



## The Influence of School Counselors and Administrators on a Young Woman's College Decision

### Setting the Stage

Utah Women and Education Project researchers conducted in-depth research in 2010 to discover why more young women around the state are not attending and graduating from college. We discovered that school counselors and administrators can have a powerful influence on a young woman's college decision. However, in our sample we found that only 32% of counselors and one principal seized the opportunity to do so with these young women.

Participants in this study who attended and graduated from college were more likely to have had a high school guidance counselor who was a "strong" or "very strong" influence. How influential were counselors?

- 25% No influence
- 18% Little influence
- 22% Moderate/adequate influence
- 20% Strong influence
- 12% Very strong influence

According to participants, proactive students receive much of the college-related time and attention of counselors. Many participants who did not attend college said they were tracked early by counselors as not being interested or college bound. Those students who did not reach out and ask questions believe they were not given information that could have been helpful. Less educated participants now wish counselors would have more assertively encouraged and "pushed" them to attend college.

### Participant Quotes

Various participants in our study had positive experiences with school counselors/administrators. One explained, "My biggest influence was my high school counselor. He wanted me to get a good education and to really apply myself to the best of my abilities. He was supportive and wrote me many flattering and helpful recommendations for my Sterling Scholar and was in part a reason that I have succeeded thus far." The other said, "My principal really made

me feel excited about the idea of going to college. He encouraged me to do my best, and to keep going. I think one of the biggest things that made an impact on me was that he was willing to learn who I was by name and situation, and he took the time to give me advice."

*Study participants included 245 women between 18-32 years of age. They were White (89.9%), LDS (80.4%) married (44.1%), and from 16 different counties (Salt Lake/Utah, 56.2%).*

Several participants had negative interactions with counselors or school administrators, the first recalled, "The counselor in high school talked about my goals for college (with my mom there). He asked what I wanted to be, and I told him a veterinarian. He then pulled up my grades (3.4 GPA) and told me that I should not waste my time because I did not have the grades for it.

That was devastating to hear, and I believed him." Another respondent said, "School administrators did not have an interest in my education," and a final individual suggested, "My school administrators were apathetic towards me and felt like there was no point in talking with me since I had a bad attitude."

### Administrators

In this study we asked a specific question about the influence of middle and high school administrators on a young woman's college decision. We were surprised to find that only four participants provided any data about administrators (the only question to have such a low response rate) and three of the responses were negative.

It is clear that there are many excellent administrators in Utah who talk to students about college. Yet, the results from this study indicate that there is cause for concern. The participants who responded believe that administrators care more about rules and discipline (they called them "mean") and not about student success and future decisions.

### Guidance Counselor Effectiveness

We asked the young women in our study what guidance counselors did that was most effective. Although many mentioned SEOPs (Student Education Occupation Plans) as somewhat helpful, it was one-on-one conversations outside of these meetings that seemed to matter most. These

times were when they felt the counselor really cared and wanted them to succeed (not just a meeting to “check it off their list”). Counselors in Utah have particularly high counselor-to-student ratios, but somehow in their limited time some counselors are finding a way to make the long-term difference needed for many Utah females.

Not surprisingly, we found that a positive, influential relationship with a counselor is strongly predictive of young women participating in college preparation activities (e.g., discussing financial aid, taking AP and concurrent enrollment courses, visiting a campus, requesting information from a college, applying to a college, being accepted to a college, and applying for and receiving scholarships or grants). Young women who are involved in college preparation activities are much more likely to attend and graduate from college.

### Key Takeaways

Researchers found a number of essential items counselors and administrators can use to influence a young woman’s decision to attend college, such as:

- Counselors specifically assigned (e.g., ETS, school or career) were especially influential to young women in this study; they were particularly encouraging and seemed to have more time to work with students specifically on college related topics and goals.
- Slightly over 50% of participants said when they had questions about college, they discussed them with guidance counselors.
- Participants do not remember much influence from counselors in middle school. They did mention the career/occupational assessment as “interesting.”

One young woman stated, “My high school counselor was a great source. She was always encouraging me to apply for different scholarships and to get my FAFSA application filled out. She was always reminding me of deadlines and due dates.”

Another study participant had the following experience, “Our school counselor did not do much of anything; I know the counselor did give me papers for financial aid, but I did not know where to start because I did not get any opportunities to explore options. I don’t know if it was because I wasn’t the BEST student, but I did have a B average and wish he would have helped me more.”

One more respondent explained, “The person who talked to me the most would be the counselor assigned to do college advising. She’s always pushed me to go to college and get as far as I can. She’s always telling me, ‘You’re my doctorate person. You’re not going to just get your associate or bachelors. You’re smart enough to go all the way.’ To say she’s my advocate is kind of an understatement.”

A final woman said, “The career counseling I remember was in junior high and they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I said a dancer (I had never danced a day in my life). They wrote it down and put me in classes to help me get there (PE). The next year I switched to zoology, so they put me in science classes...much more up my alley. But really what was I supposed to know about careers at 13 and 14....Yikes...a dancer?”

### Taking an Active Role

There are many ways counselors and administrators can inspire young women to attend and graduate college. Here are a few strategies that can be implemented:

- Be more aware of the powerful influence you can have on the college decisions of young women.
- Take the time to ask young women questions about their college plans. Look for opportunities for positive “transformational moments”— moments that can change the way young women think about themselves and their futures.
- Discuss the broad benefits of higher education with young women and talk to them about graduating from college.
- Help young women understand their strengths more than their weaknesses. Students need to see how they are unique and how this can help them be successful in college.
- Reach out more assertively to students who are not proactive in coming to you with questions.
- Show you care about individual students, even with limited time.
- As early as possible (e.g., middle school), access the support system for each student to see who will be involved in assisting these young women learn and do what is needed to get to college.

### Conclusion

High school counselors and administrators are uniquely positioned to influence several key areas of their students’ lives. It is imperative that school counselors and administrators seize the opportunity to be a powerful force in ensuring the increased success of Utah young women in their higher educational pursuits.

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