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High School Counselors as Social Capital for Low-Income Students in a Career Academy High School Model: A Case Study

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Within this qualitative study, we explored the idea that high school counselors, acting as a form of social capital, could influence the postsecondary opportunities of low socioeconomic students. We used a case study design to analyze freshman academy counselors and their influence in the career pathway selection process within one district to answer two research questions: (1) Using the knowledge available regarding college and career opportunities, how do freshman academy counselors influence low socioeconomic students' career pathway selections? (2) How do freshman academy counselors' perceptions of college and career opportunities for low socioeconomic students influence low socioeconomic students' career pathway selections? We collected data through interviews, archival records, and document analysis, and analyzed the data using initial coding, leading to themes to explain the case. We found that high school counselors' social capital was influenced by (a) the person behind the position, (b) the importance of context at specific schools, and (c) the access to resources at their school and how those resources meet student needs. We close with a discussion of the findings and the implications for practice and future research.

Keywords: career academy high school model, case study, high school counselors, low-income students, social capital

Low socioeconomic students are graduating from college at rates five times less than their high-income peers, and only 52% of low socioeconomic high school students enroll in college as compared to 82% of their high-income peers (Deslonde & Becerra, 2018). Some recent projections suggest that nearly two-thirds of U.S. jobs will require postsecondary education in some way, and roughly 90% of job growth from growing industries with middle-class wages and higher will require some higher education training (Evan et al., 2013). Evan et al. (2013) go on to state that lower socioeconomic students face an education and employment gap greater than their higher income peers. Cooper and Mulvey (2015) explain that an education beyond high school is a new phenomenon, as jobs in the 20th century did not demand the same level of skill and education that 21st century jobs require and “as we demand more sophisticated skills for the world of work, those without an education will suffer the consequences” (p. 660). Employment prospects, however, is not the only gap low socioeconomic students without college and career opportunities face compared to their peers.

Woessman (2016) explains how an increased education can positively influence not only the job opportunities but also the financial well-being of individuals. Woessman continues that the skill developed through that education must be usable in an economic system to earn a higher wage. If the marginal productivity gained from the skill does not exceed the marginal cost of employing that individual, they will remain unemployed. According to Woessman, a lack of educational opportunity and financial gain is not only a loss for the individual, but also

a detriment to society. Cooper and Mulvey (2015) concur, explaining that poverty and a lack of wealth opportunities have negative effects on quality-of-life indicators such as health, housing, environment, and stress. Access to college and career opportunities can lead to financial gains, which can lead to better life outcomes. Low socioeconomic students who do not have access to the same educational opportunities as their higher income peers could live a lower quality of life than those who do have access to those opportunities (Cooper & Mulvey, 2015; Woessman, 2016). High school counselors, however, can play a role in closing this gap between low socioeconomic students and their peers regarding college and career opportunities.

High school counselors interact with students when students make college and career decisions, and for low-income students, these interactions can be significant for decision-making (Belasco, 2013). Specifically, Belasco (2013) suggests that high school counselors are important for low socioeconomic students and their post high school choices. This is further supported by Perna (2006) in layer two of her conceptual model on student college choice, which explains how high school staff, namely teachers and counselors, play an important role in how students make decisions on what to do after high school.

Still, having only college and career knowledgeable high school counselors and staff in the building may not be enough for students who need their support the most. Low socioeconomic students often struggle building trusting relationships with counselors at school (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Additional issues for low socioeconomic students regarding college access opportunities include the restrictive nature of how high schools are designed, namely “the bureaucratic processes, the dual role of teachers and counselors as mentors and gatekeepers, and the short-term duration of interactions” (Perna, 2006, p. 118). Given the existing gap between low socioeconomic students and their peers regarding college and career opportunities, further explorations on how to best serve high school low socioeconomic students on career opportunities are warranted.

The purpose of this study was to explore and explain how high school counselors operating within a high school career academy model in an urban school district influence college and career opportunities for low socioeconomic students. A high school career academy model must have a small learning community, a curriculum that prepares students for college through a career focus, and an advisory group responsible for building relationships with businesses, community members, and higher education institutions (The National Career Academy Coalition [NCAC], 2013). For example, Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS, 2017a) in Kentucky developed a career academy model for the school district. JCPS (2017a) states that its students in career academies will align “education and workforce development needs to better prepare students for postsecondary and career success” (para. 2). JCPS model their career academies on the Ford Next Generation Learning Program.

The career academy model seeks to directly address the established problem that college and career outcome gaps exist between low socioeconomic students and their peers. It does so by attempting to advance low socioeconomic students through career pathways. A career pathway is a set of courses offered specifically for students to prepare for careers (JCPS, 2017b). The model places students in a freshman academy after middle school; those students then take a seminar their first year to determine what career pathway to choose, making their choices in the early spring (JCPS, 2017b). The career academy model is run by the freshmen administrators, which includes the freshman counselor. In JCPS (2018a), for example, the high school counselor serves as an administrator who “improves student achievement and enhances the academic, career, and personal/social development of all students” (para. 1). Based on this structure, the freshman academy counselors are tasked with college and career exposure and play a significant role in determining the career pathway for their students. This leads to a set of research questions helpful to understanding the problem identified within this study. The

research questions we explored are: (1) Using the knowledge available regarding college and career opportunities, how do freshman academy counselors influence low socioeconomic students' career pathway selections? (2) How do freshman academy counselors' perceptions of college and career opportunities for low socioeconomic students influence low socioeconomic students' career pathway selections?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Lin's (1999) theory of social capital viewed in tandem with the JCPS rubric for freshman academies and the JCPS freshman academy theory of action (JCPS, 2018b, 2018c), which were built from the NCAC career academy standards (NCAC, 2013). JCPS explicitly mentions high school counselors in their freshman career academy rubric for success, explaining that an effective counselor is dedicated to the freshman and physically located within the academy building (JCPS, 2018b). Within the JCPS theory of action, there are three specific areas of focus where freshman academies can help with student development: (a) sense of belonging, (b) academic knowledge and skills, and (c) personal and career skills (JCPS, 2018c). Counselors have been proven to help develop a sense of belonging with students (Cholewa et al., 2015), academic knowledge and skills (Bodenhorn et al., 2010; Paolini, 2019), and personal and career skills (Bryan et al., 2015; Deslonde & Becerra, 2018). JCPS's model coupled with Lin's (1999) theory of social capital helped assess how freshman academy counselors utilize social capital to influence low-income students' college and career pathways.

Capital itself is a broad concept, as Lin (1999) explained, stating, "fundamentally, capital remains a surplus value and represents an investment with expected returns" (p. 29). From a social lens, Lin suggests that social capital is a relational investment, where a return on that investment is expected. This return is based on having access to social networks, and the resources embedded within them (Lin, 1999). Given Lin's view on social capital and our focus on low-income students and high school counselors about social capital in a career academy high school, we found Lin's framework appropriate. More specifically, career academies and career academy counselors, given their social capital, can potentially change this narrative by providing access to career and college opportunities that can close gaps regarding postsecondary pathways and financial prospects (Page, 2012; Shamsuddin, 2016). In tandem, these frameworks helped provide the theoretical proposition from which we analyzed how urban career academy high school counselors influence low-income students about postsecondary decisions.

Researchers' Positionalities

While the study was guided by our theoretical framework, as instruments of data collection and analysis, we also brought our positionalities to the study and thought it might be helpful for the reader to know our entry points to the study.

O. O.: I am a philosophical conservative Black male who identifies as a Christian. I am currently employed as a higher education association president, where I advocate for policies that positively impact private colleges and universities. I grew up in Kentucky in an educated family of Nigerian immigrants; my father was a professor and academic dean for the entirety of his professional career; my mother, siblings and I all have higher education degrees. Due to some personal negative experiences in traditional education institutions, I have become somewhat distrustful of these systems. Although my overall

educational experience was overwhelmingly positive, a couple distinctly painful memories linger. I know how significant an individual teacher, counselor, or educator can be in a child's life, particularly students who may come from racially different or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. My positionality is reflected in my worldview: I believe policy, built from a constructive lens, can positively impact economically marginalized people. I also recognize that my political philosophy (limited government conservatism) influences my research. I also had a personal connection to the school district where I conducted this study; a relative was a teacher in the school district and was a high school teacher in one of the schools where I collected data.

D. M.: I am an African American man who was a low-income high school student and eventually a first-generation college graduate. I am also a college administrator and professor of education who routinely explores identity and marginalization in educational settings, particularly higher education contexts. While I did not participate in a career academy, I did participate in a math and science magnet program from middle school to high school. As I reflect on our study, I remember the influence school counselors had on my decisions to participate in certain programs, and more importantly, what I would do after college. My counselors saw my potential and encouraged me to apply to what they considered "top colleges" and to stay away from colleges like Shaw University, a historically Black university that has provided access to postsecondary education since 1865, and my eventual college choice. My school counselors' words had a profound influence on my decisions, even though my mom and I eventually settled on where I would attend. This is the lived experience I brought to the study.

Method

Research Design

We used a case study research design to conduct the study, a qualitative approach where the investigator analyzes at least one bounded system over time through detailed, rich data collection involving multiple information sources such as documents, interviews, or archival records (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In case study design, to be bounded means to be separated out for research purposes based on a specific time, place, or location. This bounding helps create parameters around the topic to be studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which was a critical aspect of this study to ensure the employment of a quality data analysis strategy.

Yin (2018) describes a data analysis strategy for qualitative research as "working your data from the 'ground up'" (p. 169). This is the process of reviewing the data collected thoroughly, potentially finding "a useful concept or two" (Yin, 2018, p. 169). For these reasons, we also considered grounded theory as the research design for this study. Grounded theory is often used to produce new theoretical approaches or frameworks for future research (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and uses similar data analysis strategies as case study. Further, Yin (2018) explained that the ground up data analysis strategy could be useful for either grounded theory or case study designs, particularly if it is used in conjunction with quantitative data collection. Some of the archival reports that we collected for this study included quantitative data, which made this ground up strategy appropriate. We ultimately selected a case study research design because of the bounded nature of the study and because we were not explicitly seeking to

develop a new theoretical approach or framework, as is anticipated in grounded theory research.

A case can be an individual, a process, a decision, or other phenomena (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Further, this case study was an instrumental case study, which Baxter and Jack (2008) describe as being "... often looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed ... because it helps the researcher pursue the external interest" (p. 549). We sought this in-depth analysis at the outset of the study.

The case in this study was District One, a southern, urban school district in the United States. The case was further bounded by focusing on freshman academy counselors in freshman academies within high schools in District One that have most students who are on free and reduced lunch (F/RL). The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) suggested that F/RL is used as a proxy for poverty among school-aged students. Because we focused on high school counselors' influence on low-income students, F/RL was the best available metric within District One public data to serve as an indicator for the schools on which to focus. Of the 12 freshman academy counselors who met the criteria in District One, eight responded and participated. Of the eight freshman academy counselors, five identified as female and three identified as male. Five of the participants identified as White and three identified as Black. Their schools' F/RL percentages ranged from 63% to 84%. For participants, their years of experience as counselors at their respective schools spanned from 1.5 to nine years. We assigned participants pseudonyms for anonymity. We conducted the study with IRB approval.

Data Collection

An important aspect of case study research is that it utilizes multiple sources for collection of data (Baxter & Jack, 2008). We collected data in three ways: interviews, archival records, and documentation.

To recruit participants for the interviews, we sent an email to the school principal for each potential participant asking for their permission to reach out to their freshman academy counselor. Once we gained permission, we sent an email to each freshman academy counselor asking for them to agree to participate. Within the email was an attachment with greater detail as to what the study was and what the interview would be about. Once a counselor agreed to be interviewed, we scheduled an in-person meeting with the counselor at their school. This process is described in Table 1. No participants dropped out of the study. We conducted semi-structured, and nearly hour-long interviews. During the interviews conducted by O. O., he asked each participant a set of 13 questions that related to how their knowledge, perceptions, and resources regarding postsecondary opportunities can influence low-income students' career pathway decisions.

We also collected data through the retrieval of archival records. The data files used as archival records came from one of District One's school surveys, which assesses how students, parents, and staff members feel about school climate. Specifically, we included two questions from this survey targeting college readiness and adult support for student postsecondary success.

Table 1
Interview Recruitment Process

School	Principal Email Response	Counselor	Counselor Email Response	Interview Completed
School 1	YES	Did Not Participate	NO	N/A
		Did Not Participate	N/A	N/A
School 2	NO	Did Not Participate	N/A	N/A
		Did Not Participate	N/A	N/A
School 3	YES	Counselor E	YES	YES
School 4	NO	Did Not Participate	N/A	N/A
School 5	YES	Did Not Participate	FOLLOWED UP	N/A
School 6	YES	Counselor F	YES	YES
School 7	YES	Counselor A	YES	YES
School 8	YES	Counselor H	YES	YES
School 9	YES	Counselor G	YES	YES
School 10	YES	Counselor B	YES	YES
School 11	YES	Counselor D	YES	YES
School 12	YES	Counselor C	YES	YES

Finally, documentation is important because it can “corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (Yin, 2018, p. 115). We asked the interview participants for copies of any documents that they fill out or directly give and explain to students who deal with career pathway selection. Upon receipt of those copies, we took notes and wrote reflections utilizing a document analysis sheet that was derived from the research questions and theoretical framework.

Data Analysis

Yin (2018) suggests there are five analytic techniques used to analyze case studies: pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis (see Yin for full explanation of each). Within the present study, we used the explanation building technique coupled with thematic data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to explain the case – District One. The explanation building technique can be described as a “hypothesis-generating process” to “develop further ideas for study” (Yin, 2018, p. 179). Yin also offers six ways to structure case study findings: linear-analytic, comparative, chronological, theory building, “suspense,” and unsequenced. The present case study is unsequenced as we present themes and subthemes, but in no specific order of relevance (Yin, 2018).

We analyzed the data using initial coding, comparing the data for similarities and differences, and then focused coding, which helped us organize the initial codes into themes and subthemes (Saldaña, 2016). First, we recorded the interviews, transcribed them, and then used the initial coding method. We also used initial coding to code the documents retrieved.

When necessary, O. O. conducted follow-up interviews with participants to ask clarifying questions regarding the analyzed documents; we also coded that data. We then took the data gathered and coded through the initial coding method and utilized focused coding. From the focused coding process, which highlighted patterns within the data relating to our exploration and theoretical proposition, we developed a narrative consisting of themes and subthemes to explain the case, District One.

Trustworthiness of the Data

As with other qualitative research designs, case studies are not conducted to make statistical generalizable claims (Yin, 2018). However, our goal was to make analytic generalizations about the social capital possessed by freshman academy counselors using District One as the case. Our analytic generalizations were bolstered by our attention to trustworthiness throughout the study. Trustworthiness can be defined using four general concepts: credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability (Shenton, 2004). Credibility, which is equivalent to internal validity (Shenton, 2004), and transferability, the equivalent of external validity (Shenton, 2004) have been addressed within this study, as has dependability, which is concerned with the alignment of the findings with the research questions. They were addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the data collection and analyses processes, triangulating the data using multiple data sources and reviewing similar research, and by providing rich, thick data to describe the case. Confirmability is defined by Shenton (2004) as “the qualitative investigator’s comparable concern to objectivity” (p. 72). Confirmability was improved by providing our positionalities, collecting various data points, and through member checking: asking participants to review their transcripts and the findings to see if their experiences within District One were accurately described.

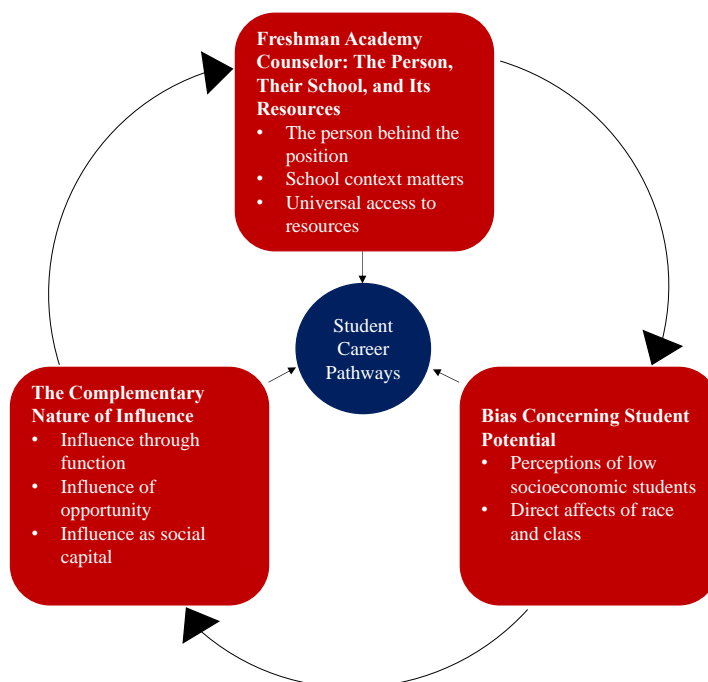
Findings

Three themes were established within the findings. They are: (1) the freshman academy counselor as a person, their school, and its resources, (2) the bias freshman academy counselors may have concerning student potential, and (3) the complementary nature of influence that freshman academy counselors possess.

Each theme had subthemes that further demonstrated the intertwined relationship between each theme. The three major themes interconnected because they form a cycle of action regarding the counselor and student dynamic. How a freshman academy counselor understands their own agency — their own lived experience, where they teach, and what resources they have — ultimately impacts what they believe their low socioeconomic students can achieve, which in turn conditions the environment for counselor influence on student pathways after high school. For example, a counselor will be a limited influence as social capital for college going if that counselor does not believe that low socioeconomic student can go to college because that counselor has a deficit mindset regarding the resources in their school or some life experience that convinces them low socioeconomic students do not belong in college. That counselor is especially limited compared to a counselor who has vast school resources, believes every student deserves access to every postsecondary option, and utilizes their influence to ensure each student has that access. Figure 1 describes the nature of these themes and subthemes.

Figure 1

The Cycle of Action for Counselor Influence Over Student Career Pathways



As displayed in Table 2, these themes and subthemes were developed based on the responses of the participants. For the first theme, which focused on the freshman academy counselors themselves and the resources at their disposal, all eight counselors contributed. For the second theme, which focused on perceptions of students, all eight counselors contributed. For the third theme, which discussed the influence freshman academy counselors have regarding student career pathways, all eight counselors contributed.

Table 2

Contribution of Participants to Themes

	Theme 1: Freshman Academy Counselors	Theme 2: Bias Concerning Student Potential	Theme 3: The Complementary Nature of Influence
Counselor Contributions	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H
Total Counselor Contributions	8	8	8
Counselor Percentage Contributions	100%	100%	100%

Freshman Academy Counselor: The Person, Their School, and Its Resources

There were three subthemes that emerged regarding the freshman academy counselor as a person, their school, and its resources. The subthemes are: (1) the person behind the position, (2) the importance of context at specific schools, and (3) the access to resources at their school and how those resources meet student needs.

The Person Behind the Position

The participants decided to become freshman academy counselors based on two definitive reasons. The first reason was professional: participants had the belief that they had a natural ability to counsel, they wanted a change in career, or they saw counseling as an opportunity to have a greater impact on student outcomes. For some counselors it was the next professional opportunity. Counselor D came from a career in business and sales outside of the education system because, "I like working with kids and I wanted to get back to the community. I am a very compassionate human and just care about kids and I wanted to see them be successful and I wanted to help." Counselor F came from a career in the classroom as a math teacher, but "finally, after twenty-something years, decided to take the leap when an opening came available here to jump into a new role and out of the classroom."

The second reason participants chose to become freshman academy counselors was due to distinct life experiences that occurred as they were growing up that compelled them to support students who came from similar situations. Counselor A and G each grew up in a challenging environment and their counselors had either a profoundly positive or profoundly negative impact on them. For Counselor G, the impact was positive because "home was not very good, and school was my place" while Counselor A had an extremely negative experience because of a counselor who said college would not be an option. Counselor A said, "I felt so defeated, because my parents didn't go to college. My parents knew they wanted me to go to college, but they didn't really know how to get me there." Since the participants expressed how their educational experiences influenced their career pathways, they also listed themselves as a major influencer for their students' postsecondary decisions.

The participants believed that the freshman academy counselor played a major role in students selecting their career pathways which, in a career academy model, is how students determine what they want to do after high school. Participants also explicitly mentioned teachers, peers, and parents as influential people for students making this decision. Still, there seemed to be a clear agreement that the freshman academy counselor was the most influential role and not only because of the job duties assigned to the role.

Every counselor also agreed that a teacher of some kind also had a major level of influence on postsecondary decisions. Some counselors were more specific, differentiating between a classroom teacher, freshman seminar teacher, and career and technical education (CTE) teacher regarding influence on students' postsecondary decisions. Many counselors referenced academy coaches as influential as well. Counselor C said, "The academy coach does a great job with just trying to introduce, not only for them to the pathways, but to bring companies in to help us with those pathways and connecting once they become seniors." A group that also played a role in student pathway selection were peers. Counselor E captured the sentiment when she said, "To be honest, their peers influence each other. If you have one, the leader of a friend group or the popular one, want to go to into engineering then all the other friends want to go."

Determining who in the school is capable of helping each student succeed depends heavily on where the students and the freshman academy counselor are placed. School context is important.

School Context Matters

There were many challenges mentioned by the participants that were specific to the school environment. One of those challenges was the total number of students in the freshman academy. Counselor A said, "I cannot influence like I want to. There's no way that I can physically influence 450 freshmen." Counselor G, who had over 360 freshmen, mentioned how

the nature of the job makes planning a daily schedule almost pointless and explained, “Well I can have the best plan in my calendar of what I’m going to do and then sometimes it just goes crazy. My day is never the same.” This sentiment was shared by many of the counselors in the study.

Another challenge was the pipeline of students and schools where many freshman academy counselors recruit future students. The participants explained that they recruit from a certain area in the community. The area refers to a zone where their students may live. The high school is the area school, and many middle schools reside in that area. Counselor D explained that this is often where freshman academy counselors recruit and the pathway selection process begins:

I’ll get my gain list of kids that are getting projected to come to me based on the [area] or kids that have been accepted here in the spring. In the spring, I go back out to the middle schools and I do an enrollment session with them where they complete their schedule. They basically let me know, you know, what academic level, what pathway elective, based on the information.

As a result, many freshman academy counselors did not get to pick their population of students; rather, they recruited from the available student pool and tried to convince students that the pathways in their building were interesting. This created a challenge: freshman academy counselors were sometimes faced with the difficult choice to recruit students who did not want any of their pathways or to help those students find a different high school that better matched the interests of each student. The participants had different approaches on how to handle this challenge, and this was displayed through interviews with each counselor.

Another challenge highlighted was the difficulty in students getting to select their first pathway choice. For some students, there were not enough options for each student to get their first choice. Counselor E captured this perspective by telling the story about how when the school needed a culinary teacher, the state department of education did not provide one, saying, “I know we could fill up that pathway quick for culinary, but we didn’t get another teacher this year so that limits our freshmen opportunities.” These were the kinds of limits that the participants mentioned dealing with.

A final challenge was a result of the high level of autonomy in each school on how the freshman academy model is executed. Some counselors still focused on individualized learning plans (ILPs) while others taught a direct course to help students select their pathway. Even with the direct course given to students, there was no districtwide system for implementation, as Counselor D concluded, “From what I understand, every Freshman Academy has a freshman seminar course. Some schools kind of embed that course.” Another way that school context plays a role is through the additional school staff and available professionals who can help freshman academy counselors influence student postsecondary outcomes.

However, many of the freshman academy counselors acknowledged that beyond professional and staff support, greater access to resources could aid their efforts to influence their students’ postsecondary success.

Universal Access to Resources

The resources for personnel seemed to be uneven. Counselor H noted, “Currently we’re down a school counselor, so I’m assuming more roles,” whereas Counselor D had many staff members to meet student needs. This unevenness in personnel seemed to create inequity in resources between schools. Time was one resource to which participants mentioned that they needed more access.

The concern regarding access to the resource of time should not be confused with the management of existing time. The participants made clear that it was not a struggle of managing what to do in a day, but rather the issue of having too many items that students need to know without the permitted time to present. This was expressed well by Counselor G:

There's just not enough hours in the day, to be honest. I wish I had more time sometimes in the classroom, but the classroom teachers have got to cover their content, too. So sometimes I wish I had more time to be in front of the students but talking to other counselors I'm getting in the class as much, if not more, than most of the others.

Counselor B explained how adequate access to time comes in waves when he expressed that, "Sometimes I feel like, hey I'm doing a great job; kind of really rocking it out. Other days I get stretched so thin in what I'm asked to do." Due to time constraints, often based on how each school day at each school is designed, each freshman academy counselor was asked to engage their time as necessary to fit the needs of their school. Still, each participant mentioned that another resource from which they all would benefit would be a recognition of district-wide technology, shared definitions of postsecondary opportunities, and professional development. As previously mentioned, each participant was a freshman academy counselor at a school that had a majority of low socioeconomic students. This was a core aspect of this study. This suggests that, as low socioeconomic students have different needs, those needs must be met. Wraparound services, services of social need that work alongside the academic and career functions of some public school systems, were additional resources that participants mentioned as important.

While the participants expressed the desire to have more resources, wraparound services seemed to be delivered inequitably. But, based on their interests and access, students may need different resources. Counselors A and D mentioned how this makes it difficult to have everything a freshman academy counselor may need for low socioeconomic students. They mentioned having some resources but acknowledged it was not likely to get all resources needed.

In order for wraparound services to be properly utilized by freshman academy counselors to best support students, freshman academy counselors must have an understanding of those students' needs, both in the present as freshman and for their futures after high school. For low socioeconomic students, the bias concerning student potential that freshman academy counselors may have regarding their postsecondary opportunities, was paramount.

Bias Concerning Student Potential

There were two subthemes in the theme of bias concerning student potential: (1) freshman academy counselor perceptions of low-income students, and (2) the direct influence of race and class on a freshman academy counselor influencing their students' postsecondary opportunities.

Perceptions of Low Socioeconomic Students

Every participant professed that they believed low socioeconomic students are capable of achieving their postsecondary goals. Where the divergence occurred among participants was with the reasons why low socioeconomic students may not currently be achieving those goals. When discussing the low socioeconomic students in the building, Counselor F stated that she believed every student in the school had opportunity, despite their backgrounds, and the school

would make sure those students succeed. She said, “We know that every child here has every opportunity they want. There’s a way to make it happen. We bend over backwards for every one of our kids to get them any resource that they need.” Counselor B agreed regarding his school context, but said that low socioeconomic students also needed encouragement about what they could do, as well as exposure to what is available:

I think it’s trying to convince the kids that they’re good enough to do it, because the tools are all there. Most of the kids here can minimally go to community college for free. It’s kind of really working with them; motivating them; encouraging them; giving them praise. There’s more on the table than ever before.

Some participants did not see the school as the source of the problem at all; some participants had biases against the profile of the students themselves. For example, Counselor E mentioned that some students may not have taken advantage of the opportunities or may have wasted the opportunities that were available:

I feel the disconnect, though, actually is some students get the student loans or the FAFSA money, and then they don’t go to college. I think that is the biggest concern I have as just an educational counselor. That’s the breakdown. My own friends have done that. Most of our students were like 91% free and reduced lunch or free lunch and so obviously that’s pretty much the entire school, but we offer postsecondary with the careers like an apprenticeship program. I mean there’s tons of opportunities for students. Some students don’t take advantage of it.

As some freshman academy counselors experienced difficulty in getting parents and students actively engaged in the pathway selection process, some freshman academy counselors took it upon themselves to select pathways for students as a way to help them succeed.

An aspect of how freshman academy counselors discussed how they prepare low socioeconomic students for postsecondary opportunities revolved around how much knowledge freshman academy counselors had regarding resources for low socioeconomic students in the career and college application process. While each participant provided documents related to postsecondary opportunities, counselors A, C, D, F, and G produced thorough, coherent documents that showed a connectedness and a process to pathway selection. For example, Counselors C and G provided a graduation plan document which outlined classes students needed to take in order to graduate with a specific pathway.

Ultimately, how freshman academy counselors perceived their low socioeconomic students played a role in how they provided information on opportunities for them to succeed. In addition, while providing financial resources for low socioeconomic students was viewed as important by all participants, providing non-financial support explicitly for low-income students was resisted by some participants. When race was a factor, counselors reacted differently.

Direct Effects of Race and Class

While each participant acknowledged the importance of providing financial resources for students to be successful, there were conflicting perspectives towards treating low

socioeconomic students any differently regarding non-financial resources, expectations, and outcomes.

Regarding finances, attending to the financial needs of low socioeconomic students was a front-and-center focus of the participants. Several counselors, including G, H, and F, discussed a specific state-sponsored merit-based scholarship that could be used for postsecondary expenses. Counselor F said the scholarship could be available for “journey men’s classes, trade schools, licensing tests, books, tools; anything that has to do with education.” She also used a metaphor referencing employment when she said, “Whatever you’re getting, basically, this is your job. This is your job right now. And you’re getting paid for that GPA, it’s going into an account.”

The interest in improving financial prospects extended beyond paying for postsecondary opportunities yet did not correlate with level of resources. Counselors A and B, who represented the different level of school resources available to freshman academy counselors for financial prospects for career pathways, provided the broader context on this shared perspective. Counselor A utilized a District One approved Google Doc to mention how there was a unit in the freshman academy class that focused on how money and salary related to career choice. Counselor A taught this unit so students could walk through the process of actually applying to college and have a specific major that would aid them in their life goals once they graduated. Counselor B, who did not provide any documents, also demonstrated clear knowledge in opportunities for low socioeconomic students. He reiterated the perspective that low socioeconomic students could receive significant financial aid if they chose to attend a postsecondary institution, regularly mentioning community college as a potential starting point until students can discover the full scope of opportunities.

Aside from finances, the indifference to supporting low socioeconomic students with non-financial resources was either because it was a non-factor in the mind of the participants or it was so all consuming it did not change how they performed in providing postsecondary resources for students. Counselor F, who saw it as a non-factor, seemed to resent the idea that focusing on low socioeconomic students in a special way, regarding academic support, could even be effective:

I think it makes them uncomfortable. I think that they’re smarter than what you think they are. And they know when they’re being pulled for certain reasons and special populations. And our kids just pretty much go with the flow. And I mean, they rise to our expectations, regardless of where they come from. Now, we may have to pull somebody aside and say, “hey, get your act together.” But it doesn’t matter; that doesn’t have anything to do with where you came from. We teach everybody the same.

Many counselors echoed this indifference to low-income students as a group of students who needed significantly more non-financial postsecondary support than other students. Counselor D mentioned that some of his “low socioeconomic students are very resilient, and they may not need all those, you know, intense supports.” He went on to further state that, “Some do; and then some of my high socioeconomic students may need intense supports, too.” These sentiments from the participants did not seem antagonistic towards low socioeconomic students, but rather resigned to the fact that the non-academic challenges were normal. While many counselors looked at low socioeconomic students with indifference regarding non-financial resources for postsecondary opportunities, nearly every participant took the opposite approach when discussing students of color.

Many participants expressed a desire for belonging and inclusion for their students of color. Many participants went so far as to increase their numbers in different pathways for the

purposes of racial diversity. The participants' perspectives were best stated by Counselor B, whose school was not a majority of students of color: "I'm always advocating for different pathways for school. And, you know, I say it openly. I want more opportunities, more pathways, and more choices than what we have [for my students of color]." Participants also voiced the importance of a deliberate effort to support students of color within the career pathways selection process through increased visible representation of adults who look like the student population. Counselor C articulated a belief that having more teachers of color or administrators of color would be beneficial to students of color, particularly the young men. Counselor G had a more personal assessment as she explained, "I mean I was a [District One] kid myself. I grew up in here. I'm used to diversity. I love working with different students."

For many freshman academy counselors, support for students of color went beyond pathways and seemed to manifest itself in the advocacy messages mentioned above. This seemed to suggest that there was a complementary nature of influence within the freshman academy counselor role; freshman academy counselors could influence students through the functions of the job itself, highlighting opportunity, and acting as social capital.

The Complementary Nature of Influence

There were three subthemes in the theme focused on the complementary nature of influence of a freshman academy counselor. Those subthemes are: (1) influence through function, (2) influence of opportunity, and (3) and influence as social capital.

Influence Through Function

For freshman academy counselors, getting their students to successfully finish ninth grade was the basic minimum of their responsibilities, but one that registered as a premium for each of them. Counselor H provided a thorough analysis that captured what the freshman academy counselors believed on why freshman year was so foundational:

There are so many indicators during the freshman year to determine how things are going to look. For example, Algebra I is a strong indicator, which is normally taken in the freshman year of high school completion. So, if I'm going to help students reach their goals postsecondary after they graduate from high school, I need to first make sure they can pass Algebra I because it's just such a strong indicator. Freshman year just really lays the foundation to the entire high school experience.

The participants believed it was their role to help students transition successfully from middle school to high school.

The freshman academy counselors believed it was important to pass freshman year. Counselor G talked about how she focused on a lot of the formal aspect of freshman year and told students that, "It's important for them to understand every class is important and every class is a credit that's required by the state; that we can't give you a diploma if you don't meet these criteria." Getting students to complete ninth grade is one of the functional aspects of a freshman academy counselor's job. Another functional responsibility discussed was each counselor being held accountable through evaluations.

The evaluation process for freshman academy counselors seemed to be school-driven or individually designed by each freshman academy counselor. There did not appear to be a systemic process or standard to which freshman academy counselors were held regarding their role in freshmen career pathway selection. There also seemed to be confusion regarding to

whom freshman academy counselors should be held accountable. Counselor D said, “My principal at the end of the year evaluates me,” but Counselor E said, “To be honest, the state looks at that,” and that the evaluation process “should have an input from the families and students through that survey that we reviewed. I think that’s important feedback as well as how we’re supporting students.” There were freshman academy counselors who set goals for themselves, namely around student success or student interaction. Counselor B had several goals, including one-on-one interaction with each of his students, as well as a “90% pass rate course pass rate and 90% attendance.” Still, some counselors preferred the current system. Counselors G and H each said they liked the nimbleness of their current evaluations, due to the complex nature of their role.

One universal form of evaluation for the participants was the year end survey taken by students. Participants were asked about an annual survey that went out to every freshman student in a freshman career academy. There were two survey questions that the freshman academy counselors were asked about. One question focused on whether students believed adults at their school helped them with the steps needed to go to college. The other question participants were asked focused on whether students believed their education prepared them to make a successful transition after graduation. The freshman academy counselors had varying opinions on whether they could, in their role, really influence the survey results.

Through their job function, freshman academy counselors could influence student postsecondary outcomes. They could also affect student postsecondary outcomes through created opportunities.

Influence of Opportunity

Pathway selection for career academy freshmen went through three phases of recruitment: middle school recruitment, freshman year recruitment, and freshman academy seminar. The process culminated with student selection. Parts of this process were very different and depended heavily on individual school settings.

The middle school recruitment process was a significant one for the freshman academy counselors. The counselors mentioned how recruitment is a large part of the role. Counselor E explained how visiting middle school students included an early enrollment program for potential career pathways:

I go to the middle schools and I meet with the students as a whole group. I’ll meet with like 100 kids from a school and review this schedule card and review the pathways with them and then let them pick their first, second and third choice and this is when they enroll.

Once students got into a freshman academy, freshman year recruitment began, and each school had its own process of pathway selection. Each process took time, especially at the beginning of the year. Counselor E said, “At the beginning of the year it’s a lot of strong academic and career guidance.” At Counselor B’s school, each student met with an advisor weekly, where they would go over an ILP and focus on skills for a potential career, or soft skills to be used in any field. Counselor B had nearly total control of the pathway selection process. Counselor G did a career fair and spent “several weeks working on making sure that [students] understand what each of these fields are, so that they can make a good choice for them.”

The final phase of recruitment was the freshman academy seminar. For the freshman academy counselors, the freshman academy seminars also differed. In Counselor F’s school, the freshman seminar was taught by the freshman academy coaches, who each have

approximately 170 students. Counselor F believed the freshman academy coaches were able to help the students who were already college-ready students in a different way:

Out of the 165, 40 to 50 of them are what we consider advanced program, who are most likely on the college track. Okay, so are they going to – even if they choose welding, or CAD, architecture, or graphic design – are they really going to do that for the rest of their life? Maybe, maybe not. But at least they can get a better job while they're in college to help pay for that college. That's the way we promote it.

Counselor B took a different approach and focused on providing as much information as possible to students during their freshman academy seminars so they could make an informed decision. Once the recruitment process was completed, freshman academy counselors had varying degrees of ability and interest regarding influencing students' pathway selections beyond the student actually making a pathway choice within the pathway selection model.

The pathway selection model at each school, and the freshman academy counselor's ability to influence a students' pathway, was largely dependent on the individual authority of each freshman academy counselor to manage selection of pathways for students. Counselor B was prideful about the system his school had regarding pathway selection. He declared, "Our system is a little bit different. I'll let every kid here choose which pathway, and which academy they want to be in. I make sure that you get your first choice." Counselor C, who also seemed to have significant authority over the process, expressed that she would be comfortable moving a student out of a pathway if they did not get along with a certain teacher. Counselor F called herself the gatekeeper of student pathway selection. The label seemed to reference a gatekeeper as a way to ensure equity among pathways.

Freshman academy counselors can influence low-income students through their job function and the opportunity of the career pathway selection process. They can also be influential as social capital.

Influence as Social Capital

The participants saw the importance of choosing a career pathway from a functional perspective, as well as how that pathway would set up their low socioeconomic students for success. The freshman academy counselors were also interested in providing foundational skills for their students so their students would be equipped with skills that could last them a lifetime. Counselor C discussed drilling down on what students wanted to do and then explained how she used that to help them:

First, I asked them what are they thinking about doing. Do you like working with your hands? Do you like helping people? What do you see yourself doing now? So, we'll just go down that path. I also try to connect them with programs.

Another benefit of freshman academy counselors encouraging skill development was the potential economic advantage those skills could lend low socioeconomic students. Many freshman academy counselors saw economic potential as a way to help their low socioeconomic students. Counselor A expressed a desire to try to influence low socioeconomic students and help them recognize how their interests could lead to economic gains:

I have a student interested in being a plumber, but his uncle said it was a grunt job and he shouldn't do it. I was like wait a minute. I just paid a man like \$400

to come fix my toilet. I was like, this is a gold mine opportunity. You know, we are always gonna have to pay someone to come and fix our air conditioning, come and fix our pipes. So, I really helped him – actually got him to go shadow. So, he's on the right path.

When asked explicitly about low socioeconomic students, Counselor B talked about the importance of building relationships and then walking that student through the pathway selection process for the purpose of finding a career that pays well. He said, "I gotta bring the kids to take an interest inventory and start thinking about careers and the need for that job in the community; you know, how much money the occupation makes." While freshman academy counselors provided support for students regarding their economic potential, socio-emotional support was also a critical type of support that students need.

One of the complexities of the freshman academy counselor position was how focused it was on non-academic, non-career activity for every student, regardless of socioeconomic status. The counselors talked a lot about how they filled a nurturing and even mothering role, with Counselor A explaining, "So, because I have freshmen, a lot of my time is that emotional piece. I feel like a lot of my job is more mothering than it is the academic piece." When asked if helping freshmen figure out their postsecondary plans was a significant portion of the job, Counselor E explained the non-academic ways freshman academy counselors can be supportive. She said, "It's trying to advocate for them, like their mother or their supporter or holding them accountable or telling them when I'm disappointed or have high expectations for them to do the right thing." This was now part of the role, as a large portion of what freshman academy counselors did was act as a comprehensive resource for students and their related issues.

Another way the freshman academy counselors discussed how they acted as social capital and merged the socio-emotional support aspects of their roles was through their work with outside groups who also have academic, social, and behavioral goals. Tolerance of each student was also a key aspect of providing socio-emotional support. Counselor H said, "Students really don't have a choice but to have a good relationship with me. That's the expectation. So, one thing is just accepting them for who they are and for where they are. Not being judgmental." Through this commitment to student skill development, economic gains, and socio-emotional support, freshman academy counselors were able to act as social capital to inspire hope in the future. The counselors believed that a lot of their role was helping students understand where they want to go and then helping them get there. Counselor G explained, "That's going to be the foundation of if they apply for college or a trade school. They're going to look at that transcript." There were many ways freshman academy counselors acted as social capital and provided influence over low socioeconomic students. That influence was often determined by how the freshman academy counselor understood their students, the context of the school environment, and the freshman academy counselors themselves.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that the freshman academy counselor is a summation of the individual in the role, the school where that person is positioned, and the resources that school has regarding low socioeconomic opportunities. Our findings also explain that the bias that freshman academy counselors exhibit regarding their perception of low socioeconomic students, particularly when considering how race and class may influence low socioeconomic students, could sway how they support their low socioeconomic students' college and career opportunities. Finally, our findings offer the analysis that freshman academy counselors balance the type of influence they display regarding low socioeconomic students'

postsecondary opportunities. Our conclusions were pulled from the findings are based on the research questions for the study.

The counselors themselves, the school resources, and the student demographics each mattered when determining how a counselor may have acted as social capital for low socioeconomic students regarding their postsecondary opportunities. In the context of the full findings and the theoretical framework, this conclusion suggested that how a counselor utilized their own being to facilitate information, offer credibility, or influence decision makers through social capital (Lin, 1999) was dependent upon what information they themselves were familiar with, what credibility their resources may have offered, and what decision makers they may have had access to influence. It did not mean that freshman academy counselors could not achieve the JCPS freshman academy theory of action (JCPS, 2018c; JCPS 2018d). Freshman academy counselors from District One were still able to influence a sense of belonging for low-income students, as well as create opportunities for personal and career development for their students.

Several counselors mentioned their personal narrative when they explained why they became counselors to begin with; the inequity of school resources also seemed to influence how each counselor conducted their postsecondary preparation responsibilities. Student load was different at each school, too, which many counselors acknowledged had an effect on their decision making and prioritization. The findings that supported this conclusion were also consistent with the literature on this topic.

Our findings indicate that when freshman academy counselors did not know how success was defined – either for themselves or their students – they created their own measures of success. This contributed to inconsistencies throughout District One regarding freshman academy counselor expectations regarding influencing low socioeconomic students' postsecondary opportunities. Within the full context of the findings, this conclusion showed the independence and uniqueness of each freshman academy counselor and their institutions may have made it more difficult to truly recognize potential resource inequities that may have existed between academies within District One.

Similarly, considering Lin's (1999) theory of social capital, lack of district-level standards could have eroded credibility for a freshman academy counselor if that counselor was at a school that was under-resourced or unaware of its low focus on postsecondary opportunities for low-income students compared to its peers. Likewise, viewing the findings through the lens of the JCPS freshman academy theory of action (JCPS, 2018b; JCPS 2018c), which was also part of this study's theoretical framework, showed that the inconsistency of resources and knowledge could have made it more difficult for freshman academy counselors to measure a student's sense of belonging or their personal and career skills. It did not mean, though, that freshman academy counselors did not work to provide postsecondary opportunities for their low-income students. It meant that some freshman academy counselors may have made it a different level priority than their peers without knowing it.

Freshman academy counselors within District One did not have agreement on the importance of students' postsecondary career goals as an aspect of their job. Our findings also revealed that freshman academy counselors were not evaluated by the same system, in the same manner, or even within the same time period. This created inconsistency with the postsecondary preparation services each freshman academy counselor provided to their students.

Hill (2011) called the high school college counseling system a core piece of the infrastructure of the student support system in high school, defining infrastructure in large part as the strategies and practices to get students toward postsecondary goals. Not having a clear infrastructure in place throughout District One for the freshman academy counselor role could be one of the causes of the inconsistency in norms and standards. Engberg and Gilbert (2013)

mentioned how students attending majority low socioeconomic schools often do not receive as much college counseling as their peers. Given the inequity in resources that seemed to exist among the freshman academy counselors who participated in this study, differing levels of postsecondary preparation and resources could be one of the consequences of a lack of system-wide norms and standards.

Our findings highlight that freshman academy counselors agreed that the socioeconomic status of a student was a condition that freshman academy counselors must contend with, but there remained conflict over how to deal with this condition. Specifically, viewed within the context of the JCPS rubric for freshman academies and the JCPS freshman academy theory of action (JCPS, 2018b, 2018c), there was debate among the positions of the freshman academy counselors on whether or not low socioeconomic students needed additional supports on academic knowledge and skills, and sense of belonging. It did not mean, however, that freshman academy counselors did not attempt to facilitate information to their low socioeconomic students or influence decision makers on their behalf, as Lin's (1999) network theory of social capital described. It meant that the freshman academy counselors did so explicitly from the perspective of attempting to provide financial or economic gain for their low socioeconomic students.

The freshman academy counselors believed that providing financial resources for low socioeconomic students was critical, but there were differing opinions on what to do beyond financial support. Some counselors thought that low socioeconomic students, by definition, experienced more trauma and challenges and needed additional wraparound supports to deal with those challenges. Other counselors did not have that opinion and even resented the idea. Historically, this fits the narrative of the counselor as a gatekeeper, choosing what opportunities and resources are offered to which students (McDonough, 2005). This historic use of the counselor role could be what drove some of the freshman academy counselors who participated in this study to determine that non-financial supports did not need to go to low socioeconomic students any more than other students. Furthermore, counselors have received scrutiny in the past for how they have rendered their services disparately to different student groups (Bryan et al., 2015). Consequently, this conclusion from our findings has the potential to create a dichotomy of outcomes and expectations for low socioeconomic students, depending on the socioeconomic philosophy of their freshman academy counselor. This was important for the final conclusion derived from our findings, which was that counselors were a form of social capital for low socioeconomic students.

High school counselors were a form of social capital for low-income students, and likely provided access to postsecondary opportunities that low socioeconomic students otherwise might not have access to. In the full context of the findings and theoretical framework, this conclusion demonstrated that social capital was manifested in many different ways by the freshman academy counselors who participated in the study, but each way remained true to Lin's (1999) theory of social capital. This conclusion also suggested that the JCPS freshman academy theory of action (JCPS, 2018b, 2018c) could be foundational for District One freshman academy counselors, as each demonstrated a commitment to being a form of social capital that created a sense of belonging and helped improve student academic, personal, and career opportunities. While this conclusion indicates each freshman academy counselor operated as a form of social capital, it does not indicate that each did so the same way for students.

With the varying degrees of influence that freshman academy counselors had on the career selection process in career academies in District One, each of the efforts to recruit, diversify, select, or directly choose pathways for freshmen seemed to guide what students might do after high school. Each freshman academy counselor believed in using their being as

social capital for economic gains for low-income students, and socio-emotional support for all students.

The participants also mentioned how their work to professionally develop students could positively impact long term financial earnings, which the literature mentioned as an aspect of social capital. A. Cox (2016) explained that social capital is utilizing a social network to provide access to support, information, and resources that an individual can use to gain employment, an academic credential, or deal with difficult decisions. As the freshman academy counselors who participated in this study demonstrated their willingness to act in this way for their students, long term financial success for low socioeconomic students could be a potential consequence for the actions of the freshman academy counselors who act as a form of social capital.

We did not conduct the study without limitations. A limitation for this study was that F/RL is not a perfect marker for low socioeconomic or low-income students, given that students who receive it can be up to 185% above the poverty threshold (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Since this article focused explicitly on freshman career academy counselors and their influence on low socioeconomic students, not including race/ethnicity as a deeper part of that analysis was also a limitation. Often, there are overlaps in educational outcomes between low socioeconomic students and students of color (Almeida, 2016; R. Cox, 2016; Murillo et al., 2017; Welton & Williams, 2015). However, including race/ethnicity could be an opportunity for future research on how freshman career academy counselors influence low socioeconomic students of color. Still, the conclusions derived from the findings produced implications for practice for District One to consider.

Implications for Practice

Consider a Standardized Evaluation System for Academy Counselors

A conclusion gathered from the findings was how counselors in District One were not evaluated in a consistent, system-wide fashion. An implication for practice within District One is that the district should consider creating a standardized evaluation system for academy counselors generally or freshman academy counselors specifically. Strear et al. (2019) provide a nationwide resource outlining existing counselor evaluation practices and guidelines. District One could use this analysis as an outline for a potential district-wide evaluation system for counselors. This may help create a system around the freshman academy counselor position.

Develop a Professional Development Seminar on Role Expectations for Existing Academy Counselors

Our findings showed a lack of district-wide consistency among expectations for freshman academy counselors. As an implication for practice, District One may decide if or how they want to address this issue. One way for the district to address this challenge would be to develop a professional development course on expectations of the role for existing academy counselors generally or freshman academy counselors specifically. This could create a standard of success that all academy counselors could operate from in their daily tasks, particularly on postsecondary opportunities for low socioeconomic students, as well as the basis from which administrators could conduct evaluations. This seminar could be developed internally through the district or in conjunction with a local postsecondary institution.

Develop Postsecondary Curriculum on the Counselor's Role in a Career Academy

Our findings highlighted that there is a lack of clarity regarding what success looks like for freshman academy counselors. A potential implication for practice is that District One may decide to clarify success for future academy counselors in general or freshman academy counselors specifically. To achieve this goal, District One could work with a local postsecondary institution to develop curriculum on the counselor's ideal role in a career academy, particular regarding college and career opportunities for low socioeconomic students, for collegiate students studying to become counselors. This resource could provide standardized training for a portion of incoming academy counselors.

Recommendations for Future Research

Deeply Analyze the Intersection of Race/Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status

A potential future study could focus on the intersection of race/ethnicity and socioeconomics among students and how that affects counselors' influence on postsecondary opportunities for their students. Each of the schools in this analysis had a majority of low socioeconomic students; some were also schools with a majority of students of color. Analyzing the perceptions of the academy experience of counselors and low socioeconomic students who are also student of color could provide useful findings for District One.

Review the Perception of Counselors as Social Capital from the Student Perspective

This study focused on a systems-level analysis by talking explicitly with counselors about their perceptions of low socioeconomic students regarding postsecondary opportunities. Talking to low socioeconomic students on how they perceived the social capital capacity of their freshman academy counselors would provide an analysis over the same system but from a different perspective. That perspective could provide value in assessing how counselors influence low socioeconomic students' college and career opportunities.

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