

What Can I Do?

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What School Counselors Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Young Women

UTAH WOMEN &
LEADERSHIP
Project

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide specific answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP)** team hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting and empowering Utah girls and women.

This idea sheet is based on a 2018 gathering of 25 school counselors from Utah junior high and high schools to discuss ways they can support young women in Utah, particularly in terms of educational aspirations and success. Their insights focus on influencing culture, advocacy, capacity building, and external engagement, as well as ideas for professional development to improve counselors’ abilities to engage and support young women in the state.

CULTURE

School counselors recognize they can influence the culture within their schools and even beyond. But first, they must be aware of the cultural pressures and messages reaching female students. For example, they can:

- Recognize how confidence and low self-esteem may affect educational success or aspirations.
- Explore the impact of social media.
- Identify external factors and attitudes that may influence girls’ decisions in various ways (friends, family, church leaders, social norms).
- Examine and address additional layers of identity that may be in play (race, ethnicity, class).

As counselors deepen their understanding of the challenges specific to young women, they can positively influence the local culture as they:

- Emphasize the broad value of a college education on all areas of life (see [The Benefits of Education](#) for details).
- Encourage teens to finish college, not just to attend college.
- Help young women plan for paid employment while still prioritizing other goals.
- Ensure young women see role models and realize that many possibilities are open to them.
- Sponsor balanced career days with both men and women representing a wide variety of roles.
- Recognize and celebrate diversity among all students and work to address additional barriers that may exist within specific populations.
- Avoid stereotyped or condescending language (calling girls sweetheart, princess, honey).
- Teach young men to respect and support the educational goals of female classmates.
- Educate teens about healthy relationships to reduce or eliminate the affects of negative relationships on young women.
- Identify and address gender disparities within schools themselves (ratios of faculty, counselors, administrators), and involve both men and women in these conversations.

ADVOCACY

As counselors recognize their role as leaders, they become uniquely empowered to advocate for young women both inside and outside of school. They can:

- Maximize the benefits of career and college readiness meetings by encouraging parental attendance and engagement, ensuring students have space to speak for themselves, and using developmental language to enable ongoing growth and progress.
- Celebrate women's achievement by bringing female role models to school and highlighting successful women in history or in the public sphere.
- Support field trips to college campuses.
- Speak up for girls with both internal and external influencers (for awards, scholarships, internships, and leadership roles).
- Champion young women in their achievements (e.g., tournaments, accomplishments, awards).
- Encourage all young women, but particularly those with unrecognized potential; they may need someone to believe in them before they believe in themselves.
- Recruit diverse female students to lead so all can benefit from their distinct perspectives.

CAPACITY BUILDING

One of the greatest ways counselors can strengthen the impact of their female students is through providing opportunities for learning and growth. They can:

- Sponsor a Women in Leadership club. This could include conferences, highlighting historical contributions of women, presentations and competitions with other schools, and workshops on resilience, confidence, boundaries, and more.
- Promote Advanced Placement®(AP), International Baccalaureate®(IB), concurrent enrollment, and other challenging classes.
- Encourage young women to explore business, STEM, and other high-potential fields.
- Support the participation of more young women in student council, club leadership, sports, and other extracurriculars where they can lead.
- Provide service opportunities and teach teens to mentor and coach others.
- Teach short-, medium-, and long-term goal setting.
- Teach adaptability, soft skills, and other key competencies of the 21st century.
- Enable young women to develop their own leadership identity as they recognize their strengths and gifts and how they can best use them.
- Support big dreams (e.g., challenging assignments, programs, awards, college, scholarships).
- Channel the energy of this generation to impact causes they care about.

EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT

Counselors' engagement and influence can extend beyond the boundaries of their schools. They can:

- Gather and share relevant research and resources focused on education issues that give young people the tools they need to succeed (see these snapshots, for example).
- Identify key information that all students need to understand about their likely participation in the labor force and the economic challenges of adulthood (many of which are gender-specific), and ensure young women understand the urgency of preparing for their own futures.
- Educate young women to find and secure external funding sources for college (a major hurdle).
- Connect young women with outside community groups, programs, and opportunities ([see list](#)).
- Work with PTA or other advocacy groups to promote public policies that support young women with educational goals and success.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

School counselors recognize that in order to best serve their students, ongoing professional development is critical, and it will be most effective when teachers and administrators join in as well. To address the challenges facing young women, counselors can:

- Receive training on gender differences in learning styles, confidence, aspirations, societal pressures and norms, and other elements.
- Undergo training in unconscious bias and learn how to minimize and manage such biases.
- Recognize and learn how to use their own voices to advocate for their students.
- Train and empower teachers to understand the critical role they play in influencing young women's decision making.
- Partner with relevant community groups to receive continuing education on issues central to young women's success. Learn which organizations can best serve their students' distinct needs and provide opportunities for engagement.

CONCLUSION

School counselors are uniquely positioned to influence several key areas of their students' lives. As counselors become increasingly educated about the challenges Utah young women face (primarily through their own professional development efforts), they can work to shape the local culture, better advocate for young women (and young men), provide capacity building, and engage outside their schools as well. By so doing, counselors can be a powerful force in assuring the increased success of Utah young women, not just in their educational pursuits but in all aspects of their lives.