

Career Counseling for Gifted Students:  
Understanding Student Needs and Strategies for Success

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Abstract

Meeting the needs of gifted students' career selection process can pose some unique considerations such as gifted asynchronous development, multipotentiality, and demographic differences such as gender, culture, and socio-economic status (SES) within the gifted population. To address the career counseling needs of gifted students, counselors need to understand the characteristics and needs of gifted students and the relationship this has in the career planning process. This article provides guidance for school counselors to understand gifted students and how to apply career counseling theories, such as the strengths-based approach, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and constructivist theory to this student population.

**Career Counseling for Gifted Students: Understanding Student Needs and Strategies for Success**

There is often an assumption that gifted students are more intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally advanced or more mature than typical students (Beerman, Schultz, & Weber, 2012; Maxwell, 2007). Because of this, educators tend to focus career counseling efforts primarily on college applications, scholarship attainment, and exploration of career paths to make occupational and academic decisions (Barker & Satcher, 2000; Muratori & Smith, 2015), sometimes assuming that gifted students require little guidance in a broad range of career-planning and exploration (Greene, 2006; Maxwell, 2007). Belasco (2013) expressed the importance of school counselors in the college planning process when he stated, "there is no school professional more important to improving college knowledge than the high school counselor" (p. 782). Similarly, according to the Annual National Survey of School Counselors conducted by the College Board National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (Hart, 2012; Bridgeland & Bruce 2011), school counselors play a valuable role in assisting diverse students and ensuring that all students have supports and guidance to promote successful graduation from high school and entrance to college with opportunities for future careers.

Based on research related to school counselor perceptions of school-based career counseling and the resources available, there is a clear need to further explore career counseling strategies among special populations of students. Peterson (2015) pointed out that little attention is given to career counseling and the social and emotional developmental needs of gifted students in the career decision-making process. If school counselors are reporting the perception of being underprepared for career counseling the general student populations (Hart, 2012; Morgan,

Greenwaldt, & Gosselin, 2014) and students of low SES backgrounds (Belasco, 2013), it can be presumed that this is also true of counseling gifted students on career and college readiness. Ultimately, there is a clear need to collect and address relevant literature and best practices pertaining to career planning and exploration strategies targeting special populations, such as gifted students, in order to more adequately serve all student populations.

### **Career Ready Students: A Goal of Comprehensive School Counseling Programs and the ASCA National Model**

School counselors can have a significant impact on the success of postsecondary outcomes for students through comprehensive school counseling programs that provide academic, career, and social/emotional services to every student. In turn, career counseling services in K-12 schools should also focus on exploration of the whole person as he or she is developing through the lifespan. School counselors can strive to empower students with the skills and tools necessary to develop career choice plans (Lapan, 2004) through guided exploration of cultural, social, academic, and value related factors of each student.

The leading professional body of school counselors, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2014), published the Mindsets and Behaviors Career Development Standards to guide school counselors in programming that helps students make connections between education and the world of work and learning how to plan for academic and career aspirations after postsecondary education. One guiding principle of career counseling cited by ASCA comes from a body of work by the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) a “career ready” model focused on three main components: academic skills, employability skills, and technical skills (ACTE, retrieved 2016). Research in gifted services indicates that, although these are imperative components to quality career counseling services, gifted students benefit from the additional layer of services that address self-assessment and life goals. Although academic and vocational skills are major components of career counseling, there are some concerns that this is a limiting perspective for students seeking fulfillment in career pathways. School counselors can help bridge the gap between employability skills and personal interests and better serve diverse student groups as endorsed by the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors standards.

The ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success (ASCA; 2014) supports K-12 college and career readiness for every student. This pivotal document describes the knowledge, skills and attitudes students need to achieve academic success, college and career readiness, and social/emotional development to transition from K-12 academics to post-secondary education and beyond. By utilizing the guidance of these standards, school counselors can assess student growth and development to deliver comprehensive school counseling programming that helps students achieve their highest potential. School counselors can develop strategies to help students reflect on the psychosocial attitudes or beliefs students have about themselves, how these beliefs relate to academic performance, and the association between personal attitudes and beliefs with being successful in relation to personal goals.

### **School Counselor Perceptions of Competency in Career Counseling**

School counselors are trained to create comprehensive school counseling programs that address current and developmental needs of students. Yet, many school counselors report feeling unprepared to offer the breadth of diverse services students need in the domain of career counseling. According to College Board (2012), a majority of school counselors say they need further training and greater resource support to provide the desired caliber of career counseling services and to ensure that all students graduate from high school ready to succeed in college and career aspirations. This perception could be the result of several factors, including the training provided in master's programs that specifically addresses the needs of school-aged students (Morgan, Greenwaldt, & Gosselin, 2014), challenges that may be encountered with gaining administrative support to promote career programming (College Board, 2011; Morgan, Greenwaldt, & Gosselin, 2014), school counselor access to supports and resources (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011) and a lack of awareness and training on current career counseling trends for specific student populations (Barker & Satcher, 2000).

In 2011, College Board conducted a national survey of more than 5,300 school counselors on the topic of career counseling services and perceptions. Results indicated that only half (49%) of surveyed high school counselors reported they felt prepared to apply career counseling interventions in ways that keep students' parents and families actively involved. Furthermore, although 93% of respondents supported a strategic approach to promote college and career readiness, they felt that career counseling is a domain in which they are underprepared to provide the best services possible. Of the school counselors surveyed, 35-43% of counselors did not think they had the support and resources to be successful at promoting the career counseling services as prescribed by ASCA National Standards (Bridgeland & , 2011). Morgan and colleagues (2014) reported similar statistics from a study by Bridgeland and Bruce (2004) citing that only 31% of school counselors believed their school was successful in fulfilling students' needs in the area of career counseling services and they did not feel competent in the delivery of career programs.

What can be derived from previous studies of career counseling is that a gap exists between the services school counselors perceive they should be providing and the services they are actually providing (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014; Clinedinst et al., 2011, Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Forester, Young, & Herman, 2005; McDonough, 2005; Morgan et al., 2014) as well as school counselor perceptions regarding the types of career counseling services that should be provided to various student populations (Barker & Satcher, 2000). One study conducted by Alger and Luke (2014) sought to examine the career counseling services being offered by school counselors. and although the authors acknowledged the need for school counselors to attend to the social, emotional, academic, and career needs of students, there was no clear information as to how or if these components were addressed by school counselors. This study found that school counselors' perceptions regarding their role in career counseling and the extent to which their graduate training addressed college and career readiness varied greatly, indicating a potential need for standardization of training and outcomes pertaining to career counseling in the K-12 setting. Another study (Barker & Satcher, 2000) revealed that school counselors perceive a need for different career counseling services for work versus college-bound students. This study further acknowledged the need for students anticipating advanced degrees to be adept at seeking information regarding plans for ongoing academic and career training. When analyzing the needs

of urban students specifically, Hill's (2011) research unveils the staggering statistics indicating less than half of urban students are able to manage the college application process to meet enrollment requirements.

It is critical that school counselors receive training not only in career counseling, but in career counseling that is specialized in K-12 student populations, which do vary. The question has been raised as to whether graduate students in school counseling programs are receiving adequate training in order to successfully fulfill their role in career counseling with school aged students and as described in the ASCA National Standards (Barker & Satcher, 2000; Forester et al., 2005; Morgan et al., 2014). Most graduate programs offer one course on career counseling and development across the lifespan which is typically designed for both clinical mental health counseling and school counseling students alike. This factor brings forward the inquiry as to how much of the curriculum is focused on K-12 specific topics, as well as, if this provides enough training to adequately prepare school counseling students for K-12 career readiness programming. CACREP 2016 standards support the development of "strategies for advocating for diverse clients' career and educational development and employment in a global economy" (standard F.4.g.) as well as, "ethical and culturally relevant strategies for addressing career development" (standard F.4.j.). Regardless of this factor, school counselors have reported not feeling prepared to deliver career counseling services (Morgan et al., 2014), and are, therefore, in need of additional information and resources to best guide and assist them in providing career counseling services to diverse populations of students. To these ends, the following discussion will focus on the special population of gifted students and relevant research regarding the career counseling process for gifted students.

### **Characteristics of Gifted Students**

Career counseling services are designed to reflect student needs; however, characteristics of gifted students often create a set of needs unfamiliar to many counselors. Gifted students are a special population of students who have been identified as having IQ scores of 130 or higher, or as being in the top 2.5% of a normal intelligence quotient distribution (Peterson, 2015). Aside from the added complexities of counseling cognitively advanced individuals such as gifted students, research also demonstrates that various social and emotional complexities often accompany giftedness, many of which could potentially impact the career counseling process.

According to Colangelo (2002), meeting the cognitive and socio-emotional needs of gifted students requires special awareness and counseling strategies that focus on the development of the whole person and the various exceptionalities that may be exhibited by gifted students. Exceptionalities might include having a disability, multipotentiality, asynchronous development, poverty, and other demographic factors such as ethnicity, religion, and gender. Gifted students are often perceptive and sensitive individuals. This population frequently reports anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation, which can be exacerbated by unfulfilling relationships with parents, peers, and teachers. As such, cognitive ability is no assurance of social adjustment or the ability to attain college and career goals without suitable guidance and support. Not unlike working with general student populations, meeting the cognitive needs of

gifted students requires understanding their social-emotional and developmental needs. Therefore career counseling with student populations needs to account for the whole child.

Gifted students may also struggle with asynchronous development, which is characterized by heightened emotional struggles when gifted students' social maturity does not correspond with their heightened cognitive maturity (Elijah, 2007). Stemming from this particular social impediment is the forced choice dilemma, which is the choice gifted students often feel they must make between social acceptance among peers or cultivating their cognitive gifts and achieving high levels of academic success (Jung, Barnett, Gross, & McCormick, 2009) which is particularly common with urban African American students (Ford, 2004) and adolescent gifted students.

As gifted students enter adolescence, they begin to undergo both internal and external processes of entering adulthood and may struggle to reconcile the various forces that influence their emerging self-concepts, such as their peers, teachers, parents, and their own budding ideas of who they are and want to become. This struggle is common in adolescence for any student but may be compounded by issues of giftedness discussed above. Therefore, taking into consideration the social and academic complexities that can accompany giftedness, it is not surprising that research often finds that giftedness is a risk factor for achieving at ability level in both personal and educational outcomes for both gifted high achievers and gifted underachievers (Colangelo, 2002; Gubbins, 2002). According to Peterson (2001), gifted students often display "intense struggles related to identity, career direction, relationships, and autonomy underscoring the salience of developmental challenges for well-being and successful movement into adulthood" (p. 157). Compounding the socio-emotional complexities gifted students can face, many studies report that gifted students are perceived by parents, teachers, and counselors as having few problems; and therefore, high expectations are frequently placed on them (Peterson, 2015; Nelson & Smith, 2001) with little corresponding support to accommodate added expectations. Peterson (2015) detailed a specific instance of school personnel, specifically school counselors, underestimating the needs of gifted students.

Veteran school counselors who conducted daily guidance lessons and assisted in classrooms acknowledged that they had not expected the gifted children, collectively, to be so different from the general school population. They also had not anticipated the wide range of within-group abilities, behaviors, and concerns (Peterson, 2015, p. 156). However, of the issues often faced by gifted students most salient to the career counseling process, multipotentiality can be the most pervasive. Multipotentiality occurs when a student's giftedness allows for numerous career options, often in completely unrelated fields, as the prospect of success in a variety of career paths is a tangible reality for many gifted students (Greene, 2002; Kerr, 1990; Wessell, 1999). This can pose added difficulty for the gifted student for fear of selecting the wrong path and outside pressures to conform to expectations of reaching one's potential. Gifted students are often interested in selecting career options that have personal meaning to them and will provide some level of personal fulfillment (Jung, 2014); therefore, selecting the "right" career that will fulfill their concept of who they are--or who they want to be--can be very high stakes for a gifted student.

### **Career Counseling with Gifted Students: Counselor Roles and Theoretical Perspectives**

Gifted students often find that due to their multipotentiality, perfectionism, asynchronous development, and outside pressures from family, peers, and teachers it is difficult for them to select a career that will define adult life outcomes (Colangelo, 2012). To guide students through these difficult decisions, Colangelo suggested reiterating the notion that a single, linear career path is not the only option; in fact, Savickas and colleagues (2009) contend that a linear lifelong career trajectory is not at all reflective of the current workplace economy, and what is more, traits identified in adolescence bear little to no resemblance to vocational behaviors reported later in life. Instead, career counselors should emphasize the career counseling process as a non-linear journey of self-discovery, thereby positioning the role of the counselor as a personal guide and support system helping the students figure out where they fit into the world, both in a more local context, such as their school and community, as well as on a global scale, such as the professional landscape and society in general.

Of course, gifted students, perhaps more so than general student populations, may independently construct their own highly fulfilling career paths. However, It is important to point out that some research has indicated females and minorities of high ability do not always have aspirations and career goals that are consistent with their abilities, as some value pursuit of family interests over career aspirations (Kerr, 1991; Colangelo 2002) or may even lack simple practical knowledge of the pathway leading up to their goals. For instance, research conducted by Kurt and Chenault (2016, in review) showed that gifted high school students demonstrated interest in career paths heavy in postgraduate education, yet their perceptions of the type of degree necessary to achieve their goals often did not match (e.g. striving for a career as a medical doctor but indicating desire for a master's degree only). These findings indicate a strong need to work with gifted students in planning beyond a four year degree and to help students match career aspirations with college planning. In addition, this study also showed a dearth in interest in Science Technology Engineering Math (STEM) oriented careers in female gifted students specifically, which may indicate a need for counselors to focus on building confidence to explore all types of career options in female gifted students, particularly female gifted students of color.

These studies demonstrate the crucial need for school counselors to serve as an information point for various career paths, especially when students may be unaware of the steps necessary to achieve their goals or wrongly feel they are under-qualified for careers at which they might excel. However, when discussing alternative options apart from the initial interests expressed by the students, it is paramount that counselors portray these options as additional information, not as "better" or "more appropriate" than the ones in which the students may have chosen for themselves. Gifted students do not respond well to mandates, or what they perceive as mandates, that do not smoothly coalesce with their own perceptions of what they believe to be enjoyable or fulfilling (Jung, 2014). Again, it is important that career counselors position themselves as a support system rather than an authority over gifted students' futures.

Additionally, it is also worth addressing the use of career assessment tools to supplement the career counseling process for gifted students, as research has shown that traditional career

inventories can be complicated by gifted students' propensity to disregard aptitude when selecting a career, especially if the aptitude assessment is external rather than coming from their own perceptions of their skills and abilities (Jung, 2014). Greene (2006) also points out that most career assessments are of limited value to gifted students due to high aptitude and a multitude of interests. Of greater use are inventories that rank interests coupled with analysis of personal goals and self-reflection. Most career counseling programs include some interest inventories for students to complete, but the guidance needed to "put it all together" is often missing. Due to a multitude of factors (time and resource limitations being predominant factors), school counselors often focus time and efforts on the college selection and application and financial aid processes of career counseling. Career counseling in schools can take an approach that engages students in developing a broader self-awareness and connecting that to life aspirations and career fit (Kosine, Steger, & Duncan, 2008; Savickas et al, 2009; Tang, Pan, & Newmeyer, 2008; Muratori & Smith, 2015). All in all, gifted students may be best served by broadening perspectives about college majors, career attainment and trajectory, and self-efficacy.

Kosine, Steger, and Duncan (2008) suggest a strengths-based approach to help students find meaning and purpose in the search for a career path. Based on research in the field of gifted education, this may be a useful approach to best serve this student population, one which searches for self and meaning. The strengths-based approach emphasizes student strengths, sense of purpose, self-identity, culture and service in conjunction with the development of meaningful career development (Kosine, Steger, & Duncan 2008; Grothaus, McAuliffe, & Craigen, 2012). Success is not defined by academic achievement alone; rather it is the multifaceted dimensions that make-up the whole of the individual. As cited by Grothaus, McAuliffe, and Craigen, the "best predictors of children's functional outcome into adulthood lay not in the relief of their symptoms but rather in an understanding, appreciation, and nurturance of their strengths and assets" (Goldstein & Brooks, 2006, p. xiii). Strength-based counseling is a logical fit for delivering comprehensive school counseling services with an emphasis on strengths and environments that promote positive student development (Akos, Galassi, 2008; Gysbers, 2013). This theoretical perspective emphasizes the belief that every student has resources, assets, and capacities to make self-guided decisions (Galassi, Griffin, & Akos, 2008; Saleebey, 2008). In the context of career counseling with gifted students, this discovery process would be guided with collaborative efforts rather than a "you're on your own" approach.

Another potentially useful career counseling theory is the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT). The SCCT perspective of career development is based on the hypothesis that there is a process of interactions between, "person, environment, and behavior variables [that] affect one another through complex, reciprocal linkages" (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000, p. 36). This theory relies on the individual's self-efficacy in career choice behavior through a process of making connections between interests, outcome expectations, and goals and how these variables interact with individual characteristics (gender, ethnicity, financial support, one's family background, personal interests, life expectations, and environmental factors) to aid in the career choice process (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000; Jiang & Zhang, 2012; Tang, Pan, & Newmeyer, 2008). SCCT can be a particularly valuable theoretical perspective in working with diverse gifted populations such as second generation Americans, low SES students, twice exceptional gifted students (students who, in addition to being gifted are also diagnosed with a disability or

disorder), and students with other diverse characteristics. One unique aspect of SCCT is that this theory accounts for perceived barriers that might hinder career attainment such as self-efficacy beliefs, perceptions of social supports, abilities to negotiate obstacles, environmental factors, and outcome expectations (Lent, Brown, & Hackett 2000; Jiang & Zhang, 2012), making this a beneficial theoretical perspective for working with marginalized gifted populations.

Maxwell (2007) supports the use of both constructivist theory and Super's developmental construct. Constructivist theory is a strategy that focuses on meaning derived from personal experiences, whereas Super's theory considers the spectrum of the lifespan in a somewhat interpretive, albeit linear fashion. However, both theories allow the participant to be reflective on thoughts and experiences, which may be appealing to the gifted population in the process of making meaningful career choices and identity formation. Savickas et al. (2009) also outlines a constructivist approach to career counseling that replaces the linearity of traditional career development theory with a more design-centered approach in which students are empowered to construct their own path little by little in real time as they are living it by evaluating their experiences, past and present.

Taking into account the positions of constructivist career development theories, rather than approaching career counseling as a passive activity where students are recipients of services, career counseling with gifted students may be best approached in a manner that actively engages students in the construction of their career paths (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012). In this way, counselors and students together can focus not only on the student's multiple academic strengths, but also on personal values, life goals, and the personal interests of students (Greene, 2006; Kosine, Steger, & Duncan, 2008; Maxwell 2007; Muratori & Smith, 2015; Stewart, 1999; Tang, Pan, & Newmeyer, 2008). As pointed out by Greene (2006), One rarely needs to ask whether or not the gifted individual has the ability or skill for his or her potential occupation, but should question if and how the individual's personal interests, traits, and behaviors will fit with the training and actual work of the chosen occupation, as well as personality fit with colleagues (p. 37).

### **Reforms and Best Practices: Strategies for Success and Moving Forward**

When working with gifted students, it is important to consider the demographics as a component of assessing student needs as racial, cultural, and economic variables play a role in student perceptions, feelings, and aspirations. When school counselors have a scholarly understanding of giftedness and the unique characteristics of gifted students, they are then able to offer information germane to helping gifted students make sense of themselves, others, and life challenges (Peterson, 2015). Kerr and Ghrist-Priebe (1988) suggested a "combination of assessment, individual counseling, and group counseling activities that (a) clarify needs, interests, and values; (b) encourage goal setting; and (c) provide support for unique concerns of the gifted" (p.367). Ultimately, to best deliver career counseling services to gifted populations, counselors must maintain awareness of contemporary research-based practices designed to help deliver optimal service to gifted students.

The following are suggestions for providing career counseling services to gifted students:

- Address the whole person in career counseling, including social and emotional needs with academic abilities, self-efficacy and cultural background.
- Work collaboratively with gifted students to help them not only identify, but also to sort and rank career interests.
- Select a career counseling theory that emphasizes self-efficacy along with interest and personal goals to guide career counseling efforts with gifted students such as Social Cognitive Career Theory, Person-Centered Career Development Theory, or Constructivist Theory.
- Maintain awareness that not all gifted populations are the same. There may be marked differences in female, urban, and minority populations.
- Recognize that gifted students may need career counseling that trajects beyond a four year degree in ways that go beyond simply pointing out the degree needed for some professions.

Peterson (2015) and Maxwell (2007) also offered the following additional suggestions for providing career counseling services to gifted students:

- Address cognitive ability, complexity, and performance of the student as interrelated components.
- Include non-academic components such as values, identity development, and the social and emotional needs of gifted students in career related discussions.
- Small-group career counseling can provide a place for gifted students to discuss and internalize issues related to multipotentiality (possessing multiple talents or capabilities) and possible career trajectories coupled with personal values and life goals.
- Do not assume gifted students and their support systems can navigate the process of career counseling and college applications without school counselor support.
- Recognize the barriers by which some groups of gifted students may be affected by (racial, gender, or religious variables).
- Recognize the different needs of gifted students.
- Continue to learn about the gifted population.

However, current counselors staying abreast of best practices and research-based strategies may not yield optimal results for gifted students if counselors lack a foundation for this knowledge. While counselors continue to work toward obtaining adequate preparation for professional roles to guide diverse populations of students toward college and career paths, one avenue that should continue to be strengthened is graduate curricula in counselor education programs, especially if graduate courses in counselor education programs have a curriculum focused on the adult population of career counseling and leave the child and adolescent population out of the ongoing course objectives. This in turn may leave graduate students with the impression they are to apply adult career counseling theories and techniques to the child and adolescent populations.

A study by Morgan, Greenwalt, and Gosselin (2014) further illustrates the need for graduate program curriculum more attuned to providing career counseling services to diverse populations of students. In this study, school counselors reported beliefs of being unprepared to offer the necessary supports to guide students through career and postsecondary planning.

Additionally, these study participants reported a need for training tailored for working with diverse student populations. They felt that, due to the lack of training and resources, their perceived helplessness prevented them from being as engaged in career counseling efforts as they thought they should be. These participants also reported that in their graduate programs counseling theories and some assessment tools were introduced, but there was “insufficient instruction on how to apply these concepts when working with students” (Morgan et al, 2014, p. 489). One alarming statement in this study points to the lack of perceived knowledge in meeting the career counseling needs of students; “none of the participants were able to recall a particular standard for career assessment or planning for secondary school counseling that they might use as a guide when working in the schools” (Morgan et al, 2014, p. 489).

The information disseminated in this study indicates that it may be worth discussing the importance of the graduate program standards endorsed by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016) to include career counseling standards that directly relate to the career counseling needs of those who will be working specifically with child and adolescent populations. Further implications could include the need for additional research conducted on career counseling with K-12 populations, including subpopulations such as gifted and minority students, to further fine-tune the strategies listed above.

### **Conclusion**

The career selection process for gifted students can be more than just a step in the process of completing secondary school. It can be a highly personal process that may lead to a deep level of introspection requiring targeted support from the adults in their lives, including teachers, parents, and counselors. Still, as is evidenced by this research, many of these individuals may be ill-equipped to provide the level of support gifted students need to confidently transition into postsecondary studies and the professional world. However, with a firm foundation of awareness and research-based best practices and strategies such as those supported by the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors, counselors can work together with students to help them construct their own path to success and confidently move into postsecondary and career worlds.

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