

Taking the Road Less Traveled

**School counselors play an important role in eliminating barriers for students
interested in pursuing nontraditional careers¹**

By Mimi Lufkin, Executive Director, National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity

Susan spends a lot of time with her Dad in his auto repair business and is fascinated by the inner workings of a car engine. She doesn't mind the dirt and grease. It washes off anyway. However, at school, she would really like to take an auto technology course but is afraid that she will be the only girl in the class and will be teased by the boys.

John has always been a caregiver as the oldest child of eight siblings. His Aunt Jean is a nurse at a local hospital emergency room and has the most exciting stories to tell. John's favorite TV show is *ER*. John has gone with his aunt to observe her work as part of a program at the hospital and finds himself very interested in the field of medicine. He knows there is a health careers program at his school but knows it's only for girls.

Do these scenarios sound familiar to you? As a school counselor you have a unique opportunity to become an advocate for your students and facilitate the elimination of barriers at your school that stop them from fulfilling their dreams. There are many

¹ Nontraditional careers are those occupations for which individuals from one gender comprise less than 25 percent of the individuals employed in each such occupation or field of work.

reasons students choose not to pursue nontraditional careers regardless of their interest.

These include:

- Gender-biased career guidance materials and practices, instructional strategies, and curriculum materials
- Limited access to and participation in math, science, and technology
- Lack of nontraditional role models
- Lack of early exposure to nontraditional careers
- Poor self-efficacy (i.e., expectations or beliefs that one can successfully perform a given behavior)
- Unsupportive school climate, community, and/or family members
- Peer pressure as a result of student attitudes, biases, and stereotypes
- Family demographic characteristics
- Media representation
- Wage potential

Although some of these causes are not under your control as a school counselor, many of them can be eliminated or influenced by your role. Consider implementing some of these proven strategies that will help the Susans and Johns at your schools take the risk of pursuing a nontraditional career.

Review career guidance materials and practices²

Often the first impression students get about the career options they may want to consider comes from print or media materials they see at school. Most students do not

² Barbara A. Bitters and Susan Foxwell, 1990, Guidance Counselor Survey, pp. 215-216 in *Wisconsin Model for Sex Equity in Career and Vocational Education*, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Madison, Wis.

picture themselves working in nontraditional fields and need consistent exposure to materials where they see someone that “looks like them” involved. Find and use materials for bulletin boards, brochures, displays, and websites that show the changing roles of men, women, and families and portray a variety of careers. Review tests and inventories and eliminate those that may reinforce bias and stereotyping. When students are selecting courses and programs in which to enroll, encourage them to consider their options realistically. Remind them that most men and women will hold paying jobs for most of their lives and work out of economic need. Traditionally female jobs pay less than traditionally male jobs. Even though greater choices are available, many students don’t enroll in courses such as mathematics and science, which limits their choices in future coursework and employment.

Invite, involve, and educate parents

In a recent study conducted by Ferris State University,³ 78% of students surveyed indicated that their parents were primarily responsible for helping plan for a career, while only 10% indicated either a teacher or a counselor had been influential. Parents play an important role as career counselors with their children and so need to be educated about this role. Parents’ own stereotypes and biases can influence their children’s career choices and may not support an interest that is nontraditional. When working with parents of diverse backgrounds, cultural sensitivity is an important skill you need to develop to be effective. Take time to participate in cultural diversity training and encourage your school district to include it as part of the professional development program for all teachers and staff.

³ Ferris State University, 2002, “Decisions Without Direction: Career Guidance and Decision-Making Among American Youth”. Available online at <www.ferris.edu/careerinstitute>.

Parents can create an environment at home that supports student career choices. This is particularly important with students who have an interest in nontraditional careers. In a publication of the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented,⁴ parents of girls talented in mathematics are encouraged to create at-home activities that involve hands-on problem solving; engage in daily math routines; visit museums of science; collaborate with teachers to keep their daughter challenged and energized; encourage participation in math clubs and competitions; explore varied careers in math; and provide female role models. The same types of activities can be developed by parents to support their sons' and daughters' career interests regardless of the field they are interested in.

Your school uses a variety of mediums to involve parents in the education of their children. The schools newsletter, website, and parents' night are perfect opportunities to educate parents about nontraditional careers. Encourage teachers to get parents involved by participating as guest speakers, hosting field trips, or even mentoring other students. Because of your role as a school counselor you potentially have a direct connection to parents. Help facilitate this relationship with teachers by setting up a database of parents and other community members willing to share their time and talents.

Conduct middle school programs

Overwhelmingly, the research indicates that early exposure to nontraditional careers positively affects student potential for pursuing a nontraditional career. Age-appropriate career counseling actually needs to start in the elementary grades when children start to develop a sense of what they are capable of and also begin to set barriers for themselves. Students of middle school age are best encouraged to consider a variety

⁴ M. Katherine Gavin, 2000, *What Parents Need To Know about...Encouraging Talented Girls in Mathematics. Practitioners' Guide*, National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, Storrs, Conn.

of career options if they have had the opportunity to have hands on experiences with the career. Summer camps, weekend workshops, all day festivals, non-traditional career fairs have all been successful in helping students consider pursuing their nontraditional career interests. For example, STEPS⁵—a collaboration of the Alexandria Technical College, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, and local high schools—brings middle school girls interested in math, science, and engineering careers on campus for a week in the summer to explore these fields. The Sally Ride Science Festivals,⁶ for fifth- to eighth-grade girls, feature Dr. Sally Ride, America’s first woman astronaut, as keynote speaker and includes discovery workshops for students and parents. You probably already have a career fair at your school. How about making it one with only nontraditional role models for a change?

Provide role models and mentors

Students will believe that they have many options, if they see individuals that look like them involved in careers that allow many options. “Seeing is believing” holds true. You have a great opportunity as a school counselor to bring students and role models together in many ways. With the improvement in technology these relationships can be fostered through a variety of mediums, including e-mentoring.⁷ However, nothing outweighs the value of personal contact, and this should be incorporated in any technology-facilitated mentoring program. Mentoring relationships can be formal and long term, as supported by a mentoring program conducted by the school or some

⁵ Science Technology & Engineering Preview Summer Camp for Girls.

⁶ See <www.sallyridefestivals.com>.

⁷ For example, Women Tech Talk is a national e-mail discussion group for women technicians and female students in technology programs in community colleges and technical schools. Available at www.iwitts.com.

community organization, or they can be informal and short term, as a one-day job shadowing experience. Either way it is important to assign nontraditional mentors to students who might rather pursue careers nontraditional to their gender. This may mean digging a little deeper and searching a little further to find that nontraditional mentor, but the effort will be worth it.

Conduct targeted recruitment activities

“But anyone can enroll in this class; we don’t discriminate” is often the response I hear when talking with frustrated teachers about their problems with getting nontraditional students to participate. Students who perceive barriers to participation in nontraditional courses, whether real or not, will not enroll unless these barriers are removed. In many cases these barriers are nothing more than their feeling unwelcome or that they would be the only girl or boy in the class. For adolescents and even adults these barriers loom large, but school counselors can help break them down with targeted recruitment activities. Targeted recruitment activities can include: extending personal invitations to students whom the teacher knows has indicated an interest or students with the prerequisites to take the program; conducting an orientation program for targeted student groups to help them explore the program in an unthreatening environment; encouraging students in the program to invite their friends who might have an interest; developing program brochures and posters targeted to nontraditional students; and running advertisements that recruit nontraditional students on TV, radio, and in-print media.

At a recent workshop a teacher told this success story that perfectly illustrates targeted recruitment. Her school offers a Cisco Networking program that has been very

successful in placing students in high-paying careers in the information technology industry upon graduation from high school. The program's enrollment had been primarily male; however, one year, four females enrolled and completed the program. When the enrollment information for the next year's program came in, the teacher, principal, and guidance counselors were disappointed that no girls had enrolled. Fortunately, there were still openings in the program, and the principal was not willing to accept the status quo. She immediately sent personal invitations to all the girls in the school who had completed the prerequisite math courses to participate in a special daylong orientation. The teacher set up hands-on workstations and worked with the four graduating female students to design activities that they would teach their peers as part of the morning session. The guidance counselor found three women in the information technology industry in the community who agreed to join the group for a pizza lunch and participate on a panel in the afternoon to discuss their experiences in their chosen career field. Twenty girls accepted the invitation and participated in the day's activities. Seven of them enrolled, filling the remaining openings. Working as a team with a common goal the principal, teacher, and guidance counselors were successful in helping these students get involved in a program that they would otherwise not have considered.

Conduct pre-technical training programs

One of the major barriers that students face when considering a nontraditional career is a lack of personal experience. Without fail, whenever I talk with students enrolled in career and technical education programs nontraditional for their gender, they indicate that they personally know someone in that career field that has acted as a mentor. Typically these students credit their willingness to pursue their career interests, regardless

of the barriers they had experienced, to the fact that they developed skills outside of school that have supported them while in the program. Whether it is Susan who works on cars with her Dad or John who has exposure to nursing careers through his aunt, both of these students know about the basics of the field. Both Susan and John have knowledge, skills, and support they can use to bolster them when challenged throughout a program. This is not the case for all students and pre-technical training programs can help build important support systems. Pre-technical training programs introduce students to nontraditional careers, give them hands-on learning opportunities, relieve subject-matter anxiety, develop support groups, and expose students to nontraditional role models.

For example, the Ohio-based Orientation to Nontraditional Occupations for Women (ONOW)⁸ program was identified by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Innovation's Gender Equity Expert Panel as the only Exemplary Program in the nation. The ONOW program was able to place 86% of its participants in nontraditional training or employment. The program includes instruction in basic math, basic blueprint reading, hand-tool identification and use, hands-on projects with power tools, self-esteem and assertiveness, job searching, resume writing, physical fitness, career guidance, placement assistance, and more.

Conduct professional development with all teachers at all levels

Even with increased awareness of gender-equity issues, the research suggests that males and females are treated differently in classrooms.⁹ In a study examining the reasons

⁸ Orientation to Nontraditional Occupations for Women (ONOW) developed by the Ohio Department of Education, Columbus, Ohio. More information is available online at www.agele.org/resources/usdeptedu/html.

⁹ Val Thurtle, Shaun Hammond, and Paul Jennings, 1998, "The Experience of Students in a Gender Minority in Courses at a College of Higher and Further Education," *Journal of Vocational Education and Training: The Vocational Aspect of Education* (volume 50, number 4): 629-46.

that female students in an industrial technology class were not succeeding, female students attributed their lack of success to finding the class irrelevant and adhering to gender stereotypes and to being treated unfairly. When efforts to create a gender equitable classroom that engaged all students were implemented, the females' completion and success rates improved.¹⁰ As a school counselor you don't want to see your efforts to encourage students to enroll in nontraditional programs thwarted by a teacher whose classroom environment is unwelcoming. Work with the school administration to encourage equity and diversity training as part of the professional development agenda for your institution. Get assistance from your state's Department of Education's Title IX Coordinator or the Vocational Education Equity Specialist¹¹ to identify individuals and programs that can work for you and your school to improve its capacity to serve ALL students.¹²

Implement and model gender-fair institutional strategies

The National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity has developed a set of institutional standards for improving equity in education. *System Building Standards for Educational Reform: An Equity Perspective*¹³ identifies ten essential system-building standards that are designed to help eliminate current inequities. Each standard has specific indicators to help educators examine and improve the total educational system. The system-building standards address variables in the areas of the Educational

¹⁰ Kathryn R. Ryan, 1999, Gender Bias in Industrial Technology at the Middle School Level, Saint Xavier University and IRI/Skylight

¹¹ See the National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity (NAPE) State Contact Directory. Available at <www.napequity.org>.

¹² Multistate Academic and Vocational Curriculum Consortium and NAPE, 2002, *Taking the Road Less Traveled, Educator's Toolkit to Prepare Students for Nontraditional Careers*. Order at www.mavcc.com/nontrad.htm.

¹³ Wright, Janet and Nilges, Lynda (1998) *System Building Standards for Educational Reform: An Equity Perspective*. Available at www.napequity.org.

Environment, Issues of Governance and Policy, Preservice and Inservice Education, Teaching Practices, Assessment Practices, Evaluation of Personnel and Curricular Materials, Individualized Educational Planning, the Allocation of Financial Resources, Data Collection and Accountability, and Partnership Building with Community/Business/Parents. Share these with your schools administration to build support for equity throughout the institution. Schools that value nontraditional choices for their students and model gender equity in their institutional practices are more likely to have students participate in nontraditional programs.

Collaborate with community-based organizations

If you are feeling overwhelmed by all these suggestions, remember you don't have to go at it alone. Many community-based organizations and professional associations have nontraditional career exposure programs for women and girls. These include Girls Inc.,¹⁴ American Association of University Women,¹⁵ YWCA,¹⁶ Girl Scouts,¹⁷ and Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work,¹⁸ to name a few. There are also a myriad of men's and women's professional associations in nontraditional career fields (e.g., The Association for Women in Aviation Maintenance,¹⁹ National Association of Women in Construction²⁰, American Assembly for Men in Nursing²¹) that are excellent sources for guest speakers, mentors, and job-shadowing experiences for your students.²² Take the time to connect with these groups and identify local contacts that can help you.

¹⁴ See <www.girls-inc.org>.

¹⁵ See <www.aauw.org>.

¹⁶ See <www.ywca.org>.

¹⁷ See <www.girlscouts.org>.

¹⁸ See <www.ms.foundation.org>.

¹⁹ See <www.awam.org>.

²⁰ See <www.nawic.org>.

²¹ See <www.aamn.org>.

²² For more links to nontraditional professional associations, see <www.napequity.org/links>.

As a school counselor you play a pivotal role in working with students, teachers, administrators and parents to help increase everyone's options. Realizing your time is limited and valuable, take stock of your situation to determine which strategy would be the most effective and have the greatest impact. This may require conducting some surveys to determine the level of commitment and awareness of all your partners to improving access to nontraditional careers. Take time to bring a team together to plan your strategy and set goals so that in the future your school supports the choices of students like Susan and John.

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