

Running head: PERCEIVED STRESS OF COLLEGE AND CAREER DECISION-  
MAKING PROCESS

High School Seniors' Perceived Stress  
of the College and Career Decision-Making Process

EDC 722: Implementation II

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**Abstract**

The focus of the school counselor is on every student's academic development, career development, and social/emotional development in order to promote a culture of academic excellence and college/career readiness (ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors, 2014). Being able to identify what students are stressed about the most can help school counselors narrow down what they need to be focusing on in preparing students for life after graduation. The purpose of this study was to determine what high school seniors perceive to be the most stressful about the post-graduation decision-making process, and what schools are and aren't doing to aid in that process. A survey was administered to seniors at a small public high school in Western New York, and among the most stressful aspects of making decisions about life after graduation, were finding the right college, financial aid, and choice of major. Students indicated that they found the help from their school counselor helpful, but wished there were more counselors so they could access support more readily.

## High School Seniors' Perceived Stress of the College and Career Decision-Making Process

By the time many high school students enter their senior year, a main concern they face is what awaits them once they leave high school. All the information about career and college can become overwhelming for students, and school counselors are often a student's point person for guidance on post-graduation planning. Although career planning is one of the domains school counselors must cover with students, they are often stretched thin with all of their other responsibilities within a school, and may not be able to provide students with the time they need to feel comfortable with the decision-making process, given the amount of information students must sort through (Lapan, Whitcomb, & Aleman, 2012). Since college and career requirements are constantly changing, along with the perceptions of high school seniors, school counselors may not always know what to focus on for the incoming class of high school seniors (Gilyardi, 2006).

This literature review will explore topics including the importance of having a post-graduation plan, the counselor's role in college and career planning, and students' attitudes towards post-graduation planning. For purposes of this literature review the terms "post-graduation decision making" refers to high school students process of making a decision on what college/vocational school to attend after high school or what career path they will take. Secondly, the term "college and career readiness" refers to a high school students skills and abilities to be successful after high school at the college, vocation, or career of their choice (Gysbers, 2013).

### **Literature Review**

#### **Importance of Having a Post-Graduation Plan**

**Employment Outlook.** Among the concerns facing high school seniors, as they get ready for life after graduation, is whether there will be jobs available for them. With the country facing economic recession in 2008, the job market experienced a significant decline (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Fortunately, however, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2015), predicts that between 2014 and 2024, the economy will grow, generating 9.8 million new jobs, a 6.5% increase. This increase in jobs could mean that students graduating within the next few years will have jobs available to them. Furthermore, it is important to consider the effect that the aging baby boomer population will have on the economy. Individuals of the baby boomer generation will be entering into retirement, opening up much more job opportunity than usual, which will contribute to the job outlook for recent high school and college graduates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; Dohm & Shniper, 2007).

Students will also have to think carefully about what career field they want to work. The BLS has projected that between 2014-2024, careers in healthcare, and technology will experience the highest percentage of growth (2015). Again, considering the effects of the baby boomer population and their increasing need for health services, healthcare is expected to have the most growth in jobs, with almost a 25% rate of growth (BLS, 2015). Computer technology is expected to be second to healthcare regarding job growth, which reflects trends in our society's use of technology in everyday life (Dohm & Shniper, 2007). This data is valuable information for students to be aware of when considering what careers to pursue after high school, however students need to consider that high percentage of growth doesn't necessarily mean a significant increase in number of jobs because it is based on how many jobs are already in the field. Students also need to keep in mind that healthcare jobs and technological careers often require some post-secondary training, and students will be required to plan for that training while in high school.

**Importance of College or Postsecondary Training.** Something high school seniors must consider when thinking about their next steps after high school is whether they want to get a job directly out of high school, or if they want to attend college or a vocational training program (Cannan, 2008). The value of post-secondary training continues to increase, while the number of Americans without post-secondary training decreases (BLS, 2015). It is becoming an expectation that individuals have some post-secondary education or training when entering the job market, and many jobs will list a college degree as a requirement for employment (Cannan, 2008). According to the Pew Research Center (2016), “one-third of Americans who lack a four-year degree report that they have declined to apply for a job they felt they were qualified for because that job required a bachelor’s degree.”

A college education gives an individual an advantage when looking for a job. College, however, is a costly investment and families may not be able to help their children with the cost (Poynton, Lapan, & Marcotte, 2015). The cost of college can often become a burden for families who do not have the financial means to help their child pay for college. Even if a student receives student loans, the costs of books and everyday living expenses can become a significant financial burden for families, and students will be left with significant debt once they leave college (Sobel, 2013). According to the US Department of Education (2015), “Higher education is no longer a luxury for the privileged few, but a necessity for individual economic opportunity” and continues to be the best investment an individual can make (para. 3). Furthermore, the level of college attainment and salary are positively correlated. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), the median weekly earnings of an individual with a professional degree is \$1,730 while the median weekly earnings of a person with only a high school diploma are \$678. Not only do employers expect applicants to have some post-secondary training, having that higher education will lead to higher earnings.

Companies are increasingly expecting their employees to have had attained a post-secondary education (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Furthermore, the level of education achieved by employees will directly connect to an employee's salary (Gilbreath, 2010). Therefore it would seem that college is critical for future success. That value, however, has been questioned due to both the financial cost of a college education, and whether or not college adequately prepares individuals for the workforce. With the cost of college on the rise, earning a higher salary after obtaining a college degree still may not be significant after taking student loans into account (Sobel, 2013). Also, even though many individuals will positively rate their college experience, many Americans are not sure that traditional four-year colleges prepare students for the workforce (Pew Research Center, 2016). Although Americans are aware of the positive correlation between college and employment, 78% of Americans believe that vocational training programs prepare students well for employment, compared to 66% of Americans believe that college prepares students well for employment, and just because one has attained higher education or training, employment depends on the types and numbers of jobs available (Pew Research Center, 2016).

The difference is that vocational training prepares individuals for skill-based trades, whereas colleges and universities focus more on critical thinking skills that may not directly relate to their career path (Seifert et al., 2008). Those critical thinking skills and conceptual skills are applicable in many situations, but the connection between a college education and singular careers are not always clear (Seifert et al., 2008). Ultimately, however, what occupation a student is interested in and what kind of training it requires is what will influence a student's post-graduation decision-making.

**Career Planning as a Life Skill.** Students are always being asked to think about what they want to be when they are older, and in doing so, adults are inherently asking what career

path a student is interested in pursuing. Career is defined as “a succession of jobs held, activities, occupational and other, constituting a life pattern, a sequence of experiences in the world of work with objectives and consequences, or an occupation” (Sears, 1982, p. 137). This definition suggests that career is a lifelong process, and therefore, is an essential aspect of one’s identity. Part of that process involves discovering what one’s strengths and weaknesses are and applying that to their career (Thurgate & Jackson, 2011). Career becomes a part of an individual’s identity and having the ability to plan for a career is an important skill to possess, both for financial and personal success.

Career planning is a skill that school counselors can help students develop throughout their elementary, middle, and high school years. According to Thurgate & Jackson (2011), “Career planning is a lifelong process and is not just about goal setting and making plans to obtain the career you want” (p. 35). Career planning should include goal setting and planning how to obtain the career of your choice, but should also take into account your past experiences, how an individual copes with risks and change, and what one’s strengths and weaknesses are (Thurgate & Jackson, 2011). The planning usually includes what career an individual is interested in, what they need to do to obtain a job in that field (e.g. school, vocational training), and a timeline to obtain that job (Thurgate & Jackson, 2011). However, to successfully establish a career plan, an individual needs self-awareness and the ability to reflect on his or her past (Mikacic & Ovsenik, 2013). It will also be important for individual’s to have the ability to research what options for a career are available to them, which may include informational interviews with professionals or job shadowing (Thurgate & Jackson, 2011). School counselors have the ability to help students set up work experiences such as informational interviews and shadowing experiences, and school counselors are in a position to be great resources for students as they embark on their career-planning journey.

A large part of one's career is the emphasis on lifelong learning. As an individual establishes career goals, they may find that to obtain their goal they must go back to school or receive additional training (Thurgate & Jackson, 2011). Similar to how high school students have to navigate what college or vocational program to attend, adults well into their career may find themselves in a similar situation. Gaining the planning skills needed for continued education, in addition to having the skills to reflect on one's career goals starts at an early age, but will stay with an individual their entire life. Thurgate and Jackson (2011) encouraged people to use strategies such as timelines to reflect on a career path as well as strengths and weaknesses to gain self-awareness. The strategies used in career planning are strategies that are important to have.

When thinking about career planning, it is important to consider why it is so important. As Mikacic and Ovensik (2013) stated, "the final goal of career is psychological success, the feeling of pride, and the personal achievement, which all come from the attainment of the most important goals in life; success, family happiness, and inner peace" (p. 235). Career decisions have long-term effects on one's life and can lead to ultimate satisfaction in life. The process of career planning can be taught and facilitated, but ultimately it is up to the individual to realize their potential and see their goals through (Mikacic & Ovensik, 2013). By taking ownership of the career planning process, individuals begin to become more self-aware and confident of their abilities, which are skills that carry over into their everyday lives (Thurgate & Jackson, 2011). Starting to build these skills, however, is the important part, and often that starts in school and starts with school counselors.

### **Counselor's Role in College and Career Planning**

**Comprehensive School Counseling Program.** The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) (2012) has developed a national model that highlights the components and

organization of a comprehensive school-counseling program, to ensure that counselors are meeting the needs of every student. The ASCA National Model (2012) includes a list of Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success, which outlines the knowledge and skills school counselors should strive to instill in students as a result of their counseling curriculum. The Mindsets and Behaviors are divided into three domains, which reflect the domains that school counselors focus on in their counseling curriculum: academic, career, and social-emotional (ASCA, 2012). According to ASCA's position statement regarding career readiness, school counselor's responsibility is to take a "proactive role in assisting students, families, and staff as they assess student strengths and interests and encourage the selection of a rigorous and relevant educational program supporting all students' college and career goals" (ASCA, 2012, p. 1). Career is a domain that counselors cover in every grade, but when students reach their senior year of high school, the reality of deciding on a career becomes much more relevant to both students and their school counselors. High school counselors are responsible for helping students combine all the work they have done involving career exploration and planning, and aid in creating a concrete plan for life after graduation.

School counselors working in high schools, often use terms such as college and career ready to describe students who are ready for life after graduation. "Career ready", however, may be a more encompassing term because career includes "the life roles, settings, and events of individuals' lives that are constantly being influenced by such factors gender, ethnic origin, race, spirituality, social class, and sexual orientation" (Gysbers, 2013, p. 283). According to Gysbers (2013), the broadness of this definition would include students who go to college as well as students who go directly to work after high school. Gysbers (2013) goes on to define "career ready students" as students who have the knowledge and skills to be able to plan for

their future. Therefore it is important that school counselors can provide and educate students on the resources necessary for them to translate their ideas into action.

A school counseling curriculum should include individual planning meetings with 100% of students, to make sure all students have the opportunity to put their career plan into action (ASCA, 2012). Individual meetings are important because every student has different strengths and goals, and most importantly, every student has different influences in their lives that are affecting their post-graduation plans (Gysbers, 2013). If the school counselor does not meet individually with students, they may not have the opportunity to explore how their strengths, weaknesses, and interests contribute to a career plan. Also, individual planning meetings are helpful in the simplest terms of helping students navigate college applications, deadlines, resumes, and other logistical questions students may have about putting their plan into action (Gysbers, 2013). Counselors to student ratios, however, are often very high. As a result, an issue arises when school counselors, who are responsible for a significant number of students, find it hard to make time to devote appropriate amounts of time to individual planning meetings, given their multitude of responsibilities.

**Counselor to Student Ratios.** According to the ASCA National Model Executive Summary, “to achieve maximum program effectiveness, the American School Counselor Association recommends a school counselor to student ratio of 1:250...” (ASCA, 2012). The Connecticut School Counselor Association conducted a study to determine the effect of smaller counselor to student ratios on student career readiness (Lapan, et al., 2012). The results of the study indicated that the high schools that had lower school counselor to student ratios were able to provide more meaningful college and career readiness guidance, which led to students who were motivated to construct personalized college and career plans (Lapan, et al., 2012).

An important aspect of having small school counselor to student ratios is also making sure school counselors are performing tasks that are appropriate. School counselors spend approximately 11% of their time performing non-guidance related tasks (Lapan, et al., 2012). Although it may not seem like a significant amount of time, having a caseload of 250 students is still relatively large, and if 11% of a school counselor's time is not related to guidance services, it can affect the effectiveness of the school counseling program. Smaller ratios, and ensuring that school counselors are performing tasks that are in line with the school counseling curriculum can positively influence the guidance students will receive for college and career planning (Lapan, et al., 2012). As important as small ratios are for providing meaningful college and career counseling, having the necessary skills to guide students in their planning is just as, if not more important as a school counselor.

**Strategies for College and Career Counseling.** When students are meeting with their school counselors to discuss career planning, what should the school counselor be focusing on with that student to ensure they receive all the knowledge they require to create a plan? Radcliffe and Bos (2013) outlined five goals of college and career counseling, as well as eight different strategies that can be employed by school counselors. The five goals are as follows: 1) understand the nature of college, 2) recognize that a college education may be necessary to his or her future success, 3) gain positive perceptions and aspirations about college, 4) prepare academically for college admission, and 5) set short- and long-term goals that support becoming college-ready” (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013, p. 137). These goals can help guide a school counselor’s conversations with students.

In addition to these five goals, Radcliffe and Bos (2013) included eight different strategies that school counselors can employ when focusing on career readiness. The strategies included activities such as visiting college campuses with students, attending presentations by

college students, and planning school-related goals that help prepare students for college (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013). These tasks are related to exposing students to college life and give them realistic expectations of college life. These are just a few strategies that counselors use alongside the goals that guide conversations about college planning. The strategies that Radcliffe and Bos (2013) list also take into consideration the transition between high school and college, and starts to prepare students for that transition.

It is easy for school counselors to become hands off with students once they have set their career plan into motion and have graduated. Students, however, do not always find the transition to college or career to be as easy as they may have thought it would be and feel as though their high school has forgotten about them. According to Dunning (2009), it is just as important to prepare students for the transition between high school and college/career, as it is to follow up with students to make sure they have the support to put their plan into action. Dunning (2009), like Radcliffe and Bos (2013) suggested similar strategies that will prepare students for the transition to college, such as college visits, attending college fairs and having college students speak to current high school students. Dunning (2009), however, emphasizes the need for high school counselors to follow up with recent high school graduates as they begin college or their career to determine if they felt prepared for life after high school and if not, what the high school could have done to help prepare them. This follow-up helps school counselors track how effective their efforts have been, and will also assist them to change how they prepare students for life after graduation.

### **Students' Attitude Towards Post-Graduation Planning**

**Student Perceptions of School Counselors.** A goal of school counseling is to ensure that students are prepared to leave high school, and can transition to into college, vocational school, or a career. To get to that point, students must be on track to graduate and reach

graduation. According to the Institute of Education Sciences, graduation rates from high school have become a national problem in the United States (Cavendish, 2013). Since school counselors aim to help students in academic, career, and social-emotional aspects of their lives, they can play a significant role in making sure students are successful both during school and after they leave school, as well as in students' social lives. When students perceived school counselors as putting forth high amounts of effort to facilitate student career readiness, students were more likely to pass high stakes test, and become more involved in their schooling (Cavendish, 2013). When students realize that their school counselors want them to succeed, their likelihood to graduate and fulfill career goals is much more likely (Cavendish, 2013).

Once students are in college and start to experience life after high school, they may see their school counselor's efforts in a different light. Solmonson, Roaten, Jones, & Albrecht (2014) found that college freshman positively perceived their school counselors, especially concerning their availability, trust, confidentiality, and guidance activities. Students reported that the school counselors helped them reach their post-graduation goals and found their school counselors to be effective (Solmonson et al., 2014). The study, however, indicated that some students believed that there should be more time to meet individually with school counselors and that they would have benefitted from more school counselors in their schools (Solmonson, et al., 2014). Although students wish they had more individual time with their school counselor, students felt as though they were prepared for life after graduation. These findings mean that the students in this study had school counselors who were performing appropriate school counseling tasks related to career readiness. Students felt as though their counselors managed their expectations for life after graduation by providing them with realistic accounts of what they would experience after leaving high school.

**Student Expectations.** When students leave high school, they leave the familiarity that comes with that experience. Students may attend a university after graduation, a vocational school, or they may go straight to work. Whatever path they choose, students have expectations of what life will be like after high school, which they have formed throughout their high school experience and their career planning process (Kreig, 2013). According to Kreis (2013), an increasing number of students are having a hard time adjusting to life after graduation, and it may be because their expectations are not matching reality. Because students receive so much information about post-graduation opportunities starting in their junior year of high school, they tend to have realistic expectations of what their experience will be. (Kreis, 2013). It was found, however, that when students had experiences after high school that was not in line with their expectations, they were more likely to report being stressed Kreis, 2013). If school counselors can help students set realistic expectations about life after graduation, it will significantly help students with the transition from high school to their next endeavor.

What school counselors need to prepare students for regarding college and career readiness is important knowledge for a school counselor to possess. According to Pike, Hansen, & Childress (2015), students are not able to fully assess and understand what their needs will be once they go to college or enter the workforce. Information on what students need after high school is something that school counselors can help educate current high school students on, and assist them to understand what their needs may be once they leave high school. Furthermore, students weren't able to predict how many hours they would need to work, and what pay they would need to receive to earn a livable wage (Pike, et al., 2015). The reality of life after graduation from high school should be a part of a school counselor's guidance curriculum to help ensure students prepare for college and a career.

There are also expectations that students have about life after high school that end up not being met, and sometimes it can be for the better. For example, Keup (2007) discussed how students reported that they didn't expect their relationships with their family to be as strong as they were once they left home, and they didn't expect their personal development to be as great as they experienced. Students may fear to leave home because they don't want to leave their family and lose a sense of belonging they feel with their family. However, students reported that they remained close to their loved ones back home, and were still dependent on their parents (Keup, 2007). One thing students found that they didn't expect, was that they would have much more academic independence than they did in high school, and would have more of an opportunity to explore topics that interested them (Keup, 2007). Possessing time management and organizational skills are important for first year students to have when going to college, because they will encounter, not only academic independence but independence in their personal lives as well. School counselors are in a position where they help students develop time management and organizational skills that will help them with their transition to college. Counselors can also help educate students on what their needs will be after high school, but should also highlight the positive aspects of life after graduation to help students from experiencing too much stress throughout the transition out of high school.

**High School Students and Stress.** With so much emphasis on college and career planning during a student's academic career, school counselors also need to take into account a student's emotional experience while planning for life after graduation. One of the other school counseling domains, besides career planning, is the social-emotional development of students (ASCA, 2012). Students often experience heightened stress during their senior year of high school while planning for life after graduation and it often impacts a student's overall mental health (Olson, 2015). With college cost on the rise and schools becoming more competitive, it

is important for school counselors to be aware of their student's mental health throughout their college and career planning process.

Knowing what students are the most stressed about will help school counselors prioritize what they focus on when creating a school-counseling curriculum for college and career planning. A study was done to survey high school seniors about the most stressful aspects of planning for life after graduation. According to the study, the primary stressors included: deciding on a career or college, whether to stay close to home or go away, cost of college, parental and teacher pressure, the college application process, standardized tests, finding the right college, being away from parents, and getting accepted into the college of their choice (Gilyardi, 2006). Furthermore, the study asked students to identify what they wish the school had done to help them with their college and career planning process, and among the top answers were more individual time with counselors and more college presentations or workshops (Gilyardi, 2006). These results provide a lot of information for school counselors on what they can do to help students with their post-graduation planning process. Since the employment outlook is constantly changing, the purpose of the current study is to replicate Gilyardi's study to determine if the stressors students are facing presently are similar to the stressors they faced seven years ago.

The purpose of the research is to determine what high school seniors perceive to be the major stressors in post-graduation decision-making. The goal is to help school counselors focus their college and career guidance efforts. If school counselors are knowledgeable of what high school students find stressful, they will be able to address those concerns first and foremost. Furthermore, the research sought to determine how students perceive their school counselor and what their school provides during the college and career decision-making process. Finding

a way to cover college and career planning comprehensively is crucial to ensure 100% of students are receiving the help they need.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The current senior class has a total of 44 students, and all were informed of the opportunity to participate in the survey. Both male and female students were informed of the survey. Only students who were 17 or 18 years old were recruited. It was expected that most participants would be white, but that a few black students would also participate, which held true with the addition of one Hispanic or Latino student. The senior class has 20 male students (45.5%) and 24 female students (54.5%), so it was expected there would be a relatively even number of male and female participants, however 100% of students who participated were female.

### **Setting**

The setting in which the research was conducted was a small suburban/rural public high school in Western New York that participates in an urban/suburban program. The population of the town is approximately 2,000. During the 2015-2016 school year, there were a total of 655 students enrolled in the school district, with 352 in the middle/high school building (data.nysed.gov). Because of the urban/suburban program, the school is relatively diverse for such a small community, yet there is a majority white population. According to the school's New York State Report Card, 76% of the population is white, 15.3% black, 3.8% Hispanic or Latino, 2.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.7% multiracial, and .5% American/Native American (data.nysed.gov). 37% of the population is eligible for free or reduced lunch, indicating the socioeconomic status of many families in the community (data.nysed.gov).

### **Instrumentation and materials**

The instrument that was used was a survey adapted from Melissa Gilyardi, 2006 (Appendix A), and is intended to measure perceived stressors faced by high school seniors in their career and college decision-making process. All seven questions from the original survey remained on the adapted version. The questions consisted of both multiple choice and short answer questions. They included gender, post-graduation plans, major stresses in making post-graduation plans, readiness, and questions addressing what their high school did and didn't do for then throughout the process. Questions regarding ethnicity and first generation college student status were added in order to add additional demographic information. No questions were excluded from the original, but instead of making gender a fixed choice question, it was left as an open-ended question.

### **Procedure**

Students were recruited through their Participation in Government course. All seniors are enrolled in Participation in Government, and their teacher offered extra credit for participation in the survey. Students were presented with the opportunity and if students were under 18 years old, they were given an informed consent form for their parent or guardian to sign. 18 year olds were provided a separate informed consent form that they could sign on their own. It was suggested that students complete the survey during a free period in the school counseling office. Students were given a two-week window to complete the survey, and had to bring in their informed consent signed in order to complete the survey. Students were given the option to terminate their involvement in the study at any time before, during, or after taking the survey.

### **Data Analysis**

The survey was administered to a total of 11 students (25%). All students completed the survey in its entirety. Once all the surveys were collected, they were coded for patterns and

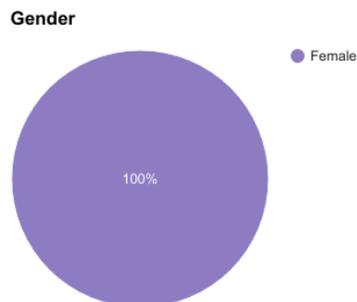
themes, and analyzed for demographic information. Patterns and themes were determined for major stresses faced by high school seniors, what the high school provided in their decision-making process, and what the students wished their school provided. Demographic information regarding gender, ethnicity, and first generation status were organized by percentage. Data on what student's future plans are and whether students feel prepared for life after graduation were also analyzed.

## Results

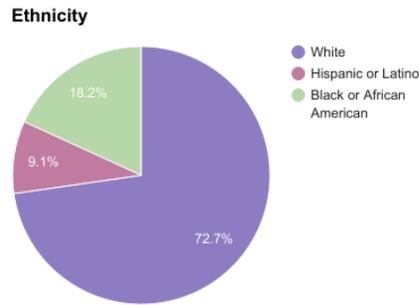
### Demographics

The following demographic data was collected and calculated from the completed surveys (Appendix A).

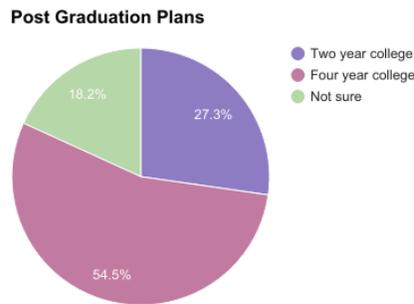
**Gender.** It was calculated that 100% of the 11 students who completed the survey was female.



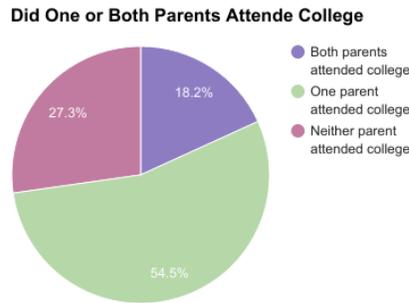
**Ethnicity.** Of the 11 students who completed the survey, 72.7% (8) of the students indicated that they were White, 18.2% (2) of the students indicated they were Black or African American, and 9.1% (1) indicated they were Hispanic or Latino.



**Post-Graduation Plans.** The majority of the students, 81.8% (9), indicated that they plan on going to college. Of those students, 6 of them plan on attending a four-year college, and 3 plan on attending a two-year college. The other 18.2% (3) of students indicated that they are not sure of their post-graduation plans.



**First Generation.** Most of the students, 72.7% (8) who completed the survey indicated that at least one parent had attended college. Out of those students, 6 indicated that one parent attended college, and 2 indicated that both parents attended college. A total of 3 students indicated that neither of their parents had attended college, indicating that if they were to attend college they would be a first generation student.

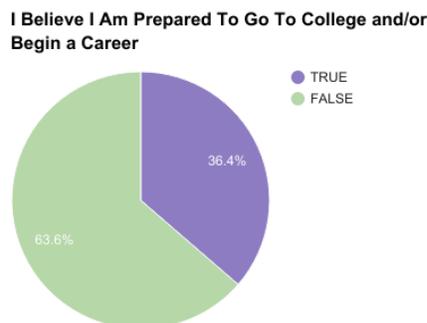


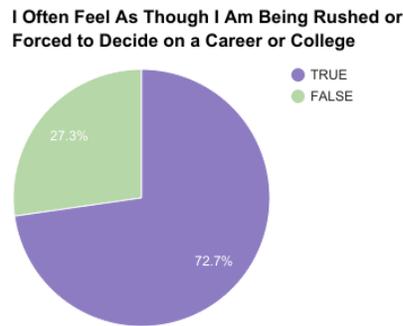
**Themes and Patterns**

The remaining questions on the survey were examined and coded for themes and patterns.

**Major Stressors in Post-Graduation Decision Making.** Students were asked to “list three things that are the most stressful for you in deciding on a college and/or a career after high school” (Appendix A). From those answers the major themes indentified included: financial aid, college/career choice, college distance from home, standardized test scores, and deadlines.

**College/Career Preceived Preparedness.** The survey (Appendix A) included two True/False questions that inquired about students perceived readiness for life after graduation. 63.6% (7) of students reported that they do feel prepared to go to college or to begin a career, but 72.7% (8) of students also reported that they feel as though they are being rushed to make decisions about life after graduation.





**School-Provided Services.** The students were asked to list two things that their school provided them during their college/career decision-making process. Students identified that they met one-on-one with their school counselor, that their school provided a few college visit opportunities, and that they had the opportunity to take the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT).

Students were also asked to list what they wish their school provided during their decision-making process. More access to their school counselor, scholarship and financial aid guidance, career exploration opportunities, and college information were the major themes of what students wished were provided to them in high school.

## Discussion

### Overview

The current study was intended to investigate what high school seniors perceive to be the most stressful factors in their college and career decision-making process. Based on Gilyardi (2006), major stressors were expected to include: deciding on a career or college, whether to stay close to home or go away, cost of college, parental and teacher pressure, the college application process, standardized tests, finding the right college, being away from parents, and getting accepted into the college of their choice. The results from the current study were consistent with what was expected, however not many students explicitly identified

pressure from parents, and being away from their parents as major stressors. Furthermore, results indicated that students wished that their school and their school counselor provided more opportunities for college and career exploration, most significantly, more time with their school counselor. This was not surprising given that the school only has one school counselor for both middle and high school, a counselor to student ratio of about 1:400, well above the ASCA recommended 1:250 (Lapan, et al., 2012).

### **Limitations**

A major limitation to this study was the number of participants. The number of completed surveys resulted in a 25% return rate, and a small sample size of 11 participants. In addition, all 11 participants were female. A larger data set and more gender diversity would have provided results that better reflect all seniors at the high school. Also, since all of the data comes from the same school, the results may not be indicative of all high school seniors. If students have smaller school counselor to student ratios, they may not indicate that they wish they had more time to meet with their school counselor.

### **Implications for School Counselors**

The results of the surveys indicate what school counselors should focus on when preparing students for their senior year of high school. Students are worried about financial aid, what career they are interested in, what college to go to, the application process, and standardized tests. Based on these themes, school counselors should make sure they are creating a school-counseling curriculum that thoroughly explores these topics with students before they reach senior year. Providing students and their families with the appropriate information on application processes and financial aid should be a priority, as well as college and career exploration throughout a student's school career.

The participants also noted what they wish their school provided during their decision-making process. More individualized time with their counselor may not be a possibility if the counselor to student ratio is too high, but the most prominent response on the surveys is that students desire more time to work with their counselor during their senior year. This result is important for school boards and administrators to be aware of if one of their goals is to ensure that 100% of their students are college and career ready. The school counselor plays a major role in that readiness and counselor to student ratios and support for school counselors should be a priority for administration.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The results of this study are consistent with previous research on high school seniors perceived to be major stressors during their career and college decision-making process. However, the results are not entirely reliable given the small sample size and lack of gender diversity. Further research would be more reliable with a larger sample size and a diverse sample. Although the current study had a somewhat ethnically diverse sample, it was not diverse in gender and could have been more diverse in first generation status.

The survey itself could be improved by not providing examples for students. A lot of the responses were straight from the examples given for the questions regarding major stresses and what the school could have done for them. Students weren't forced to think for themselves to answer the questions, and if they were in a rush to finish they may have just picked what answers were already there.

### **Conclusion**

The ASCA National Model (2012) highlights school counseling as an integral part of students' college and career readiness. By determining what students find to be the most stressful aspects of deciding what to do after graduation, school counselors can narrow and

focus their scope of when planning their college and career curriculum. How students perceive the services they are provided is also important for school counselors to reflect on their school-counseling curriculum and ensure they are providing students the services they desire. For school counselors to effectively provide students with the services that will help prepare them for life after high school, it is important for school counselors to know what students need in their decision-making process. It is also important for school administrators and school boards to understand what students need to make sure they are college and career ready. In addition to understanding what students perceive to be stressful in their senior year, administrators should consider the importance of having enough school counselors and support to meet the needs of all students.

**Appendix A**

Career and College Survey for High School Seniors

1. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. Ethnicity:
  - a. White
  - b. Hispanic or Latino
  - c. Black or African American
  - d. Native American or American Indian
  - e. Asian / Pacific Islander
  - f. Other
  
3. When I graduate I plan:
  - a. To attend a two year college
  - b. To attend a four-year college
  - c. To attend a vocational school
  - d. To go straight to work
  - e. Not sure
  - f. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. Please list three things that are the most stressful for you in deciding on a college and/or a career after high school (ex. choice of major, financial aid, career decision, etc.)
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  
5. I believe I am prepared to go to college and/or begin a career (circle one): True or False
  
6. I often feel as though I am being rushed or forced to decide on a career or college (circle one): True or False
  
7. Did one or both of your parents attend college?
  - a. Both parents attended college
  - b. One parent attended college
  - c. Neither parent attended college
  
8. Please list two things you wish the high school would provide you with to help you during your college/career decision-making. (i.e. groups, workshops, college visits, individual sessions, presentations, etc.)
  - 1.
  - 2.

9. Please list two things the high school did provide you with during your college/career decision-making. (i.e. groups, workshops, college visits, individual sessions, presentations, etc.)
  - 1.
  - 2.

*Adapted from:*

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