TEACHING OUR CHILDREN TO FISH
In small-town USA, limited exposure to a variety of career options – and limited resources – can make a rural school counselor’s job a challenge. Discover how you can provide your students with the career development resources they need no matter how small the town.

BY LORI NOTESTINE, PH.D., LPC, NCC, AND CORY NOTESTINE

Standing at the edge of town in Alamosa, Colo., you can’t help but marvel at the mountain ranges surrounding the area and standing guard over the valley floor. These stoic masses symbolically block the outside world from entering and limit locals from leaving. Many children who were born and raised in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado have never left the comfort of this isolated region, which is likely similar in any of the other rural communities making up nearly a quarter of our country.
Many school counselors and other adults start by asking, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Most children, whether in rural or urban communities, answer similarly – a professional athlete, or something that pays really well or the dreaded “I don’t know.” When students don’t know what career interests them, many school counselors automatically feel as if they have failed them somewhere along the way. However, we should view this as an opening to reach deeper and explore what we truly want to know – do students possess the self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, career knowledge and skills necessary for life beyond high school? This, of course, leads to the question, “When your resources are limited, as they most certainly are in rural areas, how do you meet students’ career needs?”

Faced with the challenges many rural areas experience, such as cultural encapsulation, lack of resources, increased teen pregnancy rates, lack of exposure to a variety of careers, isolation, lack of access and strict expectations around gender roles, you may feel powerless to provide your students with career-readiness opportunities. Although you may not be able to do much to change the larger systems isolating those in rural communities, you can still make a real difference for your school and community.

The pressure to increase students’ college and career readiness is a reality for today’s school counselor. But what does career-readiness really mean? Is it still a good idea to expose students to a variety of careers? Yes. Is it still a good idea to share knowledge of scholarships and programs offered by universities, both local and national? Yes. Is it still necessary to work to create a greater change in communities to increase access to resources for our students? Absolutely. The shift, however, comes when we begin to think and prepare students, on a larger scale, how to search, gain exposure and cope when they don’t have access to a school counselor any longer or when the student-to-school-counselor ratios limit a student’s access to a school counselor.

It may feel like more students today lack a clear idea of their future career. But think about this – today’s adults change careers as many as five to seven times throughout the course of their lives, most of these changes taking place in the early stages of their careers. With that being said, doesn’t it make more sense to prepare our students with the skills they need to not only decide on a reasonable career in the first place but to know how to make a career change if and when they feel the need to do so? To assume any individual stays static and does not grow over the lifespan is not developmentally appropriate nor is it practical.

Starting earlier is key to developing the skills necessary for career readiness. We can’t afford to wait until middle or high school but must begin as early as elementary school. A major barrier many rural students face in college and career readiness is a lack of awareness that other
kinds of careers are possible or that they even exist. In many of the small towns we have lived in, varying from mountain tourist towns to isolated farming and ranching communities, the possibilities for career options have looked bleak in terms of variety. This is certainly not to say that career opportunities aren’t available in small towns — or that they are in some way less desirable. However, it’s always a good idea to let children know what other options may be out there.

So, where do you start, especially given the limited resources available in many rural communities? Here are a few options for rural school counselors to consider.

**Virtual exposure:** Although high-tech jobs, including those in manufacturing, often don’t exist in rural towns, the Internet does reach these communities, and it’s not just dial-up. The Web provides access to a wealth of career-development websites. Even the Reach Higher Initiative has gotten on board with its launch of the Reach Higher Career App Challenge to help students with career choices. Other platforms such as Big Future by The College Board, College in Colorado and the College Foundation of North Carolina are great examples of free Internet tools helping students learn about careers. If funding is available, platforms such as Career Cruising and Naviance provide additional resources to help students find a career matching their strengths. All these tools are great, but often they focus on high school students and aren’t useful for elementary school counselors. Additionally, they are two-dimensional and lack the underlying infrastructure necessary to help students make a career choice that meeting face-to-face with a school counselor can provide.

**Development through action:** If we are serious about making an impact at the elementary level and increasing our face-time with students, our work around career and college readiness needs to be tactile and exploratory in nature. The creation of

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It’s easy to get involved. Visit: [http://teens.drugabuse.gov/ndafw](http://teens.drugabuse.gov/ndafw)
MakerSpaces and the impact of problem-based learning could be key components in creating a learning environment that fosters the skills necessary to engage students in the classroom, as well as expose them to potential new career interests. Through community collaboration and partnerships, rural towns can create spaces fostering innovation and creative problem solving. These MakerSpaces don’t need 3-D printers to be successful. As school counselors, we can work with teachers and other faculty to integrate problem-based learning into classrooms and explore how we can flip our classroom guidance lessons to reach every child. If you’re struggling with ideas about how this looks, career and technical education instructors have been utilizing project management and problem-based learning in their classrooms since their inception into education. Pooling resources with those outside of school counseling may build connections to meet those student needs.

**Community partnerships:** In rural school settings administrators and school counselors have learned to do more with less due to far fewer tax dollars generated by small communities with lower-than-average wages per capita. Although this disadvantage is evident, it has given way to greater community partnerships and often leads to collaborative efforts that might not be realized otherwise. One way to leverage small businesses is to include them on your school counseling advisory council. Through this ongoing dialogue you can build networks for future internship sites and job-shadowing experiences directly relating to student needs and future career interest. This is also an opportunity to hear what businesses are looking for in their future employees, which might be useful as you are developing classroom lessons around essential career skills for 21st-century learners. Forming these business alliances also helps you develop contacts for career days at the school. In small, rural communities it also makes sense to partner with other nearby towns to form regional career fairs. Pooling resources might be the only way to garner enough businesses to highlight all career clusters.

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An additional community partnership worth noting is the ability to work in conjunction with community colleges and local universities, should they be present in your rural communities. With increased technology many institutions have been working with K-12 education to create remote classrooms to increase concurrent enrollment opportunities. The increased rigor and early exposure to postsecondary education have shown to increase students’ ability to be successful at the postsecondary level. Through these opportunities students can explore potential career fields with a level of support often not afforded at the collegiate level.

Nontraditional career roles: Finally, a challenge often present in rural communities is the strict adherence to traditional gender roles. Although media exposure can certainly provide an outlet for children to see both men and women serving in nontraditional careers, they may not have real-life exposure to these possibilities. There is a push in education right now to allow children to explore careers in STEM; further exposing young female students to careers in science, technology, engineering and math can help to expand their horizons. Additionally, exposing young male students to more traditionally female careers such as education and nursing may allow for greater awareness of career possibilities as well. You’ll need to think outside the box to find real-life ways to expose children to individuals in nontraditional careers, as it is likely they rarely see women and men outside of traditional roles on a day-to-day basis, particularly in rural communities.

There are no secrets to breaking the code to small towns other than your willingness to roll up your sleeves and pitch in where needed. Small towns thrive off the ingenuity of their citizens, and only through collaborative efforts can you begin to have a positive impact on students in rural communities. Although it’s important to address the common issues facing school counselors in rural communities, it goes without saying that educating our students to be creative thinkers and strong decision makers will prove useful in various situations throughout their lives.

Let’s begin to shift our focus from, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” to “What skills do you need to be successful at any career?” After all, as they say, it’s better to teach someone to fish.

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