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## Counselor Educator Perceptions: College and Career Readiness of African-American Males

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# Counselor Educator Perceptions: College and Career Readiness of African-American Males

## **Abstract**

This paper presents the findings of a pilot quantitative study, investigating counselor educators' perceptions of the importance of pre-service school counselor training in college and career readiness of African American males, and the ability to train pre-service counselors to facilitate the college and career readiness of African-American males. A significant difference was detected between groups in terms of their perceived ability to prepare school counselors who could implement college and career readiness programs for African American males.

## **Author's Notes**

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## **Keywords**

African-American, males, counselor, college, career

In the age of innovation and technology, it is critical that interventions to prepare students for college and career are purposeful and deliberate. To that end, the college and career readiness process is a K-16 process. Conley (2007) defines college readiness as the level of preparation and skills necessary to qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses at a postsecondary institution without the need for remedial coursework. School counselors can be incredibly helpful with postsecondary planning, as they engage students in thinking about and planning for their future (Savitz-Romer, 2012).

School counselors are being appropriately called upon through national initiatives to engage the college readiness process of all students more purposefully and intentionally (The White House, 2014). As critical as school counselors are to facilitating the college and career readiness of students (Harris, Myers, Appel, Han, Warren, Ware, Talmage, & Addison, 2013), the revealed dissatisfaction of school counselors with their graduate training (Savitz-Romer, 2012) in this regard is cause for concern. Post-secondary education is seen as a pathway to increased economic opportunities (e.g., higher salaries), benefits (e.g., healthcare and vacation time), and career mobility (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). It is important, then, for school counselors, teachers, and administrators to create a college-going paradigm and culture within their school, and especially for African American males.

One reason for specific attention to be given to African American males is that fifty-two percent of African American males graduate from high school in four years compared to 78% of their White counterparts (Holzman, Beaudry, & Jackson, 2012). Further, only 46% of African American males enrolled as a full time undergraduate student while 51% of White males enrolled as full time during the 2007-2008 academic year (Ross et al., 2012). For counselor educators, it is imperative that college and career readiness counseling of African American

males be infused into the training for pre-service school counselors. This study aims to explore differences across race for counselor educators' perceptions regarding the importance of, and efficacy in, the training of pre-service school counselors to facilitate the college and career readiness of African American males.

### **College and Career Readiness**

Policy initiatives require that college and career readiness efforts be implemented in schools across the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2010ab). In 2014, President Obama and First Lady Obama issued a call to expand opportunity for students to enroll and succeed in college, particularly underrepresented populations (The White House, 2014). A series of convenings were sponsored in 2014, in partnership with the White House, all of which galvanized efforts to create and implement action plans to support the overall mission of increasing college and career readiness (The White House, 2014). First Lady Obama's Reach Higher initiative, specifically, partnered with the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) to support school counselors in their efforts to expose students to college and career opportunities, help them understand the financial aid process, and encourage academic planning (ASCA, n.d.). The first and second author participated in the White House Convening in San Diego in November 2014, and assisted their respective state teams in forging partnerships and creating action plans.

College and career readiness can be defined as: "...a high school graduate having the English and math knowledge and skills needed to qualify for and succeed in the postsecondary job training and/or education necessary for their chosen career (i.e. community college, university, technical/vocational program, apprenticeship, or significant on-the-job training) (Achieve, 2014, para 1). Conley (2007) defines college readiness as the level of preparation and

skills necessary to qualify for and succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing college courses at a postsecondary institution without the need for remedial coursework., Twenty-five percent of public high school students graduate on time, and of those who do, one-third must enroll in remedial courses upon entering college (Bruce and Bridgeland, 2012). While specific content knowledge is important for college and career readiness, cognitive strategies such as interpretation, problem solving, and reasoning have been consistently identified as being even more important than specific content knowledge (Conley, 2007). According to Conley (2007), large differences often exist between the amount and type of reading and writing required in high school versus college classes as well as the analytic and thinking skills required.

In addition to subject-focused content knowledge and cognitive strategies, non-academic skills and behaviors including self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control are necessary for academic success (Conley, 2010; Farrington, Roderick, Allensworth, Nagaoka, Keyes, Johnson, & Beechum). Also, mastery of skills such as study and organizational skills are critical for college success, including mastery of key material and successful completion of academic tasks (Conley, 2007). Study skill behaviors incorporate necessary skills such as time management, exam preparation, seeking and using resources, taking notes, and communicating with teachers. Furthermore, the ability to work with others, coordinate and recognize the importance of study groups, and successfully participate in study groups is a study skill behavior that may contribute to college success. Many of these academic behaviors also allow students to prioritize study time in relation to work or social activities. Strong interpersonal skills and social skills also enable students to interact with a diverse group of professors and peers, thus enhancing success in college (Martinez & Klopott, 2005).

Students also need to have an understanding of the complex college admission and selection process, the academic requirements for college work, the options available to them, how to pay for postsecondary education, and the cultural differences that exist between high school and postsecondary education (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014; Conley, 2010; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Savitz-Romer). Although many students aspire to attend a four-year college and understand the opportunities an advanced degree will allow, they have little understanding of the academic and social preparation necessary to actually enter a four-year college and to be successful in such a setting. Many students also do not receive counseling on the range of postsecondary options or are given limited guidance on how their individual academic plan matches their postsecondary aspirations (Hooker & Brand, 2010).

### **African American Males**

African American males, in particular, are at risk of not receiving equitable educational and career opportunities. Statistics related to academic achievement, graduation rate, incarceration, college matriculation and career achievement of African American males are indicative of a serious issue with the education and preparation of these students (Wyatt, 2009).

African American males have historically been an underserved population within education. Per Jenkins (2006), 57% of African American males were unable to read in 1900, and in 2001 44% remained illiterate, according to data taken from the U.S. Census. Consequently, African American males lag behind their counterparts in academic achievement (Baker, 2005; Noguera, 2003). Further, the gap between African American males and females with regard to college enrollment, is the largest of all racial groups, with African American males significantly lagging (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009). The disengagement of African American males from education often occurs by the time they are in 4th grade (Noguera,

2003). This should be disconcerting for all who work with this population. Jenkins (2006) posits that African American males are disproportionately represented among those students who are forced to withdraw, have low academic performance, and, for those who persist to college, report negative college experiences. All such data lends further credence to concerns about an educational crisis affecting African American males (Hendrie, 1998), and the need for targeted intervention with regard to the college and career readiness of this group.

Given the increased attention to the importance of a college degree and the persistent lagging of underrepresented groups in degree attainment, there is particular concern about the training available for school counselors to effectively serve historically marginalized groups. African-American males, in particular, are increasingly alienated from their schools, inappropriately assigned to special education classes, are dropping out of schools at a high rate, are illiterate, and ultimately, are not career and college ready (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008).

### **School Counselor Training Programs**

School counselors are being called upon through national initiatives to engage the college readiness process of all students more purposefully and intentionally (The White House, 2014). Given the national conversations about increasing the percentage of students across all subgroups that will be prepared for postsecondary education and employment (Martinez & Klopott, 2005), it seems appropriate that educators-in-training be trained to facilitate this development in K-12 students. Policy recommendations based on a national study of school counselors included providing counselors, teachers, and administrators with pre-service and in-service training on aligning counselors' work with students' college and career readiness (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2012). School counselor training programs, in particular, would be an ideal space within which

such dialogue and training would occur, given the significant role that school counselors play in the college and career readiness of all students (ASCA, 2012).

Counselor preparation programs have an enormous amount of content to cover with too little time to do so. School counselors, in particular, are often left to learn about how schools work when they matriculate to their first job. School counselor participants in a study conducted by Savitz-Romer (2012) described their graduate training programs as having emphasized clinical counseling, for which they were grateful, but which left very little time to focus on topics germane to public education, such as college and career readiness.

The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) plays a significant role, as its requisite standards for the accrediting of programs calls for graduate course content that will enable students to facilitate the social/emotional, academic, and career needs of students. The recently released 2016 CACREP standards (2015) contain even more specific language about supporting the college and career readiness of students. Further, advocacy efforts from entities such as College Board's National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA, 2010) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2014; 2012) have also prompted that more attention to be given to how pre-service school counselors are being trained in facilitating college and career readiness as well .

According to Savitz-Romer (2012), it is very rare for postsecondary education to be included in career development courses, and much of the vocational theory appears removed from facilitating the college and career readiness of underrepresented K-12 students, in particular. To that end, evidence-based counseling practices with African-American males seem sparse (Harper, Terry, and Twiggs, 2009). The traditional theories discussed in counselor education programs, though noteworthy, were normed mostly on White populations. As such,

they don't always translate to effective application with African-American males. According to Harper et al (2009), approaches that give attention to the systemic oppression that African American males endure are especially important. NOSCA, for example, (2010) provides a framework, comprised of eight components of college and career readiness counseling, through which attention to specific cultural and ethnic experiences can be given. They are: 1) College Aspirations; 2) Academic Planning for College and Career Readiness; 3) Enrichment and Extracurricular Engagement; 4) College and Career Exploration and Selection Processes; 5) College and Career Assessments, 6) College Affordability Planning; 7) College and Career Admission Processes; and 8) Transition from High School Graduation to College Enrollment (NOSCA, 2012). However, regardless of the framework through which services are delivered to promote college and career readiness, it is important that school counselors be trained to understand the marginalized lived experience of African American males, and to carefully analyze the cultural, social, and political barriers they face (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was two-fold: 1) To explore differences across race of counselor educators' perceptions of the importance of pre-service school counselors being trained in college and career readiness for African American males, and 2) To explore differences across race of counselor educators' perceived ability to train pre-service school counselors to facilitate the college and career readiness of African-American males. Specifically, the research questions guiding this study were as follows:

*Research Question 1:* What is the relationship between counselor educators' race and their belief in the importance of pre-service school counselors being trained in promoting the college and career readiness of African-American males?

*Research Question 2:* What is the relationship between counselor educators' race and their perceived ability to train pre-service school counselors to promote the college and career readiness of African-American males?

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

Prior to pursuing this study, approval was granted from the University institutional review board. Upon approval, various counselor educator listservs were accessed and utilized to survey participants. Specifically, the following listservs were used: Counselor Education and Supervision, also known as CESNET (over 2,500 subscribed counselor educators), AMCD (Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development), and Diversecounselor (Counselor educators of color). Multiple emails were sent to each listserv to secure participants. Ten questions, devised by the authors and piloted with a focus group of three counselor educators, were administered via Survey Monkey to facilitate the surveying of participants: demographic questions, as well as questions regarding the beliefs of counselor educators in the importance of college and career readiness for African-American males, and the perceived ability of counselor educators to train pre-service counselors to facilitate such college and career readiness for African-American males (see Appendix).

### **Participants**

After multiple emails sent to various listservs that contained broad swaths of counselor educators across the country, a total of 47 responses were received for this study. Once these responses were screened for gender, 15 responses from male counselor educators were excluded from the analysis, given their lack of significance in initial statistical tests. The participants in this study consisted of 32 female counselor educators (see Table 1): 22 (68.8%) self identified as

White and 10 (31.3%) self identified as a person of color. Participants reported a wide age distribution: one participant (3.1%) was between 21 - 29 years of age, nine participants (28.1%) were between 30 - 39 years of age, 11 participants (34.4%) were between 40 - 49 years of age, seven participants (21.9%) were between 50 - 59 years of age, and four (12.5%) reported being 60 years of age or older. In terms of years of experience as a counselor educator, 16 participants (50.0%) reported between 1 - 5 years of experience, five participants (15.6%) had 6 - 10 years of experience, eight participants (25.0%) had 11 - 15 years of experience, two participants (6.3%) had 16 - 20 years of experience, and one participant (3.1%) had 20 or more years of experience.

Table 1

Demographics for counselor educator sample

Variable	Number N = 32	Percent 100
Gender		
Female	32	100
Race		
White	22	68.8%
Person of Color	10	31.3%
Age		
21-29	1	3.1%
30-39	9	28.1%
40-49	11	34.4 %
50-59	7	21.9%
60 and older	4	12.5%
Experience as Counselor Educator		
1 - 5 years	16	50%
6-10 years	5	15.6%
11-15 years	8	25%
16-20 years	2	6.3 %
20 or more years	1	3.1%

**Data Analysis & Results**

Prior to conducting any data analysis all assumptions associated with *t* - tests were examined. Normality was established by examining the skewness and kurtosis of the dependent

variables (Lomax, 2007). Skewness statistics were -1.12 for beliefs in the importance of college and career readiness and -0.08 for ability to train for college and career readiness--both well within the accepted range of normality (Lomax, 2007). Kurtosis statistics were 0.33 for beliefs in the importance of college and career readiness and -0.74 for ability to train for college and career readiness--also within the accepted range of normality (Lomax, 2007). Equality of variance was established by non-significant Levene tests for importance of college and career readiness ( $F = 2.80, p = .11$ ) and ability to train for college and career readiness ( $F = 0.30, p = .59$ ). Since all assumptions were met, data analysis proceeded as planned.

This study sought to examine if differences existed between counselor educators across race in their (a) beliefs of the importance of college and career readiness for African American males and (b) ability to train school counselors who can implement college and career readiness programs for African American males. To evaluate these question two  $t$  - tests were conducted. No difference was detected between the groups in terms of beliefs of the importance of college and career readiness of African American students  $t(30) = -0.84, p = .41, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.68, 0.28]$ . As such, both groups felt it was equally important to provide African American males with college and career readiness information. A significant difference was detected between the groups in terms of their ability to prepare school counselors who could implement college and career readiness programs for African American males  $t(30) = -2.05, p = .04, 95\% \text{ CI } [-1.31, -0.01]$ . In this study, female counselor educators of color ( $M = 3.20, SD = 0.79$ ) felt more confident in their ability to train school counselors to implement college and career readiness programs for African American males than did White female counselor educators ( $M = 2.55, SD = 0.86$ ).

## **Discussion and Implications**

There has been much discussion about importance of college and career readiness of students in our increasingly global society. The challenges between and within groups are unique, and awareness of such, along with targeted efforts is critical. Statistics related to academic achievement, graduation rate, incarceration, college matriculation and career achievement of African American males are indicative of a serious issue with the education and preparation of these students (Wyatt, 2009).

The finding, then, that the counselor educators in the study valued such training for pre-service school counselors should be encouraging, because it hopefully points to an acknowledgement of the challenges that exist in this regard and the need for more attention to be given it. The disparity of confidence between female counselor educators of color and White female counselor educators is certainly worth further exploration, as it could potentially highlight the need for more empowerment of White counselor educators to implement such training in their classes and programs. Given that high self-efficacy correlates with successful accomplishment of a task, for example, one possible implication from the study's findings is that pre-service school counselors may not be trained well in the area of college and career readiness for African-American males. This would be critical to explore further, as counselor educator programs could be significantly improved by making any appropriate adjustments in the training of doctoral students who will train pre-service school counselors upon their entry to academia.

A focus on the increased empowerment of African American males is critical. Turner and Ziebell (2011) posit that students believe their success is not related to their efforts in school. This implies that there are other factors beyond their control that inhibit their success academically as well as career development. This feeling of powerlessness is fairly common in

minority groups due to overt and covert forms of oppression that still exist despite the efforts to expunge them. The literature often focuses on negative stereotypes, which disproportionately affect African American males and the lack of culturally competent supports for these students. (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). While it is important to have an awareness of an individual's lack of resources, it is just as important to address the strengths of an individual and how he can use those strengths to overcome obstacles.

“Empowerment can be defined as a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 40). Empowerment theory, which has roots in early feminist theory, is often used when counseling minorities or other populations who may face oppression from society (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). The driving force behind this theory is to facilitate the empowerment of the client, which Gutierrez (1995) defines as “the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families and communities can take action to improve their situations” (p. 229). The three types of power listed by Gutierrez (1995) represent control of oneself, equity in relationships with others, and the power to make systemic change. One of the most distinguishing features of this theory is the counseling relationship, which is viewed as a partnership, thus, giving the client more control by eliminating power differentials.

Through their data-driven comprehensive programming, school counselors are key to ensuring that the empowerment of these students are the priority instead of the deficits that are correlated with them being there.

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC, 2014) has published a text, *Fundamentals of College Admission Counseling*, that can easily be incorporated

into counselor education curricula to help facilitate this portion of pre-service school counselor training . Such a resource should be discussed at some point during the doctoral process, along with how to facilitate such information to master's level students who will work with diverse K-12 students. The American School Counseling Association National Model (ASCA, 2012) is another resource and framework that can guide the training of future counselor educators in this regard. Further, ASCA's recently released mindset and behavior standards (ASCA, 2014), which focus on college career readiness, provide targets for the training of pre-service school counselors.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study was limited to a small sample of only female counselor educators. Further, only listservs were utilized for purposive and snowball sampling. However, the results are still worth considering and pursuing further, given the critical nature of the college and career readiness of African American males and the lack of training that exists in school counselor training programs in this regard. Future research should endeavor to include a larger number of counselor educators, in general, and more male counselor educators, in particular. Future research should explore the differences across gender, in addition to race. Further, studies should explore the differences between CACREP accredited programs, and those not accredited. Added to such comparisons should also be those programs who explicitly tie their programmatic efforts to frameworks such as those espoused by the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). Future research should also include doctoral programs who already implement practices that yield positive results related to the confidence of counselor educators to facilitate college and career readiness training of pre-service school counselors.

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## Appendix

### Survey Questions

1. Informed Consent
2. What is your gender?
3. Which category includes your age?
4. How many years have you been a counselor educator?
5. Please describe your race/ethnicity.
6. In what settings do your students typically work upon graduation?
7. Of the courses you teach, which ones (if any) do you incorporate college and career readiness training?
8. How important do you believe it is for pre-service to be trained in college and career readiness of African-American males?
9. How confident are you in your ability to facilitate the training of pre-service school counselors in college and career readiness counseling of African American males?
10. Additional comments?