective 4: Examine counselor beliefs about race and postsecondary options relating to equity and access issues.

145

1. Would you share with me reasons why you think, or do not think, that students from lower socioeconomic groups should get more of your time and attention when developing an academic and career plan?

2. As a school counselor, in what ways does your role allow you to help at-risk students gain admission to institutions of higher education?

3. In what ways do you think that interest in college might depend on things like a student's demographics or socioeconomic group?

Objective 5: Identify how student race and socioeconomic factors contribute to counselor implementation practices.

1. Tell me about how student factors, such as race or socioeconomic status, affect how you develop a student's program of study.

2. Tell me about a time when you spent extra time with an at-risk (i.e., lower socioeconomic status, minorities, etc.) student during a counseling session to discuss the benefits of planning for postsecondary options.

3. Please tell me about the events and activities your school uses to promote college and career awareness for all students.

Vita

Michael Isaac Ormsmith was born Michael Isaac Smith on May 13, 1976, in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and is an American citizen. He graduated from Clover Hill High School, Midlothian, Virginia in 1994. He received his Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering from Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, Virginia in 1998. He received a Master of Education in Educational Leadership from Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia in 2010.