

# Morris pens top essay in Ross Trust competition

Jessica Morris of Louisiana State University was named the grand prize winner in the Ross Trust Graduate Student Essay for Future School Counselors competition. Morris wrote about the role of school counselors in college and career readiness.

For submitting the top-rated essay, Morris earned a \$1,500 scholarship grant and free registration to the American Counseling Association Annual Conference & Exposition held earlier this year in New Orleans. Each of the four authors of the winning runners-up essays received a scholarship grant worth \$500. The essay competition was open to all counseling graduate students working toward a career in school counseling at the elementary, middle or high school levels.

**Note:** The following essays have been edited only for spelling and minor style issues. The views expressed are those of the essay authors.

## Grand Prize Winner



### Jessica Morris

Jessica Morris received her master's in school counseling this past May from Louisiana State University. She first became interested in school counseling upon realizing the deficit of support systems students possess regarding personal, social, academic and career concerns. She hopes to eventually pursue a doctoral degree in counselor education, but her current goals involve working with middle or high school students in the Louisiana school system.

## What is the role of the school counselor in college and career readiness?

Preparing students for college and career opportunities after high school is a challenge most schools struggle with. How does one know a student is completely ready for college or a career? How does a professional school counselor track if and how an intervention in college and career preparation directly benefited a student? With a multitude of options in the military, technical colleges, four-year universities and in the workforce, students may become overwhelmed with such a decision or not know where to go to receive answers to questions they may have.

School counselors, at all levels, are vital to the college and career readiness process. At the elementary school level, school counselors can use opportunities during classroom guidance lessons to help students become more aware of various careers through activities resembling "Go Fish" games and "Career Bingo." Exposure and identification of careers is key in kindergarten through fifth grade. Middle school counselors work to help students find relationships between their core classes and postsecondary options through group career assessments. Middle school students tend to be egocentric, which provides professional school counselors the opportunity to assist students in learning more about their own personality characteristics and how it relates to the world of work. Here, counselors help students become aware of the importance of becoming involved in extracurricular activities, volunteer work and exploring other activities that may be of interest to them. Secondary school counselors are one of the most important resources students have available to them. PSCs are responsible for providing career exploration opportunities, ensuring

that high school course choices prepare students for college or a career and providing developmentally appropriate information about various careers, technical schools, colleges, scholarships and other opportunities.

School counselors use data from a multitude of sources, including student, faculty, parent and community needs assessments and interviews to determine what schoolwide activities (career days, guest speakers, college and technical school fairs, campus field trips) are suitable to encourage college and career readiness at their school. In addition to providing exposure to careers and colleges, PSCs must serve as advocates for college and career preparation, for students, for parents and for their schools. Counselors can encourage their school to have a postsecondary mind-set, where graduation from high school is a step in a journey for both the student and the school, never the final destination. School counselors encourage students to set the bar high, even when others may not agree. Advocating for and with the student to reach his or her highest potential socially, personally, academically and in his or her college and career decisions is at the heart of the PSC's role.

## Runners-Up



### Jennifer Berry

Jennifer Berry received her M.Ed. in school counseling from Clemson University in May 2011. She plans to pursue a career in professional school counseling.

## **What is the role of the school counselor in college and career readiness?**

Many people would agree that one of the most important components of their professional life is satisfaction with their chosen career. Career satisfaction, however, is often overlooked in career and college preparation for K-12 students. Most, if not all, school counselors would agree that preparing students for postsecondary success in their college and career is an important aspect of a counselor's job. For many school counselors, this preparation takes the form of test preparation, college and career fairs and possibly a career inventory. While all of these things are important, the most essential component of this preparation is lost: the student.

Too often the goal in college and career preparation takes the form of what the school counselor, parents, teachers or school administration think is the best choice for the student. In many instances, a student enters postsecondary life with a road map developed by others that did not take into account the individual needs and wants of the student. This situation implies that a student's needs and wants were ignored or, as is more usually the case, unknown because they were not sufficiently explored. What may seem like the best choice may not always be the best fit. Career theorist John Holland would state this best fit has been achieved when the career choice is in congruence with one's personality. The task then, as school counselors, is to aid students in the discovery of what career would provide the most satisfaction and, in turn, the steps needed to pursue that career.

Supporting students in finding this best fit requires school counselors to become leaders in awareness and exploration. Awareness can begin as early as the elementary years and continue through high school and include a wide variety of activities that not only expose students to a range of careers but also address career stereotypes (i.e., boys can't be a nurse, girls can't be a firefighter). Beginning in middle school, counselors should begin assisting students in the self-exploration process. On a very

basic level, this exploration should include some sort of personality or career inventory, including a discussion about their results. Ideally, this process would have the counselor treating the student as the expert of their self, learning from this expert (the student) and then collaborating with this student to connect who they are with what they want to pursue in life.

Even though preparing students for college and career often seems like a daunting task, counselors must make the commitment to help prepare students for this postsecondary life. This preparation does include the more traditional modes of college readiness such as test preparation, college fairs, etc., but more importantly includes awareness and exploration. Students are the experts of their life, and helping them explore themselves will support students in their postsecondary goals and decisions.



### **Holly Salters**

Holly Salters is a 2011 graduate of Missouri Baptist University's master of arts in counseling program. She aspires to be a school counselor and a licensed professional counselor, instilling joy in life and in learning.

## **What is the role of the school counselor in college and career readiness?**

Ideally, solidifying plans for college and future careers would be at the top of any student's educational bucket list. For many, however, the prospect of life after secondary education appears quite elusive. Given the economic and social conditions of our nation, it is imperative for our students to gain the academic, personal and interpersonal skills necessary to prosper in postsecondary endeavors. From the youngest students in the nation to our graduating seniors and students in alternative programs,

school counselors are responsible for implementing a systemic approach to college and career readiness. This multifaceted approach should include the identification of skills and interests in terms of future careers or education, the selection of appropriate and challenging course material, the teaching and modeling of appropriate social and interpersonal skills, as well as the deliverance of information about postsecondary planning.

Many schools succumb to the motto of "getting students through." That is simply not enough in today's challenging economic and social times. School counselors have the unique opportunity to equip students with an education tailored to their needs, while simultaneously instilling the unwritten skills necessary to function in college or in a career. Through the usage of observation, interest inventories, aptitude tests and other pertinent educational data, school counselors may guide students to select courses that will prepare them for postsecondary education or for the workforce. Such programs should build upon student strengths, interests and abilities.

School counselors must also expose students to a variety of experiential learning circumstances. Many of today's successful adults may reflect on their childhood and remember the time when the school nurse let them use his/her stethoscope to hear a heartbeat. Experiences such as these can prove to be inspiring and poignant for even the youngest of students. School counselors may also arrange for internship opportunities for high school students, wherein students spend part of the day at school and part of the day obtaining practical skills in a supervised work setting. School counselors should establish networks within the community to provide students with exposure to and experience in various fields.

Proactively, school counselors can also begin instilling positive character traits that would lend to adequate college and career readiness. This can occur via character education within the school setting, service learning projects and a number of other modalities. One of the best modalities is through

the usage of positive role models. The school counselor and other educational professionals may serve as role models of a strong work ethic, appropriate interpersonal skills and ethical decision making.

The final role of the school counselor in college and career readiness is simply the impartation of information to students and their parents or guardians. Navigating postsecondary education can be difficult, but school counselors should be knowledgeable and forthcoming with news of financial aid, career profiles, college entrance exams, application and interview processes, tuition and many other challenges of entering life after secondary education.



### **Jacquelyn Scott-Bell**

Jacquelyn Scott-Bell is a graduate student in the school counseling program at George Mason University. She will begin practicum this fall and will graduate in May 2012. Her goal as a school counselor is to contribute to the improvement of education and help increase graduation rates among at-risk youth.

### **What is the role of the school counselor in college and career readiness?**

Gone are the days when a high school diploma was sufficient preparation for a manufacturing job and the opportunity to earn middle-class wages was plentiful. Today's young people must be prepared to exit high school ready to attend college or enter into a very competitive workforce. Whether recent graduates choose to pursue a college education, compete with experienced workers in an already challenging employment climate or volunteer to serve their country by joining the military, school counselors are relied upon to offer guidance and support. It is the role of the school counselor to supply students with the

knowledge they need to pursue their chosen careers. Through exploration, planning and providing resources, school counselors help students prepare for life after high school.

It is the role of the school counselor to ensure each student has an opportunity to explore career options. Many school counselors utilize career assessment tools that can help students identify interests and goals. Resources such as Internet websites and books offered by the school counselor can help students decide which career pathway to pursue. "Career Day" is a popular event organized by school counselors that allows students to actually meet and speak with people from a variety of professions and become familiar with many careers. During the event, students have the opportunity to learn about educational requirements, working conditions and pay compensation. Exploring career options exposes students to endless opportunities and is essential in helping to identify both personal and professional goals. Many school counselors host college information fairs that allow students to interact with recruiters from colleges and universities across the country.

Once a career path is chosen, it is the role of the school counselor to assist students in planning for the required education and training. Whatever career choice is made, the school counselor can be relied upon to provide the necessary information. If the career choice requires a college degree, it is the role of the school counselor to help prepare students to take entrance exams such as the ACT or SAT, select and apply to schools that meet their academic needs, arrange for college visits and write letters of recommendation. Paying for college is an important concern for both parents and students. School counselors provide information about grants, scholarships and financial aid.

Students can also receive information from their school counselor about professions that do not require a college degree, apprenticeship training programs and military service requirements. Information regarding preparation or job skills required for a specific career can also be obtained through a meeting with the school counselor. Advance preparation can make the transition

from high school less complicated. Helping to create a viable career path is just one of the many reasons why school counselors are essential to the growth and development of the students they serve.



### **Sarah Smitter**

Sarah Smitter is a graduate student at the University of San Diego studying school counseling.

### **In these tough economic times, recent graduates are having greater difficulty than usual finding their first counseling position. What can and should ACA do to assist new professionals with employment issues?**

The current economy has counseling students and recent graduates concerned about their job prospects as new professionals. Hiring freezes, budget cuts and reduced discretionary spending have left many counselors without jobs.

In these tough economic times, it is going to take brilliance along with knowledge and seized opportunities to secure our first counseling positions. The American Counseling Association can assist in this quest by providing current data, successful examples and extending its networking opportunities to assist emerging counselors in securing their first jobs.

As the popular saying goes, "knowledge is power." We need the facts. ACA could conduct research and provide trend reports in its publications. The reports could highlight where the greatest number of job opportunities exist and what fields they are in. The current statistics could show who is hiring, where they are hiring and what they are hiring for. Not only would this help guide new professionals in their choice of specializations, but it would also help emerging counselors meet the current demands of our field.

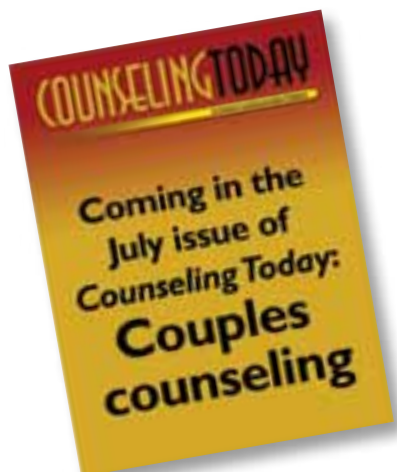
Beyond just providing a trend report, ACA could also feature success stories in their publications of recent graduates who were triumphant in obtaining their first counseling jobs in this tough economy. Their stories, as captured through interviews, would serve as an example to those of us about to embark on the journey. It would provide encouragement for us to keep trying.

In addition to providing information, ACA can extend the opportunities it provides to network. Networking is an incredible resource for all professionals. A social network page and group could be launched just for emerging professionals. This would allow students and recent graduates to connect in a way that is convenient and popular. Discussion boards could also be included on the social networking page.

Perhaps ACA can host or cohost regional counseling job fairs. Job fairs allow employers and prospective employers to connect. Additionally, ACA can also provide regional job boards on its website where employers can list their current job openings.

At the Annual Conference & Exposition, ACA could dedicate time for professionals to impart wisdom to the emerging professionals. Workshops could be held just on current employment opportunities and strategies.

As an emerging professional counselor, I am about to navigate my way through this bleak economy. I will need brilliance to shine through this storm to achieve my calling and dream of becoming a school counselor. With the correct tools and resources, I am confident a way can be made through the storm. ♦



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