

## High School Students' Career Plans: The Influence of Others' Expectations

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One of the most important tasks in school counseling is to facilitate students' educational and vocational development. High school students are in a critical stage of making educational and vocational decisions - they must decide whether to enter the work force immediately after high school or further their educational training. To be effective in helping students make the transition from school to work or from school to school, counselors need to be aware of students' level of educational aspirations, their immediate plans, and their perceived expectations from influential persons. Specifically, counselors need to be sensitive to the differences in students' racial/ ethnic backgrounds and genders. The purpose of this study is to examine high school students' postsecondary plans and what they perceive to be the counselors' and other influential persons' expectations of them.

Research on educational/ vocational behaviors of high school students has been fragmented. Most studies on educational/vocational perception and aspiration have examined either a single group-female students (Davey & Stoppard, 1993; Mau, Domnick, & Ellsworth, 1995), at-risk students (Farrell, Sapp, Johnson, & Pollard, 1994), urban, lower socio-economic students (Pollard, 1989)- or compared African Americans with White Americans (Harris, 1970; Hauser & Anderson, 1991; Kerckhoff & Campbell, 1977; Mahoney & Merritt, 1993; Pollard, 1993; Smith, 1991). Other related studies have compared cross-sectional samples. For example, Smith (1991) studied seventh and ninth graders, Davey and Stoppard (1993) surveyed 10th and 12th graders, while Wilson and Wilson (1992) and Mahoney and Merritt (1993) examined only 12th graders.

Counselors play a significant role in shaping students' career goals. Understanding students' perceptions about counselors' attitudes and how these perceptions compare to other influential persons provides valuable information for counselors. Examining students' perceptions of their significant others would give clues to identifying key persons who may have a strong influence on students' career plans. Comparing differences in perceived counselor expectation among racial and gender groups may also give clues to potential bias in guidance counseling.

In contrast to expectations, aspirations refer to a desire or wish, with no constraints on financial, intellectual, or other resources (Rehberg, 1967). Comparing students' perceived expectations and their own aspirations would help to identify potential conflicts. Lack of agreement among significant others about what they think is right for the student may create dissonance. Examining differences in aspirations among various cultural groups would also help to identify underrepresented groups for planning effective counseling interventions.

In the present study, a more comprehensive approach than prior studies was taken to include major U.S. racial/ ethnic groups with a 2-year period longitudinal follow-up, surveyed in 1990 and 1992. Data used in this study are based on the most recent series of longitudinal studies sponsored by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). Because the data contain survey information

collected from a nationally representative sample of 10th and 12th grade students, findings from this study can be generalized to high school students with confidence. Specifically, the present study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are high school students' perceptions of their counselors' expectations about their post-secondary career plans? Do the perceptions differ by race and gender? How do the perceptions change from 10th-grade to 12th-grade?
2. How do students' perceptions of counselors' college expectations differ from their perceptions of other influential persons' expectations? Do the perceptions also differ due to race and gender? How do the perceptions change from 10th-grade to 12th-grade?
3. What are the levels of students' educational aspirations? Do the aspiration levels differ by race and gender? Do students' educational aspirations increase from 10th-grade to 12th-grade?

## **Method**

The data were based on the first and second follow-up studies of the National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988 (NELS: 88) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1994), sponsored by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). The base-year survey was based on a national probability sample of 24,599 students selected from 1,052 middle schools (public, N = 815 and private, N = 237) in the United States. The base year sample was refreshed with additional students added to both the first follow-up (10th-grade, N = 20,840) and second follow-up (12th-grade, N = 21,188) to compensate for the loss of students in the follow-up surveys. Because of sample refreshing, NELS: 88 constitutes a nationally representative sample of spring term 1990 sophomores and spring term 1992 seniors. The sample was stratified by size, urban versus rural, region, and percentage of minority populations. The sample was weighted to compensate for unequal probabilities of selection and to adjust for nonresponse rates. The breakdown of the final sample included 10,713 males, 10,475 females, 1,406 Asian Americans, 2,922 Hispanics, 2,260 African Americans, 266 Native Americans, and 14,024 White Americans.

## **Variables**

The NELS: 88 questionnaires were designed to collect information about a wide range of topics, including students' and parents' backgrounds, perception of self, students' educational and vocational activities, postsecondary graduation plans, and aspirations. Two survey questions used for this study are described as follows: Post-secondary plans. This variable was measured by the survey question: What do the following people think is the most important thing for you to do right after high school? (a) Your father, (b) Your mother, (c) Your friends, (d) A close relative, (e) School counselor, (f) Your favorite teacher, and (g) Coach. Responses and coding were: Does not apply (1), Go to college (2), Get a full-time job (3), Enter a trade school or an apprenticeship program (4), Enter military service (5), Get married (6), They think I should do what I want (7), They don't care (8), and I don't know (9).

**Educational aspirations.** This variable was measured by the survey question: As things stand now, how far in school do you think you will go? Responses were coded from 1 to 6 as follows: (1) Won't finish high school, (2) Will graduate from high school, (3) Will go to vocational school, (4) Will attend college, (5) Will graduate from college, and (6) Will attend a higher level of school after graduating from college.

**Table 1. Percentage of Responses Regarding Students' Perceptions of Counselors' Expectations for Their Career Plans by Race and Gender**

<b>Career Plans</b>	<b>Asian</b>		<b>Hispanic</b>		<b>Black</b>		<b>Native</b>		<b>White</b>		<b>Male</b>		<b>Female</b>	
<b>College</b>	59	77	54	73	56	73	44	62	55	70	54	67	56	75
<b>Full-time job</b>	1	0	0	1	1	1	10	3	1	1	1	1	1	0
<b>Trade School</b>	1	0	2	2	2	3	2	1	2	2	3	3	1	2
<b>Military</b>	0	0	0	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	2	0	0
<b>Married</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Do what I want</b>	7	8	7	5	4	4	7	12	7	6	6	7	7	5
<b>Don't care</b>	3	3	3	4	2	2	1	6	3	3	3	3	3	3
<b>Doesn't know</b>	22	8	24	9	23	10	25	11	24	11	23	12	24	9
<b>Doesn't apply</b>	7	3	9	7	10	5	9	4	7	6	9	7	7	5

Note. Percentages were based on column percentage and were rounded to the first digit. Native = Native Americans

## Results

### Perceptions of Counselors' Expectations

Results of chi-square analyses on students' perceptions of their counselors' expectations for postsecondary plans by race, gender, and grade level are shown in Table 1. Since a small difference in percentage is likely to result in statistical significance due to the large sample size, it is more useful to review the results with regard to their practical meaningfulness rather than statistical differences. The percentages were computed based on a weighted sample.

As can be seen in Table 1, well over 50% of the 10th-grade students thought that their counselors expected them to go to college. This perception held across race and gender with the exception of Native American students (44%). Asian-American students reported the highest percentage (59%) of perceived expectations for college attendance from their counselors. By 12th-grade, this percentage had increased significantly across race and gender, although a greater increase was found for female students (19%) than for male students (13%).

Only a small percentage of students perceived that their counselors wanted them to choose no college options (i.e., full-time job, trade school, or military services). The exception was that about 10% of 10th-grade Native Americans perceived a full-time job expectation. Very slight

changes (< 3%) occurred between 10th and 12th grades with respect to students' perceptions of counselors' expectations of non-college career plans. A 1 % increase was found for African Americans and females for the trade school option. A higher percentage of 12th-grade Native Americans (2%) and African Americans (2%) and a greater percentage of 12th-grade males (2%) than females (0%) thought that counselors wanted them to enter the military. Compared to other groups, a relatively smaller percentage of African American students (4%) believed their counselors expected them to do whatever they wanted. There were no differences between 10th-grade male students (7%) and female students (7%) in this perception.

A relatively small percentage (< 5%) of students perceived that their counselors do not care about their career plans. The perception held relatively consistent over time except for Native American students. Only 1 % of 10th-grade Native American students reported that they perceived that their counselor doesn't care. This perception increased to 6% when they became 12th graders. Male students (3%) did not differ from female students (3%) in this perception. More than 20% of 10th-grade students did not know their counselors' expectations. There is little variation in this perception across racial or gender groups.

### **Perceived Influential Persons' College Expectations**

Table 2 summarizes the perceived college expectations of counselors and influential persons by race, gender, and grade level. Among the influential persons, 10th-grade students were more likely to perceive college expectations from parents or relatives than from counselors or teachers, and least likely from friends or coaches. The one exception was that African Americans were more likely to perceive college expectation from counselors (56%) than from their fathers (52%). By the 12th-grade, students, regardless of group membership, were more likely to perceive college expectations from counselors than from their fathers. The percentage of students perceiving their fathers' college expectations increased over time for all groups. Similarly, perceived mothers' expectations increased in percentage over time. A larger percentage of students, both 10th and 12th graders, perceived a greater college expectation from their mother than from their father.

Compared to the percentage of students perceiving college expectation from counselors, the percentage of 10th-grade students perceiving college expectations from teachers was higher for Asian Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans, slightly lower for Hispanics and Whites, and lower for males while the same for females. By 12th-grade, the percentage of students perceiving teachers' college expectations had increased across the group, as had the perceived counselors' expectations for college attendance. Among influential persons, friends and coaches were least likely to be perceived by students as having expectations for college attendance in both 10th and 12th grades. Over time, a greater percentage increase occurred for female students than male students in perceiving college expectations from all influential persons except for parents.

### Students' Educational Aspirations and Program Tracks

Educational aspiration was first analyzed using chi-square analyses to examine the distribution of responses on the various levels of educational aspiration. Since chi square is sensitive to large sample sizes, Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) comparing mean differences in educational aspirations were also conducted. Results of the ANOVA for 10th-grade students

**Table 2. Perceived Influential Person's College Expectations by Grade Level, Race, and Gender**

Perceived Persons	Asian		Hispanic		Black		Native		White		Male		Female	
	10th	12th	10th	12th	10th	12th	10th	12th	10th	12th	10th	12th	10th	12th
<b>Father</b>	73	79	58	64	52	54	44	54	61	64	58	60	61	66
<b>Mother</b>	80	83	69	75	65	71	55	69	67	70	66	68	68	74
<b>Friends</b>	43	63	36	52	37	52	35	43	38	52	37	51	39	53
<b>Relatives</b>	67	75	59	72	64	71	49	66	60	66	58	64	62	71
<b>Counselor</b>	59	77	54	73	56	73	44	62	55	70	54	67	56	75
<b>Favorite Teacher</b>	62	74	53	73	58	72	49	67	53	67	52	63	56	73
<b>Coach</b>	32	37	27	32	37	39	30	29	32	35	38	41	26	30

*Note.* Percentages were based on column percentage and were rounded to the first digit. Native = Native Americans.

showed significant difference in race,  $F(4, 2,923,644) = 6609.9, p < .0000$  and gender,  $F(1, 2,934,171) = 19835.2, p < .0000$ . Results of the ANOVAs for 12th-grade students showed significant difference in race,  $F(4, 2,345,111) = 2611.3, p < .0000$ , and gender,  $F(1, 2,352,764) = 16,566.3, p < .0000$ . Table 3 provides the column percentages, as well as the means and standard deviations of educational aspiration by group.

As can be seen in Table 3, the majority of 10th-grade students indicated that they would at least have some college education regardless of racial or gender groups. However, the majority of 12th-grade students indicated that they would finish college or go to graduate school. Results also indicate that Asian Americans had the high-est level of educational aspiration both in 10th-grade ( $M = 4.3$ ) and 12th-grade ( $M = 5.1$ ). White (10th-grade,  $M = 4.0$ ; 12th-grade,  $M = 4.8$ ) and African American (10th-grade,  $M = 3.9$ ; 12th-grade,  $M = 4.8$ ) students had higher educational aspirations than Native American (10th-grade,  $M = 3.6$ ; 12th-grade,  $M = 4.7$ ) and Hispanic (10th-grade,  $M = 3.7$ ; 12th-grade,  $M = 4.7$ ) students. Female students (10th-grade,  $M = 4.0$ ; 12th-grade,  $M = 4.9$ ) had significantly higher aspirations than male students (10th-grade,  $M = 3.8$ ; 12th-grade,  $M = 4.7$ ).

The results showed that significantly greater percentages of Asian Americans (53%) and White Americans (46%) than other racial groups were enrolled in college prep programs, while a greater percentage of African Americans (22%) and Native Americans (22%) were enrolled in

**Table 3. Students' Educational Aspirations by Grade, Race, and Gender**

Aspiration	Asian		Hispanic		Black		Native		White		Male		Female	
	10th	12th	10th	12th	10th	12th	10th	12th	10th	12th	10th	12th	10th	12th
<b>Less than high school</b>	1	0	5	1	2	0	7	1	2	1	3	1	2	0
<b>High school</b>	8	3	15	6	14	7	14	11	10	6	12	7	10	4
<b>Vocational / trade school</b>	13	7	14	12	16	12	19	14	16	12	18	13	14	11
<b>Some college</b>	39	12	41	20	39	14	44	18	46	14	44	15	44	15
<b>College</b>	18	36	8	31	14	34	5	27	15	36	13	35	16	35
<b>Graduate / Professional</b>	22	42	12	29	15	34	10	29	12	32	10	29	14	35
<b>Average on Educational Aspirations Scale</b>														
<i>M</i>	4.3	5.1	3.7	4.7	3.9	4.8	3.6	4.7	4.0	4.8	3.8	4.7	4.0	4.9
<i>SD</i>	1.2	1.0	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.1
<b>High school program tracks in which respondents were enrolled</b>														
<b>General</b>	35		50		42		55		39		41		39	
<b>College Prep</b>	53		32		36		23		46		42		45	
<b>Vocational</b>	12		18		22		22		15		17		16	

*Note.* Percentages were based on column percentage and were rounded to the first digit. Native = Native Americans. Educational aspirations scale: 1 = Won't finish high school; 2 = Will graduate from high school; 3 = Will go to vocational school; 4 = Will attend college; 5 = Will graduate from college; 6 = Will attend a higher level of school after graduating from college.

vocational programs. A slightly greater percentage of female students ( 45%) than male students (42%) were enrolled in college prep programs, whereas a slightly greater percentage of male (17%) than female (16%) students were enrolled in vocational programs.

In summary, results indicate that among various options, attending college was the expectation most likely to be perceived by the majority of students from their counselors. Very few students perceived that their counselors wanted them to work or attend trade/business school. Among various influential persons, students were more likely to perceive an expectation for college education from their parents or relatives than from their counselors or teachers, and least likely from friends or coaches. Students' educational aspirations increased from sophomore to senior year. Significant differences in educational aspirations and perceived expectations for college education were also found within racial and gender groups both in 10th-grade and 12th-grade.

## Discussion

The most important finding of this study relates to the high proportion of both 10th- and 12th-grade students perceiving that their counselors expected them to attend college regardless of racial background. A common mis-conception has been that minority and female students are more likely than White male students to have lower educational aspirations from significant others. Interestingly, the present study does not lend support to this belief, at least not in the form of students' perceptions.

The high proportion of students perceiving counselor expectations for college attendance may imply that counselors focus on college attendance and give less attention and encouragement to attending trade school or entering the military or work force. Given the fact that only about 30% of students eventually obtain a college degree (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990) and the renewed emphasis on school-to-work transition (National Governors' Association, 1990), this finding raises a red flag for counselors. Lee and Ekstrom (1987) found that college prep students were more likely to have counselor contact than either vocational or general education students. Since a relatively greater proportion of minority students are enrolled in noncollege prep programs, they may be more unlikely to be served by counselors.

Another major finding shows a significant increase in the percentage of students perceiving expectations for college attendance from 10th-grade to 12th-grade regardless of group membership. It is probable that this change is due to an increased level of postsecondary planning in the 2-year interim. Such planning takes on special significance when students must decide to enter the work force or continue with additional education. It is worth noting that, while other groups reported significant increases in the percentage of perceived college expectations from counselors, Native American students' perceptions showed little change. Lack of role models, low self-efficacy, or seeing little relationship between education and job attainment may also contribute to this perception. In addition, Native American students and their parents may be reluctant to seek educational planning assistance from the school system. Such reluctance would fit with Native Americans' reliance upon tribal leaders for guidance. Few studies have investigated Native Americans' educational and vocational behaviors. Further research may give insight to this matter.

Findings from Mau (1997) and Smith (1991) suggest that parents, especially mothers, play an important role in influencing students' college attendance. In both the 10th and 12th grades, students perceived their mothers as having higher expectations than their fathers. Another finding is that females perceived higher levels of parental expectations for college attendance than males in both the 10th and 12th grades. These intra-group differences of students' perceptions of their parents' expectations merit more attention when helping students with their career planning.

Not only had students' perceived expectations increased over time, but their own educational aspirations also increased over time regardless of race or gender. However, the level of

aspiration apparently does not necessarily relate to entry into college. There are a number of factors influencing the actual decision to enter college, and one of the strong factors may be due to the effect of academic tracking. The present study in accordance with Lee and Ekstrom's (1987) study of tracking indicated that more minority students tended to be enrolled in vocational or general education tracks. Tracking itself may subtly influence students' locus of control, since college prep students have been found to attribute academic success to internal factors and vocational education students attribute their success to external factors (Klaczynski & Reese, 1991). Attitudes about self-efficacy may also make a difference about what students say they aspire to and their willingness to act on those aspirations (Garcia & Levenson, 1975; Kerckhoff & Campbell, 1977). Other factors contributing to the disparity between aspirations and actual educational attainment deserve further study.

## **Implications**

While the results of this study do not provide definitive answers to the research questions, they do yield some implications for school counseling services and further research.

First, there is a large disparity between the levels of students' aspirations for college attendance and their enrollment in college prep classes. Since it is unlikely that the majority of students will attend and complete college, counseling programs are challenged to help students develop realistic educational goals. Helping students to review various educational/ vocational options should be one of the key elements in high school counseling programs. Vocational school options, that is, entering the work force or the military, need to be regarded as different but viable and valuable postsecondary goals. Students who choose to take such a vocational track must be assured that they are not inferior to college-bound students. Counselors must acknowledge the importance of work-bound students and spend time assisting them.

The focus of such assistance should be on helping students decide what is truly important to them. Counseling programs can be designed to help students look at their own beliefs about education and how their behavior impacts their academic achievement, to teach students decision-making skills that allow them to process critical information about themselves (e.g., interests, abilities, and values) and information about the world of work (e.g., routine, requirements, and rewards), and to help them select the most appropriate academic track in order to reach their goals. The unique educational /vocational needs and barriers facing different minority groups need to be addressed in these programs. By helping students become more effective, self-directed learners, counselors may well be able to help minority students remove the barriers they perceive to their achieving postsecondary goals.

It appeared that 10th-grade students were more likely to perceive college expectations from their parents than other influential persons. Counselor assistance to parents in helping them work with their children in planning for high school and beyond is crucial. As Smith (1991) noted, if parents want their children to develop specific attitudes about education, then they must be able to communicate those preferred attitudes to their children. Counselors could assist



parents in clarifying their expectations for their children. In working with parents, it is imperative that counselors be aware of the racial/ cultural differences in attitudes and expectations toward work and education. Different types of programs for different groups of parents and students may be more effective than blanket approaches in providing them with necessary assistance. Since these differences manifest themselves in middle school (Mau, 1995; Smith, 1991), counseling interventions may need to be implemented earlier when students still have control over what needs to be done.

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