

Utilizing Family Systems Theory in College Readiness Counseling

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*P*ostsecondary planning includes academic, emotional, and financial challenges for which many students and families are unprepared. School counselors will be able to better prepare students and their families for the college readiness process through understanding and implementing concepts from Family Systems Theory. This manuscript focuses on core tenets of Family Systems Theory that are directly applicable to the college readiness experience. The authors then propose a new framework to utilize these concepts and guide school counselor-student-family interactions. The manuscript proposes the READ-E framework to incorporate Family Systems Theory into college readiness counseling for K-12 students.

Keywords: family systems, college readiness, school counseling, adolescents

Recent college access and readiness literature highlight the gaps that exist in college readiness, attendance, and graduation for underrepresented students such as students of color, students from lower socioeconomic status, students with disabilities, and first-generation college students (Pulliam et al., 2017). School counselors are key to improving upon these gaps. When school counselors intervene and support students through the college readiness process, student outcomes are improved (Belasco, 2013; Bryan et al., 2011; Woods & Domina, 2014).

School counselors can further improve student outcomes by working with the students' families. Family involvement is critical in college readiness, especially for families of students from low-income backgrounds, who are the first in their family to attend college, and for students of color (Gonzalez, 2017). Families can be strong collaborators in the college process; parental involvement can predict whether or not a student applies to and enrolls in college (Perna et al., 2008). Parents who did not attend college often lack or have inaccurate information on the college process, placing their student at a disadvantage (McKillip et al., 2012; Perna et al., 2008). By engaging with families, school counselors can provide the support and information they need throughout the college readiness process.

The American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2019) states that a strong relationship between school counselors and families can be particularly helpful when supporting families through transitions and difficult experiences. School counselors are a critical bridge between the school and the student's family. However, less than half of CACREP-accredited school counselor programs include training in family counseling (Joe & Harris, 2016), leaving many school counselors untrained or unaware of strategies to incorporate families into their work.

This commentary discusses how school counselors might understand family systems and use a family systems approach to support students and their families in the postsecondary education planning process. The commentary discusses current literature regarding families and in the college readiness process and proceeds to situate this literature in the context of Family Systems Theory. The theory is discussed, along with its application with diverse student populations. A suggested framework for a family systems approach within college readiness counseling, including practical examples, is proposed.

Family Influence on Adolescent Academic Success

Adolescents are under constant academic and social stress (Dupere et al, 2015; Paolini, 2019). The latest research on adolescents in high school shows that students are increasingly impacted by the scholastic demands of the modern workforce, with over 50 percent of jobs requiring at least a bachelor's degree (Paolini, 2019). This adds pressure on adolescents to compete for college admission and enrollment. Students must show evidence of service, academic success, extracurriculars, and scholastic aptitude (Paolini, 2019).

Adolescents from historically underrepresented communities are dually affected by the pressures of college admission and the lack of social capital and family understanding of the college readiness process (Bryan et al., 2011). Research from Bryan and colleagues (2019) shows that family involvement in college readiness can make a positive impact on the support felt by adolescents. This is supported by George Mwangi and colleagues' (2019) structural equation modeling of 19,000 high-schoolers showing that parental involvement is critical to their success. Additionally, the Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH) found that, behind academic and financial stress, family support accounted for the largest variance in anxiety for a college-aged student (Jones et al., 2018). Roksa and Kinsley (2018) also conducted a study that examined family support and its role on students' academic outcomes in college. Their sample included 728 first-year college students who all identified as coming from low-income family backgrounds. The study showed that family emotional support in college had a positive relation to the students' psychological well-being and students' engagement. Both psychological well-being and engagement have been linked to better grades and college persistence (Roksa & Kinsley, 2018). Family support can define the high school-to-college experience for a student, especially for those who are first in their family to pursue a postsecondary education.

Recent literature and research have highlighted the impact of parent support on student outcomes (Radford & Ifill, 2015). Specifically, research has shown that parent involvement can positively impact outcomes such as post-secondary education applications and attendance rates (Gonzalez, 2017), school climate (Thapa et al., 2013), and academic outcomes (Schueler et al., 2014). School counselors need to establish relationships and share information with students and with their families in order to support them (Radford & Ifill, 2015; Robinson & Roksa, 2016).

The current college readiness practices focus on the student's abilities and logistical processes of college applications, but families of students are not always included (Roksa & Kinsley, 2018). This leads to family uncertainty, which can negatively impact attrition rates in college and family and student wellbeing (Roksa & Kinsley, 2018). Family Systems Theory can be more effectively integrated into school counselors' work to improve these outcomes.

Family Systems Theory Background

Systems theories share the concept that groups of people, especially families, are systems of energy that adjust for one another. Families, much like physical systems, have rules to regulate themselves as a closed system and make adjustments when something new is introduced to the system (Gehart, 2014). Family Systems Theory (FST), largely developed by Murray Bowen in the 1950s, suggests that the family is more than a collection of individuals; it is an acting and reacting system (Stanton & Welsh, 2012).

There are three essential concepts to understand within FST. First, one person does not conduct all of the interactional patterns. This happens in process with each other. Thus, no one person can be blamed for distress within the family. Second, behavior can be understood without considering the context of the family. Third, personal characteristics are dependent on the system (Gehart, 2014). This might mean that a parent is experiencing stress due to work. In individual counseling, the parent would focus on stress management, which will work with the individual. An FST approach tells us that the family is simultaneously affected by that stress (Frey & Oppenheimer, 1990).

Homeostasis

Central to the concepts in systems theory is homeostasis, which dictates that systems are constantly trying to meet emotional stability. The opposite of homeostasis, in FST, is anxiety. This anxiety may lead to emotional cutoff, which is a cease in emotional connection to reduce anxiety. This anxiety may also encourage unhealthy emotional triangles within the family system to disperse the anxiety between multiple individuals (Gehart, 2014). Homeostasis is a dynamic process in that, as people in a system change or behave in certain ways, the system must also adjust. The definition of homeostasis might also change, in which case a system will have to restructure to meet this new homeostasis (Diamond & Siqueland, 1995; Frey & Oppenheimer, 1990; Gehart, 2014). This is true for physical systems, and these concepts are applied to family systems as well (Diamond & Siqueland, 1995).

Tension

When a family system encounters some tension, the system will distribute the tension among its members, though it may look different for each person (Burke & Greenglass, 1999). For instance, one family member might express the tension outwardly while another might express this inwardly by withdrawing or becoming more robotic. This tension and homeostasis are processes that usually involve change. First-order change is when the system moves and returns to homeostasis (Gehart, 2014). This might happen when a caregiver or child is stressed and family resources and interactional patterns work to return the family to homeostasis as a system and maintain their structure (Frey & Oppenheimer, 1990; Gehart, 2014). Let us take the example of a two caregiver, two child family. The caregivers both have full-time jobs and the children attend elementary school. Tension occurs when a caregiver is now switched to a night shift at their job. The family's homeostasis is affected as the caregivers are no longer able to spend time together on weekdays, the children experience only caregiving from only one parent at a time,

and finances are affected because childcare is impacted by the new schedules. The family needs to reorganize to maintain their former homeostasis. Children might take on more responsibility to help the caregivers and the caregivers might plan to have a night to themselves to maintain their relationship.

Restructuring

Second-order change happens when the family needs to restructure. Second-order change involves a significant change to the system and is usually a change over time. During these changes, the family may need to create new hierarchies, change relationships between members, or isolate for protection (Frey & Oppenheimer, 1990; Gehart, 2014). Using the previous family as an example, a caregiver might be diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. This causes tension in that children might be asked to care for the caregiver, finances will be severely affected by both medical costs and loss of an income, and the healthy caregiver may seek emotional comfort with their children or other family and friends. These family members and friends might be added to the family system to create a new homeostasis that has a different emotional baseline.

Thus, the decisions that people make can be conceptualized within this system; the family systems model shows how families interact with each other in the context of tension (Frey & Oppenheimer, 1990). A student's choices to engage in clubs, play sports, or use substances are first-order changes that require some adjustment for the family to return to homeostasis. Other experiences extend the stress and tension on the family and lead to second order change (Frey & Oppenheimer, 1990), such as the decision to apply for postsecondary education opportunities.

Family Systems Theory Conceptualization of College Readiness Work

The college preparation and enrollment processes add new stressors to not only the student, but to their entire family (Fann et al., 2009). FST would espouse that the child's process of searching for, applying to, and enrolling in postsecondary education will affect the family as well as the individual. The student's post-secondary experiences will be felt in the form of tension for the family and the family may find difficulty with homeostasis, leading them to pursue second-order change (Whitner & Abrahamowicz, 1990). School counselors need to incorporate the family into the college preparation process. When additional stress is added, support and resources can help the family anticipate and decide how to restructure (Halbesleben, 2010). This process would prepare the system to recognize some of the challenges and opportunities that a postsecondary education provides, along with a breakdown of what the expectations might be of the student and family. It is important to be aware of these systems when working with all students, and especially those whose parents/guardians did not graduate from college.

Framework for Implementation: READ-E

Family Systems Theory can guide the structure for how to engage with families within the scope of the school counselor role. Using the concepts of tension, restructuring, and homeostasis, the authors propose a five-step framework to guide the school counselor's engagement with students' families. This is the READ-E approach, which stands for rapport building, exploring homeostasis, anticipating restructuring, developing a plan, and engaging.

R: Rapport building with families

Families, especially those from cultures that have stigma towards counseling and those families unfamiliar with the school system, need to build trust in the school counselor and the school system before they will rely on them for information and support (Fann et al., 2009). Aspects such as religion and culture within a community might be challenged by the school system and it is important that the family is understood from these different lenses. Building rapport may take some time and will need to be reiterated upon any change in school counselor. This rapport must also be built with the school system in creating a community of trust.

The earlier a school counselor can start working with families in the college readiness counseling process, the better. Using longitudinal data from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLs:09), a nationally representative sample of high school students, Dunlop Velez (2016) found that parents who met with a school counselor before 11th grade were more likely to then rely on the school counselor for college readiness counseling. If a school counselor develops relationships with families before students begin their college search and application process, the families may feel more comfortable actually relying on that relationship throughout the college process. Collaboration between the school counselor, student, and parents regarding the postsecondary education process has been shown to significantly increase a student's chance of attending college (McDonough, 2005).

Some of the ways school counselors can build rapport are through parent/family programs at school, newsletters geared towards families, and keeping the family informed about the college readiness process. For example, a school counselor may send announcements to students about upcoming college visits, deadlines, and scholarships; instead of just sending this to the students, parents/guardians can be copied on the communication. The school counselor may also consider holding a monthly parent/guardian-only workshop to educate families on the college process and answer questions. A regular program like this can lead to stronger relationships and familiarity with the school counselor and what they can do to help the family. As programs are planned for families, it is vital to know the community and needs. For example, it may be beneficial to run the workshops early in the morning and repeat them in the evening, to make the programs accessible to parents/guardians who work different shifts. Other considerations such as language accessibility, offering childcare during the programs, and taking parents/guardians' suggestions for topics can help build rapport as well.

E: Exploring Homeostasis

A central component to Family Systems Theory is understanding the unique system of the family (Frey & Oppenheimer, 1990; Gehart, 2014). This unique system is their homeostasis (Frey & Oppenheimer, 1990) and includes hierarchy and roles that will vary by family. There are some families that depend on the student's income from part-time work to make ends meet. Other families may have an "elders know best" culture in which everyone makes decisions based on family or community elders. Understanding current family dynamics will be helpful in preparing the family for what changes they might expect, which is the next step in this model.

Some interventions can be adopted by school counselors from FST in exploring the family's homeostasis. The first intervention is the use of genograms. Genograms are similar to a family tree, but focus on the processes and tensions within the family (Gehart, 2014). Genograms highlight close and separated relationships and also allow the family to understand generational patterns. An example of this is using the genogram to understand the relationships the child has to their siblings and caregivers and identify other family members to whom the child may feel connected. In addition, the genogram might highlight tension between the child and certain family members or tension between caregivers and family members. It is important to explore all of these dynamics because a support to the child might be a source of tension for a caregiver and vice versa. Another way to use the genogram is to explore a family's career and education history and trends. For example, by mapping out a family's educational history, it may become apparent what some of their education and career values are. This type of information may be useful in a conversation with the school counselor about a family's expectations for their student's future education and career path.

Process questions can be used to explore the family dynamic and add more depth to a genogram (Gehart, 2014). When discussing family tension, these questions might be especially powerful. Process questions decrease anxiety by focusing on how the family deals with tension, rather than the why. An example questions for the parent might be, "When your child is out of the home, what do you worry about?" For the child, a question might be, "What about your caregiver's words affect you the most?" Genogram process questions can also be geared specifically toward college readiness counseling. An example question for the parent might be, "How does it feel to know your child might be the first in your extended family to pursue a college education?" For the child, a process question might be "How does it feel to look at your family's career history and know that you have different goals from most of them?" A family that understands its norms and processes will better understand how these processes and tensions will impact restructuring when the child enters college.

While genograms can be helpful tools when working with families, it can also be difficult to find time to work individually with each student's family. For this reason, it may be more effective to introduce the idea of the genogram, as well as some basic resources on how to fill out a genogram, to a large group of parents first. For example, genogram information can be incorporated into a college night for parents where all families are invited. Then families can complete their own genogram and follow up with the school counselor as desired.

A: Anticipating Restructuring

Family dynamics will most likely change when college enters the family system. The family should be provided psychoeducation to understand the different manners of change. Jones and colleagues (2018) discussed the financial and academic stresses that college may bring. Families may not have anticipated the ways their financial planning will be disrupted and may need to have realistic expectations about the costs and benefits of a college education. Families also need to understand how the college-going student will need support during college preparation years of high school, continuing on to the years the student is actually enrolled in college.

To help anticipate changes to family dynamics, school counselors can work to normalize expectations and changes throughout the college preparation process. In a parent/guardian meeting or newsletter, the school counselor might include a “What to expect” section for upcoming months that includes what tasks a student should be working on in their college preparation process, as well as common concerns of both the student and parent/guardian. For example, as standardized tests approach in junior or early senior year, the school counselor can explain the testing process, the costs of exams, the importance of students making time to study and/or at least time to take the test, as it may conflict with the student’s or family’s typical schedule.

Further, the school counselor can help the family anticipate restructuring by connecting parents/guardians with families who have already gone through the process. If possible, parents/guardians and students from the same school or community can be invited to come and offer a panel discussion about what the postsecondary education planning process was like for them, as well as how their relationships have changed since the student enrolled in college. Previous families can be asked to discuss both positive and negative shifts that have occurred due to their student’s progression to college, and current families should be given time to ask questions and connect individually with one another after the formal program. Another way to anticipate restructuring is through specific psychoeducational sessions. For example, parents/guardians may not realize that even though a student is living at home for college, they will not be around as much as they previously were. Helping families comprehend the college schedule and expectations can lead to better communication and understanding when the student begins college.

D: Developing a Plan

Once family dynamics and potential changes to family dynamics are understood, the team can begin to plan how to best prepare and adjust. This may include planning college visits and financial aid workshops that include both the student and family. Plans should include college and career options, as well as the logistics of realizing these goals. Including career planning into the process is also important. Parent involvement and support has been shown to have a positive impact on students’ career decision-making and aspirations (Wheeler, 2016). This extends into family support and student support during the college years. The school counselor may not be involved at that point, but it is necessary to determine continuity of support.

Communication and planning go hand-in-hand for families who have a child preparing for college. While this is an exciting time for the family, it can also cause additional stress and concerns for the family. The school counselor may suggest ways to help the family plan and communicate throughout the process. For example, the school counselor may suggest that families choose one day a week to engage in thoughtful discussions about the college process. Parents can ask the students questions about their progress on applications or preparation for college, and students can talk to parents about their expectations or what they have been thinking about or concerned about regarding the process. Choosing one day a week for these conversations can help engage the whole family in the process, and limit the amount of pressure the student might be feeling about college. The school counselor can also provide prompting questions for the caregivers and students to ask each other at certain times of year, such as a

student asking, “How much money do you think our family can afford for college?” or a parent/guardian asking, “What classes are required for your major and what are the requirements for admission?” Additionally, if a strong relationship exists between the family and school counselor, the family may reach out to the school counselor if these family conversations hit a roadblock or there are significant issues. At that point, the school counselor can interject and use FST counseling concepts to facilitate these discussions and changes.

This planning should be done on a practical level and also an emotional level. Using the genogram and family process from the “Exploring Homeostasis” step, the counselor might address questions anticipating emotional processes in the future. For instance, the counselor might ask a caregiver, “What will your worries be when your child is out of the home?” Similar questions can also be asked to the child, such as, “How often do you expect to talk to your parent?” The plan can cover how to communicate with each other and how they will handle challenges that arise. The family can make decisions such as how often the child can call and how to communicate in cases of emergencies.

E: Evaluate

The final step is evaluating the process, from both the school counselor as well as the family. The school counselor needs to evaluate the family dynamics and determine if additional or alternate interventions are necessary. Each family is unique, and their needs will also be unique. From a multicultural, family systems view, it is important to evaluate each family’s needs and determine how to best support them (Gehart, 2014).

Not all changes will be anticipated. A family that restructures its finances to support the student may lose a chief financier due to death or disability. A student who initially felt emotionally ready to move out of state for college may struggle with their decision in the first year. Reevaluation and reflection may be done within the family, and the family will need to be prepared for this. This could also be supported by an external provider or community institution. In the “Develop a Plan” step, it will be important to identify potential resources to rely on, if additional supports are needed at any point in the process.

Considerations for Implementation and Future Directions

The READ-E framework presents a helpful way for school counselors to work with families, but there are some potential challenges, as well as limitations, to consider. Implementing a new program typically takes significant time and effort, so it may be helpful to plan to start small. For example, a school counseling department might consider developing a parent/family needs assessment the first year, then take some time to analyze the needs and slowly develop programs over the next few years. Similarly, school counselors have many demands on their time. Meeting individually with each student and their family may not be possible. However, large group programs and smaller interventions at targeted groups of families, such as those of first-generation college students, can be used accomplish the goals of involving families in the process.

Another potential challenge is a family's availability and willingness to be involved in the college readiness process. It will be important to consider potential barriers to parent engagement for the particular school community. For example, it may be helpful to offer childcare for younger siblings, as well as a meal if a program is offered in the evening.

The READ-E framework provides a structure for the school counselor to efficiently engage the students and their support systems to prepare them for college and the college readiness process. The framework takes into consideration the concepts of Family Systems Theory and provides real-world methods for putting those concepts into practice. However, this was an introduction to the framework. Future steps will include conducting research on understanding the effectiveness of the READ-E framework. This might include longitudinal data regarding family systems and school counselors, determining if implementing this type of theory can have a positive impact on student and family outcomes. Additionally, researchers can look at individual family engagement programs using a case study approach, to examine their impacts and how to continue to improve upon this model.

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