

Why Go to College? School Counselor Perceptions of the Benefits of College Attendance

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Abstract

School counselors have critical roles in enhancing college readiness, providing college admissions counseling, and fostering a college going culture in their schools. In fulfilling these roles, school counselors must answer the “Why go to college” question. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine school counselors’ beliefs about the major benefits associated with college attendance. Study findings indicated school counselors focused on students’ individual benefits rather than broader societal impacts associated with college attendance. Participants identified four salient categories of benefits associated with college attendance, including career preparation, financial gains, knowledge expansion, and personal growth and development.

Key Words

college admissions counseling, benefits of college attendance, impact of college

Introduction

High school students, today, are struggling with the decision to go to college since the Covid-19 Pandemic began (Conley & Massa, 2022). Rising college costs and the economic downturn experienced by many are expected to have significant impacts on the education pipeline (Bransberger, Falkenstern, & Lane, 2020).

Despite the increasing national high school graduation rate (Bransberger, Falkenstern, & Lane, 2020; Robertson, Smith, & Rinka, 2016), fewer students are attending post-secondary institutions, and the coming decline in birth rates will only exacerbate declining college enrollments (Bransberger, Falkenstern, & Lane, 2020).

Generation Z students, or those born between 1995-2010, make up nearly a third of the world's population (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

School counselors are charged with providing quality college and career counseling to a generation of students who were born in the digital age and require instant information and communication (Rothman, 2016), are financially-minded, and are more socially aware (Singh & Dangmei, 2016). Meaning, these students want to solve societal ailments and environmental issues.

Research does exist on the benefits of attending college; however, a paucity of research exists on the school counselors perceived notions of the benefits of college attendance.

Additionally, a scarcity of research exists on the college counseling of Generation Z students. School counselors are responsible for college and career counseling and conveying the opportunities that are afforded a student who attends college. The purpose of

this research is to examine the perception of college attendance benefits. Specifically, this qualitative study will investigate and answer the research question: how do school counselors describe the nature and major benefits of college attendance?

Literature Review

College attendance produces many benefits that may fall in two categories: societal and individual. Even though many benefits can be traced back to the individual, higher education produces impacts that also benefit the society as a whole (Book, 2021; Cunningham, 2006; Murray, 2009; Skrbinjek, 2020). Those with more education beyond a high school diploma tend to have jobs that provide health insurance with access to preventative care, which reduces the costs of government in social programs such as Medicare and Medicaid (Ma et al., 2019).

Additionally, college graduates are statistically more apt to have healthy children and less likely to have illegitimate births, thus reducing social programs such as welfare and food programs (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2010). Incarceration rates are also lower for those with college degrees, which reduces government spending on prison costs as well (Baum et al., 2013). Lastly, college graduates are also more likely to get involved in community services, voting, and other forms of community engagement (Barrow, & Malamud, 2015) not to mention that college graduates pay more taxes (Carroll & Erkut, 2009).

Individual benefits of a college degree include an increased annual and life-time income (Carnevale et al., 2020; Carnevale et al., 2011) that affords additional opportunities such as higher job satisfaction (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011) and lower unemployment rates (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). In fact, unemployment rates for those with a college

degree are 3.5% fewer than those without a degree. Additionally, those with a college degree typically find jobs with access to retirement plans (Ma, et al., 2019) so they are not solely reliant on a social program such as Social Security. Lastly, a college degree typically allows for the provision of better opportunities for the children of graduates (Chetty et al., 2017) as parents with college degrees are more likely to become involved in a child's education (Attewell, & Lavin, 2007).

Considering the benefits of a college education is only one factor in college and career counseling. School counselors must also consider the students they are to counsel. Today's youth who are ready for that next step are labeled Gen Z - born between 1997-2013. These youths have grown up in a culture of safety that presents challenges for college and the workforce (Rickes, 2016; Schroth, 2019).

For example, some researchers suggest that Gen Z grew up with overprotective parents that may have interfered with their social, emotional, and intellectual development, which makes it more difficult for these students to navigate challenges independently (Rodriguez, et al., 2019; Schroth, 2019). Additionally, Gen Z have grown up with technology, and as a result, expect communication to be instantaneous (Pichler et al., 2021; Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018; Szymkowiak, et al., 2021). Gen Z are also considered by some to be the most success-driven generation (Rickes, 2016; Schroth, 2019) who are embroiled in social justice movements as a result of being raised in a society with the 9/11 attacks, school shootings, and climate change (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Maloni, Hiatt, & Campbell, 2019; Sladek & Grabinger, 2014). Despite being success-driven, there is research that Gen Z have more diagnoses of depression and anxiety (Sandra, 2019; Schroth, 2019).

Considering both the benefits of college attendance and generational characteristics should be viewed in a social theory framework, such as Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (1984). Giddens claims that an individual's independence is influenced by societal structures, which are patterned social appointments that are derived from the actions of individuals.

For example, family is a social structure that influences an individual's independence, just as the law is a social structure that does the same. This social structure is then impacted and maintained through the exercise of agency, or the ability of individuals to reach maximum potential (Giddens, 1984).

Looking through the lens of structuration, college attendance is a social structure that interacts with a student's agency. School counselors are responsible for not only understanding the full potential and challenges of Gen Z students, but also understanding the rules that may limit students within the social structure of college: finances, travel, majors, and the like. Only through the interface of social structures and agency can effective counseling occur, and one of the three domains in which school counselors are responsible to deliver programs is career development (The American School Counselor Association, 2017).

Not only is it important for counselors to understand Gen Z expectations and challenges pertaining to college, it is also important for counselors to highlight and differentiate the societal and individual benefits of college to Gen Z students so the value of a post-secondary education can be realized. If only the individual benefits are discussed, Gen Z students may not be as motivated to incur the costs.

However, if societal benefits of college attendance are also discussed in the counseling process, then Gen Z students are more apt to work beyond the rules that limit agency in the social construct of college.

Methodology

A multitude of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methodology research designs have been utilized to investigate the individual and societal benefits associated with college attendance. However, few research studies have focused on school counselors' beliefs about the benefits of college attendance.

The complexity of college admissions counseling, as well as the myriad of challenges associated with fostering a college-going school culture, necessitate a thoughtful construction of the research design (Leavy, 2017). For these reasons, this study employs a basic qualitative research design, including qualitative semi-structured interviews to better understand school counselors' beliefs about the benefits associated with students attending college.

A basic qualitative design was utilized in this research study because the research questions focused on school counselors' perceptions about the benefits associated with college attendance. Leavy (2017) asserts that utilizing a basic qualitative research strategy with semi-structured interviews helps generate a more holistic view of participants' perceptions.

This research strategy enabled school counselors' rich personal reflections on their college admissions counseling experiences and the beliefs they hold about college attendance to be compared with other study participants (Creswell, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 2015; Leavy, 2017).

The interviews utilized four semi-structured questions that aligned to the study's overarching research question and utilized an open-ended question structure to encourage research participants to elaborate on their own perceptions of the benefits associated with college attendance.

By purposefully constructing the interview questions to be open-ended, informed by research literature, and aligned with the study's overarching research question, the researchers ensured the interview questions were relevant and appropriate (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Each interview was recorded and transcribed to further increase data trustworthiness (Creswell, 2018). The research interviews were conducted utilizing video conferencing software over two weeks.

Research participants

School counselors in a southeastern state in the United States were invited to participate in the research interviews. Eleven school counselors agreed to participate in the study. Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) assert that even a research sample that is small may provide great insight and information on the research topic.

The research participants shared one critical characteristic which met the inclusion criteria for the research study—employment as a school counselor. The participants in this study were diverse in years of school counseling experience, school counseling grade level, gender, and race and ethnicity, increasing the likelihood of the representativeness of the sample.

Additionally, the interview participants were geographically located throughout the state. Interview participant pseudonyms and demographics are provided in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to refer to the research participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Characteristics

Participants (n=11)	School Counseling Experience	Gender	Race
1. Brenda	10 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
2. Amy	20 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
3. Blake	15 Years, High School	Male	Caucasian
4. Emily	22 Years, High School	Female	African American
5. Hanna	17 Years, High School	Female	African American
6. Sabrina	28 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian
7. Sofia	1 Year, High School	Female	African American
8. Sally	25 Years, Elementary School	Female	Caucasian
9. Sam	8 Years, Middle School	Male	Caucasian
10. Scott	2 Years, High School	Male	African American
11. Wendy	20 Years, High School	Female	Caucasian

Data analysis

Creswell (2018) states, “The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data” (p. 183).

Following the conclusion of the first research interview, the researchers utilized a thematic, constant-comparison analysis (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Using a thematic analytic strategy, the researchers engaged in multiple stages of coding, clustering, and classifying words to ensure saturation was reached and to gain insight about developing themes, categories, and trends associated with school counselors’ beliefs about the benefits associated with college attendance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This inductive analysis led to four themes emerging from the data that

answered the study’s overarching research question.

The analysis of published research literature was also a key component of the analytic process. Previous research literature on the individual and societal benefits associated with college attendance assisted in better understanding and recognizing emerging themes, categories, and patterns in the study’s data and helped in contextualizing the research findings.

Results

School counselors participating in this study answered a variety of interview questions designed to generate insight about the following overarching research question: *How do school counselors describe the major benefits associated with college attendance?* Research participant responses were similar despite differences in years of experience, gender, race and ethnicity. School counselors identified four major benefits associated with

college attendance, including career preparation, financial gains, knowledge

expansion, and personal growth and development.

Career preparation

The overwhelming majority of school counselors participating in this study (73%) described the benefits associated with college attendance as career preparation and occupational attainment.

For example, Sofia, a first-year high school counselor described the benefit of attending college as “having the opportunity to get in a career that they desire.”

Similarly, Brenda, a high school counselor with over 10 years of experience stated, “statistically, I guess the majority of the jobs require some sort of education after high school. I think that is important. It may not necessarily be a four-year college, but we do know the importance of students attending some sort of program after high school is vital for job and labor market information.”

Wendy, an experienced high school counselor with over 20 years of experience confided, “For some of my students, it allows them to get out of this area, to start working on a career ... obviously the academic piece is needed depending on the career field.”

Two counselors participating in the study noted expansion of career options as a benefit of college attendance. For example, Emily, a high school counselor with 22 years of experience shared, “I think it gives them more career options long-term. I don't believe that the promotion of colleges is the end all, be all either. When we are promoting students' post-secondary success, it's important to look at each individual student. And for some students that might be being hired into the youth apprenticeship programs and then getting out and having a career and being able to support themselves. For some students, getting that associates degree and getting out, having that career, going straight into the workforce.”

Financial gains

Most research participants (55%) also described financial gains as a major benefit of college attendance.

For example, when asked about the benefits of attending college, Sam, a middle school counselor with over eight years of experience stated, “financial, obviously. I think the farther we go with education typically, hopefully, we can earn more money.”

Likewise, Hanna, a high school counselor with 17 years of experience highlighted, “We do know research has proven the more education you get, the higher your salary can be.”

Similarly, Emily, a high school counselor with 22 years of experience shared, “I do feel like in the majority of cases, those who go on to four-year schools over a longer period of time are going to have greater benefits in terms of healthcare insurance and in terms of income.

Blake, a high school counselor with 15 years of experience reinforced the importance of economic returns in the following statement, “To me, the economics piece is huge. It depends

on what you want to do, right? If I want to be a welder and I can make good money welding, that's great. If I know I want to be a doctor or nurse, or something that's going to require a degree, I think the financial benefits are great. It's an investment in yourself, right? I'm investing in myself, even if that means I have to take out some loans. We say to kids, 'Do you want to have an apartment? Do you want to live by yourself? Do you want a refrigerator in there? Do you want air conditioning?' All those things help them to think practically about if they are going to get the return on investment they want."

Knowledge expansion

Four of the school counselors in this study (36%) identified the acquisition or expansion of knowledge as a major benefit of college attendance.

For example, when asked about the benefits of college attendance, Sam, a middle school counselor with over eight years of experience stated, "furthering your education and critical thinking."

This sentiment was further illustrated by Sabrina, a veteran high school counselor with over 28 years of experience who shared, "Seeing a world outside of your own. Meeting people that are not from your area. It is just being around people that think differently and that are different and learning that fact. Because I don't think that a lot of our kids get that."

Likewise, Amy, a high school counselor with over 20 years of experience shared, "Just the expansion of their knowledge. They're going to learn more than they had the opportunity to learn in high school."

Similarly, Scott, a second-year high school counselor also highlighted the value of learning opportunities from college attendance in the following reflection, "Just opportunity. Educational opportunity to be able to learn, and be a lifelong learner, and get that opportunity and that experience with college."

Growth and development

Three of the research participants (27%) identified students' growth and development as an influential benefit of college attendance.

For example, Amy, a high school counselor with over 20 years of experience shared, "I think that [college] is a huge social, emotional development time for students at 18 to 20 years old to have the ability to be able to be with other 18- to 20-year-olds. And if you have moved out of your house and you're on campus, that's a huge developmental step that students need to take if they can. Just being able to learn how to be on their own."

Wendy, an experienced high school counselor with over 20 years of experience suggested, "Encourage them to find something to do to grow and that's when they mature. I think the social piece is good for some kids. I think the social piece can also be the downfall of some kids. But we want them to learn how to survive and go out on their own and kind of figure things out."

Similarly, Sally, an elementary school counselor with over 25 years of experience shared, “I think just keeping those doors open. I think it's a good growth experience for them, but also it just opens doors to different areas. It's not necessarily about that degree that you get, but the ability to learn and to continue growing and kind of just keeping doors open. Don't limit yourself. And I think they need to see you don't have to go. But if it's something that you want, it's keeping one more door open and if you don't go to college, how are you going to keep the doors open?”

Discussion

School counselors play critical roles in enhancing college readiness, providing college admissions counseling, and fostering a college going culture in their schools. In fulfilling these roles, school counselors must answer the “Why go to college” question. Since school counselors’ beliefs likely influence how they answer this question, this study was designed to examine school counselors’ perceptions about the major benefits associated with college attendance.

Study findings indicated school counselors focused on students’ individual benefits rather than broader societal impacts associated with college attendance. For example, participants identified four major types of benefits associated with college attendance, including career preparation, financial gains, knowledge expansion, and personal growth and development. Of these four types of benefits, school counselors were far more likely to identify career preparation and income growth as key outcomes from attending college.

Clearly, the individual benefits associated with college attendance, such as occupational attainment and income differentials between high school and college graduates, are important for school counselors to convey to students. This information is critical to making informed decisions about the return on investment from college attendance. It can also serve as a powerful extrinsic motivator for college attendance, especially for

Generation Z students who are financially-minded (Singh & Dangmei, 2016) and see college as a pathway to increase their earning power. In fact, college freshmen reported their reasons for attending college were to gain a better job (83.5%) and make more money (73.2%) in a recent nation-wide survey by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Center (Stolzenberg et al., 2020).

However, findings from this research study suggest school counselors may be missing a valuable opportunity to communicate the many societal benefits associated with college attendance that are also important to Generation Z.

Generation Z students are also highly intrinsically motivated and more socially conscious (Singh & Dangmei, 2016), seeing college as an opportunity to make a difference in the world and improve the lives of others.

In addition to seeing college as an occupational and financial pathway to success, college freshmen also report their reasons for attending college were gaining an appreciation of ideas (75%), helping others in need (80%), improving their understanding of other countries and cultures (62%), and developing a meaningful philosophy of life (50%) (Stolzenberg et al., 2020).

The results from this study underscore the importance of incorporating information on both the individual and societal benefits

associated with college attendance into college admissions counseling. Consistent with the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) College Admissions Specialist competencies of fostering a college-going culture, integrating current research evidence on the benefits of college attendance helps to convey a holistic picture of the potential return on investment for students. It is critically important to consider how administrators can support school counselors in meeting the college counseling needs of Generation Z students and foster a college going culture. Potential implications for practice include:

- Meaningfully reducing school counselor-to-student case load sizes to provide more opportunity for time-intensive college admissions counseling work with students.
- Investing in continuing professional development and learning opportunities in college admissions counseling. Providing professional development and the opportunity to explore new research and data about the benefits associated with college attendance will enhance school counselors' ability to share compelling evidence with students.
- Facilitating collaborative community discussions on Generation Z students' expectations and future aspirations as well as the implications of these aspirations on their college admissions counseling needs.
- Providing time for collaboration with colleges and universities as well as other school counselors to share best practices in college admissions counseling and answering the "Why go to college" question.

Study limitations and future research recommendations

While this study found strong consistency in school counselors' beliefs about the benefits associated with college attendance, an analysis of the study's methodology indicates several potential limitations and recommendations for future research. The study was conducted within one southeastern state using a basic qualitative approach which may limit the extent to which the results can be generalized. Future research studies incorporating multiple states, a larger and more diverse sample of school counselors, and different methodological techniques may improve the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion

Findings from this study provide helpful insights on school counselors' beliefs about the benefits associated with college attendance. Participants identified four salient categories of benefits, including career preparation, financial gains, knowledge expansion, and personal growth and development. Providing professional development on the societal benefits associated with college attendance may enhance school counselors' ability to effectively counsel students on college attendance, aid in expanding college access, and produce a stronger college-going culture.

Author Biographies

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