

# Career and College Advice to the Forgotten Half: What Do Counselors and Vocational Teachers Advise?

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*This article examines the career and college advice that high school counselors and vocational teachers give to the “forgotten half,” students who are unlikely to seek a 4-year college degree. Using interview data from 12 Midwestern high schools, we found that most counselors tend to encourage all students to attend college, regardless of the students’ interests or plans. Vocational teachers, on the other hand, showed evidence of a more nuanced view of the need for college. We found that vocational teachers in our sample fit in to four broad categories in terms of their advice and opinions about college: the college-for-all advocates, who push college regardless of circumstances; the diplomats, who try subtly to tell students that their plans are unrealistic; the straightforward, who try to make sure that students have realistic information; and the hands-off, who disavow any role in helping students make future plans. After an examination of these approaches, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of the various approaches for guiding students’ choices.*

This paper examines the career and college advice that high school counselors and vocational teachers give to the “forgotten half,” students who are unlikely to seek a 4-year college degree (Grant Commission, 1988). In light of heightened concern about these students, the additional skill needs of the labor force, and the increased availability of community colleges, this issue is of special interest (Bailey, 1989; Bills, 1992; Bishop, 1993; Borman, 1991; Cappelli, 1991; Gamoran, 1994; Grubb, 1993; Hallinan, 1995; Hamilton, 1990; Meyer & Wise, 1982; Osterman, 1980; Ray & Mickelson, 1993; Stern, et al., 1994). With limited, if any, institutional support and no formal instruction on how to advise these youth, most school staff have had to improvise, deciding what advice is most appropriate for graduates who, in

past decades, needed little or no special training to get well-paid jobs. Both counselors and vocational teachers have difficulties to overcome when advising work-bound youth. Counselors' training around careers has largely been in helping better students apply to 4-year colleges; they do not know much about college and career issues for students who are not planning 4-year degrees. Vocational teachers' training has been in providing job skills, and most have not received formal instruction in career advising. Neither group has typically been given specific responsibility for advising work-bound students' careers.

Youth who do poorly in high school need the organizational support of schools to help them make choices regarding employment and training after graduation. These students may look to school staff for advice, especially to counselors and vocational teachers, who are well placed to help students plan their futures. Yet there are indications that many students are not getting the kinds of assistance that could be beneficial. Although 84% of high school seniors plan to get a 2- or 4-year degree (in NELS, 1992 survey), only 41.3% of high school graduates age 30–34 have a college degree (Associates or higher; U. S. Department of Education, 1998, Table 9). Similarly, a national study (of the High School and Beyond [NCES, 1983] sample) found that, of seniors who planned to get a college degree, only 40.3% completed a degree in the 10 years following graduation. For those with college plans but poor high school grades, less than 20% completed a degree (Rosenbaum, 1998). An 80% failure rate suggests that the college-for-all approach is an unrealistic policy for these students. However, there is no societal consensus on what advice is appropriate. Although open admissions has made community college an option for many more students, the limits of this option are suggested by the large number of seniors who lack even 9th-grade achievement skills (NAEP, 1990), the large number of college students taking remedial courses, and the large number of college dropouts.

Human capital theory says that individuals will invest in their education if it improves their labor market value (Becker, 1975). However, it is not certain that increased years of formal education are the best way for all individuals to improve their labor market value. Despite theoretical gains to human capital for each course, some empirical analyses suggest little earnings gain to college attendance unless one gets a degree or certificate (Jencks et al., 1979; Grubb, 1993, 1995; but see Kane & Rouse, 1995).

However enthusiastic our nation may be in encouraging all students to go to college, college attendance may not always be the most appropriate choice, especially for students who are poorly prepared for college. For students who drop out of college with few credits and no degree, a good job with training opportunities might be a better way to improve their human capital. Moreover, students who get school help in finding their first jobs have much better earnings trajectories (Rosenbaum et al., 1999).

A recent synthesis of research on college outcomes concludes that many high school graduates of modest achievement or uncertain motivation would be well advised to lower their college plans and consider other options (Boesel & Fredland, 1999). However, this important report had little to say about how students are currently advised. The present study examines the role of schools in helping students make career plans, specifically examining what advice guidance counselors and vocational teachers give students, how they decide which students to encourage to attend college, and under what circumstances they discourage unrealistic plans.

### PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In the early years of the profession, counselors were expected to provide detailed information about occupations and hiring criteria. Counselors began focusing on college admissions in the 1950s and 1960s (Armor, 1971; Ginzberg, 1971), and this focus was maintained through the 1990s (Orfield & Paul, 1994; Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996). The gatekeeping function of high school counselors in college advising has been studied extensively (e. g., Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963; Rosenbaum, 1976). Similarly, the activities of both college (Erickson, 1975) and high school counselors in course and program selection (e.g., Heyns, 1974; DeLany, 1991; Wilson & Rossman, 1993) have been examined. However, little specific attention has been given to the way counselors advise students who are unlikely to complete 4-year degrees.

Over the past 3 decades, the organizational role of counselors and the constraints under which they work have changed dramatically. In recent years, new school conditions and societal factors have influenced counselors' duties and attitudes. First, after years of criticism for heavy-handed gatekeeping, many counselors now appear to consider it somehow proper to regard all students as "college material." The prevailing "college-for-all" perspective in many schools and communities (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996) and the trend toward "credentialism" (Collins, 1979) create special difficulties for low-achieving students who need to know the requirements for good entry-level jobs. Open admissions policies at community colleges and the ever increasing number of postsecondary options have given students from all achievement levels an opportunity for further education or training after high school (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996). In the 1960s few vocational students attended college. As many vocational fields have become increasingly complex and sophisticated in the training and skill levels they demand, substantial numbers of graduates from these programs now enroll in community and 4-year colleges (Rosenbaum & Krei, 1996).

Second, institutional changes have altered counselors' work. With the growth of student caseloads and the increasing complexity of state-

mandated graduation requirements, counselors are devoting more and more time to paperwork and administrative functions, such as checking transcripts and course assignments (Wilson & Rossman, 1993). Financial constraints, school overcrowding, and student mobility have placed additional demands on counselors (DeLany, 1991). Testing, crisis intervention, and disciplinary issues also require large portions of counselors' time. As a result of the growing scope of counselors' tasks and the increasing numbers of students assigned to them, the opportunities to know students individually have decreased and time for intensive, one-on-one student advising is limited. In addition, as counselors have increasingly come to act as ombudsmen for students, they may experience difficulty in offering straightforward guidance.

Third, recent increases in the skill needs of the labor market have made job preparation and work entry more difficult; and students need information and guidance about career choice, training options, and skill requirements. Counselors also have difficulty keeping up with this rapidly changing labor market. In a survey of Indiana schools, Orfield and Paul (1994) found that 69% of counselors needed more information about job requirements. About half of the counselors reported that they lacked up-to-date state job market information, and about 20% said they lacked any job market information. Students and parents who responded to the Indiana survey ranked the need for developing career plans, job market information and advice, and help with selecting education and career paths that keep options open among their highest priorities. Counselors reported spending only about 20% of their time in helping students with these concerns.

Students have begun to rely on vocational teachers as sources of information about career choice, training options, and skill requirements (Rosenbaum & Jones, 1995). The role of vocational teachers in giving career and college advice has not been examined. The information and advice provided by vocational teachers and counselors may be especially critical for economically disadvantaged youth for whom college attendance is particularly expensive. Moreover, these youth may also have limited access to appropriate information from family, neighbors, and friends.

In any case, neither counselors nor vocational teachers have received instruction about how to advise the career and college plans of students who are unlikely to complete college degrees and how to help them prepare for the demands of the current labor market. As noted, both occupations have difficulties in giving advice and have limitations in their expertise and little is known about what advice they currently give. This study seeks to explore how these two occupational groups approach this issue. Using samples of counselors and vocational teachers from high schools, we find that most counselors take a single approach, whereas vocational teachers take four different approaches. These results raise important questions about what school staff could do to help these youths and what actions are appropriate.

## METHODS AND DATA

Using verbatim transcriptions of taped interviews with 35 guidance counselors and 80 vocational teachers, we analyze participants' views of the importance of college attendance after high school, the advice they give to students, and how this advice varies for different students. The variety of schools in our sample allows us to compare the views of respondents from urban and suburban settings and vocational and comprehensive high schools.

The teachers and counselors in our sample were drawn from 12 Chicago metropolitan high schools. In face-to-face interviews, respondents were asked to describe their responsibilities, the postsecondary plans of their students, how they recognize that students' plans may be unrealistic, the kinds of advice they give to students regarding college and career plans, and any constraints they face in providing information and advice. In addition, they were asked their opinions about training at community colleges and the advice they give about attending community college. Both groups were also questioned about employment opportunities for youths seeking jobs after high school.

Schools in our sample were selected to provide variation in location, curriculum, and racial and economic composition. The schools are evenly split between urban and suburban. Five are vocational high schools; the others are comprehensive schools offering vocational programs of varying depths. The suburban schools include four that are mostly White, one mixed race, and one mostly African American. The city schools include one mixed race and five majority African American and Latino.

Interview respondents, whose racial composition reflects their schools' enrollments, have diverse levels of experience from 1st-year teachers and counselors to veterans nearing retirement. Whenever possible, all counselors in the schools were interviewed. Counselor caseloads ranged from approximately 400 to 600 students. Vocational teachers were chosen to represent "traditional" fields, such as sheet metal, woodworking, and office occupations, and more high-tech fields, such as computer-assisted design and television. Teachers from fields that traditionally attract female students, such as office occupations and childcare, were included along with traditionally male-dominated occupations, such as machining and auto mechanics.

## POSTSECONDARY EXPECTATIONS

Most of the counselors and teachers in our sample work in high schools that encourage them to push college attendance. There is a kind of institutional pride in insisting that all graduates enroll in college. Students themselves often view the "work-bound" label as stigmatizing, and 86% of the students planned to get college degrees. In many of the schools, we

heard comments like this from vocational teachers: "Every kid here thinks he's going to college, without exception. . . . And that's because parents told them to do that, and the teachers told them, and the counselors told them that, administrators—everybody tells them that. . . . If they don't go, they're not as worthy as somebody else." Teachers report taking informal surveys in their classes: "If you ask in a class how many guys are going to college, they'll all raise their hands." "Most of the work-bound students are going to college until their junior or senior year. They've been told this since they were 5 years old by everyone." It was striking to hear these statements even in high schools where a small proportion of the school's graduates actually attended college.

### ADVICE FROM COUNSELORS

Although both counselors and vocational teachers tend to encourage college for students who show any interest, the two groups approach college and career advice in strikingly different ways. As a part of their regular duties, counselors typically advise students' college choices, help administer the application process, sometimes arrange for students to meet with visiting recruiters or go to visit colleges, and occasionally urge colleges to admit certain students (Armor, 1971; Cookson & Persell, 1985).

There is no corresponding set of activities in place to assist students who are not planning to attend college. Neither schools nor society at large have defined what counselors should do to assist work-bound students (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1997). No standard procedures exist to help students choose or apply for jobs. Employers rarely state academic prerequisites nor do they ordinarily use grades or counselor recommendations when making hiring decisions. In addition, there is usually limited contact between employers and counselors, and the typical counselor has little knowledge of specific skills or training needed for jobs that do not require college.

Quite apart from the issue of quality of advice is the problem of the amount of counseling that is offered to students. Because of their heavy caseloads, counselors in our sample often provided career information in large group settings; and, all too frequently, their appointments with individual students were brief and rushed. The High School and Beyond (NCES, 1983) survey of guidance counselors offers additional evidence of the low priority given to career counseling by most guidance departments. Only 22.5% listed preparation for work roles as a first or second priority for their guidance programs. However, placing a high priority on career and work roles is associated with an increase in time spent on preparation for careers after high school. For example, in the complete sample ( $N = 400$ ), only 25% of counselors spend 30% or more of their time on career planning; but if they work in departments that give high priority to preparation for

work roles, 37% of counselors spend this much time on career planning. When asked about time spent with juniors and seniors in their professional guidance roles, 30.6% of counselors reported spending 14% or less of their time on occupational choice and career planning. Even in schools with a majority of students who do not plan on pursuing BA degrees, 75.9% of counselors responded that they spent 29% or less of their time on career planning (Rosenbaum & Krei, 1996).

When counselors do talk with students about their plans after high school, postsecondary choices are most often framed as a decision between college and work. Few of our counselors report that they advise students to consider alternative kinds of training, such as apprenticeships or technical schools. When asked if some students would be better off going to work rather than to community college after high school, a counselor replied, "An unqualified no, meaning I think every kid should go to school in some capacity. I think everyone can benefit from going to school." Another counselor stated his college-for-all position this way: "I think [they] would be better off for the experience. I recommend it to every senior. To go over to [two local community colleges] and test it out and see what they think." At an urban comprehensive school, a counselor stresses getting skills in junior college: "You're going to college. Fine. You're going to start community college, and this is why, not because you're stupid but because you need to build up skills that you didn't have before, and you don't want to spend all that money and not get anywhere."

Generally, we found that counselors do not articulate clear reasons why they steer students to college, what kinds of students should choose college, or for what career goals. They do not discuss specific college courses students should take nor do they offer information about specific careers for them to consider. This statement from a counselor in an urban vocational school is typical: "I try to encourage them all to go to college, even if it's just a junior college. You know, I always encourage them, because I just feel that you need something more than a high school diploma." Several counselors simply express a "personal bias for education" and stress that students should take "at least one class" at community college "to try it out." All students get the same prescription: enroll in college.

In addition, the majority of our counselors are reluctant to confront students who have unrealistic expectations regarding college or job plans. Fearing complaints from parents or administrators, counselors find it hard to discourage unrealistic plans although some counselors express concerns about not doing so. As a counselor working in a middle-class suburban school said: "I think the biggest problem is the parents. I think there are many counselors that don't want to fight the parents. Instead of saying, 'Yes, that's true, but do you realize college doesn't guarantee a job? . . . [Your child] likes to work with his hands, why not put him in to a 2-year



program and make good money?’” (For a more detailed discussion of counselors’ advice on college and the constraints they face, see Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1996.)

We found only 12 exceptions to a college-for-all perspective among the 35 counselors interviewed. Regarding going to work after high school, a counselor told us that her advice “would depend on what they’re interested in.” She goes on to describe the way in which she tailors her postsecondary advice to individual students’ plans. Another counselor working in the same school said, “We just don’t think college is for everyone. . . . [Y]ou try to figure out what’s best for each individual student because it is not best for everyone. I’m not the judge of that, but college is not necessarily the only option. . . .” A few of the counselors help students to explore options: “I don’t think college is for everyone. . . . It’s amazing sometimes how when I meet some kids, they’ll say to me things like, ‘Well I want to be a secretary so I guess I have to go to school and get a degree in business. . . . But they don’t realize that if you don’t, you can go to secretarial school or perhaps have . . . a business course in high school and be able to be a successful secretary.” A suburban counselor tells his students to get some further training and “get good at something, whether it’s on-the-job training, further schooling, college, whatever.”

Although we found strong college-for-all attitudes across our sample, the exceptions were concentrated primarily in schools with a strong vocational emphasis. We found no pattern in educational level or other experience; however, two counselors who were exceptions had experience as vocational teachers. All the exceptions carry the typical heavy caseload, and none seemed to have an unusual degree of access to or knowledge about their students. The primary characteristic they share is the sense that students vary in their capabilities, interests, and needs, and that college is not the most appropriate choice for every student. For example, a counselor emphasized that students “should go back [to school] with a goal in mind, and some people just don’t have a goal at 18.” Typical of the viewpoints expressed by the exceptions is this statement by a vocational school counselor: “I believe in college, but I don’t think it’s necessarily right for everybody. . . . They may benefit from college later on, but I think they need the hands-on right now and an opportunity to use the skills they have.” Another counselor in a vocational school summed up her view of students’ options in this way: “Go to college, get a job, go to vocational school, learn a trade.”

### VOCATIONAL TEACHERS

Unlike the majority of counselors, vocational teachers offer a far more nuanced view of college, often providing students a much broader range of postsecondary choices. However, vocational teachers are full of contradic-



tions regarding college and career advice. Although lamenting the college-for-all attitudes of their schools and communities, some will go on to advise that all young people go to college. Many feel constrained to advise college attendance because of community values or parental preference, but most express much more willingness to provide at least some specific, cautionary information and advice than counselors do in similar circumstances. Some teachers stress the acquisition of additional skills in their fields. Others mention the need for advancement, and a few emphasize the preference of employers for more mature workers when they suggest that students need college degrees.

Vocational teachers seem to regard themselves as better qualified to advise about careers and further training than the counselors who work in their schools. One teacher described sitting down with counselors and explaining the value of her class: "I would love to see students get into college, if they have the means, the desire, or whatever. [But] I think we have to let the counselors know there are other avenues for some of these students that they can be more successful with. . . ."

Attitudes among vocational teachers in our sample range from an almost pure "college-for-all" perspective to the stance that their students are already well prepared to enter the workforce and to get well-paid entry level jobs with opportunities for advancement. Although we found no clear pattern of characteristics shared among teachers within any group, we noted that vocational teachers fit in to four broad categories in terms of their advice and opinions about college: (a) the "*college-for-all*" group, who push college regardless of circumstances; (b) the *diplomats*, who try to gently and subtly tell students that their plans may be unrealistic; (c) the *straightforward*, who want to make sure that students have realistic information and who feel it is part of their responsibility to advise them; and (d) the *hands-off*, who simply disavow any role in helping students plan their futures.<sup>1</sup>

#### "COLLEGE-FOR-ALL": MIXING MESSAGES

This group that stresses the need for college-for-all students is quite small, only 9 of our 80 teachers. Their views correspond closely to those of most counselors who encourage everyone to go to college. Somewhat surprisingly, the teachers in this category are not confined to fields that are more likely to require college training or to high schools that might be expected to stress college attendance. Moreover, these teachers do not appear to distinguish among students regarding their interest in college work, career plans, or academic ability. One particularly interesting characteristic of this group is that, when initially asked about the need for college in their fields or the importance of college-for-all students, many said that college is not for everyone and that good jobs in their fields do not necessarily require

college training. However, later in the interview they went on to say that they encourage all their students to at least try college.

Some “college-for-all” vocational teachers give a relatively clear rationale for their college push. They often mention the competitive labor market and believe that somehow even a little exposure to college work will increase a job applicant’s chances. Other reasons for stressing college attendance include increased maturity that comes from some time spent in college and increased skill levels. As one teacher explained: “I feel [college-trained workers in his field] don’t always have better skills than my high school students, but [employers] look for that.”

In a few cases, teachers say that they push college attendance but give no explanation for its benefits. For example, one teacher said he encourages students to “take something” at the local community college, even if it is only one class. Others see college as a way to “test the field,” as if taking college courses is the best way for young people to decide if they like the occupational area they studied in high school.

#### DIPLOMATS: TREADING SOFTLY

The 26 *diplomats* talk with students about postsecondary plans “as subtly as possible,” as one teacher told us. They are reluctant to tell students that their plans may not be feasible and that college may demand more than they are prepared to deliver. A teacher working in a suburban vocational school shared these kinds of concerns: “I don’t go around with a pin and burst everybody’s balloon. . . . I don’t want to discourage [a student] because that’s not my job. I want to encourage him. So I try to paint everything in a good picture. But a realistic one . . . A lot of these kids, it’s a self-esteem thing . . . I try to be real careful about that.” Another vocational teacher described this cautious approach: “I might not directly say you’re never going to get this, but I might say, ‘Have you thought about what it’s going to take to get from where you are to that job? What does it take? What kinds of grades does it take? What kinds of courses does it take?’” These teachers try to balance encouragement with realistic advice: “I try not to discourage them. I say, ‘Well, that’s not a bad idea, but how about this?’ And then what I’ll do is say, ‘Have you had this class?’ or ‘Are you pretty good at this?’ . . . I kind of open it up . . . so they say, ‘You know, he’s probably right. I should probably be doing something else.’”

Diplomats are found across our sample in every field, but many of them are concentrated in schools located in communities where most students are expected to be college bound. In blue-collar communities in which parents may see college attendance as a sign of upward mobility, teachers feel that they must tread softly on this issue. One suburban teacher working in a blue-collar setting expressed his reluctance to speak out, saying that

there is a “push for all kids to go to college. Every mother and dad wants his and hers to go to college, whether or not they’re going to make it.” He added that there is a “stigma, I guess, with being workbound.”

In middle- and upper middle-class suburbs, teachers are also careful in offering advice about alternatives to college because they believe the college-for-all attitude to be the norm in their communities. In an effort to deflect responsibility, these teachers may recommend that students talk to people they know outside of school to get more information: “I would suggest that they look around a little bit and take stock of where they want to be and what they think it’s going to take to get there. Talk to a couple of other people who are there. . . . Maybe another relative of theirs. Older brothers sometimes can help, or sisters, in drawing some reality to them.” Still this group of teachers indicates that they feel some responsibility to help students make realistic decisions about plans after graduation, but they do not feel that they have enough authority to give unambiguous advice.

The diplomats are commendable in that they attempt to provide college and career information to students. Although some in this group decry the prevailing college push in their schools and communities, they are often reluctant to challenge that view themselves. Instead, they gently introduce to students the possibility that their plans may be unrealistic and that other options should be considered. The potential problem with this careful, subtle approach is that teenagers may not be particularly adept at interpreting the real meaning contained in these teachers’ cautiously worded advice. Many counselors and teachers told us that students are not the best listeners; the indirect appeal may be lost on many of them.

#### THE STRAIGHTFORWARD: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

The *straightforward* teachers try to ensure that students have realistic information and believe it is their responsibility to offer advice about career issues. As one teacher told us regarding career advising: “Well, someone’s got to.” He went on to say that counselors in his school are known for “sometimes kind of tiptoeing” around students who have unrealistic plans. The straightforward group, the largest in our sample at 32, are found across the vocational fields included in our study, but many of them work in vocational schools. The fact that students chose to come to a vocationally focused school may help them feel free to suggest options other than a four-year college. If anything characterizes this group, it is that they tend to have current information about opportunities in their occupations and that they are more likely to maintain contacts with employers in their area. Consequently, they seem to be particularly confident about the information regarding career requirements that they can provide to students. The following statement characterizes their views: “I tell them because I’d rather

see them do something where they can succeed than [to] get out there and drown, so to speak. I'm very straightforward . . . . Whatever I can tell them I try to make sure it's factual and try to make it as plain as possible, so that they can really understand."

They also differ from the diplomats in that they tend to provide career information as a regular part of their course work and build individual advising in to their class time. When giving postsecondary advice, these teachers present a range of options beyond 4-year colleges: "I would indicate that there are ways that they can get some training also through apprenticeship programs, going on to a private vocational school . . . I'd like to tell them that it's going to cost them. These programs are not inexpensive, but it's a good investment of their money." This group handles career issues in a candid manner: "I try to be truthful. I don't want to discourage them from going in to a specific field, but I give them some straight information about what he can expect after he goes to school." The teacher continues, saying, "I just try to give them a more realistic course for what they're thinking. Otherwise they go through certain [education and training] which won't come off the way you think it's going to."

The straightforward group expresses much less concern about hurting self-esteem or about repercussions from parents and administrators, at least in part because they feel confident about their knowledge of their fields and their students' interests and capabilities. As one teacher told us: "I think I'm less concerned with hurting their feelings than I am about wasting a good portion of their life doing something that is a dead end for them."

The straightforward teachers tend to provide experiential, concrete kinds of information and activities that are meaningful to their students. In their classrooms, this group often includes college and career information as part of their regular curriculum. Some offer very explicit career information and job skill requirements as part of their classroom activities, including discussions of job advertisements and examples of quality control manuals used in industry. Teachers in this group also conduct mock interviews and have frank discussions about salaries. One teacher explained his approach this way: "Just explain to them where their skills are going to take them and where they are not going to take them. . . . I have them research a career, which they are doing right now; and they're giving speeches all this week on a career of their choice. Many of them find out at that time that they don't have the skills to go in to that field, and I think that's important. Or they listen to somebody else's [speech] and say 'Gee, that would be good, what did you say the educational requirements are for that?' and so forth." If plans are unrealistic, he suggests, "Reassess. Talk with someone who can help you." Students may be required to do research and give reports in class about job opportunities in their fields of study. In addition, students

are taken to job sites and employers are invited to speak. The straightforward teachers also have individual discussions with students about what they want to do and if they feel prepared for additional academic work in light of their high school performance. Teachers describe these talks as very detailed sessions that challenge and motivate students to consider various options.

There is evidence that this approach may actually reach students and help them to grapple realistically with postsecondary choices. When asked if their students tend to have unrealistic college or career plans, the straightforward group is less likely to respond that their students are unrealistic. They believe that their students have the information necessary to formulate workable postsecondary plans. As one teacher explained, "I tell them what the qualifications are for what they want to get in to, and that if they really want to achieve that goal, there are certain requirements they're going to have to satisfy and if they can't get them here, they'll have to get them at a junior college or wherever they're available." Noting that he rarely sees students who have unrealistic plans, another straightforward teacher said that "normally I give them the boundaries of what their starting pay is, and it's possible that they will become a journeyman in future years, what this future pay will be. I think they're very much aware of how much money they are going to make." If they do identify students whom they believe to be unrealistic, these teachers provide information. Even in middle-class suburbs where the college push is strong, we found several straightforward teachers, such as the one who said, "If a student doesn't have decent grades, I tell them to wake up and realize what is required. . . . I show them college catalogs, and we do reality checks."

It should be noted that these teachers do not discourage college attendance. Virtually everyone we interviewed affirmed that students *should* go to college if that is what they want to do and if they are willing to expend the requisite effort. However, they know that many of their former students did not continue college through their 1st year. This is the only group where a substantial number of teachers mentioned this fact, which was rarely mentioned by counselors. These teachers feel a responsibility and a need to prepare students for other options. In the words of one straightforward teacher, they consider it a "disservice to the students" to do otherwise.

Like others, the straightforward group is not anxious to "burst bubbles" or hurt feelings. On the contrary, they believe that they are less likely to have to share disappointing news because they have provided information to their students all along, as part of their regular curriculum. In addition, this group tends to discuss options with individual students and to offer advice when needed. Teachers believe that their students' motivation is enhanced by having knowledge of workplace requirements and training opportunities and by receiving the advice of adults who are not reluctant to talk with them about formulating realistic plans.

#### THE HANDS-OFF: SUBSCRIBING TO THE "SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS" MODEL

This group is small, only 13 teachers, but they stand out in the clarity of their message: College and career advice is not their job. For a variety of reasons, they simply disavow any responsibility to take a role in helping students plan their futures. These teachers turn up everywhere in our sample, even in schools with a vocational focus. Many tend to subscribe to a "school of hard knocks model," believing that it is part of young people's development to make a number of false starts before finding an appropriate job or training opportunity. "They sort of find out themselves, in a roundabout way." Some explain that they opt out of discussing plans because they lack the authority to offer such advice or that students won't listen anyway: "I don't tell them, 'Well, you will never do this.' Who am I to say? They might mature after graduation and go on to something else." Another teacher told us, "Once they graduate, they realize they need more education and different skills."

Some of the *hands-off* indicate that they are willing to provide some objective information in their classes, but they are reluctant to offer any individual guidance: "I tell them sometimes. There's a personal relationship that must be established between teacher and student [before plans can be discussed]." Another explained that these issues are discussed only "if a student showed an interest in wanting my advice." Others simply state that they do not deal with postsecondary issues at all, saying, "That's what the counseling office is for."

Like counselors, many of the hands-off have doubts that they are serving students well by failing to provide clear career guidance and neglecting to explore the feasibility of students' plans. One of the hands-off teachers in a working-class suburban school told us that the school prides itself on the college-bound status of its students but that actually only about 40% attend college after senior year. He said that the emphasis on college is unfair to kids because it creates false hopes and aspirations. Parents in his school believe that their children have to "go to college to succeed" when a trade school or work program might suit them much better. Such parental pressure seems inappropriate to this teacher, but he did not think anyone would thank him for saying this to students.

#### THE DIFFERING APPROACHES OF VOCATIONAL TEACHERS AND COUNSELORS

Obviously, the majority of vocational teachers differ substantially from most counselors in their approach to providing postsecondary advice to students. Looking over all these reports, we can speculate about why most vocational

teachers are more willing to challenge unrealistic plans and to offer a wider variety of options concerning plans after graduation. First, vocational teachers tend to have more direct knowledge about the job world, especially in their respective fields. As a consequence, they are more confident in offering a range of options that are suited to individual students, their talents and interests, and their academic abilities. Second, because of the nature of vocational programs, teachers are often quite well acquainted with their students. Teachers tend to have students for more than one year, and in many cases have a large block of time each day with their students. As a result, teachers often have more information than counselors do about a student's abilities, motivation, and financial situation. Third, because vocational teachers often know their students well, they do not want them to be hurt; and many times even crusty, middle-aged, male teachers expressed genuine feelings of concern about how their students would do in the job world. Many of these teachers realize that leaving unrealistic plans unchallenged is a disservice to their students.

Counselors, on the other hand, typically do not know students as well. In addition, counselors often are not expected to have comprehensive information about the job world or the many related postsecondary training opportunities. They, like much of the public, can describe the educational requirements of the professions, but many have only a vague idea of what tool-and-die makers or machinists do. Moreover, counselors often have limited awareness of the skills and training necessary to enter these fields; and they know little about the current opportunities for employment and advancement in skilled trades.

In contrast, counselors are expected to be quite well versed in current college admissions requirements and procedures; and they are generally knowledgeable about colleges and their course offerings. Most high school counselors who work with juniors and seniors spend much of their time advising students on college choice. This is all too often true, even when counselors work with students who are unlikely to enroll in college or to complete a degree.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although we have studied diverse high schools and interviewed a large number of vocational teachers and several counselors, the sample is relatively small and may not be generalizable to all high schools. The findings represent self-reports, and they may be distorted. We do believe, however, that our interview format, with its many open-ended questions, allows far more detailed and thoughtful responses than those provided by surveys.

This study would be enriched if we knew more about additional sources of advice and about students' perspectives on the quality and quantity of



the counseling they receive. Our data do not allow us to speculate about other ways in which students in the schools we studied obtain career information and postsecondary advice. Help in planning provided by teachers and counselors may be less critical if students are receiving information and guidance elsewhere. However, we suspect that the quality and kind of information and advice given outside of school is highly dependent on one's social class background. Public high schools provide the best chance of equalizing the information available to low-SES students, so the findings of this study have particularly great relevance for the opportunities of these students.

Further research in other regions of the country would also extend the usefulness of our findings. The Chicago metropolitan area, with its large and varied industrial base, may yield results that are different from a similar study conducted in an economically depressed region, an agricultural area, or a section dependent on more high-tech industries. However, the Chicago area offers a large number of skilled jobs that do not require college, and newspapers regularly have stories about the high dropout rate at city colleges, so we might expect that these teachers and counselors would be less likely to push college unconditionally than their peers in some other regions.

#### CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR REFORM

Rapid changes in the job world and the lack of a clear-cut path in to the labor force create difficulties for the "*forgotten half*." Most find that there is no "consistent policy framework nor are there programs that effectively facilitate their transition from school to work. As a result, most are left to their own devices" (Law, Kuth, & Bergman, 1992, p.1). The consequences, especially for low-income students, can be destructive; and the economic costs to individuals and to society can be considerable.

The college-for-all approach used by most of the counselors and a few vocational teachers does not acknowledge the reality of the college dropout risks for these students. In these 12 high schools, 86% of the seniors planned to get college degrees (AA or higher). However, since only about 40% of students with college plans succeeded in getting any degree (in the High School & Beyond [NCES, 1983] national sample), we expect that many of these students will end up entering the labor market with the high school diploma as their highest degree. Indeed, our sample may have lower completion rates, given their achievement levels and the degree completion rates of the colleges they attend. Many are likely to leave college with few credits, having mostly taken remedial courses that offer no college credit (Deil & Rosenbaum, 2000); Kane & Rouse, 1995; Rosenbaum, in press). For students who are poorly prepared for college, the college-for-all approach may be highly inappropriate unless these students are warned about the

difficulties they will face and the efforts they must be willing to exert to overcome these difficulties. Although we would never say that students should not have the right to a second chance, advice that allows poorly prepared students to think they can breeze through college is a recipe for failure.

It should be emphasized that counselors did not create the organizational problems posed by advising work-bound students nor should they be blamed for not knowing how to correct them (Rosenbaum, Miller, & Krei, 1997). We only want to suggest that many students need more advice and information about their realistic chances for getting some benefit from college and what actions they can take in high school to improve their chances in college. They also need help in preparing for the current job market as a fallback option in case they do not attend college or if they do not complete a degree. Part of the institutional role of schools can include the development of a more efficient and meaningful way to provide this kind of guidance.

The institutional values and expectations of schools do not foster an atmosphere that encourages vocational teachers and counselors to be active in assisting work-bound youth in planning their careers. Our interviews reveal that school staff have received virtually no training or guidance about how to advise these students about any postsecondary option other than college. Consequently, as our findings show, they respond in a variety of ways. Teachers and counselors must improvise their own approach, having received no guidelines or information. They have not received instruction on available jobs, their requirements, or their advancement potential.

Educators are rightly resentful when outside critics say that their job is just “common sense,” as if anyone could do this without training. Our results have shown the consequences—teachers and counselors take a variety of approaches, many of which are ill informed and unsuitable for many students. We cannot blame these teachers and counselors; they have never received training in this area.

Although jobs require more skills than formerly, policy makers have mistakenly assumed that they require a college education, when in fact they require strong high school skills. Recent research has shown that the contemporary labor market requires “new basic skills,” but the requisite skills can be taught in high school (Murnane & Levy, 1996). Our emphasis on sending all students to college is not only unnecessary, it may even be counterproductive if students get the idea that open admissions means they can wait until college to start learning important skills (Rosenbaum, 1998). The key to increasing high school students’ motivation is to show them the payoffs to current efforts in high school, and this requires good advising. Advisors must show students the relationship between high school skills and the variety of desirable options after high school.

Vocational teachers and counselors should be offered professional training to allow them to learn about job requirements, salary levels and advancement opportunities, information on apprenticeships, jobs that offer training and advancement, short-cycle occupational schools and certification programs, job-training opportunities, and the like. Schools can improve communication with parents and community members to help them understand these labor market and training opportunities for students who are not planning college degrees or for those who are most at risk of dropping out of college.

Large college-going percentages look good on school reports; and administrators, faculty, parents, and community members take pride in citing these college admission numbers. However, the reality is that many students who begin 4-year colleges will drop out, often with few or no college credits. The forgotten half youths need to be acknowledged and assisted in developing skills and finding careers. Vocational teachers and guidance counselors have the opportunity to provide that kind of help, and they should be encouraged and equipped to offer it.

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### Notes

1 Given the small numbers in our sample, quantitative analyses were unable to detect significant differences among groups. For example, of the 35 urban vocational teachers, we found 5 college-for-all, 13 straightforward, 12 diplomats, and 5 hands-off. Of the 45 suburban teachers, we found 4 college-for-all, 19 straightforward, 14 diplomats, and 8 hands-off.

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