

Multicultural Career Development Considerations for Students in 8th to 12th Grades

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Nationwide ethnic youth face factors that either impede or support high school graduation. Graduation barriers include family income, minority status, community economic vitality, parental involvement, and school environment. These barriers generate dropout rates of 27.4% (Brown & Beckett, 2007; Johnston, 2005; Tirozzi, 2005). The New Mexico Next Step Plan (NSP), a postsecondary career transition planning mandate for students in 8th-12th grades, attempts to remove educational barriers and guide students toward achieving their career goals. Similar to the American School Counseling Association National Model (ASCA, 2005), the NSP extends services once offered to students in special education to students in regular education.

This paper presents a career development plan, the NSP, for school counselors working with increasing rates of ethnic students (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Gushue & Constantine, 2007). Nationally, the rate of high school graduates who immediately transitioned to postsecondary education/training was 62% (USDOE, 2005). However, ethnic youth evidence lower participation in postsecondary education and training (Hawkins & Lautz, 2005; USDOE). Therefore it is important to become familiar with multicultural counseling

theories that are not grounded only in traditional European American values and practices (Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996). Career-related multicultural theories such as social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) and the race/gender ecological approach to career development (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002) are starting points to understand ethnic youth career development. This paper will also present the results from a compliance audit of randomly selected NSPs as well as a discussion section detailing cultural variables to consider when designing career-related activities.

Next Step Plan (NSP)

The NSP and its elements are designed to facilitate students acquiring 21st century skills for postsecondary transitions. Legislation enacted in New Mexico created the NSP (House Bill 522, <http://www.ped.state.nm.us/div/humanites/index.html>). With NSP, every student (8th-12th grade) is expected to envision and work towards accomplishing academic and personal career goals.

Beginning with 8th grade NSPs, students receive advisement from significant adults in their lives toward more purposeful goals, course selection, extracurricular activities, and community linkages that contribute toward successful transitions. Collaborative teams (students, counselors, teachers, administrators, and/or community members) convene to help students explore their personal likes/dislikes, skills, interests, problem-solving, and decision-making strategies. The NSP comprises two plans: an interim NSP for grades 8-11 and a final NSP for grade 12. The interim NSP requires collaborative teams develop individualized plans based on students' goals, and annually review and revise the NSPs according to students' current desires. To ensure collaborative efforts, NSPs must be signed by the student and team members. The final NSP requires collaborative teams ensure seniors have detailed roadmaps for postsecondary transitions. Seniors whose final NSPs lack required signatures are not eligible for graduation.

Methods

The New Mexico Next Step (NSP) compliance audit provided the State of New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) with its first set of data highlighting middle and high school compliance rates at the end of the first year of NSP implementation. Secondly, the data gave NMPED officials insight into what school officials needed in order to successfully implement the NSP in upcoming school years. Finally, the data equipped school officials with necessary information to modify and adjust their NSP procedures to benefit all students. This section discusses the sample of school representative volunteers, procedures, instrumentation, and compliance audit demographics.

School Representatives

A total of six NSP training workshops were held. The first workshop, a 7-hour training-of-trainers, included 76 school representatives (counselors, teachers, principals, administrators, and parents). Another 200 public school representatives attended one of the remaining five 6-hour workshops. All participants learned about NSP law, usage of the state-designed form, the Outcomes Checklist, and current NSP implementation.

Procedures

During the 7-hour training-of-trainers and the five 6-hour workshops, handouts were disseminated that included the presentation slides, NSP law, state forms, Outcomes Checklist, New Mexico High School Initiative, NSP examples, career Best Practices, National Career Development Guidelines, and website resources. After all workshops, school representatives were contacted and asked to participate in the audit.

A compliance audit of randomly selected student NSPs ($N = 228$) from eight schools state-wide was conducted. One representative per school was trained to use the NSP Outcomes Checklist for auditing. The goal of training school representatives to

audit their school's student NSPs was to foster accountability for compliance with state law and to assist them in detailing courses of action to meet ongoing compliance goals.

The NSPs were audited by the co-investigators and school representatives. After reviewing the plans, compliance results were tabulated and entered on the Outcomes Worksheet. Results were then shared and discussed with representatives with future compliance goals and strategies to strengthen NSPs developed.

Instrumentation

The compliance audit utilized the Outcomes Checklist and Outcomes Worksheet. First, a task force from all levels of education and state regions determined items to include in the Outcomes Checklist designed to audit student plans ($N = 228$). An 8-item *yes/no* Outcomes Checklist emerged and was presented to all school representatives who attended six training workshops. The school representatives suggested keeping the original 8 items in addition to adding a 9th item, regarding resources needed for NSP implementation. The Outcome Checklist was used to create the 9-item NSP Outcomes Worksheet (see Table 1).

Compliance Audit Demographics

Statewide, 37.6% of students qualify for free lunch and 10.9% qualify for reduced lunch prices. Data collected on seniors statewide reveal that ($n = 19,172$), 49.9% applied to 4-year colleges and universities while 31.7% applied to 2-year colleges and postsecondary training (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2004). The 228 NSPs audited represent 8 of 89 school districts statewide. Districts range in size from large metropolitan to small rural communities. NSPs audited included 24 (10%) 8th grade plans, 76 (32%) 9th grade plans, 65 (27%) 10th grade plans, 36 (15%) 11th grade plans, and 33 (14%) 12th grade plans. Of the total NSPs audited, 101 (42%) were male, 127 (53%) were female, and 5% did not indicate sex. Schools 1 and 2 are located in the same metropolitan school district. School 1 is a traditional 9th-12th grade high school,

and school 2 is an alternative middle and high school where demographics fluctuate throughout an academic year. Schools 3-8 are all located in rural areas statewide; schools 3-5, located in the same general vicinity, participated in the same compliance audit. School 6 is a K-12 campus. School 7 is a high school composed of 10th-12th grades, and school 8 houses 588 students on a K-12 campus.

Results

Compliance results from the eight public schools volunteering for the audit are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Audit of 228 Next Step Plans (NSP) Across New Mexico

Item Number	Number of NSPs Audited	Compliance Percentage
1. Plans exist for ensuring every student, (8th-12 th) has a NSP	228	95%
2. NSP contains documentation of future planning by students (grades 8-11)	195	100%
3. Plan specifies post-high school goals	195	95%
4. Course of study reflects courses and other educational experiences (for remaining school years) that promote achievement of long range goals (e.g., job shadowing, specific courses)	195	63%
5. Parent(s) participated and signed NSP	228	65%
6. Student was informed, annually, whether on target with graduation requirements	195	87%
7. Plan addresses non-course options (opportunities/linkages) to support graduating and reaching post-school goals	195	59%
8. 12 th grade final NSPs specify linkages with adult services, postsecondary training/education, employment, etc	33	70%

Feedback from school representatives resulted in item 9, regarding additional resources and assistance needed to implement the NSP more effectively. Item 9 included: NSP and career development workshops; funding for additional school counselors and teachers; physical space; clear and consistent communication with administrators; and continued state assistance and follow-up with NSP implementation.

Discussion

Although the NSP is relatively new legislation, initial results show 95% of NSPs indicate students had an opportunity to develop an individualized career plan (item 1). Moreover, 100% of the interim NSPs audited contained documentation to support students in accomplishing academic and career goals (item 2); only 5% of the plans lacked documentation specifying post-high school goals (item 3). Items 4 (interim NSP) and 8 (final NSP) were similar in terms of schools documenting that students are linked with resources to accomplish their NSP goals. For example, the 30% of final NSPs (item 8) that did not meet compliance suggests this percentage of 12th grade students may not have been prepared for their postsecondary transitions (Robelen, 2003). Aside from postsecondary transitions, 37% of the interim plans (item 4) consisted of incomplete student programs of studies, likely leaving these students unprepared to transition to the next grade.

Consistent with the NSP spirit, enhancing relationships was indicated by parental signatures on 65% of audited NSPs (item 5). Slightly over 35% of interim NSPs lacked appropriate signatures with this percentage mirroring the student dropout rate (USDOE, 2005). School officials, as stressed by Heyer and Pifel (2007), need to recruit students, parents, and stakeholders to help with transition programming as active participants in a collaborative team. Successfully implementing career programs requires collaboration and knowledge about the cognitive, physical, cultural, and psychosocial development (Gushue & Constantine, 2007; Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007).

Item 6 was informing students annually whether they are on target with graduation requirements. The audit indicated 87% of the schools had programs in place. To increase compliance, as Heyer and Pifel (2007) reported, schools should call for assistance beyond the school to better serve students. For example, career fairs, sports, and church activities are beneficial avenues to inform students and parents about career development. Dymond, Renzaglia, and Chun (2007) echo that, regardless of the medium used, soliciting assistance from parent teacher associations, student organizations, and community stakeholders to help organize and implement career events can increase parent participation.

Non-course options needed to support students in graduating on time and reaching post-school goals were in place for 59% of students (item 7). The opportunities and linkages pages indicated that over half of the school officials reported resources and methods to support students with timely graduation. To increase chances for a timely graduation, internal and external resources are needed to expose students to relevant educational experiences (Robelen, 2003). Exposure can be in the forms of job shadowing, informational interviewing, and apprentice and internship experiences, to connect students with their communities.

Of final NSPs, 70% had documented resources and plans for meeting postsecondary goals (item 8). Linking students with community resources in early grades enhances their chances of refining their career choices and gaining insights into their goals (Heyer & Pifel, 2007). Graduating seniors benefit from career fairs sponsored by internal and external resources such as students, parents, and community stakeholders. If seniors do not participate in setting up career fairs, then students in lower grades can help assemble the event. Career exploration seminars can also be provided for students in their communities, universities, or home schools.

Recommendations for Professional School Counselors

The following recommendations are based on state NSP grant work, professional experiences, and previous empirical findings. It is

recommended that school counselors first utilize internal school resources before seeking community assistance. Collaboration between school representatives must first occur before weaving the academic and career counseling standards into the curriculum. These groups should discuss responsibilities for designing and implementing career activities, and equipping teachers with strategies to help students prepare programs of studies paralleling their short and long-term career goals with other personal needs.

School counselors enhance student development by addressing students' academic, career, and personal/social needs; and for students of color, addressing ethnic identity is also critical in overall development (Johnson & Kottman, 1992). School counselors must first become aware of and sensitive to multicultural similarities and differences within student populations before they can design activities. To avoid complicating students' career planning and postsecondary transitions, career-based activities must overtly emphasize cultural traits that promote not hinder their academic development. Ethnic identity, acculturation, language, (extended) family, gender, socialization, religious and spiritual practices, immigration, and historical hostility are variables that must be emphasized in career activities (Lee, 1997). Racial identity development, economic levels, and political forces are additional cultural factors to explore with under-represented groups (Flores & Heppner, 2002).

External resources such as families and community members who are ethnically similar to students are needed to serve as mentors (Flores & Heppner, 2002). To acquire community and business support, administrators and professional school counselors must market their instructional and career curricula so that stakeholders can determine how they can best promote student growth (ASCA, 2005). A second strategy is to expose stakeholders to the curriculum outlining specific activities that demonstrate how stakeholders can positively impact student development. If strategies to meet with parents at open houses, student-parent orientations, and parent-teacher gatherings at schools prove ineffective, then using community businesses/organizations as designated sites to meet with

parents can enhance relationships between schools, parents and community stakeholders. Additional areas for consideration include placing career programming messages for parents on school agendas and enlisting help from student organizations.

As with most state-mandated programs, desired outcomes are at risk because of limited resources to fully implement programs (Stone & Dahir, 2006). Based on the NSP mandate, dialogue with participants and compliance audits, Olguin, Blalock, and Hamilton (2005) recommend that students, families, and other stakeholders collaborate with schools in the following needed and cost effective areas: a) photocopy needed NSP materials; b) design, recruit and coordinate career fairs and career lecture series in classrooms; c) mentor students prior to graduation; d) provide students with opportunities for job shadowing and informational interviews; e) design and develop school-based stores tailored to career clusters, and f) enhance academics through everyday school business such as inventory of supplies and conducting needs assessments.

If state and national mandates are embraced, then career programming for ethnic youth will naturally evolve within the instructional curricula. Stakeholder participation is vital to the education of ethnic youth; and, if educators are invested in preparing all students to become contributing members in society, then it is necessary to expose them to the variety of careers that exist in and beyond their communities.

Conclusion

The NSP plays a key role to help students explore the world of work while gaining self-awareness. The demographic makeup in the U.S. public schools is cause to advance career programming that includes multicultural theories, advocacy and social justice (Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). School counselors who become aware of their students' cultures and are familiar with educational strategies will be better equipped to assure career programming meets the needs of all students. The selection of techniques and strategies must not diminish

the collective worldviews of ethnic students (Flores & Heppner, 2002), but should facilitate understanding of their family's values towards education.

Comprehensive career programs are needed to remedy disparities for ethnic youth, generating hope that they, given adequate support, contribute to closing the achievement gap. Closing the gap is important because biases, racism and oppression affect students and their desires to be or not to be in schools where cultural, individual or institutional barriers along with discrimination exist (Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). It is also difficult for students of color to blend into schools primarily because of their skin tone, physical features and language. Since these barriers can eventually impede academic performance, career-related activities must be developed to begin eliminating such educational barriers. Most importantly, a paradigm shift needs to occur where more students of color are exposed to an academically rigorous curriculum (Flores & Heppner, 2002; Ford, 1997) that is relevant to them, their communities, and to the world of work.

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