

School Counselor Advocacy: Postsecondary Planning for Adolescents Experiencing Emotional  
Disturbances in Urban Environments

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**Abstract (Academic)**

While research studies have investigated postsecondary planning for high-need student populations, few studies have explored the intersectionality of students experiencing emotional disturbances and students living in urban environments and the postsecondary planning perspectives of school counselors with this demographic. The purpose of this study was to explore the current perspectives, practices, and experiences of 10 high school counselors working within a large school district of the northeastern U.S. on postsecondary planning with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. An ecological perspective framed the discussion to provide a holistic picture of the postsecondary needs of adolescents experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. Using a constructivist grounded theory qualitative approach; themes emerged and provided a voice to urban high school counselors on the concepts related to the postsecondary planning process. Two primary themes were attributed to the postsecondary planning perspectives of urban high school counselors with each theme including three sub-themes. Elements hindering postsecondary planning included (1) school resources, (2) poor parent engagement, and (3) higher-level needs; while elements supporting postsecondary planning incorporated (1) school personnel, (2) high parent engagement, and (3) computer-based planning resources. Three themes were linked to the postsecondary planning practices of urban high school counselors: (1) college campus connection, (2) information dissemination, and (3) student-counselor connection. Three themes

were also associated with the postsecondary planning experiences of urban high school counselors: (1) learning from mistakes, (2) planning multiple options, and (3) similar planning for all students. These eight primary themes and six sub-themes provide evidence that offers a greater understanding of the postsecondary planning process for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. Implications for school counselors, counselor educators, and higher education support staff are presented. Study limitations are discussed and recommendations for future research ideas are suggested. By conducting research on this underserved student population, the emerging themes intend to create more equitable postsecondary planning procedures for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments.

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**Abstract (General Audience)**

High school aged students experience increased pressure to succeed, as greater attention is committed towards postsecondary planning in later grades. For high-need adolescent student populations various barriers to postsecondary planning may hinder their ability to envision successful postsecondary futures. Students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments may potentially encounter numerous barriers to postsecondary planning from a personal perspective as well contexts within the home, school, and community. By comprehending potential barriers according to each of these contexts for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments, school counselors can be better prepared to assist this high-need student population in overcoming barriers and realizing postsecondary success. This research study examines the postsecondary planning perspectives, practices, and experiences of urban school counselors assisting students with emotional disturbances. A better understanding of the lived experiences of urban school counselors contributes to more effective postsecondary planning, specifically for students experiencing emotional disturbances, thereby attending to an underserved student population. Results of this research study offers insight into barriers and supports that could improve postsecondary planning by school counselors for all high-need student populations.

## **Dedication**

Words cannot express the gratitude I have for my beautiful fiancé – Alexandra “Allie” Marie Luceri – for an endless amount of support, love, patience, encouragement, and selflessness throughout my doctoral program. Every time I doubted myself, Allie gave me the confidence to persist. Every time I grew anxious, Allie brought me calm. Every time I reached a goal, Allie reminded me to appreciate the moment. Allie, I admire you as a person and I cannot wait to call you my wife. A great deal of appreciation must also be acknowledged towards my wonderful family – Mary “Mom” Rowley, Michael “Dad” Rowley, and Michael “Brother” Rowley Jr. Mom, thanks for taking the time to listen when I needed an ear. Dad, thanks for instilling in me the drive to reach my true potential as your son. Michael, thanks for giving me an escape from academia when I required a much-needed break. As demanding as the process has been, without each of you, this would not have been possible. I love you very much!

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Children and youth experiencing emotional disturbances achieve academically at a disproportionate rate in comparison to any other student subgroup (Landrum, Tankersley, & Kaufman, 2003; Reid, Gonzalez, Nordness, Trout, & Epstein, 2004; Rice & Yen, 2010). The gap in student achievement leaves youth experiencing emotional disturbances at a disadvantage regarding their postsecondary planning. The home environment of children and youth experiencing emotional disturbances further contributes to the poor potential for successful life outcomes (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, & Sumi, 2005b) and the transition into adulthood after secondary school (Wagner & Davis, 2006). Similarly, youth of minority status experience poor academic achievement outcomes at a disproportionate rate when compared to non-minority students (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002; Thomas, Caldwell, Faison, & Jackson, 2009). Boschma and Brownstein (2016) described that minority students in urban environments have a higher likelihood of attending schools with a majority of low-income peers. Previous research has also demonstrated that student socioeconomic status presents as a significant factor impacting academic achievement (Frempong, Ma, & Mensah, 2012). Sanders (2000) emphasized how the postsecondary planning for urban adolescents can be impeded by school practices, family dynamics, and community surroundings.

This chapter will provide an overview for the current study that examines the perspectives, practices, and experiences of school counselors in supporting the postsecondary planning of students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments. The context of the study will be reviewed based on the intersectionality among students experiencing emotional disturbances and students living in urban environments from an ecological perspective

(Bronfenbrenner, 1977). A discussion of supportive elements towards postsecondary planning for high-need students will precede the statement of the problem. The purpose of the study and presenting research questions will be described. Before concluding this chapter, key terms will be defined as well as an overview of the methodology of the study and its limitations.

### **The Intersectionality of Students Experiencing Emotional Disturbances and Students Living in Urban Environments**

From 2000-2009, the U.S. Department of Education funded the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), a second examination that disaggregated students among various subgroups to determine their preparation for the postsecondary transition (National Center for Special Education Research, n.d.). NLTS2 uncovered empirical evidence addressing the barriers to postsecondary success for adolescents experiencing emotional disturbances as well as the need for further longitudinal research to inform practice and policy (Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, & Epstein, 2005a). Specifically, students with emotional or behavioral disorders were determined to be underachieving when compared to students with and without disabilities in regards to transition variables incorporated in NLTS2, i.e. functional characteristics, educational and community-based service experiences, and household characteristics (Sitlington & Neubert, 2004).

Previous research has demonstrated that the functional characteristics of language and communication are delayed in students experiencing emotional or behavioral disorders (Joffe & Black, 2012; Mackie & Law, 2010). In a literature review of 26 studies on the relationship between emotional disturbances and language skills, Benner, Nelson, and Epstein (2002) determined that 71% of students with emotional or behavioral disorders experienced clinically significant language deficits and 57% of students diagnosed with a language deficit experienced

an emotional or behavioral disorder. With language and communication skills providing a foundation for learning and development, the prevalence of language deficits in students experiencing emotional disturbances hinders academic achievement and future postsecondary planning (Nelson, Benner, Neill, & Stage, 2006).

Stability in the school environment has shown to be a determining factor for the academic performance of all students (Wagner et al., 2005a). In a study investigating the academic performance of over 18,000 students classified by socioeconomic status between 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, students considered to be at the highest risk were those experiencing homelessness and/or high rates of school mobility (Herbers, Cutuli, Supkoff, Heistad, Chan, Hinz, & Masten, 2012). A similar study by Malmgren and Gagnon (2005) indicated that 66% of students experiencing an emotional disturbance changed schools by 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and 89% of students changed schools by 5<sup>th</sup> grade. This research presents evidence that students with an emotional disturbance are limited in their potential for academic achievement due to frequent school transitions that may occur prior to the time when postsecondary planning comes to the forefront of their educational experience. Furthermore, Wagner et al. (2005b) described a considerable gap between the suspension and expulsion rates of students experiencing emotional disturbances and other student subgroups. In a study of 2,750 students with disabilities, those diagnosed with an emotional disturbance were almost twice as likely to be suspended 2 or more times than any other disability category (Sullivan, Van Norman, Ethan, & Kingbell, 2014). In particular, exclusionary practices within the secondary school environment are more pronounced than any other school level. According to NLTS2 data, Wagner, Friend, Bursuck, Kutash, Duchnowski, Sumi, and Epstein (2006) concluded that expulsion rates increased from 0.4 to 3.5 between the elementary level and secondary level for schools supporting students experiencing emotional disturbances. The high

rates of school mobility, suspension, and expulsion among students experiencing emotional disturbances create additional barriers to the postsecondary planning for this demographic. These barriers demonstrate a need for school environments to improve postsecondary practices by connecting with the home environments of students experiencing emotional disturbances to more effectively support their academic and emotional functioning (Kutash, Duchnowski, Albert, Green, & Ferron, 2011).

In comparison to more affluent peers, children and youth who reside in an area of low socioeconomic status experience greater risk for a myriad of negative factors including poor health, a substandard education, and deficient social functioning (Lewit, Terman, & Behrman, 1997; Wagner et al., 2005b). According to a study based on data from the 2001 National Health Interview Survey, results indicated that a disproportionate amount of youth experience severe emotional disturbances among low socioeconomic, minority families in comparison to students without disabilities (Mark & Buck, 2006). NLTS2 data supported the link between students experiencing emotional disturbances and low socioeconomic status reporting a significant difference between poverty levels for students with emotional disturbances and students within the general population (Wagner et al., 2005b). These postsecondary planning barriers are magnified for students experiencing emotional disturbances when considering the limited resources of schools in low socioeconomic areas. Henderson, Klein, Gonzalez, and Bradley (2005) revealed that teachers of youth with emotional disturbances were less experienced and credentialed when compared to other special education teachers. The combination of a higher student incidence of emotional disturbance and limited school resources within low socioeconomic areas further substantiates the difficulty in postsecondary planning for this student population.

The barriers to postsecondary planning are comparably complex for students experiencing emotional disturbances as they are for students living in urban environments. By reviewing barriers to postsecondary planning for students in urban environments, a clearer picture can be depicted to understand the intersectionality of these two demographics. A review of barriers to postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances described above, revealed obstacles related to functional characteristics, academic achievement, school exclusionary practices, and low socioeconomic status. These barriers, in addition to others, match those experienced by students living in urban environments.

When compared to rural and suburban environments, urban school settings serve a larger, more densely populated area of students often characterized by high rates of poverty (Scanlon, Saxon, Cowell, Kenny, Pérez-Gualdrón, & Jernigan, 2008). Kincheloe (2010) highlighted that over 80% of urban environments affected by disproportionate rates of poverty are located within the nation's 100 largest cities. Urban communities marked by low socioeconomic status have been linked to a number of barriers to postsecondary planning including single-parent households (Vargas, Park-Taylor, Harris, & Ponterotto, 2016), neighborhood violence (Milam, Furr-Holden, & Leaf, 2010), and limited school resources (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013).

According to Fix & Capps (2005) 95% of students from immigrant families and 91% of students experiencing limited proficiency in English attended schools in urban environments. Kincheloe (2010) supported these findings reporting that urban school environments comprise a student population with higher rates of racial and ethnic diversity as well as linguistic diversity. In a study based on data from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR), Coutinho, Oswald, Best, and Forness (2002) found that culturally and linguistically diverse students were disproportionately diagnosed with an emotional disturbance when compared to

non-diverse student populations. From this notion, it could be proposed that students experiencing language skills deficits within urban school environments may be inappropriately diagnosed with an emotional disturbance due to the impact of ecological factors not considered during diagnosis, thereby creating greater barriers toward postsecondary planning.

Factors related to school achievement paint a similar picture for both students experiencing emotional disturbances and students living in urban environments. According to a national study through the America's Promise Alliance, a significant gap in graduation rates existed across school settings with 53% of students reaching graduation in urban school environments compared to 71% of students in suburban environments (Dillon, 2009). In a study focusing on the relationship between school engagement and high school graduation, Reschly and Christenson (2006) found that students experiencing an emotional disturbance described less school engagement, which presented as a significant predictor of school dropout. Parent engagement has also been considered as a barrier to postsecondary planning for high-need populations. A study that investigated the link between school engagement and parent-child relationships for minority adolescent students within low-income, urban settings indicated that poor parent-child relationships negatively impacted adolescent school engagement (Murray, 2009). Similarly, Duchnowski and Kutash (2011) recommended increased parent involvement to support the academic and emotional functioning of students with emotional disturbances in urban environments in a study of school reform efforts.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) currently mandates transition planning for students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), starting at the age of 14, to facilitate a transition after secondary school graduation. For students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments, transition planning may prove to be more difficult due to the

barriers to postsecondary planning facing this population of students (Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2002). By implementing an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) that incorporates the various interactions between the individual, home, school, and community, a more appropriate plan may be achieved.

### **Supportive Elements for the Postsecondary Planning of High-Need Student Populations**

Although past research has documented the many potential barriers to postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances and students living in urban environments, the literature also stresses the importance of supportive elements that promote postsecondary planning for high-need populations. A number of research studies have advocated for an emphasis on building social capital for high-need student populations to encourage postsecondary planning through the development of relationships with parents (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003), mentors (Leake, Burgstahler, & Izzo, 2011), teachers (Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp, & McHatton, 2009), and school counselors (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). For students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments, language deficits (Joffe & Black, 2012) and an inclination for aggressive behaviors (Grothaus, 2013) may limit their ability to build social capital independently, thereby requiring further support to effectively foster interpersonal connections.

A second body of research has linked the characteristic of resilience to positive postsecondary outcomes for high-need student populations (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005; Masten, 2001; Short & Russell-Mayhew, 2009; Ungar, Ghazinour, & Richter, 2013). In a study conducted by Salazar, Jones, Emerson, and Mucha (2016) on the postsecondary strengths for students with a history in foster care, the research identified themes related to positive self-esteem, overcoming interpersonal relationships, finances, academic orientation,

mental health, and independent living skills to be associated with resiliency. These strengths present as some of the very same postsecondary barriers students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments experience on a regular basis. By emphasizing the importance of resiliency in high-need populations, students may start to visualize how barriers can become areas of strength.

Self-determination has been characterized as a third element toward effective postsecondary planning for high-need students (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001; Test, Mason, Hughes, Konrad, Neale, & Wood, 2004). In a research study that focused on the abilities of paraprofessionals to incorporate components of self-determination (choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, self-advocacy and leadership, self management, and self awareness) for students with disabilities, Lane, Carter, and Sisco (2012) revealed that paraprofessionals incorporated all 7 components in their practices to improve outcomes for students with disabilities beyond secondary school. These components could be further highlighted during transition planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments to improve postsecondary planning and limit potential barriers to success.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In December of 2015, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) was signed introducing the most recent revision of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA). The implementation of the legislation calls for “consistent, state-adopted standards for all students” to urge greater attention to postsecondary success (The Education Trust, 2016). The regulations within ESSA plan to “enhance equity for historically underserved students” by determining gaps of postsecondary preparation among subgroups within student populations across schools (U.S.

Department of Education, 2016). As a result, secondary schools are currently being challenged to identify strengths and areas for improvement towards postsecondary planning to meet the standards and expectations of ESSA, which will be fully integrated into the school system by the start of the 2017-2018 academic year (American School Counselor Association, 2016).

As documented within the research, school counselors play an integral role in shaping the college and career perspectives for students through the postsecondary planning process (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, Day-Wines, 2009; Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011). According to the American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2012a) National Model, school counselors are responsible for “ensuring equity and access for all students to reach their full potential in K-12 schools and beyond (p. 14).” However, particular student subgroups, such as students with disabilities and students attending schools in low-income urban environments, continue to underachieve after secondary school, partly due to ineffective postsecondary planning (Banks, 2014; McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012). More specifically, a study of 400 practicing school counselors found that participants expressed the least degree of preparation for the postsecondary planning of students with disabilities (Milsom, 2002).

Despite the evidence suggested in research and the standards communicated through policy in education, insufficient attention has been given to the importance of social capital and how this element is incorporated within school counseling practices to improve postsecondary planning for high-need students (Trainor, 2008). The ASCA National Model (2012a) specifies strategies for school counselors to demonstrate delivery of services through teaming and partnering with school staff members, parents, business organizations, and community members.

By doing so, school counselors can provide access to various outlets of social capital for students facing barriers to postsecondary planning.

Through IEP meetings, transition plans can be developed that establish individualized goals for students towards achieving postsecondary success. Research recommended that high-need students with disabilities participate in such meetings in an effort to promote self-determination (Ankeny, Madison, & Lehmann, 2011). However, a study of 159 special education teachers reported that parent and student participation in IEP meetings for students experiencing disabilities in urban school environments were significantly lower than parent and student participation in rural school environments (Williams-Diehm, Brandes, Chesnut, & Haring, 2014). Milsom (2002) found similar evidence describing that school counselors were often excluded from providing transition services for students with disabilities. According to the ASCA National Model (2012a) school counselors are responsible for “helping students make decisions for future plans based on academic, career, and personal/social data (p. 86).” If school counselors are to make an impact on the postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments, they should advocate for a greater degree of involvement within the transition planning process.

While previous research has provided school counselors with an increased understanding of resiliency (Ostraszewski & Zimmerman, 2006; Short & Russell-Mayhew, 2009) few studies have attempted to grasp how school counselors encourage resiliency through practice. One such study demonstrated how resiliency could be fostered through the Achieving Success Everyday Model (ADE), which attempted to integrate academic, personal, and social development through group work (Rose & Steen, 2014). However, further research is still needed to better

comprehend how school counselors may incorporate resiliency practices in relation to the postsecondary planning of high-need students.

With increased pressure on schools through policy in legislation to support the postsecondary planning of high-need populations, school counselors are tasked with the responsibility of identifying underserved populations within their school. For school counselors working within urban environments, students experiencing emotional disturbances could benefit from an increased emphasis on elements that have demonstrated support for the postsecondary planning of high-need student populations through the literature. By exploring the viewpoints of school counselors working in urban settings, more light could be shed on current postsecondary planning for a population that warrants a higher degree of support.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the current study is to develop a deeper understanding of postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments through the perspectives, practices, and experiences of school counselors. Many barriers related to the individual, home, school, and community inhibit school counselors from attaining goals for high-need populations through the postsecondary planning process. Moreover, school counselors may exhibit tendencies that hinder the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. From the data gathered within the current study, I plan to analyze the perspectives of school counselors to discern themes and patterns in their professional experiences that could guide future postsecondary planning practices for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments.

### **Research Questions**

The research study will take a qualitative approach to develop a greater understanding of the postsecondary planning perspectives, practices, and experiences of school counselors in working with students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments. In order to effectively depict these postsecondary planning concepts, the research study will be guided by the following questions:

- (1.) What are the most important elements in postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments?
- (2.) How do school counselors promote postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments?
- (3.) What experiences have school counselors had that guide postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments?

### **Need for the Study**

Due to standards communicated through the *Every Student Succeeds Act* designed to improve postsecondary outcomes for underrepresented populations, schools are being challenged to identify student subgroups in need of additional postsecondary support and act upon these findings. Based on the ASCA National Model (2012), school counselors have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to facilitate postsecondary change for high-need populations through methods requiring leadership, advocacy, and collaboration. While research on potential barriers as well as supportive elements to postsecondary planning for high-need populations exists, a knowledge base has yet to be founded regarding school counselor perspectives for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. As a result, the question could be asked, “What are the perspectives, practices, and experiences of school counselors working in urban

environments to support students with emotional disturbances?” The data gathered through the research study could be helpful in improving postsecondary practices for high-need populations as a whole and meet the expectations for underrepresented populations presented through the *Every Student Succeeds Act*.

### **Definition of Terms**

Throughout the research of this topic varying definitions were articulated to describe students diagnosed with emotional and behavioral deficits in urban environments as well as the barriers and elements that either hinder or support their postsecondary planning. In order to clarify these ambiguities, the following definitions have been included alphabetically:

*Ecological Model*: The processes and conditions that govern the course of human development in the actual environments in which human beings live (Bronfenbrenner, 2000, p. 129).

*Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities (EBD)*: Students who experience difficulty coping with their emotions or managing their behavior, or both, to the extent that it makes learning in the general classroom setting difficult for them and often for their peers (Shamberger & Friend, 2012, p. 773).

*Emotional Disturbance (ED)*: A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s education performance: (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. (B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. (C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances. (D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or

depression. (E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems (IDEA, 2004).

*High-Need Student:* Students at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students who are living in poverty, who attend high-minority schools, who are far below grade level, who have left school before receiving a regular high school diploma, who are at risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, who are homeless, who are in foster care, who have been incarcerated, who have disabilities, or who are English learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

*Individualized Education Plan:* A written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting regarding the following content (1) a statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performances, (2) a statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals, (3) a description of how the child is meeting the annual goals, (4) a statement of the special education and related services provided to the child, (5) an explanation of the extent, if any, to which the child will not participate with nondisabled children in a regular classroom setting, (6) a statement of any individual appropriate accommodations, and (7) the projected date for the beginning of services and modifications described (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

*Intersectionality:* The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016).

*National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2):* A national study funded by the U.S. Department of Education from 2000-2009, documenting the experiences of a national sample of students between the ages of 13-16 as they moved from secondary school into adult roles, (National Center for Special Education Research, n.d.).

*Parent Engagement:* Any relationship building activity that involves two-way communication between parents and schools designed to build a partnership between home and school (Ferlazzo, 2011).

*Postsecondary Success for High School Students:* Indicators include less than 10% absences, no more than 1 failure of ninth grade subjects, a mathematics sequence plan, a 3.0 or higher grade point average, passing state examinations, FAFSA completion, meeting benchmarks on national assessments, participation in transition programs, and developing knowledge around college readiness. Predictors include few school transfers and early completion of the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT). Other potential factors include Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) intervention, meeting with an academic advisor, and college and career assessments (College & Career Readiness & Success Center, 2013).

*Postsecondary/Transition Planning:* A coordinated set of activities for a student with a disability that is designed to be within a results oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-secondary activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation (IDEA, 2004).

Resiliency: Manifested competence in the context of significant challenges to adaption or development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998, p. 206).

Self-Determination: A combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior (Wehmeyer, 2002, p. 2).

Severe Emotional Disturbance (SED): An individual functioning under one of the following criteria - (a) in a residential or inpatient mental health setting operated whether fully or partially by public funds or (b) in a special education program for children with serious emotional and/or behavioral disturbance (Greenbaum, Dedrick, Friedman, Kutash, Brown, Landieri, & Pugh, 1996 p. 131).

School Mobility: The involuntary (i.e., expulsion) or voluntary (i.e., parent job transition) movement between schools for students based on reasons other than grade promotion (Sparks, 2016).

Social Capital: Resources that are derived from a person's connectedness to society via social networks (Bourdieu, 1986)

Social/Emotional/Behavioral Difficulties (SEBD): An individual demonstrating difficulties in two areas (1) the inner world of the child and (2) the outer world of behavior (Evans, Harden & Thomas, 2004, p. 4).

Student Engagement: The degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education (Glossary of Education Reform, 2014).

Urban: An area comprising all territory, population, and housing units within a developed region of 2,500 or more persons (U.S. Census Bureau, 1995).

### **Overview of Methodology**

The current study utilized a qualitative approach based on constructivist grounded theory to develop themes from the perspectives, practices, and experiences of school counselors working in urban environments with students experiencing emotional disturbances. I sought participants that function as secondary school counselors with at least 2-years of postsecondary planning experience within the urban setting of a large northeastern city of the United States. Semi-structured one-on-one interviews with these participants were conducted, transcribed, and verified by participants, forming the foundation of the qualitative research data. A process of initial coding was followed by focused coding to align with the constructivist grounded theory approach. From these themes, a greater understanding of school counselor postsecondary planning practices for students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments was gathered.

### **Limitations**

A few limitations are presented for the current study. First, the study sought a sample of participants within one large, northeastern city of the United States. Hence, any conclusions constructed from the qualitative data may reflect the specific policies or procedures established within the school district. Second, the study recruited urban high school counselors from all public high school institutions within the school district of interest. In doing so, participants included urban high school counselors from special admittance schools, or magnet schools, which supported a limited population of students experiencing emotional disturbances. The selective admittance criteria of magnet schools regularly present as a barrier to students experiencing emotional disturbances who demonstrate poor academic achievement or aggressive behaviors. As a result, many of the significant themes that emerged during data analysis

stemmed from the interviews with school counselors functioning at neighborhood schools where special admittance criteria was not a factor, thereby increasing the potential population for students experiencing an emotional disturbance. Third, the research explored the insights of urban school counselors on postsecondary planning perspectives working with students experiencing emotional disturbances. Therefore, participant self-report may have influenced the results of the research. To account for this potential limitation, interview questions highlighted the specific demographic of interest at the beginning of the interview process and reiterated this focus within the language contained in the research questions. Fourth, all recruited research participants presented as female. A larger sample of various genders for urban high school counselors could have provided an alternative perspective on postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. Lastly, I, as the researcher, have a school counseling background, specifically working with students experiencing emotional disturbances. As a result, a potential for researcher bias exists within the results section that may have shaped the theme development of the qualitative analysis. In order to diminish the potential for research bias, I engaged in a two-tiered focused coding process that included a reflective journal throughout the research process and peer auditors to inform me of blind spots within the research analysis.

### **Delimitation**

The research study focused on the postsecondary planning perspectives of school counselors in urban settings, not the postsecondary perspectives of students experiencing emotional disturbances within these environments. The experiences of high-need students encountering significant barriers toward postsecondary planning are equally as important as the perspectives of school counselors attempting to assist this demographic. As a result, it may prove

beneficial to include the postsecondary perspectives of students with emotional disturbances living urban environments within future studies to add greater depth to the research.

### **Organization of Study**

The research study will be presented in five chapters. Chapter One provided an initial understanding of the current study by stating the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions guiding the study, and a definition of key terms included within the study.

Chapter Two will highlight the overlapping barriers associated with postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances and students living in urban environments in addition to elements that have proven to be beneficial in postsecondary planning for high-need student populations. Previous research related to school counselor postsecondary planning perspectives, practices, and experiences with high-need populations will be examined to better understand areas for improvement and implications for future research. Chapter Three will describe the research questions in connection with the methodology for the current study as well as data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter Four will communicate the results of the research study through the emerging themes and their relationship to the research questions. Chapter Five will incorporate the discussion section, implications, limitations of the research study, and suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

The purpose of the research study was to engage in a qualitative review of the perspectives, practices, and experiences of school counselors in providing postsecondary planning services to students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. Many barriers related to the individual student, home, school, and community inhibit school counselors from working towards goals for high-need student populations through the postsecondary planning process (Greenbaum et al., 1996; Wagner et al., 2006; Wagner et al., 2005a; Wagner et al., 2005b). Many of these barriers interact across environments, thereby creating a difficult path to postsecondary achievement. However, supportive elements have been attributed to the effective postsecondary planning of high-need populations (Clark, Ponjuan, Orrock, Wilson, & Flores, 2013; Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003; Hill, Bregman, & Andrade, 2015; Mihalas et al., 2009; Trainor, 2008). A review of the literature in this chapter will include a definition of postsecondary success as well as a description of the potential barriers and supports to postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. A better understanding of the current postsecondary planning perspectives, practices, and experiences of school counselors will follow. From the data gathered within the current study, I analyzed the perspectives of school counselors working within urban environments to identify postsecondary planning themes and patterns from their professional experiences with students diagnosed with an emotional disturbance.

### **Context of the Study: Postsecondary Success Defined**

Prior to describing the postsecondary planning barriers for students experiencing an emotional disturbance and students living in urban environments, a concrete understanding of postsecondary success must be presented. The College and Career Readiness and Success Center

(2013) defines postsecondary success for high school students through the following indicators, predictors, and other potential factors:

**Indicators:** Less than 10% school absences, no more than 1 failure of ninth grade courses, a mathematics sequence plan, a 3.0 or higher grade point average, passing state examinations, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion, meeting benchmarks on national assessments, participation in transition programs, and developing knowledge around college readiness.

**Predictors:** Few school transfers and early completion of the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT).

**Other Potential Factors:** Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) intervention, meeting with an academic advisor, and college and career assessments.

### **Students with Emotional Disturbances Defined**

Previous research has identified emotional support needs through various titles including severe emotional disturbances (SED) (Greenbaum et al., 1996), emotional disturbances (ED) (Duchnowski & Kutash, 2011; Wagner et al., 2006; Wagner et al., 2005a), social/emotional/behavioral difficulties (SEBD) (Evans et al., 2004; Lund, 2014), and emotional/behavioral disabilities (Lane, Carter, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006; Trainor, Smith, & Kim, 2012). This literature review will refer to emotional support needs as emotional disturbances in order to align with the verbiage used within the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA). IDEA (2004) defines the term emotional disturbance as the following:

A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's education performance: (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.

- (B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. (C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- (D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression. (E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

**Adolescents with Emotional Disturbances: An Ecological Perspective**

Bronfenbrenner (1977) first introduced ecological systems theory suggesting that an individual’s development was influenced by the interaction of social relationships and the environments with which these relationships occur. Table 1 includes findings from previous empirical research studies on the various associated barriers to postsecondary success for students with emotional disturbances. Barriers are divided according to environment from an ecological perspective that includes the individual, home, school, and community.

Table 1: *Barriers for Adolescents with Emotional Disturbances (ED)*

Individual	Home	School	Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Minority Status</li> <li>* Social Skills Deficits</li> <li>* Poor Self-Esteem</li> <li>Aggressive Behaviors</li> <li>Substance Abuse</li> <li>Learning Disability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Socioeconomic Status</li> <li>* Single-Parent Home</li> <li>Physical/Sexual Abuse</li> <li>* Parent Engagement</li> <li>Parent Unemployment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* School Population</li> <li>* School Absenteeism</li> <li>* Suspension/Expulsion</li> <li>* School Engagement</li> <li>Extracurricular Participation</li> <li>* High School Dropout</li> <li>* Teacher Expectations</li> <li>Mainstream Classroom Time</li> <li>* Academic Achievement</li> <li>Grade Retention</li> <li>* School Mobility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disability Discrimination</li> <li>* Juvenile Justice Involvement</li> <li>* Future Employment</li> <li>Postsecondary Education</li> <li>Community Participation</li> </ul>

\* Overlaps with barriers found in Table 2

**Adolescents Living in Urban Environments: An Ecological Perspective**

Table 2 integrates findings from previous research studies on the associated barriers to postsecondary success for students living in urban environments. Similar to Table 1, the barriers were divided according to environment from an ecological perspective.

Table 2: *Barriers for Adolescents Living in Urban Environments*

Individual	Home	School	Community
* Minority Status * Social Skills Deficits * Poor Self-Esteem Disability Diagnoses	* Single-Parent Home Homelessness Parent Education * Socioeconomic Status * Parent Engagement Family Pressure	* School Population * School Absenteeism * Suspension/Expulsion * High School Dropout School Resources Teacher/Staff Turnover * School Engagement * Teacher Expectations * Academic Achievement * School Mobility	Neighborhood Violence Minority Discrimination Quality of Health Care * Juvenile Justice Involvement Career Education Training * Future Employment

\* Overlaps with barriers found in Table 1

**The Intersectionality of Students Experiencing Emotional Disturbances and Students Living in Urban Environments**

Students experiencing an emotional disturbance and students living in urban environments encounter various barriers to postsecondary planning. The U.S. Department of Education (2012) presents the following definition of high-need students that includes many of the barriers depicted above:

Students at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students who are living in poverty, who attend high-minority schools, who are far below grade level, who have left school before receiving a regular high school diploma, who are at risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, who are homeless, who are in foster care, who have been incarcerated, who have disabilities, or who are English learners.

By viewing these barriers through the lens of an ecological perspective a greater understanding of the intersectionality among students experiencing emotional disturbances and students living in urban environments can be gathered.

**The Individual.**

Potential postsecondary planning barriers in relation to the individual for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments include being of a minority status, exhibiting poor social skills, and demonstrating poor self-esteem. Numerous research studies have shown an overrepresentation among minority status students diagnosed with an emotional disturbance (Blanchett, 2006; Raines, Dever, Kamphaus, & Roach, 2012; Patton, 1998) potentially due to variables including social processes within the school environment (Jordan, 2005), inadequate behavior management planning, subjective evaluation processes (Hart, Cramer, Harry, Klingner, & Sturges, 2010), and exposure to poverty (Wiley, Brigham, Kauffman, & Bogan, 2013). For students living in urban settings, the overrepresentation could be even greater when considering that urban school environments encompass a population of students with higher rates of racial and ethnic diversity (Kincheloe, 2010). As a result, school programs within urban environments must take a closer look at current practices to ensure a less discriminatory and more holistic understanding for student diagnoses of emotional disturbance (Hart et al, 2010).

Social skills characteristics such as language deficits and reading skills impact postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. In a study of over 150 students experiencing an emotional disturbance Nelson, Benner, and Cheney (2005) concluded that two thirds of students exhibited clinically significant expressive and receptive language deficits that remained stable throughout schooling. A similar study of 142 students with an emotional disturbance determined that this demographic of students experienced high rates of language skills deficits that considerably impacted their academic performance (Goran & Gage, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics

(2007) indicated that the most important factors associated with reading skills deficits were poverty, racial minority status, and inadequate schooling. With evidence of both emotional and functional support needs, Kauffman (2010) encourages a more integrated school approach to promote the academic performance of students experiencing emotional disturbances.

Deficits in communication and reading skills may also be indicative of research pointing to poor self-esteem in students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. In a study based on data from the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) (Gage, 2013), teachers suggested that students experiencing emotional disturbances often internalized their emotions by displaying poor self-esteem toward academic activities. Another study focusing on increasing self-esteem in minority youth revealed that factors including instances of discrimination, academic success, and positive emotional functioning all affected adolescent self-esteem (Okeke-Adeyanju, Taylor, Craig, Smith, Thomas, Boyle, & DeRosier, 2014). For students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments, social and emotional difficulties may influence their ability to cope with instances of discrimination and a lack of academic success (Sullivan, Sutherland, Lotze, Helms, Wright, & Ulmer, 2015).

### **The Home.**

Barriers pertaining to socioeconomic status, parent engagement, and single-parent families within the home environment all have the potential to adversely shape postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban settings. In a meta-analysis of journal articles published between 1990 and 2000, family socioeconomic status presented to be one of the strongest predictors of academic achievement (Sirin, 2005). While researching the influence of socioeconomic status on emotional-behavioral achievement, Ansary,

McMahon, and Luthar (2012) found that the characteristics of negative mood, social anxiety, and physiological anxiety were all associated with poor academic achievement in low-income urban youth. Wagner et al. (2005b) found that students experiencing emotional disturbances lived in poverty at a significantly greater rate than students without disabilities. Sinclair, Christenson, and Thurlow (2005) suggested that experiencing both low socioeconomic status and an emotional disability increases the risk of school failure and poor postsecondary outcomes.

The impact of socioeconomic status on postsecondary planning may be limited by increased parent involvement in the academic performance of urban adolescents. Murray (2009) determined that the factors of closeness and trust, encouragement, and clear expectations were all predictive of quality academic performance in urban adolescents. However, O'Connor (2001) suggested that students from low-income families experience less academic support from parents than students from high-income families. Similarly, Wagner and Davis (2006) found that transition planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances was heavily guided by school professionals despite a parent desire for increased involvement in the planning process. As a result, it could be inferred that students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments may not benefit from increased parent engagement as means to improve the postsecondary planning.

Parent engagement in school activities may be affected by the number of single-parent households for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. Wagner et al. (2005b) revealed that students classified with emotional disturbances live in single-parent households at a higher rate than students without disabilities and students in the general population. In a study on the relationship between household structure and academic performance, Battle (1998) determined that there was a significant difference between the

academic performance of African American students living in single-parent households of low socioeconomic areas and the academic performance of African American students in dual-parent households of higher socioeconomic areas. From the research, evidence related to the home environment of students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments points to poor socioeconomic status as being a key indicator of potential limitations concerning future postsecondary planning.

### **The School.**

The school environment demonstrates the greatest overlap in barriers to postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. These potential barriers include school population, academic achievement, school absenteeism, suspension and expulsion, school mobility, high school dropout, school engagement, and teacher expectations. Studying a national representation of data, Wagner et al. (2006) determined adolescents experiencing emotional disturbances attended schools with a higher average enrollment, a higher absenteeism rate, and an increased number of school expulsions. Gregory and Weinstein (2008) studied the disproportionate rates of school suspensions for minority youth in urban school environments and showed evidence that disciplinary referrals were more interactional than situational. Therefore, the dynamics of the student-teacher relationship for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments may influence student engagement and academic performance. Previous research studies concluded that lower teacher expectations toward students within an urban school environment (Harris, 2012) and students experiencing an emotional disturbance (Lane et al., 2006) impacted the academic performance of these subgroups, further contributing to barriers for postsecondary planning.

Providing a context for urban school counseling, Lee (2005) associated the following characteristics with urban school environments: an increased risk for high school drop out, a decreased likelihood students complete high school within 4 years, a lack of student preparation for postsecondary success, a greater likelihood students attend a high-poverty school, increased percentages of under-qualified teachers, significant absenteeism rates, and limited access to school resources. Lane et al., (2006) made similar conclusions for students experiencing emotional disturbances linking elevated school drop out rates and lower enrollment in postsecondary education for this demographic when compared to students without disabilities.

Gasper, DeLuca, and Estacion (2012) reported that students who experience school mobility are more likely to drop out of school, exhibit behavioral problems, have increased absentee rates, live in low socioeconomic areas, and experience frequent residential mobility. Wagner et al. (2005a) communicated that the occurrence of school mobility influenced the academic performance of students, regardless of socioeconomic status and disability diagnosis. However, the rates of school mobility are increased for high-need populations. Two separate studies demonstrated that a higher risk for school mobility existed for students of low socioeconomic status (Herbers et al., 2012) and students experiencing an emotional disturbance (Malmgren & Gagnon, 2005). When considering variables including school climate, behavioral interventions, and academic supports, the school environment has the opportunity to diminish postsecondary planning barriers and create greater potential for postsecondary success (Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Van Ryzin, 2011).

### **The Community.**

Students experiencing emotional disturbances and students living in urban settings encounter two overlapping barriers to postsecondary planning within the community:

involvement in the juvenile justice system and future employment. Examining the disproportionate rates of minority youth in the juvenile justice system, Davis and Sorensen (2013) revealed that urban areas prone to crime exhibited increased percentages of minority placement in the juvenile justice system, proposing that the trend stemmed from broader social inequities. Similarly, Rodriguez (2013) determined that racial and ethnic minorities and individuals living in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage were overrepresented within the juvenile justice system, suggesting that macro-level factors (i.e., limited presence of community support agencies) and individual-level factors (i.e., single-parent households) may contribute to the disproportionality. Malmgren and Meisel (2002) found that juvenile justice agencies serve an extensive amount of students experiencing severe emotional disturbances, partly resulting from late identification and intervention. These research studies substantiate the claim that students experiencing an emotional disturbance living in urban environments may be predisposed to characteristics related to involvement in the juvenile justice system.

The road to potential postsecondary success for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments does not become any easier after exiting high school. Siren, Diemer, Jackson, Gonsalves, and Howell (2004) revealed that urban adolescents in secondary schools perceived fewer job opportunities and access to adult mentors who could help navigate the career-decision making process. Statistics on employment trends for students experiencing emotional disturbances exhibit comparable disadvantages. According to a nationally representative sample of students with disabilities, Wagner and Newman (2012) learned that postsecondary education and employment rates remained low for students with an emotional disturbance despite improvements in these rates for students of other disability categories. Wagner and Davis (2006) advocated for increased access to programs that teach workplace

behaviors, occupational skills, and career awareness to adolescent students with emotional disturbances in order to facilitate a smoother and more successful postsecondary transition.

Reviewing the aforementioned associated barriers for postsecondary planning demonstrates the high degree of intersectionality between students with emotional disturbances and students living in urban environments. Many of the characteristics linked to each demographic overlap with the characteristics defining high-need populations and curtail the achievement of variables associated with postsecondary success, thus creating a more complicated journey towards postsecondary planning. For school counselors to effectively support the postsecondary success of students with emotional disturbances in urban environments, they must not only understand the potential for these barriers to exist but also the interactions among these barriers and their impact on the individual student (Bowen, 2009; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012).

### **Supportive Elements for the Postsecondary Planning of High-Need Student Populations**

For adolescent students with emotional disturbances in urban settings, the interaction of barriers across multiple environments may limit their scope for postsecondary planning upon entry into high school (Clark et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2006; Wagner et al., 2005a). However, previous research demonstrates how high-need students overcome barriers to realize postsecondary success. Elements including increased self-determination (Benitez, Lattimore, & Wehmeyer, 2005; Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Glaeser, 2006; Trainor, 2008), resiliency (Armstrong, et al., 2005; Joyce-Beaulieu & Grapin, 2014; Short & Russell-Mayhew, 2009), higher academic expectations (Mihalas et al., 2009), parent engagement (Kenny et al., 2003; Kim & Schneider, 2005), peer relationships (Holland, 2011; Westerlund, Granucci, Gamache, & Clark, 2006) and adult mentorships (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Leake et al., 2011; Newman, Madaus, &

Javitz, 2016) have all been linked to school engagement and postsecondary success for high-need students. By looking at three supportive elements for the postsecondary planning of high-need students, ideas for school counseling practices can be proposed to improve the postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments.

### **Social Capital.**

Research studies on students with emotional disturbances and students living in urban environments have demonstrated the benefits of accessing social capital for adolescent postsecondary success (Bryan et al., 2011; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Hill et al., 2015; Kim & Schneider, 2005). Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as resources that are derived from a person's connectedness to society via social networks. For students with emotional disturbances in urban environments forms of social capital may include parents, teachers, school counselors, peers, and community members. Holland (2010) advocated for an integrated postsecondary approach that included various forms of social capital such as family members, friends, and school personnel to support the academic, financial, and social needs of underserved populations towards more effective postsecondary planning.

However, individual research studies have also examined specific forms of social capital to better understand its impact on postsecondary planning. Kenny et al. (2003) determined that perceived support from parents was associated with school engagement and higher expectations for postsecondary success for urban high school students. Mihalas et al. (2009) identified teachers as role models within the lives of students with emotional disturbances who can assist in the planning and monitoring of established goals for postsecondary success. Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) observed that greater individualized support from school counselors improved college preparation and awareness for urban high school students. Westerlund et al. (2006) found

that participants with emotional disturbances in a vocational program supported the incorporation of peer mentors to develop postsecondary skills for the workplace. Leake et al. (2011) learned that diverse groups of students with disabilities recognized the importance of adult mentors as a support system for career success. Finally, Collins, Weinbaum, Ramon, and Vaughan (2009) found evidence that supported partnerships between schools and reputable community-based organizations to serve the postsecondary planning of underserved populations within eight different urban environments.

For school counselors, connecting high-need students to social capital provides an avenue to increase the potential for postsecondary success of students with emotional disturbances in urban environments. According to Reid and Moore III (2008) school counselors may function as a form of social capital for underserved populations by providing students with information on appropriate curriculum planning, collegiate institutions, the college application process, financial aid applications, and available scholarships and grants. By increasing knowledge and awareness of the aspects of postsecondary planning, students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments have a greater potential for postsecondary success.

### **Resiliency.**

Previous research studies have observed how the characteristic of resiliency can promote the postsecondary planning of high-need students despite the presence of various barriers to success (Armstrong et al., 2005; Minnard, 2002; Short & Russell-Mayhew, 2009; Ungar et al., 2013). Masten and Coatsworth (1998) referred to resiliency as “manifested competence in the context of significant challenges to adaption or development (p. 206).” As previously discussed, the potential challenges faced by students with emotional disturbances in urban environments are extensive. Rather than view each challenge in isolation (Gore & Eckenrode, 1994), the

ecological approach understands the challenges in conjunction with one another. Conversely, a strengths-based understanding of resiliency promotes focus on the factors and processes for adaption and development in relation to multiple student environments. Similar to the ecological perspective, Masten and Coatsworth (1998) described the characteristics of resiliency for students raised in unfavorable environments from three different sources: the individual, family, and the extrafamilial context. Within these sources, attributes included intellectual functioning (individual), parent engagement (family), bonds to prosocial adults (community), and effective schooling (schools).

Gilmore, Campbell, Shochet, and Roberts (2013) advocated for the development of interpersonal skills and increased involvement in extra-curricular activities for students experiencing intellectual disabilities to promote individual resiliency by realizing success in a variety of social arenas. Masten (2001) found substantial support connecting supportive parenting qualities and positive student self-perceptions with resiliency for disadvantaged children. Rak and Patterson (1996) identified evidence linking the characteristic of resilience to a network of close family members and strong parental expectations for at-risk youth. Mortimer and Finch (1996) observed how early work experiences within the community contributed to a more positive sense of self-efficacy for adolescents transitioning from school to the workplace. Harvey (2007) encouraged schools to promote resiliency for inner-city youth by providing a supportive environment, fostering positive attitudes, advocating for volunteerism, and cultivating self-determination skills.

School counselors can benefit from a greater awareness of the concept of resiliency to improve postsecondary planning with students from multicultural populations. A school counseling approach that focuses on resiliency enables school counselors to work with students

from a variety of backgrounds by utilizing the unique assets and strengths for each student (Short & Russell-Mayhew, 2009). With increased attention to the positive aspects within their lives, students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments may start to visualize how their strengths and support systems can be applied to the postsecondary planning process to limit barriers to success.

### **Self-Determination.**

Research has demonstrated the significance of incorporating the concept of self-determination into school practices to provide adolescent students with a greater sense of autonomy and independence (Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Trainor, 2008). Wehmeyer (2002) defined self-determination as, “A combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed and self-regulated autonomous behavior (p. 2).” Self-determination has been linked to stronger adolescent decision-making, self-advocacy, problem solving, and goal attainment for students with disabilities (Algozzine et al., 2001; Test et al., 2004). Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) found evidence that suggested increased self-determination improves the potential for greater postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities. Stanton-Salazar (2001) argued that minority students with access to social and cultural capital within their schools demonstrated a higher inclination for self-determination skills. Benitez et al. (2005) introduced the Self-Determined Career Developmental Model, which included setting career related goals, developing a plan, and evaluating progress towards goals. According to the study, students with emotional disabilities demonstrated positive employment outcomes after engaging in career decision making through a process highlighting self-determination.

As students with emotional disturbances in urban environments prepare to transition from school to their postsecondary plans, they require additional supports and guidance to achieve postsecondary success. School counselors can offer underserved students opportunities to communicate their preferences and interests to promote involvement in the postsecondary planning process (Cavendish, 2013). Transition planning within IEP meetings and the course selection process in high school offer opportunities for students experiencing disabilities to voice their opinions towards the development of postsecondary planning. In fact, past research has shown that student participation in transition planning increases self-determination skills (Ankeny, Madison, & Lehmann, 2011). Furthermore, Field et al. (2003) communicated that providing students experiencing disabilities an opportunity to develop self-determination skills through course selection improved academic performance and postsecondary outcomes for this demographic. Through active engagement in postsecondary planning students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments can create a pathway to future success.

**Statement of the Problem: The Perspectives, Practices, and Experiences of School Counselors in Promoting Equitable Postsecondary Planning**

The emphasis to improve postsecondary planning for high-need student populations has received national attention through recently approved policy in education. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* addresses these concerns by presenting guidelines for prevention and intervention programs for students considered at-risk by highlighting postsecondary planning and social-emotional learning (Darling-Hammond, Bae, Cook-Harvey, Lam, Mercer, Podolsky, & Stosich, 2016). In order to successfully meet the requirements dictated through the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, schools must conduct analysis on underserved populations within the schools, re-

evaluate their approach with these student subgroups, and utilize resources to work more collaboratively within the school community.

School counselors have a responsibility to foster the academic, personal/social, and career development of all students within the school system (ASCA, 2012a). According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model, school counselors provide individualized services to support the postsecondary planning of all students. More specifically, the school counselor performs school counseling curriculum development, future student planning, responsive direct services, and indirect student services (ASCA, 2012a). For adolescent students with emotional disturbances in urban environments, a comprehensive, individualized approach that combines these services allows school counselors to navigate the complicated systems impacting the student for greater postsecondary success.

The various postsecondary planning barriers facing students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments may stymie the efforts of school counselors. As a result, school counselors must be flexible in their roles and functions when serving high-need student populations in their postsecondary planning (Durodoye, Combes, & Bryant, 2004). While an abundance of literature on school counseling practices has been studied to support greater equity in postsecondary planning (Belasco, 2013; Deemer & Ostrowski, 2010; Lapan, Wells, Petersen, & McCann, 2014; Milsom, Akos, & Thompson, 2004; Reddick, Welton, Alsandor, Denyszyn, & Platt, 2011; Rylance, 1997; Test, Fowler, White, Richter, & Walker, 2009; Trainor, 2010), few research articles have examined the perspectives (Clark et al., 2013; Savitz-Romer, 2012) and experiences (Johnson, Moeller, & Holsapple, 2013; Storlie & Toomey, 2016) of school counselors toward postsecondary planning. The following review of the literature will present guidelines for school counselors on postsecondary planning as described by ASCA. An analysis

on school counseling perspectives, practices, and experiences toward equitable postsecondary planning for student populations will follow. Finally, a description of research making recommendations to school counselors for effective postsecondary planning will be explained.

### **ASCA Guidelines for Postsecondary Planning.**

ASCA (2012b) established School Counselor Competencies to “ensure that new and experienced school counselors are equipped to establish and maintain a comprehensive school counseling program addressing academic achievement, career planning, and personal/social development.” The criteria for these competencies include school counselor knowledge, abilities and skills, and attitudes that correspond to the four cornerstones of the ASCA National Model (2012a): Foundation (i.e. beliefs and philosophy and mission statement), Management (i.e., use of data and use of time), Delivery (i.e., school counseling curriculum and individual student planning), and Accountability (i.e. results reports and school counselor performance evaluations). These competencies serve as guidelines to provide school counselors a framework for implementing equitable services to all students.

In order to demonstrate the effectiveness of school counseling programs, these guidelines for practice must agree with the attitudes and behaviors exhibited by students. As a result, ASCA (2014) introduced the Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College and Career Readiness Standards for Every Student. According to ASCA, the Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success are intended to “describe the knowledge, skills, and attitudes students need to achieve academic success, college and career readiness, and social/emotional development.” Student behavior standards are divided among three categories - learning strategies, self-management skills, and social skills – each encompassing 9-10 specific principles (Appendix F). The 6 student mindset standards are described as follows:

- (1) Belief in development of whole self, including a healthy balance of mental, social/emotional, and physical well-being
- (2) Self-confidence in ability to succeed
- (3) Sense of belonging in the school environment
- (4) Understanding that postsecondary education and life-long learning are necessary for long-term career success
- (5) Belief in using abilities to their fullest to achieve high-quality results and outcomes
- (6) Positive attitude toward work and learning

By linking School Counselor Competencies to the Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success, school counselors can better understand how their postsecondary planning approach promotes the success of all students.

#### **School Counseling Perspectives.**

A limited amount of research studies have examined the perspectives of school counselors regarding the process of postsecondary planning with high-need student populations (Clark et al., 2013; Savitz-Romer, 2012). ASCA (2012b) introduced attitudes school counselors must possess to support the academic, emotional, and social development of students through their School Counseling Competencies. One specific standard addresses school counselor attitudes towards the postsecondary planning of students stating, “School counselors believe every student should graduate from high school and be prepared for employment or college and other postsecondary education (I-C-3).” For school counselors working within urban environments with students experiencing emotional disturbances, this attitude may not always be followed due to the various barriers facing this student population. By giving school counselors a

voice on the postsecondary planning process, a better understanding can be gathered for future analysis.

Savitz-Romer (2012) conducted a qualitative investigation on the perspectives of urban school counselors and their role as college counselors in the postsecondary planning process with low-income students. School counseling participants were required to have 3-years of professional experience working in the college admissions counseling process. The themes of the qualitative study were grouped according to the three research questions: (1) complex college and career readiness counseling, (2) interpretation of the role, and (3) unpreparedness. School counselors considered the postsecondary planning process to be influenced by the complex ecological interaction of student environments. Emerging themes of this subgroup comprised low student expectations, student lack of college knowledge, limited student motivation, compounding personal issues, insufficient parental college knowledge and experience, heightened financial distress, and inconsistent familial support. These themes mirror the barriers for postsecondary planning depicted for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments including socioeconomic status (Sirin, 2005), social skills deficits (Nelson et al., 2005), poor self-esteem (Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014), parent engagement, and single-parent homes (Wagner et al., 2005b).

Themes related to school counselor interpretation of their role in the postsecondary planning process encompassed a heightened degree of influence, the potential to be enabling, and personal concern for student postsecondary success. Bryan et al., (2009) agreed with the sentiments of school counselors regarding their potential to influence the postsecondary planning of students, considering school counselors to be an integral piece to the process. However, very little research has considered the balance between enabling and assisting high-need student

populations with postsecondary planning as well as the potential anxiety for school counselors stemming from postsecondary planning with high-need students. Two such studies (Hannon, 2016; Owens, Pernice-Duca, & Thomas, 2009) encouraged continued professional supervision for practicing urban school counselors so that they more effectively cope with challenges and employ more efficient techniques to serve high-need students.

The final subgroup of themes focusing on unpreparedness involved an overemphasis on clinical counseling in graduate programs, the absence of an educational context in graduate programs, and a lack of college readiness counseling in graduate coursework. Perusse, Poynton, Parzych, and Goodnough (2015) confirmed these attitudes expressed by school counselors through a study on recent changes in masters-level school counseling programs. Within the study surveys were sent to the department leaders of school counseling programs revealing a decrease in the number of courses constructed specifically for school counseling students. This study further warrants the need for continued supervision for practicing school counselors communicated through other research studies (Hannon, 2016; Owens et al., 2009).

A second study conducted by Clark et al. (2013) investigated school counselor perspectives of the barriers and resources impacting the postsecondary educational enrollment of Latino male adolescents within low-income rural and suburban areas. Findings indicated that school counselors identified the following barriers: (1) limited resources supporting Latino male students, (2) familial expectations for Latino males to contribute financially, and (3) negative peer influence of postsecondary planning. Previous research has suggested similar findings that students living in low-income environments experience a lack of resources to support their postsecondary planning (Lee, 2005). Packard, Babineau, and Machado (2012) reiterated the financial constraints of college enrollment for of low-income, ethnic minority adolescents,

suggesting that this demographic of students often chooses vocational programs over college enrollment in order to provide financial stability to their families. Interestingly, the study by Clark et al. (2013) refuted previous research claiming that peer relationships can have a positive influence on postsecondary planning (Holland, 2011; Westerlund et al., 2006). The perspectives of school counselors within this study that both supported and refuted evidence presented in previous research studies calls attention to the importance of individualized postsecondary planning (ASCA, 2012a) for high-need students from multicultural backgrounds.

A third study introduced by Krell and Pérusse (2012) examined the perspectives of a panel of experts on the role of school counselors in providing postsecondary planning services to students diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Participants included individuals who directed postsecondary support programs for students with ASD as well as individuals who advertise postsecondary transition services for students with ASD. According to the results of the panel discussions, experts highlighted five standards connecting the ASCA National Model (2012a) to the postsecondary planning of students experiencing an ASD diagnosis: (1) early initiation of transition services, (2) a collaborative transition process, (3) information outreach, (4) professional development, and (5) individualized counseling. Similarly, Wagner et al. (2005a) identified early intervention as a critical component to improving the outcomes for students experiencing an emotional disturbance. Bailey and Bradbury-Bailey (2010) determined that collaboration with family members and community members improved the postsecondary outcomes of underserved low-income minority students. Information outreach relates to the concept of social capital, which Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006) found to be significant for the improved college preparation of urban high school adolescents. Professional development and

individualized student planning link to previous research (Hannon, 2016; Owens et al., 2009) as well as guidelines established through IDEA (2004).

The body of research reviewed on the perspectives of school counselors for postsecondary planning with high-need students justifies the need for further examination of the postsecondary planning practices of school counselors with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. The perspectives of school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments may draw similarities to the perspectives of school counselors working with other high-need populations. However, the research reviewed encourages a narrow focus for school counselors to comprehend best postsecondary planning practices for specific populations of students. Future research can help fill the gap in the literature on postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments.

### **School Counseling Practices.**

According to ACSA (2012b), School Counselor Competencies incorporate two standards that relate to the skills and abilities guiding school counseling postsecondary planning practices. Specifically, these competencies focus on individualized student planning through transitional strategies (IV-B-2b) and the development of greater awareness towards postsecondary education (IV-B-2e). The following research studies highlight such strategies for effective postsecondary planning.

Belasco (2013) analyzed data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS), emphasizing how high school counseling services influenced postsecondary education enrollment for low-income 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. Results of the study indicated that an increase in time and access to school-based counseling services supported decision-making towards

postsecondary enrollment for low socioeconomic student populations. Lapan et al. (2014) reviewed school counseling practices that mitigated barriers to postsecondary planning for 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students within a large school district characterized by high minority populations and low socioeconomic status. Findings suggested that personalized school counseling services limited the impact of barriers including poverty and school mobility rates and improved student perception of school connectedness and school safety. Personalized school counseling services related to course scheduling and educational and career planning presented as focal points of support in the relationships between underprivileged students and school counselors. These two studies substantiate claims of past research, suggesting the significant role of school counselor-students relationships in the postsecondary planning process (Bryan et al, 2011), particularly as a form of social capital for low-income student populations (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006).

A meta-analysis of empirical articles conducted by Test et al. (2009) examined scholarly research identifying evidence-based practices in the transition planning for students with high incidence disabilities. The study determined that school counselors incorporated practices concerning student development and interagency collaboration for postsecondary planning to improve postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities. These practices included the development of career awareness, individualized counseling, access to vocational training, involvement in extracurricular activities (student development) and family referrals to community mental health agencies (interagency collaboration). Rylance (1997) analyzed data from the original National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) focusing on characteristics influencing postsecondary outcomes for students with severe emotional disturbances from an ecological perspective of the individual, home, and school. Results revealed that school

counselor postsecondary planning practices associated with individualized counseling and access to vocational education significantly impacted the high school graduation rates of students experiencing an emotional disturbance. Strategies supported by these two studies link directly to the guidelines of Delivery established within the ASCA School Counselor Competencies (2012b) as well as previous research findings advocating for an integrated school counseling approach across student environments to advance postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances (Kauffman, 2010).

A study conducted by Deemer and Ostrowski (2010) focused on the behaviors and perceptions of students in their sophomore year of high school participating in a graduation project to explore postsecondary options. Students indicated that they benefited the most from school counselor assistance in choosing courses that matched career planning interests and accessing job shadowing experiences that helped with future career decision-making. The voices of high school students within this study on the most relevant supports for postsecondary planning connected to school counselors functioning as a form of social capital (Hill et al., 2015; Holland, 2010) through vocational training opportunities. Furthermore, student perceptions associated the advantages of incorporating self-determination skills (Benitez et al., 2005; Carter et al., 2006; Trainor, 2008) through school counselor-student discussions on course selection. However, the majority of participants within this study presented as Caucasian students from a suburban school district in Pennsylvania. Therefore, the results of this study may be indicative of school counseling practices within a district of ample school resources when compared to school counseling practices within low-income urban environments, characterized by limited school resources (Lee, 2005).

Milsom et al. (2004) learned about the impact of a psychoeducational group facilitated by school counselors aiming to promote the postsecondary transition planning for students experiencing disabilities. Pre and post-test data from the group counseling intervention indicated that students gained a greater awareness of their disability, a better understanding of postsecondary knowledge, and an increased willingness to advocate for their needs. Results from this study paralleled two supportive elements for the postsecondary planning of high-need student populations – social capital and resiliency. The interaction between school counselors and students aided adolescents experiencing disabilities by providing them a form of social capital through information on postsecondary education (Trainor, et al., 2012). At the same time, the student-student interaction may have increased adolescent resiliency. Bernard (1993) determined that four factors are commonly associated with resiliency in students: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. Considering these factors and the results from this study showing an increased willingness for self-advocacy, it could be gathered that group work may present as method to enhance a student's ability for personal and educational resiliency (Rose & Steen, 2014).

Reddick et al. (2011) studied the inequity of postsecondary education through school environment characteristics and their impact on enrollment in low-income, high minority high school graduates. Results from the study found that student perceptions emphasized the importance of access to school counselors as a form of social capital for postsecondary planning and the importance of having high expectations established by school counselors for greater academic achievement. This study supports evidence determined through previous research, suggesting that social capital functions as one of the most significant support elements to postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances (Banks, 2014; Trainor,

2008; Trainor, Morningstar, Murray, & Kim, 2013) and students living in low socioeconomic environments (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hossler, 1998). Moreover, this study substantiates past research stressing the need for high expectations among student-teacher relationships to promote academic performance in high-need student populations (Harris, 2012; Mihalas et al., 2009; Murray, 2009).

From a review of these research studies, the claim can be supported that school counselors are implementing practices aligned with ASCA (2012b) School Counselor Competencies through individualized student planning. The supportive elements of social capital, resiliency, and self-determination were intertwined throughout the school counseling practices demonstrated through these articles. For students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments, school counselors may require the inclusion of all three elements to most effectively support their postsecondary planning.

### **School Counseling Experiences.**

An analysis of school counseling practices communicated effective strategies for the postsecondary planning of high-need students. A review of school counseling perspectives stressed a connection to school counseling practices as well as areas that require further examination to better support school counselors working with high-need student populations. Investigating the experiences of school counselors working with high-need students will synthesize the literature on school counselor postsecondary planning with high-need student populations.

Storlie and Toomey (2016) identified school counseling barriers in counselor-student relationships with Latino student populations by surveying over 150 school counselors within six U.S. states. The conclusions drawn from the research uncovered that school counselors

encountered barriers related to intercultural interactions and cultural sensitivity. More specifically, themes classified as intercultural interaction barriers involved a lack of connection with the parents and students of various cultural backgrounds. Themes categorized as cultural sensitivity described barriers pertaining to the climate of the school and understanding the cultural values of the family and student.

This study emphasized the need for school counselors to develop a strong multicultural awareness to provide effective postsecondary services to high-need student populations and limit the influence of potential barriers to success. ASCA (2012b) School Counselor Competencies confirm the value of multicultural knowledge, skills, and abilities within school counseling when working with various student populations through five of its standards (I-A-1; I-A-8; I-B-1h; II-B-4b; IV-B-1g). Storlie and Toomey's (2016) article draws similarities to the research presented by Savitz-Romer (2012), advocating for further training in order to effectively prepare school counselors to engage specific multicultural populations. In this regard, school counselors may benefit from self-determination strategies through a narrative approach, which has exhibited effectiveness in working with culturally diverse populations by allowing students to explore potential barriers to success through their personal perspectives (Mims, Newland, & Mims, 2009).

Stone-Johnson (2015) collected data through qualitative interviews with school counselors functioning within a low-income suburban environment to understand their work experiences implementing college and career readiness policy. Emerging themes of the qualitative analysis exhibited that school counselors expressed an interest for increased involvement in student college and career readiness training. Rather than facilitate postsecondary planning, school counselors communicated they were often providing individualized support for

more urgent events and engaging in non-counseling responsibilities due to limited resources within the school. Consequently, students within the school environment of this study experienced the same limitations in postsecondary planning resources that students within low-income, urban environments regularly encounter (Henderson et al., 2005; Lee, 2005).

ASCA (2012b) established School Counselor Competencies to guide the practices of school counselors and best support the overall development of students. However, insufficient training (Storlie & Toomey, 2016) and limited school resources (Stone-Johnson, 2015) hinder the ability of school counselors to provide an equitable form of access to postsecondary planning for high-need student populations. School counselors have a responsibility to voice these concerns and advocate on behalf of underserved student populations within schools. Future research on school counselor experiences with high-need student populations may serve this purpose.

#### **Postsecondary Planning Recommendations for School Counselors.**

Corwin, Venegas, Oliverez, and Colyar (2004) centered a research study on school counseling practices by questioning how differences in counseling services impacted the postsecondary planning for low-income minority populations across different schools. The study gathered qualitative data from focus groups and interviews with various school personnel, including school counselors and students. Results identified over-arching themes that included organizational constraints to postsecondary services (i.e., large caseloads, an overabundance of responsibilities, and a lack of personnel within the department), school counselor perceptions and frustrations (i.e., advantages of individual counseling and poor communication between the counseling department and the school community), and student perspectives and frustrations

(i.e., inaccessibility of school counselors, improperly assigned courses, a poor emphasis on postsecondary planning, and discriminatory preferences for a specific demographic of students).

From this research study, Corwin et al. (2004) made recommendations for the future postsecondary planning practices of school counselors. First, a more appropriate counseling structure was suggested to account for the overcrowding often characterized within low-income, urban school environments (Doan & Jablonski, 2012). Second, school counselors were encouraged to start the postsecondary planning process upon entry into high school rather than during 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Supporting this sentiment, Orthner, Akos, Rose, Jones-Sanpei, Mercado, and Woolley (2010) advocated for the introduction of career planning to start during the middle school years.

Hitchings, Retish, and Horvath (2005) prepared a research study focusing on the preparation of high school students experiencing disabilities for postsecondary education. The majority of participants within the study either experienced a learning disability or a severe emotional disturbance. Results from this study indicated that student interest in postsecondary education enrollment significantly decreased between the sophomore and senior years of high school. Evidence also demonstrated that students were not participating in college preparatory courses despite interest in attending a postsecondary institution.

Recommendations to improve postsecondary planning for students with disabilities included participation in mainstream classrooms, the development of self-advocacy skills, and student engagement in career planning activities. Previous research has described the connection between positive student outcomes and the participation of students experiencing disabilities in general education classrooms (Carpenter, King-Sears, & Keys, 1998). Furthermore, Barnard-Brak and Lechtenberger (2010) determined that a positive association existed between the

academic achievement of students experiencing disabilities and student participation in IEP meetings.

### **Summary**

Current research demonstrates the importance of incorporating an ecological perspective when counseling high-need students (Black & Krishnakumar, 1998; Bowen, 2009; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). The ecological approach provides a framework for school counselors to better understand the interaction of barriers across environments that hinder the postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. For school counselors, a greater understanding of supportive elements for the postsecondary planning of high-need populations must also be gathered to limit the effects of potential barriers. Research has provided evidence emphasizing the characteristics of self-determination (Trainor, 2008), resiliency (Short & Russell-Mayhew, 2009), higher academic expectations (Mihalas et al., 2009), parent engagement (Kenny et al., 2003), and social capital (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Leake et al., 2011; Westerlund et al., 2006) to promote the postsecondary planning of high-need student populations.

Policy in education has raised awareness for improving postsecondary planning for high-need populations and encouraged school systems to be innovative in their approach to support this objective (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). School counselors have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to work effectively with high-need students and advocate for postsecondary planning and success (Bryan et al., 2009; Bryan et al., 2011). To the detriment of students with emotional disturbances in urban environments, the complex and varied barriers experienced creates a more complicated path to postsecondary planning that requires a comprehensive, individualized school counseling approach for success (ASCA, 2012a).

While many research articles have examined the barriers associated with postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances (e.g., Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Leake et al., 2011; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009) and students living in urban environments (e.g., Constantine, Erikson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998; Kenny et al., 2003), few studies have explored the postsecondary planning perspectives of school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. Conducting a qualitative analysis on the postsecondary planning perspectives, practices, and experiences of school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances intends to fill two gaps within the literature.

First, the research will add to the limited amount of literature focusing on school counselor perspectives toward postsecondary planning. When working with students requiring a high degree of postsecondary support, previous research has determined that school counselors may internalize some of the anxiety caused by planning for postsecondary success (Savitz-Romer, 2012). The research study will identify whether school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments share similar sentiments. Secondly, the research will build evidence of postsecondary planning barriers and supports through the practices and experiences of school counselors specifically working with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. Navigating the complex interactions of high-need student environments can prove to be difficult for school counselors. Past research has shown that school counselor postsecondary experiences have left individuals feeling underprepared (Storlie & Toomey, 2016), which may be compounded by attempts to facilitate under-resourced postsecondary practices for high-need student populations (Clark et al., 2013). The research study will determine whether school counselors have experienced similar barriers working with

students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments in addition to potential supports implemented to overcome such barriers. Examining this topic within a the research study could aid school counselors in the development of future postsecondary planning techniques intended for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

A review of the literature on the barriers and supports involved in postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments indicates the complexities of postsecondary achievement and/or success for this particular demographic. The research identifies characteristics related to social capital (Farmer & Adams, 2006; Kenny et al., 2003, Leake et al., 2011; Mihalas et al., 2009; Westerlund et al., 2006), resiliency (Armstrong et al., 2005; Minnard, 2002; Short & Russell-Mayhew, 2009; Ungar, et al., 2013), and self-determination (Algozzine et al., 2001; Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Trainor, 2008; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997) that promote effective postsecondary planning for high-need student populations. However, few research studies have examined the perspectives of school counselors supporting the postsecondary planning of high-need student populations. The current study highlights the perspectives, practices, and experiences of school counselors to better understand the factors influencing postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments.

The current chapter describes the methodology presented for the research study. The emphasis on school counseling perspectives established the need for a qualitative research approach. First, I illustrate the rationale for implementing a qualitative research design through a constructivist grounded theory approach. A brief history of the constructivist grounded theory approach is included. Second, I depict the selection process and recruitment procedures for participants in the current study. Third, the structure of the interview is highlighted to demonstrate how I collected data, followed by a description of the data analysis plan. Lastly, the rigor and credibility are explained for the research study, followed by a brief summary.

Through the voices of urban secondary school counselors, a theoretical understanding may be developed that provides a postsecondary planning framework for school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. The research was guided by the following research questions:

- (1.) What are the most important elements in postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments?
- (2.) How do school counselors promote postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments?
- (3.) What experiences have school counselors had that guide postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments?

### **Research Design**

Anderson (1987) defined qualitative research as an approach that emphasizes inductive, interpretive methods applied to a subjective and socially created reality. Departing from the quantitative approach, qualitative methods enable participants to voice their perspectives on the phenomena of interest (Austin & Sutton, 2014). A qualitative methodology is suitable when attempting to explore the lived experiences of participants on a specific topic of interest (Creswell, 2003). Integrating the qualitative approach through one-on-one interviews within the research study offered school counselors an opportunity to articulate their perspectives, practices, and experiences regarding postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments.

### **Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Glaser and Strauss (1967) introduced one method of qualitative inquiry known as grounded theory in a publication titled “The Discovery of Grounded Theory.” Grounded theory

can be described as a systematic effort of qualitative research intended for theory development (Charmaz, 2014). The original depiction of Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory merged positivist traditions based on scientific evidence, with pragmatist philosophy based on interpretative interaction (Charmaz, 2016). However, in its early stages, grounded theory was challenged based on assumptions arguing for either a stronger adherence to methodology over content, or content over methodology (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Charmaz (2000) advocated for an alternative perspective, framing grounded theory through a constructivist mindset that allowed researchers to construct their own research methodology and content. Charmaz (2008) characterized constructivist grounded theory through the following principles: (1) reality is multiple and subjective, (2) interaction presents as the foundation for the research process, (3) research incorporates the experience of both the researcher and the participants, and (4) the construction of data is a shared process between researcher and participants.

With origins rooted in pragmatist values of social justice, constructivist grounded theory provides a method to studying issues of inequality and marginalization (Charmaz, 2016). Research has demonstrated how students experiencing emotional disturbances and students living in urban environments encounter various barriers limiting the potential for equitable postsecondary planning (Banks, 2014; Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Stang, 2008; Dutta, Kundu, & Schiro-Geist, 2009). The current study utilized the tenets of a constructivist grounded theory approach to describe the postsecondary planning perspectives of school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. By aligning the principals of a constructivist approach with the fundamentals of grounded theory, I provided a thorough analysis of emerging themes on postsecondary planning for school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments.

**Role of the Researcher.**

When discussing the qualitative research process Widdowfield (2000) described that a researcher's emotional interpretation of the research process can be influenced by the topic being studied and the background of the individual studying it. In regards to the current study, I have personal experience working alongside students with emotional disturbances in urban secondary school environments. Through these professional experiences I have observed various instances of ineffective postsecondary planning with this student demographic, motivating me to take action to improve postsecondary practices for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. As a result, I understand how my personal emotions may impact the analysis of the data collected. Munkejord (2009) supported the incorporation of methodological emotional reflexivity in grounded theory research to increase understanding and awareness of emotional biases during the qualitative process. Similarly, Charmaz (2016) advocated for the use of methodological self-consciousness in a constructivist grounded theory approach to challenge the privileges and preconceptions of the researcher in relation to the research process and the relationships with participants.

To account for my own biases and implement strategies related to self-consciousness and reflection, entries within a reflexive journal were compiled at the start of the interview process through the conclusion of data analysis. By doing so, I was able to better comprehend the blind spots in my data analysis that could have guided or impeded an accurate understanding of participant perspectives (Berger, 2015). Despite efforts to implement strategies that helped to eliminate potential researcher bias, the reader should be permitted to make their own determination regarding the quality of the results (Creswell & Miller, 2000) with my own biases in mind. Consequently, it is important for the reader to know my preference for a relational-

cultural postsecondary planning approach emphasizing growth-fostering relationships when working with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments.

### **Participants.**

The current study was designed to identify high school counselors working within an urban setting of a large northeastern city of the United States with at least 2-years of postsecondary planning experience. Secondary-level school counselors were selected as participants because postsecondary planning time increases as students advance through high school and make decisions toward an appropriate college or career (Certo, Luecking, Murphy, Brown, Courey, & Belanger, 2008). Urban school environments were established as a criterion for school counselors to ensure that participants encountered, to some degree, the intersecting barriers of effective postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances and students living in urban environments. At least 2-years of postsecondary planning experience was required because school counselors with minimal experience aiding in the postsecondary transition for students at the high school level could have influenced the results of the research. Participants from a large northeastern city of the United States were selected for two reasons: (1) to create consistency in district policy and access to community-based resources (i.e., mental health organizations) and (2) the school district of the large northeastern city encompasses a substantial amount of secondary schools, providing a large source of potential school counselors. No requirement was made pertaining to the amount of students experiencing an emotional disturbance assigned to school counselor caseloads. Under most circumstances, secondary school settings assign students to school counselors according to grade and/or last name, providing an equal opportunity for school counselors to engage students with emotional disturbances in postsecondary planning services (Akos, Schuldt, & Walendin, 2009).

A homogeneous purposive sample was established based on the criteria selected for the research participants. According to Patton (2002), a homogenous purposive sample characterizes a sample whose units (i.e., urban secondary school counselors) share the same traits (i.e., 2-years postsecondary planning experience). To identify potential participants, a list of 52 high schools was compiled from the school district website of the large northeastern city. Once all secondary school names were gathered, I collected contact information (i.e. names, email addresses and telephone numbers) for each school counselor from the 52 secondary school websites. All school counselors with information provided through their school websites were contacted to participate in the research study. School counselors who did not have contact information listed on their individual school websites were excluded from the study. The first 10 school counselors who responded with interest and fit participant criteria for the research study were contacted regarding availability for a one-on-one interview. The remaining school counselors who responded with interest were placed on a secondary list to be contacted, if saturation of the data was not obtained. Data saturation was reached through the original 10 participants (Table 3) when enough information was presented to replicate the study and new emerging themes were no longer being presented (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

### **Recruitment Process.**

The participants of the research study were contacted by electronic mail and by phone to request participation in the study. First, a letter (Appendix A) was emailed to all potential participants informing each individual about my personal background as well as the purpose, the plan, and the benefits for the research study. Included within the email was a link to a brief Qualtrics Research Study Questionnaire, if people chose to participate (Appendix B). The completion of a research study questionnaire demonstrated whether potential participants fit the

criteria for the research study (i.e., 2-years postsecondary planning experience as a high school counselor). Individuals who replied indicating they choose not to participate were no longer contacted to invite participation. I contacted the initial group of participants, fitting the predetermined criteria (10 school counselors) by telephone to schedule a one-on-one interview. Once the date, time, and location were established for the interview, I emailed each participant the informed consent (Appendix C) for review prior to meeting for the one-on-one interview. To increase the likelihood of follow through, I contacted participants by email 3 days before the date of the scheduled interview to serve as a reminder of the date, time, and location. The information of individuals on the secondary list that met participant criteria and wished to participate in the study was archived for potential contact in the future to reach data saturation, if deemed necessary.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) through Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (2016) demonstrates a commitment to “protecting the rights of and ensuring the safety of human subjects participating in research.” The current research study was submitted to the IRB to ensure that the appropriate protocols and procedures were being followed for research on human subjects. The next two sections demonstrate how the current research study protected the safety of research participants.

#### **Confidentiality.**

ASCA (2014) communicates that the therapeutic relationship between school counselors and students requires an environment of trust and confidence that can be promoted through confidentiality. Similarly, I aimed to build trust and confidence through confidentiality with participants of the research study. Confidentiality of participants was maintained through the

following techniques: (1) one-on-one interviews were conducted in a private setting consisting of the school counselor and I only, (2) a digital audio recorder was utilized to record the interviews, (3) digital audio recordings were stored in a password protected file folder on a computer, (4) a mutual non-disclosure agreement was completed between the transcription services company and I prior to uploading the interviews for transcription, (5) pseudonyms were assigned to all schools, participants, and other pertinent information to de-identify data gathered for the research study questionnaires and content of the interviews, and (6) all data sources were destroyed at the conclusion of the study. These guidelines promoting participant confidentiality were articulated within the informed consent of the research study.

### **Informed Consent.**

Previous research has debated whether the length and terminology included within an informed consent impacts participant interest and/or participant awareness of the study (Kent, 1996; Ogloff & Otto, 1991). The informed consent created for the current study limited these barriers by including subheadings for easier identification of topics and understandable terminology to describe each topic. Key elements of the document included the purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality, compensation, withdrawal rights, and researcher contact information (The Ohio State University, 2012). One benefit of the current study related to participant contribution to research that could impact future postsecondary planning for high-need student populations. One risk of the current study concerned the potential for emotional distress to result from reflection on postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances. Participants did not receive compensation for their involvement in the current study. I provided participants with an electronic copy of the informed consent once the interview was scheduled. Before collecting the informed consent on the date of the scheduled interview,

time was given to each participant to ask any final questions. A copy of the signed informed consent was given to participants so that they could reference the document in the future.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for the current study included sources of qualitative analysis regularly incorporated by professionals within the field of research, such as one-on-one interviews and a reflective journal (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002). While a questionnaire often presents as a quantitative form of data collection (Carmichael, 2015), its purpose within the current study did not justify a mixed-methods approach to research. All questions within the interview guide presented as open-ended to promote the voice of school counselors regarding their postsecondary planning perspectives (Austin & Sutton, 2014). I suggested that all interviews take place within the professional environment of each school counselor so that I could gather some familiarity of the school culture and student population. When unable to meet in the school environment, I scheduled the interview for a private setting, such as a local library, where private rooms could be reserved. Thoughts and opinions stemming from my personal experience within the school and my interactions with participants during the interview process were recorded within the reflective journal to limit researcher bias (Chenail, 2011).

### **Research Study Questionnaire.**

Within the original email requesting interest for participation in the current study was a link to a brief research study questionnaire through Qualtrics (Appendix B). A prompt to complete the research study questionnaire was only required for those individuals willing to participate in the current study. The short research study questionnaire included information on participant professional experience and contact information. This instrument served as a screener to eliminate potential participants who do not fit the criteria outlined for the study. A copy of the

informed consent for the study was included at the end of the research study questionnaire so that potential participants could review the document prior to meeting for the scheduled one-on-one interview.

### **Individual Interview Method.**

One-on-one interviews were the primary qualitative methodology of the research study. I developed and structured all interview questions as well as requested feedback on the content and organization of the questions from a counselor educator with substantial research experience. The semi-structured interview consisted of 8-questions with additional probing questions (Appendix E) to encourage participants to elaborate on perspectives, practices, and experiences involved in postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments. According to Brugha, Bebbington, and Jenkins (1999) semi-structured interviews allow researchers the flexibility to clarify unclear responses by probing further into responses through freeform inquiries. Two pilot interviews were conducted to assess the quality and format of the interview questions with two school counselors who have relevant experience with this population. Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) suggested that pilot interviews assist the researcher in detecting potential shortcomings of the questions guiding the research process. Pilot interviews for the research study served two purposes: (1) they offered me another opportunity to revise interview questions based on mock interview feedback and (2) they offered insight into some of the perspectives, practices, and experiences actual participants communicated during the interview process.

Participants were informed that the allotted time for the interview process ranged between 60-minutes to 75-minutes, depending on participant responses. Prior to engaging in the interview process, I provided time for any final questions and determined if participants had

signed the informed consent. A copy of the informed consent was given to participants, which included my personal contact information, if questions arose after the interview.

After I posed all interview questions, participants were informed that the interview would be transcribed and an electronic copy would be provided to them for review and approval, if the participant chose to verify the transcription. Next, I requested that each participant complete a short, 5-question demographic questionnaire (Appendix D). After concluding the interview, I uploaded all the recorded audio files to a professional transcription service company. A mutual non-disclosure agreement was signed by the transcription service company and I to ensure participant confidentiality during the transcription process. The transcription service company completed the transcriptions of all audio-recorded interviews within a 4-day period. Participants had the option to decline a review of the transcriptions through the informed consent. If participants choose to review and approve the content of the transcription, each participant was provided a 5-day period in which to do so. After this 5-day period, the participants no longer had the opportunity to review and approve the transcription. One of the ten participants chose to review the finalized transcription. Necessary modifications were made to the transcription after feedback was received from the requested participant. A follow-up interview was offered to all participants, if participants felt the content of the transcription diverged greatly from what they were attempting to communicate. No participants requested to meet for a follow-up interview.

### **Reflective Journal.**

As part of the qualitative research process, a focus should be placed on potential research bias to develop a greater awareness of how the perspectives of the researcher may potentially impact data analysis (Chenail, 2011). Therefore, I recorded thoughts and insights within a reflective journal throughout the research process. The incorporation of a reflective journal

during the qualitative research process attempted to diminish the potential for research bias to be included within the research study through continuous reflection of past and present experiences.

### **Interview Guide.**

The following questions and prompts reflect the semi-structured format for all interviews with participants in the research study:

(1.) How do you promote postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances?

*Prompt:* What specific actions do you take for quality postsecondary planning?

*Prompt:* What individuals do you involve in the postsecondary planning process?

(2.) Could you describe an incident in which you effectively supported the postsecondary planning of a student with an emotional disturbance?

(3.) Could you describe an incident in which you felt unable to properly support the postsecondary planning of a student with an emotional disturbance?

(4.) How would you describe your experiences in promoting the interest of students with emotional disturbances towards postsecondary planning?

*Prompt:* From your experiences, what factors may contribute to a greater interest in postsecondary planning?

(5.) What do you consider to be the most important elements to effective postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances?

*Prompt:* What makes these elements so important?

(6.) According to your experiences, what are the most influential barriers to effective postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances?

*Prompt:* What factors cause these barriers?

(7.) How do you navigate the potential barriers towards greater postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances?

*Prompt:* What factors prevent you from navigating these barriers?

(8.) What can school counselors do from a professional perspective to improve the postsecondary planning of students with emotional disturbances?

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I utilized open coding to process the qualitative data for the purpose of engaging in thorough research procedures leading to an emergence of conceptual themes (Grounded Theory Institute, 2014). These concepts created the foundation for theory development on the perspectives, practices, and experiences of school counselors towards postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments. A description of the coding process and data analysis software program utilized follows. Table 3 concludes this section, detailing the data analysis plan throughout the research study according to 3 different phases.

#### **Initial Coding.**

The current research study called for a highly engaging process between the participants and I in order for theory development to align appropriately with the perspectives of school counselors working in urban environments with students experiencing emotional disturbances. The constructivist grounded theory of qualitative inquiry supported this process through reflective interaction with the data gathered (Charmaz, 2014). For the initial coding process, emerging concepts were gathered, coded as themes, and analyzed using a qualitative analysis program (NVivo). Excerpts from the qualitative data were placed into categories of similar themes.

Throughout the initial coding process, reflections on the data continued so that I could raise valid questions through microanalysis, which contributed to the depth and overall analysis of the data. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008) microanalysis allows the researcher to “generate ideas and focus on pieces of the data that seem relevant but whose meanings remain elusive (p. 59).” In practicing this technique, I made notes through a reflective journal on these covert meanings so that I could return to such data later in the process with newfound insight in relation to previously coded themes. Categorizing the primary, more overt themes provided me with an organized frame of reference of the emerging themes for continued analysis. Once initial coding was complete, a secondary coding process was implemented.

### **Focused Coding.**

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990) axial coding presents as a secondary coding methodology utilized within grounded theory to relate initial coding themes to one another through a coding paradigm. Considering that the current research study utilized a constructivist grounded theory approach and sought to develop theory from the perspectives of school counselors, axial coding was not be included based on the contention of Charmaz (2006) that axial coding is too rigid for the constructivist ground theory approach. Instead focused coding was implemented to identify the most frequent codes incorporated in the qualitative analysis and form more substantial themes around these highly targeted categories (Saldana, 2013). Focused coding allowed me to determine the most relevant codes that conveyed the most meaning to school counselors in their postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. Once the focused coding process was complete, I began to identify meaningful responses related to each of the research questions.

**Data Analysis Software.**

All qualitative data was collected, uploaded, coded, and analyzed via the QSR International NVivo software program, Version 10.2.2 for Mac computers. The NVivo software program functioned as a storage system so the qualitative data could be quickly accessed and critically analyzed using features including text searches, word frequencies, and matrix coding. Additionally, the NVivo software program has a memo function that enabled me to archive thoughts regarding the qualitative data analysis process that could be included in the reflective journal.

Table 3: *Three Phases of the Data Analysis Plan*

Transcriptions	Initial Coding	Focused Coding
<p>Requested amended IRB approval to have audio-recorded interviews transcribed by a transcription services company.</p> <p>Reviewed the transcribed audio files to ensure all appropriate information was redacted from the finalized transcription.</p> <p>Sent the finalized, redacted transcription to participants who requested to confirm its content. Participant(s) were given 5-days to provide feedback.</p> <p>Uploaded all finalized transcriptions to Nvivo for coding analysis and saved transcriptions under a password-protected file.</p>	<p>Conducted an initial coding process that resulted in the identification of 35 emerging themes related to information gathered within all transcribed interviews.</p> <p>Examined each excerpt within all 35 identified themes to determine if initial coding was completed appropriately. Specific themes were modified and merged to clarify the voices of participants.</p> <p>Sought feedback from 2 peer auditors. The peer auditors reviewed the reflective journal entries and the finalized transcriptions to provide information on potential blind spots within my data analysis. Minor revisions were made.</p>	<p>Identified the 13 most common themes communicated collectively by all participants. Common themes were defined as themes that were communicated by 8-10 of the 10 total interviewees.</p> <p>Reviewed all 13 themes according to the research questions guiding the research study. 5 themes related to Research Question # 1. 5 themes related to Research Question # 2. 3 themes related to Research Question # 3.</p> <p>Analyzed the most common perspectives, practices, and experiences of high school counselors to articulate the most significant themes and finalize results.</p>

**Rigor and Credibility**

Creswell (2003) suggested eight methods to validate qualitative research. For the current study, I demonstrated rigor and credibility of the qualitative research through three of these recommended methods: internal member checking, external auditing, and clarifying. These three methods gave me a varying, internal perspective on the qualitative analysis, an external perspective on qualitative methodology and design, and a strategy for reflection to challenge potential personal biases.

**Internal Verification.**

Internal verification was incorporated into the study through member checking in two different ways. First, I sought confirmation of the content included in the transcribed interviews from each participant. I provided participants the option to review the transcriptions before starting the coding process and offered a potential follow-up interview, as explained in the individual interview procedures. However, participants had the option to decline verification of the transcription. Overall, only one of the ten participants requested to verify the finalized transcription. Second, I requested the assistance of two peer auditors, both of who are experienced counselors with doctoral level training in qualitative research methods. To verify appropriate coding analysis, these two individuals reviewed the reflective journal to better comprehend my thoughts on the data analysis process. In addition, the peer auditors collectively spot-checked all 10 interview transcriptions to determine if their perspectives matched or diverged from my own perspectives. After independent coding of the qualitative data, I engaged in discussions with the peer auditors to review their perspectives on the results from the coding process. I sought input from individuals with a counseling background because these individuals had a degree of familiarity with the concepts presented by school counselors in the interview

transcriptions. Incorporating this strategy within the current study allowed me to identify areas of strength within the coded themes as well as underrepresented themes that could be included within the research analysis.

### **External Verification.**

External verification was implemented within the study through the oversight and feedback from the dissertation committee. The dissertation committee encompassed three faculty members from a counselor education program in addition to one faculty member from an educational leadership program with a qualitative research background. During this process committee members were tasked with assessing my findings, interpretations, and conclusions, as supported by the data (Creswell, 2003). Specifically, committee members were given segments of the research study (i.e., introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and discussion) as I proceeded through the dissertation process. Before finalizing each chapter within the dissertation, I considered comments from all committee members in an effort to improve the context, implementation, and communicated findings of the study. Members of the dissertation committee had familiarity with constructivist grounded theory and were able to critique the methodology of the current study.

### **Clarifying.**

To avoid researcher bias, the constructivist grounded theory technique of methodological self-consciousness was incorporated. Methodological self-consciousness pertains to “dissecting our worldviews, language, and meanings by revealing how they enter our research in ways we had previously not realized” (Charmaz, 2016, p. 3). Through professional experiences, I realized the importance of establishing growth-fostering relationships with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments to effectively build postsecondary plans (Miller &

Stiver, 1997). As a result, I identify with a relational-cultural approach when supporting the postsecondary planning needs of the demographic of interest within the current study. I implemented methodological self-consciousness through a reflective journal that allowed me to recall past experiences during the research process and attend to how and why such thoughts could be impacting the data analysis.

### **Summary**

School counselors possess the ability to impact the postsecondary planning of students preparing to transition into a college or career. For students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments, the process of postsecondary planning may seem overwhelming due to the various barriers hindering their future achievement and success. Research has demonstrated that emphasizing specific elements during the postsecondary planning process improves the opportunity for future success of high-need populations (Farmer & Adams, 2006; Short & Russell-Mayhew, 2009; Trainor, 2008). However, few studies have researched the perspectives of school counselors toward the postsecondary planning of high-need student populations. The current study explores the perspectives, practices, and experiences of school counselors to better understand the factors influencing postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments. By utilizing a qualitative research approach based on constructivist grounded theory, I developed a theoretical framework grounded in the data and constructed through the critical methodology of the analysis. Constructivist grounded theory presents as an instrument for studying power and inequality through constant examination of the data (Charmaz, 2016). Through such examination I intended to promote a greater sense of equity for the postsecondary planning of students with emotional disturbances in urban environments through the research.

### **Chapter 4: Results of the Study**

This constructivist grounded theory approach of qualitative inquiry utilized methods to better understand the perspectives of secondary school counselors in supporting the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. Participants included ten female secondary school counselors who engaged in one-on-one, in-person interviews to share their practices, perspectives, and experiences on postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. Participant criteria for inclusion within the research study focused on three main components: (1) participants were required to work at an urban high school setting (2) within the district of a large northeastern city of the United States (3) with at least 2-years of postsecondary planning experience. Participant contact information was obtained through public information made available through the urban school district of interest. In the end, 10 participants were identified to meet criteria from 10 different high school institutions located within the large northeastern city of interest. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What are the most important elements in postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments?
- (2) How do school counselors promote postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments?
- (3) What experiences have school counselors had that guide their postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments?

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the current research study. Data collected during the research process included participant responses to a semi-structured interview as well as a short, demographic questionnaire, follow-up verification by the participants of the interview

transcriptions, and a reflective journal based on the one-on-one interviews and data analysis process. Each of these qualitative components was utilized to identify emerging themes through a two-phased coding process in relation to the three research questions. I placed a high degree of emphasis on objectivity throughout data collection to diminish researcher bias towards the topic of interest and highlight the voices of high school counselors within the data findings. This chapter includes participant demographics, results from the research study, and a summary.

### **Participants**

Participants were asked to complete a short, demographic form at the conclusion of the semi-structured, one-on-one interview. The demographic questionnaire (Appendix D) requested information on participant gender, age, race, ethnicity, highest degree obtained, and total years of postsecondary planning experience within an urban high school setting. All ten interviewees presented as female with an average age of 41.1-years. Of the ten participants, eight identified as White, one individual identified as Asian, and one individual identified as African American. Nine of the participants did not identify ethnically as Hispanic or Latino, while one of the ten participants did identify ethnically as Hispanic or Latino. The majority of participants, seven in total, earned their master's degree. Of the remaining participants, two earned an education specialist degree and one earned a doctoral degree. On average, participants had an average of 7.2-years of postsecondary planning experience within an urban high school setting. Pseudonyms were assigned to the names of each participant as well as their place of employment (public high school within the urban city of interest) to protect participant confidentiality. The participant demographics are listed in Table 3:

Table 4: *Demographic Summary of Participants (N=10)*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Race*	Ethnicity*	Degree	PS Planning Experience	*HS Setting
Chloe	F	40	A	2	M.S.	8-Years	M
Danielle	F	47	AA	2	M.S.	14-Years	N
Fiona	F	47	W	2	M.S.	9-Years	N
Grace	F	41	W	2	M.S.	5-Years	N
Hannah	F	32	W	2	Ph.D.	2-Years	M
Lydia	F	39	W	1	Ed.S.	4-Years	N
Matilda	F	47	W	2	M.S.	14-Years	M
Olivia	F	41	W	2	M.S.	3-Years	N
Sabrina	F	30	W	2	M.S.	3-Years	C
Scarlet	F	47	W	2	Ed.S.	10-Years	M

\*Race: A = Asian; AA = African American; W = White

\*Ethnicity: 1 = Hispanic or Latino; 2 = Not Hispanic or Latino

\*HS (High School) Setting: M = Magnet School; N = Neighborhood School; C = Charter School

### High School Setting Descriptions

I conducted the in-person, one-on-one interviews at eight of the ten high school institutions of the participants. The remaining two interviews were conducted at local public libraries within the urban city of interest. In one case, the high school institution of employment for the participant recently closed due a decision from the state judging that the institution was not meeting adequate academic performance standards to support the student population. In the second case, scheduling conflicts arose and it was mutually deemed that a weekend interview date would be most convenient for the participant.

All ten high school institutions were contained within the school district of a large northeastern city of the United States. Three of the ten academic settings were considered public, magnet schools with special admittance, or criteria for enrollment. The U.S. Department of Education (2017) defines magnet schools as:

Institutions that assist in the desegregation of public schools by supporting the elimination, reduction, and prevention of minority group isolation in elementary and secondary schools with substantial numbers of minority group students in addition to providing all students with the opportunity to meet challenging academic content and student academic achievement standards.

One of the ten academic settings was characterized as a public, charter school. The Center for Public Education (2012) defines charter schools as:

A non-religious, open enrollment public school established by teachers, parents, or community groups with increased freedom and autonomy from state and local rules (i.e., staffing, curriculum choices, and budget management) operating under a charter that governs its operation, including elements such as the measurement of student performance.

The remaining six high school settings were considered public, neighborhood schools. A neighborhood school can be defined as, “A school with an attendance boundary which gives admission priority to those students who live within that particular boundary without the requirement of submitting an application (Office of Student Enrollment and Placement, 2017).”

School student populations differed greatly across these ten high school settings. The three magnet schools maintained similar student populations ranging from 569-608 students, with an average of 587.6 students. The lone charter school comprised the lowest population of

students among the ten high school institutions with a total of 160 students. The six neighborhood schools varied widely regarding student population with the largest school consisting of 1,561 students and the lowest school serving 273 students, with a total average of 780.6 students. All interviewees communicated they engaged in the postsecondary planning support of students experiencing emotional disturbances within their urban school setting.

### **Results**

Before conducting the interview, I requested that participants be mindful of their responses regarding their perspectives, practices, and experiences with postsecondary planning. More specifically, I wanted to identify the most important elements of postsecondary planning, the activities promoting postsecondary planning, and the experiences guiding postsecondary planning for high school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances within urban environments. Through a semi-structured, one-on-one interview format that included 8 questions and 6 prompts (Appendix E), I collected data to answer the research questions.

Supplementing the data collection from the in-person interviews were follow-up verifications of the interview transcriptions, a reflective journal to identify potential researcher bias, and peer auditing feedback based on the coding of the transcriptions and content of the reflective journal. Of the 10 participants, 1 high school counselor requested to review the finalized transcription for verification purposes. This participant communicated no modifications or suggestions after reviewing the finalized transcription. Peer auditing conversations on the transcriptions and reflective journal were conducted after I completed the initial and focused coding process of the transcriptions. During two different discussions with two peer auditors with experience in counseling and qualitative research, one recommendation was made in

regards to the title of theme three in research question two to more clearly communicate the voice of participants in the research study. Besides this minor adjustment, the peer auditors and I felt as though the themes coded appropriately matched the postsecondary planning perspectives, practices, and experiences of high school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments

### **Research Question One**

The first research question explored the perspectives of high school counselors on the most important elements to postsecondary planning with students experiencing emotional disturbances living within urban environments. Each participant provided responses to two questions within the semi-structured interview that connected to this concept: (1) According to your experiences, what are the most influential barriers to effective postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances? (2) What do you consider to be the most important elements to postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances?

Through a process of both initial and focused coding, I was able to determine common themes across the interviews to highlight the perspectives of urban high school counselors working with this high-need demographic of students. Similar to the information presented within Chapter 2, participants emphasized the presence of elements that hindered postsecondary planning as well as elements that supported postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. A variety of the barriers depicted within Table 1 and Table 2 were expressed by participants as important elements hindering postsecondary planning while social capital presented as a focal point for elements supporting the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. The emerging sub-themes connected to elements hindering postsecondary planning were: (1)

school resources, (2) poor parent engagement, and (3) higher-level needs. The emerging sub-themes connected to elements supporting postsecondary planning were: (1) school personnel, (2) high parent engagement, and (3) computer-based planning resources. A description of each theme is included below. \_\_\_\_\_

### **Elements Hindering Postsecondary Planning.**

#### ***Theme One: School Resources.***

School resources available for students experiencing emotional disturbances at the high school level presented as a concern for the majority of high school counselors interviewed. Chloe described how the lack of school personnel within her institution creates a barrier to postsecondary planning:

I think the problem is resources, not enough school counselors. Our caseload ratio is probably double what the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) recommends. We are in a district that their funding is questionable and unreliable, so resources are limited. We need to offer the same opportunities to our students as those that are offered in wealthier school districts.

Sabrina shared frustration toward financial resources, as it pertains to the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances stating:

In a huge public school with no resources, they're not taking students on trips to see different colleges. And if they are, they're taking the top performing students, but it's the lower performing students that I really wanted to see [attend these events].

Interestingly, participants also communicated concern regarding the lack of resources at the collegiate or university level for students experiencing emotional disturbances. Matilda communicated her feelings of frustration between resources made available to students

experiencing emotional disturbances within the high school setting versus the collegiate setting: “Some of these schools are so big that you [the student] are just a number, and they are not going to support high-need students as much as we do here.” Scarlet described her perspective in connecting a student experiencing a disability to a collegiate institution with the appropriate accommodations as the following:

They [the students] still have to meet all the criteria [of the collegiate institutions], so if they have an issue, they are not going to be able to get in. So it’s difficult to find and direct parents to schools [collegiate institutions] that will accommodate them. I feel like their choices are very limited.

From the perspectives shared by high school counselors within the interviews, school resources at both the high school level and collegiate level create barriers for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments towards postsecondary planning. Therefore, the feelings expressed by many of the high school counselors may indicate the presence of a broader issue related to a lack of support for high-need populations within multiple levels of academia.

***Theme Two: Poor Parent Engagement.***

Many of the participants referenced lack of parent engagement as an element hindering postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. Multiple comments by high school counselors expressed difficulty encouraging parent involvement in the postsecondary process and minimal support to students during the postsecondary process. Grace conveyed a perspective on her inability to contact and communicate with the parents of students experiencing emotional disturbances:

It's amazing how many times I called a phone number and it's disconnected, the mailbox is full, or there's a message saying, 'This number has been blocked.' By the time that they [the student] get to high school, the parents have gotten negative phone calls throughout their whole school career. I would say that the only way they [the parents] were ever reached was if the kid was truant and the police needed to get involved.

Other participants communicated that parent involvement was limited due to a lack of parent college knowledge rather than by choosing not to interact with school personnel regarding postsecondary planning. Olivia described situations in which the connection between school and the home was absent, thereby hindering progress towards postsecondary planning for a student with interest:

If I can get a kid that's actually on board with doing the college piece, the biggest barrier for most of them is a fractured family component. Whether they [the parents] are just not there or they're not up-to-par with knowing how to apply to colleges or knowing how to fill out financial pieces. Students don't necessarily know all the information that's being asked on these forms and there's not a parent component that's strong enough to assist them.

Sabrina explained the different perspectives she has toward parent involvement according to school environment: "In an urban setting, I think it's very hard to get the parents involved. In other settings, parents are way too involved." Lydia provided a similar sentiment on parent involvement in relation to one student experiencing an emotional disturbance within an urban environment school who exhibited risky behaviors:

Parental involvement is very, very, very low. I had a kid who was a major drug dealer. It was hard to break him and get him to buy into our program. He was arrested twice in the school and I feel like no matter what I did, I couldn't get the parental support.

From an ecological perspective, postsecondary planning may be inhibited for students experiencing emotional disturbances living within urban environments when one of the systems – the home – does not engage in the process. Participants within the current research project confirmed this concept. Students are left at a disadvantage for future postsecondary achievement when there is a gap within this system of necessary complex interactions.

***Theme Three: Higher-Level Needs.***

Some students may be so far removed from the postsecondary planning process that their basic needs of safety and shelter may need to be met before the student can envision the postsecondary planning process. Olivia communicated this notion best stating, "Postsecondary planning is really not at the top of their list. They're just trying to get through the day. Postsecondary options are so far in the future, they can't really grasp it." All participants, to varying degrees referenced this perspective within their interviews. Higher-level needs involving instances of homelessness, student pregnancy, parent death, neighborhood violence, and improper student medication were all shared during participant interviews. Overall, participants focused on how the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances is hindered by the traumatic events within their lives. Danielle suggested how academic expectations become secondary to more pertinent issues for students experiencing emotional disturbances:

It's hard to be proactive. A lot of our kids, their parents are deceased. And then their grandmother becomes their guardian, and then she passes away. Or, they get kicked out

of the house with a baby. It's almost like every kid in the school has an issue and school is always dropped down as being less important because they [the students] are facing real-life issues.

In addition to the emotional needs of this high-need student population, participants also recognized the behavioral needs of this demographic. Lydia conveyed her perception of how the behaviors of one student impacted postsecondary planning and academic achievement:

One student with severe emotional support needs was very aggressive, but also very smart. His behaviors were definitely impeding his learning. When he first arrived, he would leave jump on cars after dismissal and regularly attempt to fight his peers.

Fiona articulated how emotional issues occurring within the home may influence postsecondary planning within the school:

It's really hard to help this student because his life is all over the place. He's often having outbursts, and because there is a lot of violence around him and his family, he doesn't come to school for days at a time.

From the data gathered from participants, various needs may need to be addressed for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments before the student can readily participate in postsecondary planning. Infusing social and emotional learning within the curriculum for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments may be an effective intervention to diminish barriers and promote greater postsecondary planning time and consideration for this high-need student population.

**Elements Supporting Postsecondary Planning.*****Theme One: School Personnel.***

Themes related to elements supporting the postsecondary planning needs of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments also emerged within the participant interviews. The first theme characterized several school personnel who fulfill meaningful roles supporting the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances. Individuals identified included special education liaisons, principals, assistant principals, college access coordinators, teachers, school psychologists, parent advocates, and mental health workers. The most commonly referenced school personnel by participants were teachers. Hannah provided some insight into how teachers support student postsecondary planning:

Students are encouraged to find two teachers to write them letters of recommendations.

Teachers also instruct the junior and senior seminar courses, which are classes they [the students] have to attend once a week to work on steps to postsecondary planning, such as resume construction and preliminary college searches.

Besides instructing courses related to postsecondary planning, participants also reported teachers to be instrumental in connecting school counselors to specific colleges and universities. Matilda articulated the following:

The teachers help a lot. Since this is an agriculture-focused high school, many of our teachers have second jobs, or really good partnerships with different universities around the country so they are able to help with the kids. They [the teachers] are also the ones that got me hooked up with a local university, who I became really good friends with. So

the teachers help me get involved with different universities and different organizations so that I can help the kids.

Outside of essential school personnel, grant funding has opened the door to new individuals that enter high school institutions to improve postsecondary planning for all students. Fiona expressed her perspective on the impact a college access coordinator can have on the student population:

Up until this year, I had a college access coordinator. We did everything together. We had a 98% graduation rate here, and the majority of students were going to college, but it was taken away and given to another school. So far this year, it [the removal of the college access coordinator] has definitely negatively impacted us because most of our students don't go on college campuses so they don't understand what we are talking about.

This notion underlies a previous theme related to elements hindering the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments – financial resources. According to Fiona's perspective, added financial resources can improve the postsecondary planning of all students. When these financial resources are removed, it may result in a decrease in postsecondary achievement in students, specifically those that require a higher-level of support such as students experiencing emotional disturbances. Grace communicated another form of school personnel uncommon to all high school institutions – parent ombudsman – that was able to establish more intimate connections with parents to improve postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances:

We had what was called a parent ombudsman. She was a parent advocate within our school. These individuals would actually go to the homes and try to get the truant kids back in school and speak with the families directly.

From participant perspectives, it can be determined that the incorporation of additional school personnel who function as ancillary supporters of postsecondary planning can assist school counselors in shouldering the responsibilities of the postsecondary process and collaborate to create greater postsecondary achievement for high-need students.

***Theme Two: High Parent Engagement.***

High parent engagement represents a supporting element that stands in direct contrast to a previously described element hindering the postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. Chloe described her perspective on parents working through the postsecondary planning process with students experiencing an emotional disturbance:

I can imagine parents are scared in not knowing what to do. I think it's hard to ask for help, and it's hard to disclose what they are going through. We were holding these brief workshops [on postsecondary planning] and parents were coming in to help complete it. They were very intimidated by the process. So, of course, their daughter is going to be just as intimidated. I think in a situation where your child is diagnosed with something, it intimidates you and halts you. I think including parents is really important in this situation.

Participants emphasized the importance of engaging parents in postsecondary planning conversation during Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. Scarlet described her

discussion with parents during these meetings to ensure that the appropriate supports are included within the IEP as the student approaches their postsecondary transition:

At IEP meetings for seniors, I will always sit and let the parents know and the student know, ‘Is there absolutely anything that you think you would need moving forward?’

This is the time to get it in there because this will be your last IEP that you will take with you forever.

Participants described the importance of collaboration among other school personnel and parents. Parents can provide insight into a quality person-environment fit for students experiencing emotional disturbances transitioning into a collegiate setting. Matilda articulated her perspective of parents offering input into the postsecondary planning process:

It’s not just me making the decision; it’s the parents, the special education teacher, and I.

We all get together and figure out the best thing for this kid based on what they have at the college, the size of the college, and what major the kid wants to go into.

As students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments begin their postsecondary transition, school counselors have a responsibility, along with the parents, to ensure that the chosen postsecondary option places the student in a position to achieve postsecondary success. By including parents within the discussion, high school counselors have the opportunity to identify potential blind spots and build a support system for the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments.

### ***Theme Three: Computer-Based Planning Resources.***

Throughout participant interviews one computer-based planning resource – Naviance – was mentioned repeatedly. According to participants, Naviance has become an asset to high school counselors for the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional

disturbances in urban environments. Naviance is described as “A comprehensive K-12 college and career readiness solution that helps districts and schools align student strengths and interests to postsecondary goals, improving student outcomes and connecting learning to life (Hobsons Education Advances, 2016).” All participants communicated the advantages of using the software program with students for effective postsecondary planning. Scarlet discussed the versatility of Naviance related to the postsecondary process stating, “We work with the Naviance program to do strength explorers, college searches, and resume planning.” Olivia articulated her perspective on another benefit of using the Naviance system to teach students about college campuses:

Through Naviance, they [the students] have the opportunity to do a 360-tour, which takes you on a virtual tour around campus. So for instance, if you wanted to go to the University of Alaska, they’re [representatives from the collegiate institution] are not coming here for a presentation, but students can click on this program and it will give you an idea of what the campus looks like.

Participants also reported how they utilize Naviance to better understand potential gaps in supporting the postsecondary needs of the student population. Hannah discussed her perspective on the advantages the software program provides to her as a professional school counselor:

Naviance is great. I like that it’s collecting data. This is only our second year using it so it doesn’t have that much data yet, but over time I can understand how students are doing compared to past academic years.

Unfortunately, students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments may not demonstrate an interest in engaging in postsecondary planning conversation. According to Danielle, computer-based planning resources, such as Naviance, can

also limit the potential for infrequent postsecondary planning to negatively impact the process as a whole:

Most of the students, unless they already know they want to go to college, need me to come get them by the hand. This year, I started earlier so I could track it in the system because, I have to be honest, I don't remember every little thing. Now, I go on my Naviance and say 'Oh yeah, I met with you on this date and that date, and this is what you said each time.'

The largely positive response from participants regarding Naviance demonstrates the importance of using computer-based postsecondary planning resources to meet both the needs of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments and the needs of school counselors who support them. However, hurdles stemming from available financial resources within the school district may rear its ugly head once again if the grant that provided the Naviance program to the school district is not renewed. As a result, school counselors must advocate for such postsecondary planning resources that ease the burden of postsecondary planning and connect high-need students to various resources that were previously inaccessible.

### **Research Question Two**

The second research question focused on the practices of high school counselors in promoting postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. Participants were asked to reflect on their current practices as high school counselors in supporting this high-need population. Each participant responded to the following three questions within the semi-structured interview that related to this notion: (1) How do you promote postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances? (2) How do you navigate the potential barriers towards greater postsecondary planning for students with

emotional disturbances? (3) What can school counselors do from a professional perspective to improve postsecondary planning of students with emotional disturbances? By asking these questions, I attempted to identify if the practices employed by high school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments connected to some of the supportive elements proposed in Chapter 2: social capital, resiliency, and self-determination. Additionally, I wanted to determine if the participants communicated alternative practices that departed from the literature review and could be included as recommendations for future improvement of postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments.

By using a constructivist grounded theory coding approach, I identified emerging themes intertwined throughout participant interviews to emphasize the practices of current high school counselors working within urban environments with this student population. Themes associated with practices that promote postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments were the following: (1) college campus connection, (2) information dissemination, and (3) student-counselor connection.

### **Theme One: College Campus Connection.**

The impact of connecting students to college campuses and/or college representatives proved to be an important piece to promote postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. A large degree of responses from participants related to the importance of encouraging students experiencing emotional disturbances to visit college campuses and/or arrange college visits through the high school. According to the interviews, participants suggested that providing opportunities for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments to be on college campuses

was an eye-opening experience for them. Fiona painted a nice picture of visiting a college campus through the lens of the school counselor and a student experiencing an emotional disturbance:

This one kid who I'd sort of given up on, we took a trip when he was a junior. We went to [Henry Wadsworth University - pseudonym], and he was like, 'I'm coming here. I love this. This is great!' I remember talking to the college access coordinator, and we were like, 'Oh my God. I've never seen him like this before. This is awesome!'

Sometimes that is what they need, to see it and picture themselves there. I thought it was a breakthrough for him.

Despite student responses to visiting college campuses and student interest to succeed beyond their current community, many students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments may lack the motivation to explore areas outside of their neighborhood, or what is outside of their comfort zone. As a result, high school counselors may encounter resistance from students experiencing emotional disturbances to attend these college excursions. Danielle articulated the contradicting emotions students experiencing emotional disturbances convey regarding college visits:

They [the students] want to get out of the neighborhood. They know they don't want to be poor. They want to get out, but they are very fearful of leaving. When we go on [college] trips in the area on the school bus, they are like, 'Ooh, wow!' They say they want to get out, but then they – I don't want to say lack the courage. They have not been encouraged to explore.

When given the opportunity to explore a college campus, participants communicated that students experiencing emotional disturbances enjoy the idea of independence. Grace discussed this idea stating:

Oh, they [the students] love college visits. They love being there and seeing the college, and I think they were impressed by the buildings. I guess the freedom of it, and seeing that they [the college students] are going from class to class and there's no bells or anything like that.

Participants also emphasized the significance of connecting students with a college representative during college campus visits. As previously noted, collegiate institutions may not provide the same types of resources available within the high school setting for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. To limit this barrier to postsecondary achievement, Matilda commented on her efforts to ensure the student establishes a relationship with a college representative:

We take them on college tours so they can see the college, and sometimes it's a matter of me getting them in contact with somebody. I feel like having somebody, not so much to baby them while they are there, but to overcome the barriers you need to set them up. I want to make sure they reach out to the counseling department.

As reported by participants within the interviews, college representatives can assist students experiencing an emotional disturbance in developing a postsecondary plan when invited to work with students at the high school. Sabrina discussed some of the information college representatives impart to students saying, "Having the representatives from the colleges come to speak to the students was also helpful for them [the students]. Just going over the stats of the different schools was eye-opening for them." Whether students experiencing emotional

disturbances living in urban environments have the opportunity to visit college campuses or speak with college representatives, participants expressed the significant impression these types of learning experiences can have on this high-need student population.

**Theme Two: Information Dissemination.**

All research participants were asked to consider specific practices they implement to promote the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. The dissemination of information presented as the second theme articulated by all participants during the interview process. Participants discussed a variety of practices that offer vital information on promoting postsecondary planning to students experiencing emotional disturbances and their parents including college information nights, summer and international programs, community programs, college fairs, financial resource options, and career information days. Most frequently, participants referenced scheduling and distributing information on college fairs or expositions for students. Danielle communicated an effective practice that encouraged colleges and universities to attend college fairs at a low-income school with a high-need population of students:

I don't know if you are aware, but a lot of colleges don't want to have college fairs at every school anymore. So we had a regional college fair where multiple schools in the area collaborate. The school counselors wanted to work smarter, not harder. So, instead of just coming to our high school, we have multiple schools. It's the difference of 200 people coming as opposed to 50 people. This will be our fourth year coming up this September so we make an effort to get that information out to the students and parents.

Scarlet suggested another college fair practice designed specifically to support the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments:

There is a college fair for students with disabilities. And I always try to make sure that the parents know when that's coming up so that they can go and meet with the representative from the schools to find out what other options would be a good fit. And just encourage the kids to spend whatever time they need to help navigate everything.

Participants conveyed how disseminating information to students experiencing emotional disturbances may present as the first step towards increased feelings of empowerment and motivation towards postsecondary planning. Hannah described her efforts to encourage a student experiencing an emotional disturbance to engage in a community program and the result of the student's participation:

We introduce students to a program called the [Walt Whitman – pseudonym] Project.

The purpose is to teach youth, empower youth to go to school and come back and build in their community. The student who completed it was a first generation college-goer, low-income and her family was invited to a very fancy gala. They introduced her, she went up to the stage, and everyone was clapping. It was a very big deal. So, now she's very proud of that, and it's something for her to really hold on to.

Aside of informing students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments on school and community events and programs, participants suggested that the practice of disseminating financial aid information was equally important. Families living in areas of low socioeconomic status may not possess the financial resources to consider university and/or collegiate institutions as viable postsecondary options for their children. This concept validates the practices participants shared during one-on-one interviews on sponsoring financial aid information events. Olivia expressed the support she feels such events provide to her, as a school counselor, and students experiencing emotional disturbances within her high school:

We just had a member of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in today. We try to pull in [an individual] from each [postsecondary] component so there's someone outside of just the school staff that can help answer questions. Obviously, FAFSA experts are going to know a lot more information than I will, even though I've helped fill out the forms. He has all the ins and outs. So we try to get different components for different pieces from outside agencies to come in and work with us.

Many participants mentioned how the socio-economic status of students experiencing emotional disturbances impacts their college and career decision-making. By incorporating financial aid information workshops, school counselors may limit the financial burden of this high-need population.

### **Theme Three: Student-Counselor Connection.**

As seen in the first two theme of this section, some practices may require increased time and planning. The next theme demonstrated practices that participants used on a regular basis to promote postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. All of the participants agreed with this practice and discussed the importance of regular conversation with students experiencing emotional disturbances on the postsecondary process. Chloe communicated a unique practice that collaboratively connected students experiencing emotional disturbance with their interests and future postsecondary plans:

We [the student and counselor] will look up a school that they might be interested in, and then start creating a vision board. I'd say, 'Okay, here's where you are. This is what you want. How do we get there?' I think it's a connection. I think, for any student, it's support. I think it's hearing them, whether it's a conventional career, whether it's an unconventional path – you support it. You ask questions genuinely.

Lydia articulated a passionate approach to communicating with students experiencing emotional disturbances on their postsecondary planning:

I'm not very conventional. I reach my kids to the max. I'll visit their houses. I'm relentless going to community games, or if they were hanging at a local recreation center, I would meet them there and just have conversations with them there. I am very relentless.

This comment conveyed the potential need for school counselors to reconsider their approach to postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. With the numerous postsecondary barriers that this population of students may encounter, school counselors may want to examine alternative practices to connect with students on postsecondary planning outside of the school.

Some of these conversations between high school counselors and students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments may present as more challenging than others. Many participants mentioned the need to balance support towards postsecondary decision-making with confrontation on the postsecondary perspectives of students. Sabrina shared her practice of challenging student perspectives related to postsecondary planning:

A lot of them would say, 'I'm not going to college. I'm owning my own business.' I would break it down and explain to them, 'Okay, so what are you going to do in this situation? How are you going to make money with your business?' Explain to them, 'Here's how you make money if you can do it with a background in business. People are going to believe you a lot more.' Showing them, 'Here's the average salary of someone with a high school diploma. Here's the average salary of someone with an associate's

degree, bachelor's degree.' Because a lot of them had inflated ideas of how easy it was to just, 'Oh, I can be a doctor without going to college.' It doesn't work that way.

Even when engaging students in these types of conversations, students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments may not fully comprehend the gravity of postsecondary planning or be willing to acknowledge it. For many of the participants, being present for students experiencing emotional disturbances and allowing students to disclose their thoughts and feelings toward postsecondary planning factors into the equation. Olivia described, "I think it's the personal component. They really have to have someone that they can talk to, ask questions, run ideas off. If they don't have that connection with someone, it can be a problem." For school counselors, making time for all students may prove difficult. However, for students experiencing emotional disturbances these moments that allow open discussion on postsecondary planning may be the first step to postsecondary success.

### **Research Question Three**

The third research question emphasized the experiences of high school counselors that have guided their postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. I asked participants to consider past experiences during their professional careers as high schools counselors and discuss how those experiences have impacted their postsecondary planning with this student population. Each participant responded to the following three questions within the semi-structured interview relating to this concept: (1) Could you describe a story in which you effectively supported the postsecondary planning of a student with an emotional disturbance? (2) Could you describe a story in which you felt unable to properly support the postsecondary planning of a student with an emotional disturbance? (3) How would you describe your experiencing in promoting the interest of students with emotional

disturbances towards postsecondary planning? In asking these questions, I sought to determine what high school counselor experiences affected their decision-making when supporting the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments.

By engaging the data in an initial and focused coding process, I identified significant themes according to the responses of the participants within the research study to determine how high school counselor experiences influence postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. The themes connected to the experiences that guided the postsecondary planning of urban school counselors for students experiencing emotional disturbances were the following: (1) learning from mistakes, (2) planning multiple options, and (3) similar planning for all students.

#### **Theme One: Learning from Mistakes.**

All participants suggested that there was room for improvement to support the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. Many of the participants suggested that starting the postsecondary process earlier in the academic year would increase engagement in postsecondary planning for this high-need student population. With a greater degree of postsecondary planning time, high school counselors may be able to more effectively navigate the various barriers students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments may encounter. Chloe discussed a change she would like to make in the future regarding the postsecondary planning of students experiencing an emotional disturbance:

My answer may come out of realizing I didn't do it for previous students in the past. I think starting a plan as soon as possible is really important. Breaking down the process to

a level of understanding and to the level of being able to have them do tasks. I think if we do it incrementally, it feels like they [the students] are doing something and they feel more motivated to do more things.

Outside of tasks specifically related to applying to collegiate institutions and obtaining financial aid, school counselors communicated a need to engage students earlier in postsecondary conversations on academic achievement in preparation to make informed college decisions.

Sabrina articulated a change in her practices after an experience with a high-need student:

Students need to be made more aware of the work that needs to be done early in their high school experience. One student during his senior year said, 'I'm going to Harvard.' And he had a low grade point average. So I started meeting with kids their freshmen year and explaining what a grade point average was and how important that was and how important their classes actually were.

Other participants discussed changes in sharing information with students regarding postsecondary planning and choosing a career. Danielle discussed her experience in expanding information on careers to more effectively support the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances:

There's a lack of exposure here for a careers. Everybody only knows the medical field. Most students can't get into nursing, and I explain why. And then we talk about other career pathways such as respiratory therapist that you can get a good job after two years [of college]. So we changed up how we do career day based on the kids' lack of knowledge.

From participant responses, it was clear that past experiences guided decisions to alter their approach to postsecondary planning with students experiencing emotional disturbances living in

urban environments. It's likely that high school counselors will continually need to adjust to support this high-need population. By asking questions on the postsecondary experiences of high school counselors working within urban environments, I hoped to start the process of reflection for participants to benefit future planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances.

### **Theme Two: Planning Multiple Options.**

Throughout one-on-one interviews with participants, high school counselors highlighted the various options students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments have to achieve postsecondary success. Participants referenced alternatives to 4-year academic institutions that included the armed forces, community colleges, beauty programs, technical programs, 2-year college institutions, labor unions, and careers in law enforcement and the fire department. Most frequently, participants discussed the idea that a college or university may not be the best fit for students experiencing emotional disturbances. Fiona conveyed her realization that college does not present as the best option for all students and how it changed her approach to postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances:

Sometimes you can't show them there is a different kind of life if you go further, and sometimes it might not be for them anyway. Not everyone is a college student. So actually, that's what I'm trying to work on now. We just had a meeting with my principal and some people from a local education fund, and we are going to work really hard to include some alternative options within a college fair. We are going to work on doing a separate thing just for two-year programs and under that might grab the kids.

For some participants, these alternative postsecondary options were not always strongly encouraged by school administration due to district-wide postsecondary expectations. For students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments, this may create

increased anxiety towards the postsecondary process. Matilda communicated the change in district expectations and an instance of student achievement that resulted:

So I would try and push them, ‘Wait, college isn’t for everyone. You could go to a trade school and get a job working as a carpenter making \$100,000 per year.’ And let’s say that someone from the school district was a fly-on-the-wall, they would recommend that you not say that to them. Now, I’m like, ‘Go to trade school, go into the unions, go into the firefighter.’ We just did a firefighter application for one of the kids. They saw it at \$57,000 per year!

Due to the various barriers that students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments encounter toward planning a successful postsecondary future, school counselors must inform this high-need population of students on alternative options to 4-year collegiate institutions. By providing these students with various options that potentially result in less debt and less anxiety towards planning, students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments may achieve greater postsecondary success.

### **Theme Three: Similar Planning for All Students.**

Similarities on postsecondary planning for all students presented as the third theme in relation to how high school counselor experiences have guided postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances. Interestingly, almost every participant communicated that their postsecondary approach does not vary greatly between students experiencing emotional disturbances and students characterized with other support needs or without disabilities. Hannah articulated that postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances was, “Typically, exactly the same way as others.”

Chloe shared a similar sentiment in the following comment:

We don't change our tone at all so they are very much a part of the same conversation.

We may have to adjust it for its nuances but the conversation is just the same as a regular population [of students] in terms of, 'What do you want to do after? How do we get there? How close are we? What do we have to do to get closer?'

Grace stated:

The same way that I would go about handling a kid with no emotional disturbances, just asking them what they want to do with the rest of their lives. Talk about what they might feel as being too much for them or things that they feel that they couldn't compensate for.

Matilda provided her perspective saying, "So we would do it as if we were doing any other student. We talk about what majors they want to get into and what would be a good fit for them."

Scarlet expressed her experience on postsecondary planning communicating, "Same process that we would use for pretty much any student. I don't distinguish. I pretty much treat the kids all the same and give them whatever support they need."

Responses from participants regarding this theme deter from many of the comments pertaining to other questions on postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. For me, it was surprising to uncover this common theme among participants, especially when participants also communicated effective practices, hindering elements, and supporting elements to postsecondary planning specific to this high-need population. Further conversation on how this theme may impact the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances will be introduced in the discussion section in Chapter 5.

### Summary

I met with ten secondary school counselors to discuss their practices, perceptions, and experiences on postsecondary planning with students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. Data analysis revealed that themes were more suggestive of students experiencing emotional disturbances rather than students living in urban environments. This notion could be connected to school environment in that both the students experiencing emotional disturbances and high school counselor participants engaged within an urban school setting. Therefore, the comments of school counselors were more commonly associated with the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances since the urban school setting impacted the postsecondary planning of all students within the school. The three research questions that guided the current research study were the following:

- (1) What are the most important elements in postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments?
- (2) How do school counselors promote postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments?
- (3) What experiences have school counselors had that guide their postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments?

Various responses related to each of the three foci of the research study as they pertained to the postsecondary practices, perspectives, and experiences of high school counselors supporting students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments.

Themes concerning the first research question were divided between two primary themes: elements hindering postsecondary planning and elements supporting postsecondary planning. Sub-themes hindering postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances

living in urban environments were (1) school resources, (2) poor parent engagement, and (3) higher-level needs. Sub-themes supporting postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments were (1) school personnel, (2) high parent engagement, and (3) computer-based planning resources. The second research question emphasized the practices of high school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. Themes identified regarding this question presented as the following: (1) college campus connection, (2) information dissemination, and (3) student-counselor connection. The third research question highlighted the experiences guiding postsecondary planning for high school counselors with students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. Relevant themes pertaining to this research questions were (1) learning from mistakes, (2) planning multiple options, and (3) similar planning for all students.

All 8 primary themes and 6 sub-themes were determined from an analysis of data gathered from the semi-structured interviews with participants, a short demographic questionnaire, follow-up verification of interview transcriptions by participants, and a reflective journal completed throughout the research process. The constructivist grounded theory approach was utilized to provide a voice to high school counselors working within the urban school district of a large northeastern city of the United States with students experiencing emotional disturbances. Rigor and credibility were incorporated in each phase of the research study through internal checking, external checking, clarification, and ethical considerations to ensure confidentiality of participants. Chapter 5 will introduce the discussion and implications of the research study as well as its limitations, future research considerations, and a conclusion.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of the research study was to develop a deeper understanding of postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments through the practices, perspectives, and experiences of school counselors. The voices of high school counselors working within urban environments were highlighted to comprehend the intersectionality between students experiencing emotional disturbances and students living within urban environments. Specifically, I wanted to learn about the perspectives, practices, and experiences of urban high school counselors functioning within the district of a large, northeastern city of the United States. A constructivist grounded theory approach was utilized for this research study. Constructivist grounded theory provides a qualitative methodology to study issues of inequality and marginalization (Charmaz, 2016). By incorporating this approach, I intended to identify potential inequality and marginalization in the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments.

To ensure that data collected pertained to the research topic of interest, criteria for all participants was established that included (1) a high school counselor (2) working within the urban school district of interest (3) with at least 2-years of postsecondary planning experience. From the recruitment process 10 high school counselors, all ten of which were female, engaged in one-on-one, in-person, semi-structured interviews. Each of the ten interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. In this chapter, a synopsis of the themes is presented according to the three research questions that guided the study as well as a description of the limitations of the study and a discussion of study implications. This chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and a summary.

### **Summary of Significant Findings**

This research study incorporated the thoughts and feelings of ten urban high school counselors on their postsecondary planning perspectives, practices, and experiences with students experiencing emotional disturbances. The following sources of qualitative data were analyzed for the purpose of data collection: one-on-one interviews with the participants, follow-up verification of interview transcriptions by participants, a reflective journal from the my perspective, and peer auditing feedback on the coding process and reflective journal. A process of initial and focused coding was implemented during data analysis to ensure that the most prevalent themes were emerging from the collective viewpoints of urban school counselors (Charmaz, 2016). The following three research questions guided the data analysis process:

- (1.) What are the most important elements in postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances living in urban environments?
- (2.) How do school counselors promote postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments?
- (3.) What experiences have school counselors had that guide postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances in urban environments?

#### **Research Question One.**

The first research question highlighted the postsecondary planning perspectives of urban high school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances. Two primary themes emerged related to the postsecondary planning perspectives of urban school counselors with three additional sub-themes for each category. The first primary theme presented as elements hindering postsecondary planning with the following three sub-themes: (1) school resources, (2) poor parent engagement, and (3) higher-level needs. The secondary primary theme

was characterized as elements supporting postsecondary planning and included the following three sub-themes: (1) school personnel, (2) high parent engagement, and (3) computer-based planning resources. Overall, participants identified a greater number of elements hindering the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments than elements supporting the postsecondary planning of this high-need population.

Similarly, Chapter 2 described the variety of barriers students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments may encounter toward their postsecondary planning. These barriers (depicted in Table 1 and Table 2) were substantial and experienced across ecological settings that included the individual (e.g., minority status and social skills deficits), the home (e.g., socioeconomic status and parent engagement), the school (e.g., high school dropout, teacher engagement, and school mobility) and the community (e.g., juvenile justice involvement and future employment opportunities). Chapter 2 also illustrated how these barriers could potentially be overcome for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments through the supportive elements of social capital (Bryan et al., 2011; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Hill et al., 2015; Kim & Schneider, 2005), resiliency (Armstrong et al., 2005; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Minnard, 2002; Short & Russell-Mayhew, 2009; Ungar et al., 2013), and self-determination (Algozzine et al., 2001; Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Test et al., 2004; Trainor, 2008).

After coding the collected data, I was able to identify similarities and differences between participant responses in relation to research question one and the literature reviewed. The topic of school resources was articulated within the interviews and examined within recent literature as an element that may hinder the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. According to Farmer-Hinton and Adams (2006),

greater individualized support from school counselors improved college preparation and awareness for urban high school students. However, similar to the sentiments expressed by participants, Corwin et al. (2004) found that large caseloads presented as an organizational constraint to postsecondary services for low-income minority students. In addition to the limitation of staffing resources, participants also perceived postsecondary planning restrictions based on limited financial resources. Lee (2005) recognized a similar trend within his own research study suggesting that urban school environments are often linked to the characteristics of high-poverty and inadequate access to school resources.

The degree of parent engagement in the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments determined to be an element hindering as well as an element supporting the process. Research introduced within the literature review shared similar contrasting viewpoints on parent engagement in the postsecondary planning process for high-need students. One research study conducted by Murray (2009) described that poor parent-child relationships were associated with poor academic achievement for students within low income, urban environments. Conversely, other research studies have advocated for increased parental engagement in the postsecondary planning of students within urban school settings (Kenny et al., 2003) and students experiencing emotional disturbances (Duchnowski & Kutash, 2011).

Reflecting on both of these subthemes – school resources and parent engagement – it can be determined that the high school counselors who participated in this research study consider social capital to be an important element supporting the postsecondary planning needs of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. Participants agreed with past literature by acknowledging the impact a higher degree of social capital could have for

this high-need population by increasing access to school counselors and working closely with parents on postsecondary planning. At the same time, students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments may lack appropriate social skills (Grothaus, 2013; Nelson et al., 2005) and exhibit poor self-esteem (Okele-Adeyanju et al., 2014). The College and Career Readiness and Success Center (2013) indicated that social-emotional learning promotes postsecondary success for high school students. Creating social connections between the student and members within the school, home, and community can help to diminish these potential higher-level needs and present as an outlet for increased social-emotional learning.

### **Research Question Two.**

The second research question focused on the postsecondary planning practices of urban high school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances. Three primary themes emerged related to the postsecondary planning practices of urban high school counselors interviewed and were described as the following: (1) college campus connection, (2) information dissemination, and (3) student-counselor connection. Each of these themes emphasized the practices implemented by urban high school counselors to connect students experiencing emotional disturbances to information at the collegiate level and high school level for postsecondary success.

The most common practices associated with each theme reviewed in the interviews with urban high school counselors were college trips (college campus connection), college fairs and financial aid information (information dissemination), and individualized postsecondary conversation (student-counselor connection). The majority of participants acknowledged the importance of encouraging and supporting students in scheduling and/or hosting college trips to promote the postsecondary planning interests of students experiencing emotional disturbances. In

a number of these discussions within participant interviews, urban high school counselors connected students experiencing emotional disturbances to representatives within college or university institutions to provide the students an additional resource during their postsecondary transition. As seen within the first two themes highlighted in reference to research question one (school resources and parent engagement), connecting students experiencing emotional disturbances to forms of social capital at the university level can also contribute to creating greater postsecondary success for this high-need student population. According to the ASCA National Model (2012a), school counselors can initiate postsecondary planning services by teaming with school staff members, parents, business organizations, and community members. For school counselors, making connections for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments at the collegiate or university level may be the difference between postsecondary achievement and failure. A research study conducted by Lee, Rojewski, Gregg, and Jeong (2014) on collegiate education persistence determined that the influence of poor socioeconomic status and a lack of support impacted the college persistence of students experiencing emotional disorders.

At the high school level, urban school counselors highlighted the significance of scheduling college fairs as a practice of information dissemination as well as individualized postsecondary conversation as a practice of connecting with students. Both practices demonstrate the need for high school counselors to provide students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments an opportunity to develop self-determination skills. By establishing yearly career fairs, students experiencing emotional disturbances can explore information on various postsecondary options that may connect with their personal interests. Through individualized postsecondary conversation, school counselors can more effectively guide

students experiencing emotional disturbances to their postsecondary interests while also functioning as a form of social capital (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006; Reid & Moore III, 2008). Research has shown that infusing self-determination skills into school practices communicates a greater sense of responsibility to the student population (Carter & Lunsford, 2005; Trainor, 2008). In addition to more intimate student-counselor discussions, IEP meetings have also been suggested as a period to promote self-determination skills so that high-need students with disabilities can advocate for their postsecondary interests (Ankeny et al., 2011).

While connecting to the individual postsecondary interests of students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments can stimulate postsecondary planning, financial barriers may dictate potential postsecondary options for this student population. High school counselors attempted to remedy this potential barrier through the practice of financial aid nights for students and parents. Past research has expressed a similar sentiment to participants conveying that low-income, ethnic minority adolescents experience financial constraints that may hinder their postsecondary planning (Packard et al., 2012). As suggested within Chapter 2 and supported within the participant interviews, the postsecondary barriers to students experiencing emotional disturbances are multi-faceted. Even when an urban high school counselor can identify the postsecondary interests of a student experiencing an emotional disturbance, problems including academic achievement (Gutman et al., 2002; Thomas et al., 2009), behavioral issues (Ansary et al., 2012), and socioeconomic status (Sirin, 2005) may cause the postsecondary process to falter. As a result, high school counselors need to address each potential barrier from an ecological perspective, rather than in isolation (Gore & Eckenrode, 1994), to continue the advancement of greater postsecondary achievement for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments.

**Research Question Three.**

The third research question emphasized the postsecondary planning experiences of urban high school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances. In an effort to distinguish between the other research questions, participants were asked to provide instances in which they, as urban high school counselors, were able to effectively support and were unable to effectively support the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances. I also requested that participants communicate insight into experiences that may alter future postsecondary practices with this high-need population. As a result of the data collection and coding process, I was able to identify three emerging themes related to the experiences of urban high school counselors: (1) learning from mistakes, (2) planning multiple options, and (3) similar planning for all students.

In relation to the first primary theme (learning from mistakes), urban high school counselors frequently cited engaging in the postsecondary planning process earlier for students experiencing emotional disturbances. Interestingly, one research study indicated that motivation toward postsecondary planning decreased for students experiencing a severe emotional disturbance towards the later years of high school (Hitchings et al., 2005). A second research study encouraged postsecondary planning to start as early as middle school years (Orthner et al., 2010). These findings substantiate the previous oversights articulated by participants. As a result, participants within this study could benefit from earlier engagement in the postsecondary process with students experiencing emotional disturbances to increase motivation towards postsecondary planning and more effectively navigate potential concerns.

Perhaps most importantly participants also discussed their experience of planning multiple postsecondary options for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban

environments. When planning for a postsecondary future, students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments may adjust and overcome many of the potential barriers only to fall short of their highest aspirations due to a momentary lapse in judgment or misunderstanding. To counteract these potential problems, participants expressed how planning alternative options for this high-need population aided in the overall postsecondary planning experience. Rather than succumbing to a poor sense of self-esteem (Gage, 2013) during instances of rejection from colleges or universities, students experiencing emotional disturbances may persevere through adversity when other options are available and discussed. The literature in Chapter 2 referred to this notion as resiliency, or “manifested competence in the context of significant challenges to adaption or development” (Masten & Coatsworth, p. 206). When urban high school counselors recognize the complexity of postsecondary barriers faced by students experiencing emotional disturbances, they must engage in exploration with these students to identify potential strengths in various settings, such as extra-curricular activities (Gilmore et al., 2013) and volunteerism (Harvey, 2007).

For the final theme associated with research question three, participants expressed how their experiences engaging in postsecondary planning with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments did not vary much from the manner in which they engaged regular education students. For me, as the researcher, this concept contradicted many of the postsecondary planning perspectives, practices, and experiences communicated by participants in relation to other research themes. Throughout interviews, participants articulated the significance of high versus low parent engagement, the need to establish a student-counselor connection, and the potential benefits of earlier postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. However, participants described across the majority

of interviews that the postsecondary planning process does not change for students experiencing emotional disturbances.

Reviewing the literature on postsecondary planning for this high-need population, it became vividly clear to me that numerous elements hinder postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. However, I was only able to identify three elements that supported the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments (social capital, resiliency, and self-determination). Research, specifically related to school counselor experiences, demonstrated that school counselors articulated barriers associated with intercultural interactions and cultural sensitivity (Storlie & Toomey, 2016). A second study on school counselor experiences called for increased multicultural training so that school counselors could more effectively engage various student and parent populations (Savitz-Romer, 2012). Perhaps, working with this high-need population has become so overwhelming for school counselors, as a result of potential barriers, that utilizing what has shown to be effective with other populations of student has become the norm. As a result, it may be crucial for school counselors to start perceiving postsecondary planning from a multicultural perspective to more effectively address potential barriers and gain a better understanding of possible strengths across various backgrounds.

### **Implications**

The significance of postsecondary planning for underserved student populations has entered into the forefront of policy in education through the introduction of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The results of this study may assist school counselors, counselor educators, and higher education support staff in developing more intentional practices to support the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional

disturbances living in urban environments. The implications of this research study relate to establishing a postsecondary process for high-need populations, developing multicultural approaches to postsecondary planning, and extending the norms of the postsecondary planning process.

### **School Counselors**

The current study revealed the postsecondary planning perspectives, practices, and experiences of 10 high school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. Previous research and findings from this study identified hindering elements (Joffe & Black, 2012; Herbers et al., 2012; Sitlington & Neubert, 2004; Vargas et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2006) and supporting elements (Kenny et al., 2003; Mihalas et al., 2009; Test et al., 2004; Ungar et al., 2013) to the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. However, findings reported across interviews within this research study also communicated that some urban high school counselors do not vary their approach to postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances in comparison to regular education students. As one urban high school counselor stated, “I go into every classroom. It doesn’t matter if the students have a diagnosis or not. Our kids, actually, are included. So I go into every classroom and do the same plan with everyone.”

The College and Career Readiness and Success Center (2013) defined postsecondary success for high school students through a list of indicators, predictors, and other potential factors. Yet, the components included within these criteria failed to account for potential barriers to success extending outside of the school that students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments encounter on a regular basis, including minority status (Thomas et al., 2009), single-parent homes (Wagner et al., 2005b), and juvenile justice involvement (Rodriguez,

2013). As a result, high school counselors must advocate for a postsecondary planning approach to students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments that acknowledges potential barriers from an ecological perspective to more effectively address the postsecondary achievement of this high-need population. Advocacy could include analyzing the graduation rates of students experiencing emotional disturbances compared to regular education students and developing a structured postsecondary plan, specifically designed for higher-need populations that intentionally infuses the systems of the individual, school, home, and community.

### **Counselor Educators**

Previous research has indicated that school counselors expressed a lack of preparation and training when working with students of various multicultural backgrounds (Savitz-Romer, 2012; Stone-Johnson, 2015; Storlie & Toomey, 2016) and high-need populations (Hannon, 2016; Owens et al., 2009). While a minority of participants expressed a similar sentiment within the current research study, urban high school counselors did articulate the importance of building a connection with students experiencing emotional disturbances for improved postsecondary planning. For school counselors, one method to enhance effective postsecondary planning would be to advocate for increased multicultural training and understanding how this information may be incorporated within the postsecondary planning process.

Counselor educators have the responsibility of including postsecondary training and preparation for school counselors through programs in higher education. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (2016) addresses this responsibility in their standards saying counselor education programs will introduce “strategies to facilitate school and postsecondary transitions” (Section 5 G., pg. 32). In a study conducted by

Holcomb-McCoy, Harris, Hines, and Johnston (2008), findings revealed that school counselors who successfully completed between 5-7 multicultural counseling courses during graduate degree programs communicated significantly higher levels of multicultural self-efficacy. Therefore, it may be that professional school counselors are not required to enroll in multiple multiculturalism courses in higher education that could appropriately prepare them for potential postsecondary planning barriers when working with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. Counselor educators should improve curriculum planning by infusing multiculturalism across graduate courses and make multiculturalism a focal point in career counseling courses to more effectively train future school counselors on postsecondary planning for high-need students.

### **Higher Education Support Staff**

This research study provided insight into the practices of urban high school counselors in supporting the postsecondary needs of students experiencing emotional disturbances. One theme included within this research study was the significance of establishing a connection for students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments with personnel at the collegiate or university level to enable a smooth transition. Some participants communicated their ability to foster these connections while other participants voiced their concern regarding the level of support for high-need students at colleges and universities. As one urban high school counselor stated:

But I think that it's support, when they're on their own because it's the first time and, if something triggers their emotional disturbance, whether it be a roommate or a classroom setting. And it's not like the high school where it's like, 'Oh, okay, I'll go down to the counselor's office.' I think that's a big issue.

One research study (Farrell, 2008) supported this claim communicating that counselor-student ratios in higher education were 1 counselor to every 1,969 students. Similar to the perspectives of urban school counselors within this study, colleges and universities may lack the amount of personnel to appropriately support students experiencing emotional disturbances. If school stakeholders expect high-need students to succeed in higher education, counselors at colleges and universities must advocate for increased mental health personnel to better support this population of students.

### **Limitations**

While the current study strived to create a design that proved to be valid, credible, and thought provoking, possible limitations must be presented. First, the study included a homogenous purposive sample that requested the participation of school counselors practicing within a large city of the northeastern United States. Even though the research aimed to dissect the perspectives of school counselors on postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances within an urban environment, the sample of school counselors was only taken from one geographical area. Therefore, the theory developed from this study is only indicative of the policies and procedures of the urban school district of interest. Second, while gathering information on all public high school institutions within the urban school district of interest, some high school counselor participants articulated limitations in their interactions with students experiencing emotional disturbances due to school admittance criteria, i.e. magnet schools. As a result, these urban high school counselors provided insight on postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances from a small population of students when compared with neighborhood schools within the school district of interest. Third, all participants recruited for the research study presented as female. It would have been more

beneficial to obtain participants that represented various genders. This may have created a more diverse understanding of the postsecondary planning perspectives of urban high school counselors working with students experiencing an emotional disturbance.

Fourth, while I sought the input of urban school counselors on their postsecondary planning perspectives working with students experiencing emotional disturbances, participant self-report could have influenced the results of the research. For instance, school counselors interviewed may have included perspectives on students with emotional support needs without an emotional support diagnosis. To account for this potential limitation, I highlighted the specific demographic of interest - students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments - at the onset of the interview and reaffirmed this focus through the language contained within the interview questions.

Lastly, I have a professional counseling background working with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments. My experiences with these students cemented my belief in a relational-cultural approach with this population of students. Therefore, there was a potential for research bias to skew the analysis of the data. I incorporated strategies of a reflective journal and peer auditors in order to diminish the potential for research bias to affect data analysis. Peer auditors with counseling backgrounds were sought to ensure the peer auditors could identify with the material presented within the interviews. After the peer auditors collectively spot-checked all 10 interviews and the corresponding journal reflections, I was able to conduct a more thorough analysis the data collected.

### **Delimitation**

The research study only sought the perspectives, practices, and experiences of urban school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances. The thoughts and

feelings of students experiencing emotional disturbances were not included within the study. The postsecondary planning perspectives, practices, and experiences of this student population would serve to strengthen future potential findings by demonstrating possible similarities and differences across the two demographics.

### **Future Research**

This research study added another piece to the puzzle of postsecondary planning for students experiencing emotional disturbances. More specifically, the research provided key insights from high school counselors on their perspectives, practices, and experiences conducting postsecondary planning with students experiencing emotional disturbances living in urban environments. Despite the increased understanding on postsecondary planning for this high-need student population stemming from this study, future researchers have the opportunity to add more pieces to this complex puzzle.

This study sought the input of high school counselors functioning within the school district of a large urban city in the northeastern region of the United States. A future research study should incorporate multiple urban school districts from various geographical regions of the United States to obtain a more accurate, national depiction of the postsecondary planning process for high school counselors working in urban settings with students experiencing emotional disturbances. Additionally, sampling urban high school counselors from all public schools within the urban school district of interest included special admittance schools with limited populations of students experiencing emotional disturbances. Future researchers could potentially gain more fruitful insights by sampling a population of urban school counselors from neighborhood, public high school institutions only that support a larger population of students experiencing emotional disturbances.

Finally, high school counselors working within urban environments only represent one piece of the postsecondary planning process. Future research should consider including the thoughts and feelings of high school students experiencing emotional disturbances within urban environments. In doing so, future researchers will gather a body of research to compare and contrast with the perspectives of high school counselors and develop a more thorough understanding of the postsecondary process from multiple stakeholders.

### **Conclusion**

The perspectives, practices, and experiences of high school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments presented as a gap within literature. The intention of this current study was to provide a voice to urban school counselors so that they may convey their postsecondary planning approach with this high-need population. Participant perspectives illustrated that there were many more barriers hindering the postsecondary planning of students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments when compared to elements supporting their postsecondary planning needs. Urban school counselors revealed how the practice of establishing connections with students and higher education personnel can significantly improve the motivation of students experiencing emotional disturbances toward greater postsecondary planning. Participants demonstrated the importance of planning for multiple postsecondary options for this high-need student population. For the future, urban school counselors should focus on being creative with the postsecondary planning process by establishing a plan, specifically designed for students experiencing emotional disturbances and/or other high-need populations. Urban school counselors should trust their training in multiculturalism and/or seek out additional training and preparation if they feel their lack of multicultural awareness is influencing the postsecondary planning process. Finally, urban school

counselors should connect with university and collegiate institutions to ensure they have appropriate systems in place to support the postsecondary transition and achievement of students experiencing emotional disturbances in urban environments.

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**Appendix A: Invitation to Participate**

Dear (Person of Interest),

Do you have an interest in contributing to the field of school counseling through participation in a research study? My name is Patrick Rowley and I am currently a doctoral candidate at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University engaging in the dissertation process. My professional experiences within urban school environments and emotional support classrooms motivated me to gather information on current postsecondary planning practices for high-need student populations. Through a review of recent literature I realized a need to better understand the postsecondary planning perspectives of urban school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances. As a school counselor working within an urban environment, your perspectives on postsecondary planning would help guide future postsecondary practices for students experiencing an emotional disturbance.

If you are interested in participating, I am requesting that you complete the short research study questionnaire attached to the link below. The questionnaire will serve to determine if willing participants fit the criteria for the research study. Participants who fit the criteria will be contacted for an in-person one-on-one interview. Participant criteria include the following: (1) high school counselor, (2) working in an urban setting, (3) with at least 2-years of postsecondary planning experience. The 60-75-minute, in-person, one-on-one interviews will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. Participants will be given the opportunity to verify the content of the transcription. Information regarding names of people, places to the level of state, and organization to the level of state will be de-identified within the transcription for confidentiality purposes.

The informed consent of the research study has been attached to this email for your review. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me by phone at 610.505.3582 or email at [patrjr7@vt.edu](mailto:patrjr7@vt.edu). I look forward to hearing from you in the near future!

Sincerely,

Patrick J. Rowley

Doctoral Candidate

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Qualtrics Survey Link: [https://virginiatech.qualtrics.com/jfe1/preview/SV\\_9QSBRQtF49vG55X](https://virginiatech.qualtrics.com/jfe1/preview/SV_9QSBRQtF49vG55X)

[INFORMED CONSENT](#)

**Appendix B: Research Study Questionnaire**

Study Overview: The researcher is conducting a research study on the postsecondary planning perspectives of urban school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances. As part of this research, the researcher is contacting all secondary school counselors within your school district to participate in the research process. You will be invited to participate in this study if your responses on this research study questionnaire match the criteria for potential participants. The study results will be used to inform recommendations for future postsecondary practices of urban school counselors in working with students experiencing emotional disturbances. Data received for individuals who do not meet criteria for participation will be destroyed. If you meet criteria for participation, you will be contacted for an in-person one-on-one interview. Data received for individuals who do meet criteria will be combined with the data obtained during the in-person one-on-one interview process. Participation in this study is voluntary and confidential.

6. How many years of postsecondary planning as a high school counselor do you have?

- Less than 1 Year
- 1 - 2 Years
- 2.5 - 5 Years
- 5 or more Years

7. What is your best contact number and email address?

Contact Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C: Informed Consent**

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title of Project: School Counselor Advocacy: The Postsecondary Planning Perspectives of

Urban School Counselors Working with Students Experiencing Emotional Disturbances

Investigators: Dr. Laura E. Welfare, Ph.D., LPC, ACS [welfare@vt.edu](mailto:welfare@vt.edu)

Mr. Patrick J. Rowley, MS, NCC [patrjr7@vt.edu](mailto:patrjr7@vt.edu)

(610) 505.3582

### **I. Purpose of this Research Project**

The investigators are conducting a research study on the postsecondary planning perspectives of urban school counselors working with students experiencing emotional disturbances. As part of this research, the investigators are contacting all secondary school counselors within your school district to participate in the research process. You are being invited to participate because you identified as a high school counselor working within an urban school district with at least 2-years of postsecondary planning experience. The study results will be published and used for a dissertation to inform the future postsecondary practices of urban school counselors in working with students experiencing emotional disturbances.

### **II. Procedures**

The research study involves interviews with school counselors from high schools identified within your school district. Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to be part of a 60-75 minute, audio recorded interview that includes 8-questions. The investigators will contact you to verify the content of the interview once the interviews have been transcribed. You may choose to decline the opportunity to verify the transcription. If you choose to verify the transcription and

the content diverges from what you were attempted to communicate, a follow-up interview will be offered. The potential follow-up interview will be scheduled at a time and place that is convenient for you.

### **III. Risks**

There is minimal risk involved in the study. It is possible that participants may experience a degree of emotional discomfort while reflecting on specific postsecondary planning incidents with students experiencing an emotional disturbance. Please inform the investigators if you experience any emotional distress.

### **IV. Benefits**

This research may provide some benefit to participants through the reflective nature of the interview process. The research also has the potential to inform future postsecondary practices of school counselors working with urban students experiencing emotional disturbances.

### **V. Extent of Confidentiality**

The investigators will use pseudonyms to refer to you and your school throughout the interview process. Any identifiers that are communicated during the audio-recorded interview will be de-identified with pseudonyms through the transcription process. All de-identified transcripts and digital audio recordings will be stored on password protected files. Only the primary investigator and co-investigator will have access to the original copies of the transcriptions and digital audio recordings. At no time will the investigators release identifiable results of the study to anyone without your written consent. The Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and members of the co-investigator's dissertation committee may view the study's de-identified data for auditing purposes. The IRB and members of the co-

investigator's dissertation committee are responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subject's involved in research.

#### **VI. Compensation**

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research.

#### **VII. Freedom to Withdraw**

It is important for you to know that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You have the right to choose not to answer or respond to any questions included within the interview. Please understand that any information provided will not be utilized for any purpose other than research. As a result, the investigators must have your written consent before moving forward with the interview. It is your right to refuse consent. There will be no penalty for choosing to refuse consent.

#### **VIII. Questions or Concerns**

Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact the investigators, Mr. Patrick Rowley or Dr. Laura Welfare. Contact information for both these individuals may be found at the top of this informed consent form.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study's conduct or your rights as a research subject, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the VT IRB Chair, Dr. David M. Moore at [moored@vt.edu](mailto:moored@vt.edu) or (540) 231-4991.

**IX. Review and Approval of Transcription**

If you choose to review and approve the content of the transcription you will have 5-days in which to do so. After the 5-day period, you will no longer have the opportunity to review and approve the transcription. Please indicate one of the following:

- I wish to review and approve the transcription
- I waive the opportunity to review and approve the transcription

**X. Subject's Consent**

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject signature

Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject printed name

**Appendix D: Demographic Questionnaire**

1. Please indicate your gender.

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to Answer

2. Please indicate your age.

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Please indicate your race.

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Two or more Races

4. Please indicate your ethnicity.

- Hispanic or Latino
- Not Hispanic or Latino

5. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

- Associate Degree
- Bachelor Degree
- Master's Degree
- Education Specialist Degree
- Doctorate Degree

### Appendix E: Interview Guide

Please take a moment to close your eyes and reflect upon your perspectives conducting the postsecondary planning process for students experiencing emotional disturbance. Please make a quality effort to distinguish your postsecondary planning perspectives with students experiencing emotional disturbances from the perspectives of any other student without an emotional disturbance diagnosis.

With this being said are you prepared to start the interview?

(1.) How do you promote postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances?

*Prompt:* What specific actions do you take for quality postsecondary planning?

*Prompt:* What individuals do you involve in the postsecondary planning process?

(2.) Could you describe a story in which you effectively supported the postsecondary planning of a student with an emotional disturbance?

(3.) Could you describe a story in which you felt unable to properly support the postsecondary planning of a student with an emotional disturbance?

(4.) How would you describe your experiences in promoting the interest of students with emotional disturbances towards postsecondary planning?

*Prompt:* From your experiences, what factors may contribute to a greater interest in postsecondary planning?

(5.) What do you consider to be the most important elements to effective postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances?

*Prompt:* What makes these elements so important?

(6.) According to your experiences, what are the most influential barriers to effective postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances?

*Prompt:* What factors cause these barriers?

(7.) How do you navigate the potential barriers towards greater postsecondary planning for students with emotional disturbances?

*Prompt:* What factors prevent you from navigating these barriers?

(8.) What can school counselors do from a professional perspective to improve the postsecondary planning of students with emotional disturbances?

Thank you very much for your time and insight into this research study. Please contact me with any questions or comments.

**Appendix F: ASCA Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College and Career Readiness Standards  
for Every Student**

Behavior Standards: Students will demonstrate the following standards through classroom lessons, activities, and/or individual/small group counseling.		
Learning Strategies	Self-Management Skills	Social Skills
B-LS 1. Demonstrate critical-thinking skills to make informed decisions	B-SMS 1. Demonstrate ability to assume responsibility	B-SS 1. Use effective oral and written communication skills and listening skills
B-LS 2. Demonstrate creativity	B-SMS 2. Demonstrate self-discipline and self-control	B-SS 2. Create positive and supportive relationships with other students
B-LS 3. Use time management organizational, and study skills	B-SMS 3. Demonstrate ability to work independently	B-SS 3. Create relationships with adults that support success
B-LS 4. Apply self motivation and self-direction to learning	B-SMS 4. Demonstrate ability to delay immediate gratification for long-term rewards	B-SS 4. Demonstrate empathy
B-LS 5. Apply media and technology skills	B-SMS 5. Demonstrate perseverance to achieve long- and short-term goals	B-SS 5. Demonstrate ethical decision-making and social responsibility

B-LS 6. Set high standards of quality	B-SMS 6. Demonstrate ability to overcome barriers to learning	B-SS 6. Use effective collaboration and cooperation skills
B-LS 7. Identify long- and short-term academic, career, and social/emotional goals	B-SMS 7. Demonstrate effective coping skills when faced with a problem	B-SS 7. Use leadership and teamwork skills to work effectively in diverse teams
B-LS 8. Actively engage in challenging coursework	B-SMS 8. Demonstrate the ability to balance school, home, and community activities	B-SS 8. Demonstrate advocacy skills and ability to assert self, when necessary
B-LS 9. Gather evidence and consider multiple perspectives to make informed decisions	B-SMS 9. Demonstrate personal safety skills	B-SS 9. Demonstrate social maturity and behaviors appropriate to the situation and environment
B-LS 10. Participate in enrichment and extracurricular activities	B-SMS 10. Demonstrate ability to manage transitions and ability to adapt to changing situations and responsibilities	

American School Counselor Association. (2012b). *ASCA School Counselor Competencies*. Retrieved from <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/home/SCCompetencies.pdf>

**Appendix G: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval**

Office of Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board  
North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech  
300 Turner Street NW  
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061  
540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959  
email [irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu)  
website <http://www.irb.vt.edu>

**Memorandum**

**Date:** March 2, 2017

**To:** Laura Everhart Welfare, Patrick James Rowley

**From:** Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires January 29, 2021)

**Protocol Title:** School Counselor Advocacy: Postsecondary Planning for Adolescents with Emotional Disturbances in Urban Environments

**IRB Number:** 16-1144

Effective March 2, 2017, the Virginia Tech Institution Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the Amendment request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

**Protocol Information:**

Approved As:	Expedited under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6,7
Protocol Approval Date:	January 9, 2017
Protocol Expiration Date:	January 8, 2018
Continuing Review Due Date*:	December 25,2017

\*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

**Federally Funded Research Requirements:**

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

[VT IRB-16-1144 Approval Letter](#)