

The Role of School Counselling in Shaping College Access Across Public and Private High Schools

Research Proposal

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Introduction and Research Problem

High school counseling plays an important role in helping students prepare for life after graduation. School counselors support students in many different ways. They help with emotional well-being, academic planning, course selection, career exploration, and the college application process. Counselors often guide students through writing personal statements, requesting recommendation letters, meeting deadlines, and understanding financial aid options. For many students, especially those whose families have limited experience with higher education, school counselors may be the main source of information about how college works and what steps are required to apply (Bryan et al., 2011).

At the same time, students do not receive the same level of counseling support across schools. In many public high schools, counselors are responsible for very large caseloads, which limits the amount of time they can spend with individual students. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a ratio of 250 students per counselor, however the national average is significantly higher (American School Counselor Association, 2023). When counselors work with large numbers of students, they must divide their time between academic advising, emotional support, behavioral concerns, and administrative responsibilities. As a result, college advising may not always be their top priority. Previous research suggests that smaller counselor-to-student ratios and more structured counseling programs are associated with higher student engagement and stronger college enrollment outcomes at the school level (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014).

A lot of the existing research compares public and private schools based on academic outcomes such as standardized test scores, graduation rates, and college enrollment numbers (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006). While these comparisons are useful, they often focus on outcomes rather than on how students experience the college preparation process inside schools. Less attention has been paid to the everyday practices of counseling programs, such as how often students meet with counselors, what types of guidance they receive, and how families are involved in college planning. These factors may help explain why students in different school settings feel more or less prepared for college, even when they attend schools in the same city.

Parental awareness of counseling services is another area that is often overlooked. Parents play an important role in shaping students' educational pathways, including decisions about school choice and postsecondary planning. Research suggests that parents frequently focus on visible indicators such as school reputation, safety, and academic performance when evaluating schools, while aspects like counseling may receive less attention (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Valant & Newark, 2017). However, studies also show that when parents are more informed and involved in school-based supports, students tend to show stronger motivation and academic outcomes (Hill & Tyson, 2009). This shows that how parents understand and value counseling services may influence how students experience college preparation.

This study aims to better understand how school counseling functions as part of college preparation across different school contexts. Rather than only comparing public, charter, and private high schools based on outcomes, this study focuses on counseling structures and lived experiences. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study examines how counseling programs are organized, how they relate to school-level college enrollment patterns, and how students, parents, and counselors describe their experiences with college

advising. By connecting school-level data with personal perspectives, this study aims to provide a more complete understanding of how counseling supports college access.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do counseling program characteristics, such as counselor-student ratios, availability of college advising, and overall program structure, differ between public, charter, and private high schools in Boston?
2. How are differences in counseling program characteristics associated with school-level college-going outcomes, such as college enrollment rates?
3. How do students, parents, and counselors describe and explain differences in college readiness support across public, charter, and private high schools?
4. How does parental awareness of school counseling services shape families' perceptions of school quality and influence school-choice decisions?

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on two theoretical perspectives: Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1988) and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). Together, these frameworks help explain how counseling supports college access and how these supports are shaped by relationships, school structures, and family contexts.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital refers to the relationships and networks that provide individuals with access to information, guidance, and support (Coleman, 1988). In contrast to financial or academic resources, social capital is created through interactions, trust, and shared expectations. In schools, counselors can be understood as important sources of social capital, particularly during the college preparation process. Through meetings, emails, and informal conversations, counselors share information about college options, application requirements,

deadlines, and financial aid. For students whose families are not familiar with the U.S. higher education system, this support can be especially important. Bryan et al. (2011) found that stronger counselor-student relationships were associated with higher college application rates, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds. When counselors have time to build relationships and provide individualized guidance, students may feel more confident and better informed about their options. However, access to this type of social capital is not evenly distributed. In schools where counselors serve very large numbers of students, it may be difficult to provide individualized support or build strong relationships. From this perspective, counseling programs are not simply services offered to students, but systems that distribute college-related information and guidance in uneven ways. Social capital theory helps explain why students in different school contexts may experience college preparation differently.

Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory helps situate counseling within the broader environments that shape students' development (Härkönen, 2007). Instead of applying all levels of the ecological model, this study focuses on the systems most directly connected to counseling and college preparation. The microsystem includes direct interactions between students, counselors, teachers, and parents. These everyday interactions shape how students understand their options and feel supported during the college process. The mesosystem involves communication between home and school, such as meetings or emails between parents and counselors. The exosystem includes school-level policies and decisions, such as staffing levels and resource allocation, which indirectly affect how counseling programs operate.

Together, these theories provide a way to understand counseling as both a relational resource and an institutional structure. They help explain how counseling experiences are

shaped not only by individual relationships, but also by broader school contexts and family engagement.

Literature Review and Background

The Impact of Counseling on College Outcomes

Research suggests that school counseling plays an important role in shaping students' postsecondary pathways. Belasco (2013) found that students who had more frequent conversations with school counselors about college were more likely to apply to and enroll in four-year institutions. These conversations helped students better understand application requirements and encouraged them to consider a wider range of options. Similarly, Bryan et al. (2011) showed that counselor-student relationships were associated with higher college application rates, particularly for students from historically underrepresented groups. These findings suggest that counseling matters not only because it provides information, but also because it supports students emotionally and academically during a complex and stressful process. College preparation involves many steps, and students often rely on counselors to help them navigate this process.

Counseling Program Quality and Counselor Caseloads

The quality and structure of counseling programs also matter. Carey and Dimmitt (2012) reviewed several statewide studies and found that schools with more comprehensive and well-organized counseling programs reported stronger academic outcomes, better attendance, and fewer disciplinary issues. These programs often had clearer goals and made greater use of data to guide their work. Engberg and Gilbert (2014) focused specifically on counselor caseloads and found that schools with smaller counselor-to-student ratios tended to have higher rates of four-year college enrollment. When counselors are responsible for too many students, it becomes difficult to provide individualized guidance, especially during

peak application periods. These findings suggest that staffing levels and program organization play an important role in shaping how effective counseling can be.

Differences Across School Types

Public, charter, and private schools often differ in how their counseling programs are structured. Public schools typically serve larger and more diverse student populations, which can place pressure on counseling services. Counselors in these schools often balance multiple responsibilities, including academic advising, mental health support, and administrative tasks. Private schools, in contrast, often have smaller student populations and lower counselor caseloads. This may allow counselors to spend more time on college advising and develop closer relationships with students. At the same time, some charter schools, particularly in urban areas, have shown promising college enrollment outcomes for low-income students. Angrist et al. (2016) found that certain charter schools in Boston were effective in supporting students' postsecondary success, suggesting that institutional design and counseling models may play an important role regardless of school sector.

Socioeconomic Context and Parental Awareness

Socioeconomic context also influences how families engage with counseling services. Families with greater access to educational information may supplement school-based counseling with private tutors or external college advisors, while others rely more heavily on school counselors for guidance (Perna, 2006). These differences can shape how much support students receive during the college preparation process.

Parental awareness is another important factor. Research on school choice suggests that parents often focus on visible indicators of school quality, such as academic reputation or location, while less visible supports like counseling may receive less attention (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Valant & Newark, 2017). However, Hill and Tyson (2009) found that when parents are more informed and involved in school supports, students show stronger academic

motivation and outcomes. This suggests that parental understanding of counseling services may shape students' experiences in meaningful ways.

Methods

Research Design

This study uses a mixed-methods design to explore both structural patterns and personal experiences related to school counseling. Quantitative data helps with comparisons of counseling characteristics and college-going outcomes across different types of schools. Qualitative data, collected through interviews, give opportunity for students, parents, and counselors to describe their experiences in their own words. Using both approaches together allows for a more complete understanding of how counseling supports college preparation.

Study Context

The study focuses on high schools in the Boston area, where public, charter, and private schools operate within the same city but differ in size, resources, and counseling models. While Boston Public Schools provide universal free lunch through the Community Eligibility Provision, schools still vary widely in neighborhood context and student populations. These differences make Boston an appropriate setting for examining variation in counseling experiences.

Population and Sample

The quantitative component uses publicly available school-level data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and school websites. Variables include counselor-student ratios, graduation rates, college enrollment rates, AP or IB offerings, and school sector. The qualitative component includes participants from approximately four to six high schools, including public, charter, and private schools. The sample consists of about 6-8

counselors, 10-12 students, and 6-8 parents. Purposeful sampling is used to capture variation in counseling structures and family experiences.

Instruments

Quantitative data are drawn from existing databases and public reports. For the qualitative component, semi-structured interviews are conducted with counselors, students, and parents. Interview questions focus on specific experiences, such as how students learned about college options, how families communicated with counselors, and how counselors manage college advising alongside other responsibilities.

Data Analysis Procedures

For the quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics are used to compare counseling characteristics and college enrollment rates across school types. If the data allow, simple regression analyses may be used to explore associations between counselor caseloads and school-level college enrollment outcomes. For the qualitative analysis, an inductive thematic approach is used. Transcripts are read carefully, initial codes are developed based on participants' language, and these codes are grouped into broader themes related to access, communication, and school context. After analyzing each strand separately, findings are brought together by comparing quantitative patterns with qualitative themes. This integration helps connect school-level data with participants' lived experiences.

Validity and Reliability

To improve the credibility of the qualitative findings, I will ask another person to review part of the interview data and discuss our interpretations. I will also keep short notes to reflect on my decisions during analysis. Looking at information from different sources will help strengthen the findings.

Budget

This study is designed to be low-cost and feasible. The quantitative data used in the study are publicly available and do not require funding. The main expenses are related to small incentives for interview participants and basic transcription support. Participants in the qualitative interviews will be offered a modest gift card to thank them for their time. If needed, low-cost transcription software or limited transcription services will be used to support data analysis.

Estimated costs include:

- Participant incentives: **\$300**
- Transcription support or software: **\$75**
- Miscellaneous materials: **\$25**

Estimated total budget: \$400

Positionality

As an international student, I did not grow up in an educational system where school counseling was a formal part of schooling. Many aspects of school counseling in the U.S. are new to me. At the same time, as a parent, I am increasingly interested in how schools support students and families during important transitions such as college preparation. I recognize that my background may shape how I interpret participants' experiences, so I rely closely on their perspectives and use reflective notes throughout the research process.

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