



Strengthening College and Career Success with Culturally-Sustaining School Counseling

IDRA Policy Brief



by Vivek Datla, MPA • November 2025

Every student deserves a high-quality education that prepares them for college and lifelong success. School counselors can play a unique role in achieving this goal by ensuring that all students receive the support and guidance they need to access and be ready for college. This is especially true for students from underrepresented backgrounds who may not have such support by other means.

Unfortunately, state-level policymakers have struggled to provide school counselors with the resources they need to make sure all their students are college and career ready. School counselors face challenges due to limited resources, insufficient training, and implicit and structural biases. This makes it harder to provide effective college and career guidance.

Students need access to school counselors who recognize their strengths, value their diverse cultures, and advocate for equity in college access and career success.

In turn, state policymakers must provide for the training and resources school counselors need to implement culturally-sustaining school counseling programs that can reduce barriers to college and career success for all students, regardless of race or background.

This issue brief addresses the following.

- Why college access and success matters;
- Recent college enrollment trends for students from historically marginalized backgrounds;
- How school counselors impact college and career success
- Legal and policy background for school counselors' responsibilities
- An overview of key constraints facing school counselors today and policy solutions to build fairly funded, culturally sustaining school counseling programs

Why a College Degree Matters: Economic and Career Outcomes

Access to college and earning a college degree have a profound impact on students' career and life.

College graduates consistently experience better economic and financial outcomes compared to their peers without degrees. Full-time workers in the United States earn more over their lifetime as their level of education increases. For instance, between 2009 and 2019, full-time workers with a bachelor's degree earned 75% more in median lifetime earnings than those with only a high school diploma.¹

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Recent data reinforces this trend. In 2023, full-time workers with a bachelor's degree earned a median annual wage of \$60,000, while their peers with only a high school diploma earned \$36,000.²

In November 2024, the unemployment rate for individuals age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher was 2.4%, compared to 4.0% for those with only a high school diploma.³

The link between higher education and economic mobility will only strengthen in the coming years. Projections show that, from 2021 to 2031, 79% of jobs requiring a bachelor's degree will be “good jobs,” defined as jobs paying at least \$43,000 (2022 dollars) for workers aged 25-44. In contrast, only 38% of jobs requiring a high school diploma are expected to meet this threshold.⁴

Higher education should serve as a “engine of social mobility” that is accessible to all students, improving their personal, educational and career prospects.⁵

Unfortunately, disparities in access to college and completion of four-year degrees remain significant, particularly among historically marginalized groups, including students of color, first-generation college students and students from low-income backgrounds.

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College Enrollment Trends for Students from Historically Marginalized Backgrounds

Opportunities to earn a college degree should be equally accessible to all students. Yet students from historically marginalized backgrounds (including Black, Latino, low-income, and first-generation students) have faced persistent barriers to college access over the past decade.

These barriers are increasing following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, which ended race-conscious admissions policies in higher education. The ruling makes it “more difficult for colleges to consider all aspects of a student's identity, qualifications and experiences – including their racial and ethnic background – during the admissions process,” creating another obstacle for students from underrepresented communities.⁶

Results of this decision are already beginning to be felt by students as IDRA's Texas-based preliminary study notes, these combined shifts in policy have led students, parents and educators to report that historically marginalized students are facing “barriers in finding helpful college information, funding opportunities, key student services and staff personnel to help them access and succeed in college.”⁷

However, even before the court's decision, longstanding disparities in college access and enrollment have continued to limit opportunity for students from historically marginalized backgrounds.

Enrollment Trends for Black Students

Between 2010 and 2020, college enrollment among Black students declined significantly. In 2010, 3.04 million Black students were enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions. By 2020, that number had fallen to 2.39 million – a 21% decline, or nearly 650,000 students.⁸

While overall college enrollment also declined by about 10% during this period, the rate of decline among Black students was more than double the national average. Population

trends do not explain this gap: Black students' representation in the overall K-12 population declined by just 1% between 2010 and 2020.⁹

Enrollment Trends for Latino Students

College enrollment among Latino students has grown over the last two decades, alongside their increasing share of the U.S. student population. Between 2000 and 2019, college enrollment more than doubled for Latino students from 1.5 million to nearly 3.8 million students.¹⁰ Their representation in K-12 schools also grew by 11.3% during that time, making them the second-largest population group in U.S. public schools.¹¹

Despite this growth, gaps in college access remain. In 2021, only 32% of Latino youth ages 18-24 were enrolled in college, compared to 33% of Black students, 37% of white students, and 58% of Asian American students.¹² This rate also reflects a four-point drop since 2012.¹³

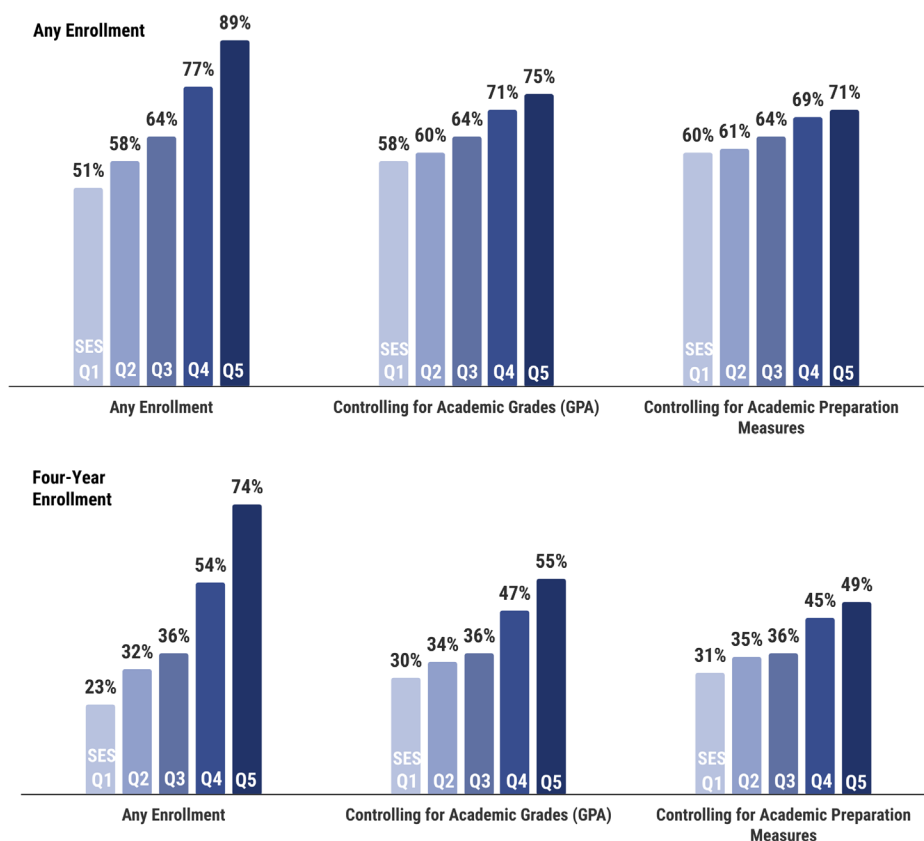
Financial concerns and perceptions of college accessibility likely contribute to these disparities. Among Latinos without a college degree and not currently enrolled in college, 71% cite cost as a reason, and 42% say they don't believe they would be accepted into a four-year institution.¹⁴

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College Access for Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

Economic inequality continues to shape access to higher education. Black students and Latino students are more likely to attend high-poverty schools than the national average than their white and Asian American peers.¹⁵

College Enrollment Gaps by Socioeconomic Status are Substantially Smaller, Though Still Notable, Among Students with Similar Academic Preparation



Reber, S., & Smith, E. (2023, January). Too Many Students Left Behind? Trends in U.S. College Enrollment and the Impact of Socioeconomic Inequality. Brookings Institution.

Only about half of the students in the lowest socioeconomic quintile enroll in college, compared to 89% in the highest quintile. For four-year institutions, the gap is even wider: nearly three-quarters of students in the top quintile enroll, compared to less than one-quarter in the bottom quintile.¹⁶

Enrollment Gaps for First-Generation Students

First-generation college students (those whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree) make up over half of U.S. undergraduates.¹⁷ However, their college enrollment rates remain lower than their peers with college-educated parents.

Almost three fourth (72%) of first-generation high school sophomores from 2002 had enrolled in college by 2012. This compares to 84% of students whose parents had some college education and 93% of those whose parents had a bachelor's degree.¹⁸

Immediate enrollment rates (within three months of high school graduation) are even lower: 58% for first-generation students, compared to 63% and 78% for students with parents who had some college or a bachelor's degree, respectively.¹⁹

Importantly, race, income and first-generation status are deeply interconnected. First-generation students are more likely to come from lower-income families, and over half are students of color with Black and Latino students being the most represented.²⁰

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The Role of School Counselors in Expanding College and Career Access

School counselors are uniquely positioned to shape students' educational and career paths through college and career guidance counseling. This is especially true for students from historically marginalized backgrounds.

College and career guidance counseling refers broadly to the advice and expertise students receive as they plan for postsecondary education and employment.²¹ This includes support with course recommendations, college admissions, financial aid applications and navigating the enrollment process.

Students of color, students from low-income backgrounds and first-generation students often rely heavily on school counselors for information about postsecondary options.²²

While families offer strong encouragement, students from these backgrounds may lack access to social networks with detailed knowledge of college systems and processes.²³ As a result, counselors play an important role in shaping these students' understanding of – and access to – college and career opportunities.

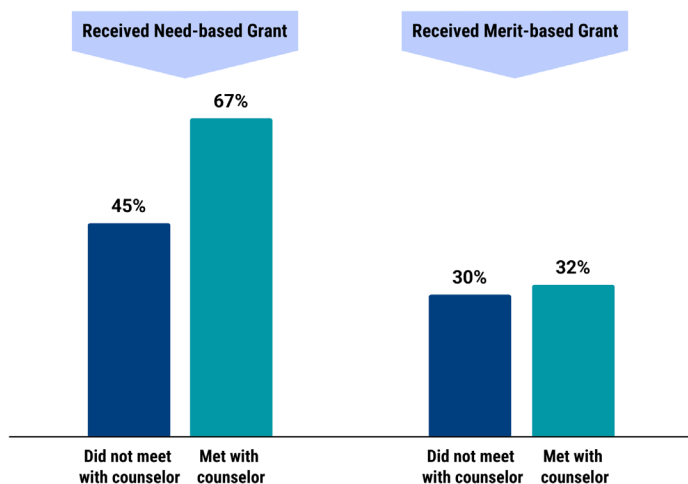
Research shows that, when counselors dedicate time to effective college and career advising, students may be more likely to pursue college opportunities. And this effect can be even stronger for students from historically marginalized backgrounds.²⁴

One critical example is completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Students who meet with counselors about financial aid are significantly more likely to complete FAFSA, a key indicator of college access and enrollment.²⁵ These students are also more likely to receive need-based grants upon enrolling in college.²⁶

But counselors do more than provide information. They also influence how students see themselves and their future. For underrepresented students in particular, counselors can shape perceptions of college readiness and possibility – positively or negatively – based on the nature of their interactions.²⁷

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High School Counseling Impacts College Financial Aid



NCES. (2023). High School Counseling and College Financial Aid. U.S. National Center for Education Statistics

Need-based grants include federal Pell Grants, Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grant (FSEOG) awards, state need-based grants, and institutional need-based grants. Institutional and state grants include grants that were need-based and had a merit consideration.
Merit-based grants include state merit-only grants and scholarships and institutional merit-only grants and scholarships, including athletic scholarships. Students can receive both need-based grants and merit-based grants.

Unfortunately, many school counselors face structural barriers that limit their capacity to support students effectively. Heavy caseloads, competing responsibilities and limited resources all hinder their ability to deliver affirming and equitable college and career guidance – especially to the students who need it most.

Additionally, counselors must often confront implicit biases and institutional practices within schools and counseling programs that may unintentionally reinforce inequities.²⁸

The next section of this brief outlines the legal and policy landscape that governs school counselors' roles across states. Understanding this context is critical for identifying the levers policymakers can use to help counselors overcome these constraints and deliver equitable, culturally-sustaining college and career guidance counseling for all students.

The Legal and Policy Framework for School Counselor Responsibilities

School counselor roles and responsibilities are shaped by a combination of state laws, school districts and professional standards. As a result, the scope of a school counselor's duties can vary across states and school districts. Still, most states share common expectations due to the influence of national organizations and accrediting bodies over time.²⁹

Two groups in particular – the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) – have helped align state expectations through consistent models and standards.

ASCA, a national nonprofit, promotes effective school counseling through professional development, research and its widely adopted ASCA national model. This model has been adopted or adapted by 40 U.S. states and serves as the foundation for many school counseling programs.³⁰

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CACREP, meanwhile, provides voluntary accreditation for university-based counselor education programs. Its standards align with those of ASCA, helping ensure counselor training programs prepare school counselors to meet professional expectations across states.

While certification requirements differ from state to state, most require:

- Completion of school counseling coursework from an accredited college or university;
- A practicum and internship in a K–12 setting; and
- And passage of a state or national certification exam, such as the praxis.³¹

ASCA defines school counselors as certified or licensed educators who support student success through comprehensive counseling programs.³² Counselors work directly with students to:

- Develop academic strategies,
- Strengthen social and emotional skills, and
- Plan for postsecondary education and career paths.³³

In practice, school counselors engage in a wide range of activities. One national study identified four major areas of responsibility³⁴:

- Counseling Services (*e.g.*, individual and group counseling, family consultation);
- Advocacy and Systemic Improvement (*e.g.*, policy advocacy, identifying barriers to equity);
- Prevention Programs (*e.g.*, school-wide curriculum on topics like bullying, mental health); and
- Educational and Career Planning (*e.g.*, college and career advising and course placement).

This brief focuses primarily on the second and fourth areas (identifying barriers to equity, policy advocacy, and educational and career planning) and the essential role counselors play in supporting college access for students from historically marginalized backgrounds.

The sections that follow explore the individual and structural challenges school counselors face along with policy solutions that can help address them.

Policy Solutions for the Four Key Challenges School Counselors Face Today

Despite their critical role in expanding college and career opportunities, school counselors often face working conditions and structural challenges that limit their ability to consistently support students from historically marginalized backgrounds.

In many cases, counselors must contend with limited time and high caseloads as well as with structural and implicit biases embedded within school systems and counseling programs. These conditions make it more difficult for counselors to provide the kind of affirming, equity-focused support that all students deserve, especially those who are students of color, first-generation or from low-income backgrounds.

This section outlines four major barriers that constrain counselors' ability to deliver effective and equitable college access and guidance counseling.

1. High student-to-counselor ratios that exceed recommended best practices.
2. Heavy workloads and competing responsibilities that reduce the time available for college and career and career guidance counseling.
3. Insufficient training and inadequate resources made available to deliver effective and culturally sustaining college and career counseling strategies.
4. Implicit and structural biases that shape both individual counselor practices and broader programmatic priorities.

Each of these constraints reflects a policy opportunity – and a challenge – that state leaders, local education agencies (school districts), and schools must address to ensure that counselors are fully equipped to support every student's college and career goals.

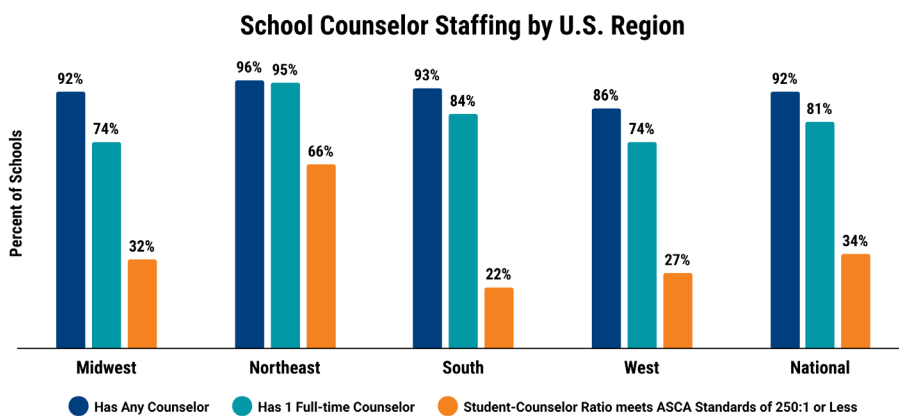
1. Student-to-Counselor Ratios Matter

For students from historically marginalized backgrounds who often rely heavily on school counselors for college guidance consistent, individualized access to counselors is essential. But across the country, and particularly the U.S. South, students' ability to connect with school counselors is severely limited by unmanageable student-to-counselor ratios, especially in schools serving large numbers of low-income students and students of color.

ASCA recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1, based on research linking lower ratios to higher standardized test scores, better attendance and graduation rates, fewer disciplinary actions, and increased conversations about postsecondary planning.³⁵

Nearly all U.S. states exceed this recommended ratio, many by a significant margin.³⁶ Southern states have the lowest percentage of high schools meeting ASCA's standard, compared to other regions.³⁷

Barrier:
High student-to-counselor ratios that exceed recommended best practices.



Some improvements occurred due to temporary federal support during the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund* (ESSER) helped states hire more counselors and reduce caseloads. ESSER funds have expired, so many of these gains are at risk (Burns, 2024; Klein, 2024).³⁸

This poses a major challenge for state legislatures, which have underfunded counseling staff for over a decade. Between 2010 and 2020, 21 states and Washington, D.C., reduced their number of full-time counselors per student. This reflects a broader trend of states failing to restore education funding to pre–Great Recession (2009) levels.³⁹

Students in underfunded schools serving primarily historically marginalized communities are most affected. Counselors in schools with majority students of color serve, on average, 34 more students than counselors in schools with fewer students of color.⁴⁰

Similarly, students from low-income households attend schools with higher student-to-counselor ratios than their more affluent peers. States that under invest in counselor staffing tend to especially underfund schools with high poverty rates and higher percentages of students of color.⁴¹

These issues have real consequences.

Smaller student-to-counselor ratios are linked to higher four-year college enrollment rates, particularly for students from historically marginalized backgrounds.⁴² Research also confirms a strong negative relationship between high counselor caseloads and students' college-going behaviors, including applying for admissions and financial aid, applying to college and enrolling in college.⁴³

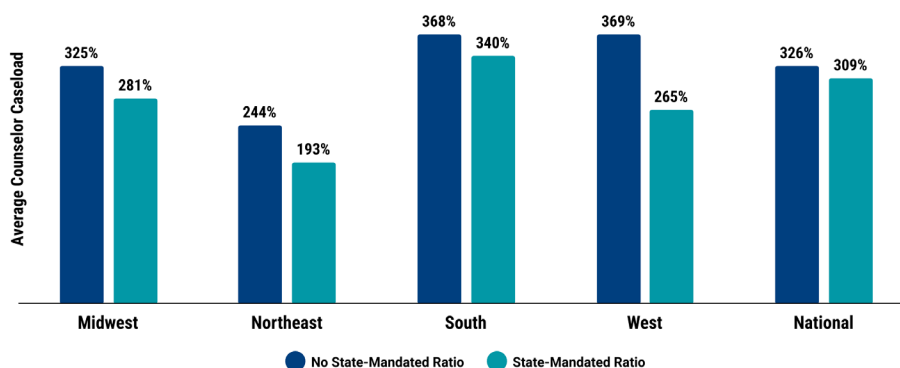
Unless states make targeted investments to lower student-to-counselor ratios, particularly in under-resourced schools, equity in college access will remain difficult to achieve. When counselors are responsible for hundreds of students, they have less time to build relationships, guide students through college admissions and financial aid, and help students make informed decisions about their futures.

What policymakers can do to lower student-to-counselor ratios

To improve college access for historically marginalized students, state policymakers must take the lead in reducing school counselor caseloads. Student-to-counselor ratios are directly tied to state-level education funding decisions, which determine how many counselors school districts can hire and whether or not schools can provide students with the college and career guidance they need.⁴⁴

Research shows that states make progress on this issue when they establish maximum student-to-counselor ratios in statute or regulation and provide sufficient, targeted funding to help schools meet those standards.⁴⁵

Counselors in States with No State-Mandated Student-Counselor Ratios Have Higher Caseloads



Data Source: Meyer, K., & Bell, E. (2023.). The School Counselor Staffing Landscape: Policies and Practice. Brookings Institution.

To ease counselor workloads and expand access for underrepresented students, state leaders should:

- **Set enforceable ratio limits aligned with ASCA's 250:1 recommendation.**
- **Monitor and report gains or deficiencies in student access to school counselors in school districts serving higher percentages of students from historically marginalized backgrounds.**
- **Provide equity-based funding formulas that direct additional resources to high-need schools.**
- **Ensure that funding increases are sustained and not reliant on temporary federal relief.**

2. Extra Roles Undermine College and Career Guidance Counseling

School counselors need more protected time in their work schedules to provide consistent and effective college and career guidance counseling, particularly for underrepresented students who often rely on counselors as a primary source of support in navigating college access.

ASCA recommends that counselors spend at least 80% of their time on direct or indirect services to students.⁴⁶ Within that, research shows that dedicating at least 50% of time specifically to college advising leads to meaningful improvements in college access outcomes.⁴⁷ When counselors meet this threshold, students are more likely to receive college and career guidance, submit multiple college applications and enroll in college.⁴⁸

Unfortunately, research also suggests that school counselors nationally spend, on average, only 20% of their time on college advising.⁴⁹ Despite their intentions, many school counselors are stretched across a wide array of responsibilities that limit their time for college and career guidance.⁵⁰ These duties include personal needs counseling, course scheduling, academic testing and teaching or administrative tasks.⁵¹

The problem is even more acute in schools serving high numbers of students from low-income backgrounds. In these schools, counselors often report spending less than 20% of their time on college advising.⁵² In Texas, interviews with school counselors revealed that some spend up to 75% to 100% of their time on non-counseling tasks, leaving “minimal” if any time for college or career support.⁵³

When counselors are unable to prioritize college and career advising, students with the most to gain from this support are left without the guidance they need to pursue college and career opportunities.

What policymakers can do to make room for college and career school counseling

Policymakers can support school counselors and the students who rely on them by creating conditions that enable counselors to spend more of their time on activities proven to increase college and career success. This includes reinforcing the previous recommendation to reduce student-to-counselor ratios to ASCA's recommended 250:1. Smaller caseloads not only improve access but also give counselors the flexibility to focus more time on college and career guidance counseling.⁵⁴

In addition, state leaders should introduce or revise laws and regulations that clearly define and protect the scope of counselors' work. To ensure that counselors can prioritize college and career guidance, states should:

Barrier:

Heavy workloads and competing responsibilities that reduce the time available for college and career and career guidance counseling.

- Establish clear minimum standards for how school counselors allocate their time, such as requiring a percentage of time be dedicated to college and career counseling.
- Limit or eliminate the assignment of non-counseling duties (e.g., test administration, substitute teaching or hallway supervision) that take time away from student support.

3. Lack of Resources and Preparation for Effective College and Career Counseling

School counselors' preparation for supporting students in college and career readiness begins in graduate programs required for certification. However, research suggests that many of these programs may not adequately prepare counselors to deliver effective college and career guidance counseling.⁵⁵

A national survey found that most school counselors felt their graduate training did not sufficiently cover college advising.⁵⁶ Those working in schools with low college attendance were especially likely to express a need for more training, and only half reported feeling confident in supporting students' academic planning for college.⁵⁷

Historically, many graduate programs have prioritized training on students' social and emotional development over college and career planning. While CACREP – the leading accreditor for counselor education – introduced stronger college and career readiness standards in recent years, program-level adoption has been inconsistent.⁵⁸

Even after entering the profession, many school counselors lack access to targeted, frequent professional development on college and career advising. Research shows gaps in counselors' preparedness to advise students on financial aid, especially students from historically marginalized groups, and with using data to inform practice.⁵⁹

In Texas, school counselors interviewed by IDRA frequently expressed uncertainty about the college and career advice they were offering and reported having limited access to the data needed to guide and improve their practices.⁶⁰

Without adequate preparation, ongoing training, and access to robust and easily accessible data, school counselors are less equipped to deliver the equitable, informed support that underrepresented students need to navigate complex and career college pathways.

(Policy solutions are combined in the next section.)

4. Implicit and Structural Biases Impact College and Career Guidance Counseling

School counselors and the programs they work within are not immune to the cultural and institutional biases that have long shaped disparities in education access. These biases, whether individual or systemic, can hinder college and career advising efforts and perpetuate inequities, especially for students from historically marginalized backgrounds.⁶¹

As emphasized earlier in this brief, school counselors are often the most influential in-school adults guiding students through college and career planning, particularly for students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.⁶² However, that influence is not always positive. Counselors' expectations, assumptions and behaviors (conscious or not) can shape students' postsecondary aspirations and the nature of the support they receive.⁶³

Barrier:

High student-to-counselor ratios that exceed recommended best practices.

Barrier:

Implicit and structural biases that shape both individual counselor practices and broader programmatic priorities.

Students tend to internalize the expectations counselors hold for them. These expectations impact how frequently students seek out their counselors and the type of information they receive.⁶⁴ Greater contact between students and counselors about college-related information is strongly linked to higher rates of college application and enrollment.⁶⁵ Therefore, all students – not just those perceived as “college-bound” – should feel encouraged and supported in these interactions.

Research also shows that students’ access to meaningful, high-quality college advising often varies by race and ethnicity. Black students, for example, are more likely than white students to seek out school counselors for college information, but their access to usable, effective and equitable support is more limited.⁶⁶

Similarly, studies find that many Latino students perceive their counselors as unsupportive due to a range of factors, such as low expectations, inadequate guidance or high student-to-counselor ratios.⁶⁷

Counseling programs – even those that promote a strong college-going culture – often fall short in meeting the needs of diverse student populations when they fail to consider students’ cultural identities and lived experiences in the delivery of services.⁶⁸

Effective counseling must be personalized, culturally-sustaining and rooted in equity. When it is not, school counselors may unintentionally reinforce educational stratification based on race and class.⁶⁹

Without addressing these structural and interpersonal barriers, even well-funded school counseling programs may continue to leave behind the very students they aim to support.

What policymakers can do to build culturally sustaining school counseling programs through data and ongoing professional development

Policymakers can pursue multiple actions to resolve the constraints around inadequate training, insufficient resources, and implicit and structural biases within school counseling programs.

State legislatures should annually update data systems so that school counselors have meaningful access to timely, actionable and student-level college and career data disaggregated by characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender and disability status. These data should be user-friendly and designed to help:

- Counselors reflect on their own practices and identify student groups that may be underserved;
- Schools and districts improve the quality and equity of their school counseling programs; and
- Communities, advocates and policymakers monitor progress in closing gaps in college access and enrollment.

In addition, states should provide dedicated funding for ongoing professional development that equips school counselors with the tools to deliver culturally-sustaining, equity-centered college and career guidance counseling.

Research suggests that professional development focused on culturally-sustaining school counseling practices can help reduce cultural biases and better equip counselors to advocate for equitable practices that support students’ college and career success.⁷⁰

To ensure this training reaches all counselors and translates into practice:

- **Professional development should include content on implicit bias, culturally-sustaining school counseling strategies and working effectively with students from historically marginalized backgrounds.**
- **Professional development should equip school counselors with the skills to use data effectively to identify disparities in college access and to advocate for equity for underrepresented student groups.**
- **Renewal of counselor licensure or certification should be tied to annual completion of this equity-focused training.**
- **States should encourage or require training to be led or co-designed by organizations with expertise in educational equity and culturally-sustaining practices, such as ASCA.**

Closing

College degrees open new doors for students in their lives and in their careers. Every student deserves access to effective, culturally-sustaining college and career advising delivered by school counselors who uplift and honor their unique backgrounds, experiences, and cultures.

To achieve this, policymaking should improve current conditions. School counselors need adequate resources, dedicated time, culturally-sustaining training, and access to disaggregated data to deliver equitable college and career guidance for all students. These conditions depend on policy decisions within the power of state and local policymakers.

Policymakers should prioritize reducing student-to-counselor ratios, protecting counselor work time for meaningful student engagement, and investing in data systems and professional development that support culturally-sustaining school counseling practices. Through these actions, equity gaps in college access can begin to close.

All students deserve college and career guidance that equips them for future success. Policymakers must act decisively to make this possible.

Additional resources, including a literature review, culturally responsive practices framework, webinar videos, articles, podcasts and other resources, are available in IDRA's online assistance toolkit, **Culturally Responsive Instruction and Leadership – Online Technical Assistance Toolkit**, available at <https://idra.news/webCRI>.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. For more information, contact Terrence Wilson, J.D., at terrence.wilson@idra.org.

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