

Research paper

The Role of School Counselors in Building Social Capital: Relationships, Networks, and Educational Opportunities for Student Success

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ABSTRACT

School Counselors are often viewed solely as course selection advisors and graduation requirements facilitators. However, due to their placement in the educational environment, School Counselors are uniquely positioned to bridge students/families to informational, people, programmatic, institutional, and opportunity-based assets (that would otherwise be unavailable). Through a lens of social capital theory, specifically examining the nature of bonding, bridging, and linking relationship types, this conceptual piece will examine the larger scope of the School Counselor role. The article will discuss how counselors build trust, convert institutional knowledge into actionable advice, advocate for students, and link students and families to both academic/post-secondary and community/professional resources. Additionally, this paper will focus on first-generation college student/immigrant/multilingual/lower income students who have fewer options for developing their own institutional knowledge via their personal network(s). This synthesis highlights the potential for counselors to serve as institutional brokers through relational development, which could lead to transforming information into accessible opportunity. It also outlines the limitations of such practice by way of counselors having too many students/caseloads/administrative responsibilities/inconsistent parent/family communication/unfairly distributed school resources. A School Counselor Social Capital Framework has been developed to outline the steps involved in this process: Relationship -> Information -> Connection -> Opportunity -> Outcome. The framework illustrates that simply possessing information is insufficient; students can maximize benefits when they possess a trusted relationship to assist in interpreting that information, building meaningful connection(s), and utilizing available opportunity(ies).

Keywords: school counseling, social capital, educational equity, college access, family-school relationships, institutional knowledge, student opportunity

Educational success is frequently attributed to students' academic capability, motivation, tenacity, and availability to educational resources. While each of these components plays a part in explaining educational success, they don't explain why some students successfully transition from K-12 to post-secondary education. The transition from K-12 to post-secondary education is significantly influenced by the amount of adult advocacy, institutional connection to the institution of post-secondary education, and the number

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of adult explanations about how to get to an opportunity that the student has identified. Thus, regardless of whether a student possesses academic capability to succeed in an advanced course, obtain financial assistance to attend college, pursue a career opportunity, etc., if no adult explains the process to him/her, encourages him/her to participate, or helps him/her navigate institutional expectations, he/she will likely never realize his/her potential. Social Capital offers a useful framework for explaining the difference among students. Social Capital focuses on the resources that are made available to individuals based upon their relationships and networks (Coleman, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Hopkins et al., 2021).

Social Capital can be very practical in an educational setting. For example, a parent who knows college admissions; a teacher who promotes a student's participation in more rigorous courses; a mentor who introduces a career area; or a school professional who assists a student in obtaining financial aid and connecting that student with resources at the institution. What is significant is not only whether the student has an adult relationship with someone in authority, but what that relationship enables the student to access: Information, Guidance, Advocacy, institutional knowledge, resources, and/or Connections to People/Organizations that enable the student to access additional opportunities.

Research has shown recently that relationships that are formed during schooling and the organization network that those relationships afford can positively impact the educational decision-making and opportunity structures for students (Glass, 2023; Kraft et al., 2023; Bridwell-Mitchell et al., 2023).

When students begin to attend school, they arrive with different types and amounts of social capital. Some families have had extensive experiences with post-secondary education and many professional contacts, whereas other families value education equally as much as the former group but lack knowledge regarding eligibility requirements, deadlines, application procedures, and unwritten expectations for Advanced Placement Courses, Dual Enrollment Programs, Scholarships, Internships, and College Admissions. Thus, there are important policy and practice implications when considering that having formal access to an opportunity doesn't ensure meaningful access. Therefore, students are required to have both the necessary information regarding the opportunity and adults who can assist them in interpreting that information and acting upon it (Williams & Cholewa, 2024; Gast, 2022; Poynton et al., 2021).

One position in particular within the educational system allows professionals to interact with various stakeholders, including students, parents/guardians, teachers, principals/administrators, colleges/universities/community agencies/scholarship programs/employers/institutional partners/etc. School counselors occupy this position. Comprehensive School Counseling Models promote equity of access to postsecondary planning, family involvement, advocacy, and collaboration (ASCA, 2022 & 2025). Thus, through these roles, counselors can facilitate building and utilizing social capital for students by enabling students to connect with individuals/institutions/opportunities that would otherwise not be accessible through the students' own networks. Perhaps more so than other students due to barriers related to generational status (first generation), socioeconomic status (lower income), immigration/multilingualism (English language learner), or historical marginalization (historically underserved populations) (Cavazos Vela et al., 2024; Brookover et al., 2022; Williams & Cholewa, 2024).

However, while counselors can create/build social capital for students/families, their ability to sustainably build and utilize social capital is limited. High student-to-counselor ratios, increased testing responsibility, reduced instructional time due to compliance and administrative tasks, and variability across schools can all decrease the time counselors have to form sustained relationships with students and proactively seek out partnerships with external organizations (Hilts et al., 2023; Donohue et al., 2022; ASCA, 2025). This creates a paradox: students who most require access to institutional knowledge and bridging relationships are likely to attend schools with counselors that have the least time and organizational capacity to provide them. An understanding of school counseling via a social capital lens connects scholarship/policy/practice by examining not only what counselors do, but how their position within educational networks can either enhance or limit students' access to opportunities.

The article is a conceptual synthesis and not an empirical investigation. The authors' intention is to examine school counselors as creators/brokers of social capital for students/families by developing a conceptual framework that relates the type/quality of counselor-student relationships with information/knowledge/institutions/connecting students/opportunities/student outcomes. Three research

questions guide the analysis: (1) How can school counselors create/mobilize bonding/bridging/linking social capital for students and families? (2) Through which mechanisms can counselor-student relationships/institutional knowledge be transformed into educational connections/opportunities? And (3) How can counselor-created social capital minimize informational/relational inequities - and what structural limitations exist for counselors to perform this role?

Conceptual approach and focus

This study integrates social-capital theory into current scholarship in school counseling, college access, mentoring, family-school relationships, educational networks, and counselor work environments using a conceptual review method. The literature selected focuses on studies from 2021 forward. However, due to their foundational status within the theories discussed in this study, the seminal works of Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam, and Stanton-Salazar were retained. Contemporary peer-reviewed articles will be examined to demonstrate the application of the theories in today's school environment regarding college knowledge, first-generation students, counselor-student relationships, family involvement, organizational partnerships, and unequal access to educational resources (Brown et al., 2024; Gast, 2022; Bridwell-Mitchell et al., 2023; Williams & Cholewa, 2024; Kraft et al., 2023).

The review is categorized based on analytical organization instead of systematic reviews or meta-analytic methods. The objective is to determine common processes that help transform relational and network systems into educational resource systems. Four key process areas have been identified across the literature as being particularly relevant to the counselor role: trusting relationships, translating institutional knowledge, acting as brokers connecting people and organizations, and advocating to assist students to mobilize available resources. These mechanisms serve as the foundation for the School Counselor Social Capital Model developed later in this article.

Understanding social capital in education

Social capital has been applied across various disciplines and within education to describe the ways in which relationships and networks generate access to resources that would otherwise be unavailable to an individual. Definitions vary across authors; however, several primary categories include relationships, trust, communication channels, collective understandings/expectations, and ties to formal/institutional entities (Mishra, 2020; Acar, 2011; Niedlich et al., 2021).

Pierre Bourdieu described social capital as "the resources...available through membership in a durable network" (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu's view of social capital is particularly significant in understanding educational inequalities because families vary significantly in terms of the networks they can draw upon. For instance, students whose parents have professional and educational connections may gain counsel on selecting a college, taking courses at a high level of difficulty, participating in internships, or securing financial aid options that many other students are unable to acquire (Kruse et al., 2022).

James Coleman focused primarily on the roles of relationships. Social capital facilitates actions via trust, obligations, expectations, norms, and communication channels. Relationships within a school setting, i.e., among students, families, teachers, and counselors, can also convey information to promote behavior aligned with educational objectives. For example, a student who trusts a counselor is much more likely to ask for help or pursue an unfamiliar academic possibility (Coleman, 1988; Brooms, 2021).

Robert Putnam defined networks, trust, and participation, and differentiated between two types of social capital: bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital involves strong bonds between family members, friends, or like-minded groups and typically generates emotional support and feelings of belonging. Conversely, bridging social capital allows individuals to connect across multiple social networks, potentially exposing individuals to new information or opportunities (Putnam, 2000; Hopkins et al., 2021).

Additionally, there exists a third type of social capital known as linking social capital, which refers to relationships that connect individuals to those with greater levels of authority, knowledge, or resources. Of relevance to school counselors are connections to colleges/universities, financial aid offices, employers,

scholarship organizations, or community agencies where students may access resources not readily available outside of these relationships (Fletcher et al., 2025).

Educational social capital, institutional knowledge, and inequality

Educational social capital includes access to the knowledge needed to navigate the institution. The most obvious examples include knowledge about graduation requirements, prerequisite courses, testing protocols, dual enrollment, scholarship deadlines, financial aid, and college admission requirements. While many of these items could theoretically be in the public domain, being technically "public" does not necessarily imply that the information will be useful (Gast, 2022; Poynton et al., 2021), nor does it ensure that the student has the capacity to identify what information pertains to them, to properly understand how the information applies, and to take action when necessary. For example, a student might meet all the qualifications for dual enrollment but find out about it too late to register. Similarly, a student might qualify for financial assistance but misinterpret the process. Ultimately, a relationship involving institutional knowledge determines whether information is viewed as an opportunity. Additionally, there is growing literature regarding the ways in which college advising also demonstrates that institutional knowledge is socially constructed (Williams & Cholewa, 2024); students' availability of counsel is determined by their school setting, social class position, racial background, and the number and quality of adults available to assist them in making sense of the college experience (Gast, 2022; Williams & Cholewa, 2024).

Parents familiar with postsecondary education typically share this institutional knowledge within their families. In contrast, students from families unfamiliar with postsecondary education often rely more heavily on their schools (Poynton et al., 2021) to provide some level of understanding of course selection, college admissions, scholarships, financial aid, and occupational pathways (Glass, 2023; Poynton et al., 2021). Schools can serve as counselors who translate institutional knowledge into understandable language for students by providing students with information relative to policies, choices, timelines, and critical decision-making moments. Students enter schools with varying levels of access to educational networks and institutional knowledge. Many students come from families and communities that are well-connected to individuals who are experienced in selecting high school courses, applying for colleges and scholarships, obtaining financial aid, identifying professional pathways (Glass, 2023; Kruse et al., 2022), and having access to mentors and internship opportunities. Other students may have similar aspirations and support from their parents/guardians; however, they have limited access to individuals familiar with the aforementioned systems. Lack of educational social capital should not indicate lack of ability, motivation, or parental involvement.

In addition to differences based on formal access, there are significant differences between access formally provided and actual access. Access to a scholarship may be advertised openly, but a student must be aware of it; understand if he/she/they qualify; recognize why it is relevant; and submit his/her/their application before the deadline. Access to dual enrollment may be listed on a school's website, but accessing it requires completing tests; registering for classes; choosing specific courses; coordinating with a college; and possibly other steps. Social capital facilitates conversion of available information into actionable opportunity. Families represent one of the primary sources of social capital because they provide support for children and adolescents through encouragement, expectation building, guidance, advocacy, and networking (McDermott et al., 2022). However, educational social capital varies greatly among families (Brown et al., 2021; Kruse et al., 2022; McDermott et al., 2022). College-educated parents may have first-hand knowledge of the admissions process; financial aid; required testing; academic rigors; and expected timelines for applications. Additionally, educated parents may feel more confident in communicating with educational institutions (Sallie Mae & Ipsos, 2022). Families without previous college attendance may value education similarly yet have limited direct experience with these processes.

Students' economic status can affect access to social capital (Kruse et al., 2022). Families with greater wealth and professional resources may have the means to pay for tutoring; test prep materials; college tours; expensive summer camps; extra-curricular clubs and organizations; internships; and professional mentorship (Acar & Yigit, 2023; Tompsett & Knoester, 2023). These experiences can generate additional

relationships and new opportunities. Students from lower-income backgrounds may encounter obstacles associated with fees for certain services/products; transportation issues; job commitments/work obligations; familial responsibilities etc. Economic constraints can intersect with limited network capabilities (Jack, 2019; Perna et al., 2021). Counselors may mitigate some of the barriers created by limited access to social capital and/or financial constraints by establishing links for students with reduced-fee programs; no-cost programs; scholarships; paid opportunities; transportation assistance; and institutional contact persons. Counseling may modify the real resources available to students (Bryan et al., 2023; American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2022).

Teachers, counselors, mentors, and other community-based organizations, as well as teachers themselves, could serve as bridging and linking social capital sources for first-generation students (Kraft et al., 2023; Brookover et al., 2022). Counselors can help these students understand their post-secondary choices, including financial costs, academic expectations, and procedural requirements necessary for applications. These types of services need to be initiated early in students' high school careers. Students' decisions on course load, testing, and extracurricular activities during the early years of high school will determine future opportunities.

Early counseling will allow students to develop knowledge regarding college systems over time, instead of being forced into this new system at the last minute when applying to colleges. A social capital approach does not assume that individuals from lower socio-economic status do not have connections or knowledge. Individuals from lower socio-economic status have many forms of capital. School systems also do not always value or use those forms of capital. Therefore, the issue is not whether students have connections and knowledge that students have, but whether those networks and knowledge provide access to institutionalized resources that support specific educational outcomes. This shifts the focus away from what students allegedly "lack" and toward the resources available to students.

Therefore, low rates of participation in advanced courses may be due to a lack of information, motivation, or both. Likewise, failure to complete the financial aid process may be due to the complexities associated with the process itself (Billings et al., 2022). Finally, low rates of participation in internships may be due to students' inability to get to internship sites due to transportation issues, lack of funds, etc.

Counselors working in educational settings can attempt to mitigate some of the inequalities associated with access to networks and knowledge by identifying students who may not receive adequate support (e.g., English language learners), recommending advanced courses for students who would benefit most from such instruction, connecting families with appropriate resources to assist in completing the financial aid process, facilitating dual enrollment for students in need of additional credits before entering college, introducing students to college representative personnel, and developing collaborative relationships with outside agencies to increase students' awareness of opportunities (Poynton et al., 2021).

While counselors can attempt to mitigate the effects of structural inequality associated with differences in school funding levels, family income levels, availability of neighborhood resources, etc., social capital should not replace broader educational reform efforts. However, counselors can certainly influence the way opportunities are allocated within schools.

School counselors as social capital brokers

School counselors serve as connectors between potential social interaction partners, such as students, families, teachers, college representatives, employers, community organizations, and other supporting agencies (Fletcher et al., 2025; American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2022). As such, they can act as brokers for social capital. Brokerage is the action of linking individuals or groups to each other through the crossing of different network boundaries. For example, a school counselor could facilitate a meeting between a student and a university admissions representative. Similarly, a counselor could provide a referral to financial aid assistance for a family. Additionally, by introducing a student to a mentor, facilitating dual enrollment, advocating for placement into advanced courses, or providing access to additional educational opportunities through technology and/or travel, counselors are expanding their students' effective social networks.

Counselor–student relationships and trust

Trust is what effective brokerage depends upon. When students feel confident that their counselor is acting in their best interest, they will be more willing to share their concerns, ask for help, and take the counselor's recommendation. The types of support a counselor can provide include both emotional and tangible type of support. For example, a school counselor could offer encouragement to a student at the same time they assist them in developing a plan for courses as well as assisting with finding scholarships, completing college applications, meeting graduation requirements, or resolving issues related to the institution (Bryan et al., 2022; American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2023). In addition, because school counselors work directly with students, this familiarity allows them to make the guidance they provide relevant to each individual student.

Connecting students to postsecondary and external networks

Students have to be able to establish appropriate connections with potential institutions, know what their specific needs are for applying, how long it takes to apply, who to ask for letters of recommendation from, go through the financial aid process, find/apply for scholarships, and then make a decision about which offer(s) to accept (Poynton et al., 2021; Gast, 2022; Acar, 2025). To do all of these tasks, students could create an organized way to work in conjunction with post-secondary institutions. Developing a relationship with admissions representatives will help students get timely, correct information, view campuses, hear presentations, and assist with understanding applications (Gast, 2022; Poynton et al., 2021; Acar, 2025). Developing these types of relationships is considered linking social capital, as it connects students with institutions that possess specialized knowledge and authority. Counseling guidance can also open up new post-secondary pathways to students that were previously thought to be out of reach or non-existent.

Additionally, counselors can develop partnerships with colleges, employers, nonprofit organizations, professional associations, scholarship foundations, mentorship programs, and community agencies. These partnerships can result in providing students with internship opportunities, allowing them to visit campuses, participate in summer programs, engage in research projects, receive mentorship, learn about possible careers, and access funding. Over time, these partnerships can transform into institutional resources as opposed to being one-time benefits to each individual student (Fletcher et al., 2025; American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2022). Inter-organizational research has shown similar results demonstrating that school partnerships can act as external social capital to bring additional cognitive, social, and material resources into schools (Bridwell-Mitchell et al., 2023; Antonio et al., 2023).

Advocacy as a form of social capital mobilization

Social capital is most important when relationships can be used at the exact time a student needs help with a problem. School counselors may also use their relationships with teachers, administrators, colleges, financial aid offices or other organizations to help students overcome institutional barriers (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2022; Stone, 2022). This could include helping students resolve registration problems, clarify academic circumstances, support course placement, verify scholarship eligibility, and help families understand institutional requirements. However, school counselors should also help students develop self-advocacy skills. The goal is not to permanently depend on the counselor but to increase students' ability to ask questions of institutions, seek assistance from these institutions, communicate with them, and mobilize their own relationships independently (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2022; Stone, 2022).

Proactive brokerage and equitable access

The counseling model that is dependent upon the student initiating contact may be at risk of perpetuating previous inequities. Those with greater levels of institutional knowledge are likely aware of when to seek guidance and/or support, as well as how to request such through attending campus events, etc. However, those with lower social capital do not always know what it is they should be seeking (Poynton et al., 2021;

Gast, 2022). Therefore, a social capital model would require counselors to proactively engage in outreach efforts. Using student academic records, course enrollments, graduation data, and other interests, counselors could proactively seek out students who may benefit from opportunities available to them (Gast, 2022; Poynton et al., 2021). Examples of proactive brokerage could include reaching out to students qualified to take advanced courses, following up with students whose financial aid has been incomplete for an extended period of time, and providing current high-achieving students with information regarding post-secondary opportunities they may not have previously considered. In this way, counselors become network builders actively working to build relationships between students and resources, as opposed to merely responding to individual requests.

Building student agency and network capacity

In order to develop students' ability to generate social capital over time, school counseling should include teaching students how to find out about resources available to them, how to interact with an institution, how to identify and establish mentoring relationships, how to establish professional relationships, and self-advocacy skills. (Kraft et al., 2023; Stone, 2022). As students develop this set of skills, it will allow them to utilize resources throughout their post-secondary education experience. Additionally, students will have developed the skills needed to effectively navigate their first year in college, their first job, and their profession.

The role of the school counselor is one of a broker and/or a teacher of brokerage. The school counselor initially establishes connections for students by acting as a bridge. Eventually, the students are expected to take on greater responsibility for establishing/maintaining their own personal/professional networks. When school counselors act as both brokers and teachers of brokerage, this positions school counselors as institutional bridges. School counselors can help connect students with various types of educational opportunities, help families understand schools and what schools expect from students, connect high schools with colleges, and connect students with external organizations.

School counseling is not just about providing advice and guidance to individual students. It is also about creating/mobilizing networks of educational relationships. This includes translating institutional expectations into student-friendly language, advocating for students when necessary, using existing connections to open up new avenues of opportunity, and identifying/creating pathways through which resources can move. (Fletcher et al., 2025; Poynton et al., 2021). These connections can be especially important for students who come from networks that limit access to educational institutions and professional environments.

Family-school relationships as social capital

Family-school interactions are another way for students to develop social capital (Yulianti et al., 2022) -- they help establish what each party expects from the others, whether the decision to stay in school will continue, how students plan their future educationally, and ultimately how they prepare for and make decisions about post-secondary plans. Both parties bring different forms of knowledge to this interaction. Families have "institutional" knowledge of the students' life experiences, family dynamics, etc. Schools possess the institutional knowledge necessary to assist with graduation planning, academic planning, standardized test preparation, college application procedures, financial aid processes, and so forth. Typically, school counselors act as the link between the two institutions.

School counselors can explain how graduation requirements work, how to create a comprehensive high school academic plan, which tests a student should take, how to apply to colleges, how to complete financial aid documents and/or process financial aid packages, etc. The counselor can also learn about the family's economic situation and how it affects a student's ability to pursue higher education (Bachman et al., 2022; Brookover et al., 2022; Goodall, 2021).

Strong family-school connections enable both parties to share information. In essence, parents become knowledgeable about the workings of the institution, school counselors become more informed about their

students' lives outside of school, and ultimately students receive a more cohesive package of support to assist them during their high school experience (Goodall, 2021; Yulianti et al., 2022).

Trust enables parents to seek out information related to their child's educational experiences. Trust enables parents to share their concerns with school professionals. Trust enables parents to actively engage in developing plans with school professionals. School counselors are able to establish trust by being available to parents. They can do this by establishing consistent lines of communication. School counselors can achieve this by explaining the role of the school counselor in detail. They can achieve this by being responsive to parents who call or come into the office seeking assistance. Establishing trust becomes a form of social capital because, once established, it facilitates cooperation between family and school. Once established, it enables information and support to flow between the two institutions more readily (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2024; Bachman et al., 2022).

Family engagement, parent education, and institutional knowledge

Family involvement is more than just getting parents to come to school functions. It's about whether families acquire valuable knowledge and connections so they can successfully navigate the education system (Goodall, 2021; Yulianti et al., 2022). School-based parent information programs and one-on-one counseling sessions can provide parents with an explanation of academic pathways, graduation requirements, how to get into college, financial aid for college, and important deadlines. These types of sessions may also increase parental confidence when it comes to communicating with their child's educators. For effective family involvement, we need to make sure parents are provided information that is relevant to them, as well as inform them on what they can do with this new knowledge (Shea et al., 2023).

Immigrant, multilingual, and international families

Families from immigrant backgrounds, who speak multiple languages, or have an international background may be in need of help to understand unfamiliar terms for education, institutional norms, and practices. Counselors can assist families to translate unfamiliar terms into understandable ones, including grade point average (GPA), weighted courses, dual-enrollment options, test preparation for standardized exams, degree completion requirements, financial aid, and application processes for college (Attia et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2025). In doing so, they are assisting in the translation of the institutions' culture as well as language. They can also take into account the numerous cultural, linguistic, educational, and professional assets many families already possess. Rather than correcting families on how things should be done, this type of counseling works towards connection to allow counselors to support families utilizing the strong existing resources in a new educational setting. Research regarding culturally and linguistically diverse students indicates that the counselor's role can be enhanced by recognizing students' pre-existing cultural and community resources and building upon those instead of working from a deficit model of supporting families (Cavazos Vela et al., 2024).

Two-way communication and proactive family engagement

Parents need to be able to receive information back from schools. Schools don't have all the information they would need to counsel effectively. Parents provide a lot of valuable information regarding their child's goals, commitments, economic status, cultural background, etc. If counselors were aware of the many different factors that influence an adolescent's behavior, they could possibly provide better advice. For instance, if a student does not participate in any after-school programs, it may be due to work or family obligations and not because he/she is not motivated. Establishing two-way communication will create mutual trust and enhance social capital for each other by providing the data each party needs to develop an effective plan to educate the child (Ishimaru, 2019; Goodall, 2021).

Schools and parents can strengthen their relationship to help children through several means. It provides earlier intervention into issues that occur academically. School counselors become better prepared to advise parents on course selection and post-secondary options based upon the amount of information gathered.

When parents feel comfortable with school counselors, parents become more active participants in counseling services and college planning services (Waalkes et al., 2023; Brookover et al., 2022)

When families have adequate knowledge of how education works, they can further support what counselors tell them at home. Counseling can take place in addition to meeting times, and family decisions can include educational considerations. Parent involvement in schools cannot be solely dependent on parent-initiated communications. Those parents who have a good understanding of the school system are most likely to initiate meeting requests or attend school functions, whereas parents with little experience working within school systems do not realize when they require assistance. School counselors can establish proactive communication at critical junctures, including entry into high school, course selection, testing, college planning, financial aid periods, and graduation (Brown et al., 2024; American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2024; Shea et al., 2023).

Social capital and student outcomes

The relationship of counselor-generated social capital to course choice, course progression, college-readiness, completion of a Free Application for Federal Student Aid, access to scholarships, career exploration and post-secondary enrollment is documented by Brookover et al. (2022) and Shea et al. (2023). The social-capital literature suggests that counselors' actions represent one mechanism among others that connect students with available educational resources. It is likely that the academic preparedness of students, their families' economic status, the quality of their schools, and other environmental factors will significantly affect these outcomes. Therefore, while counselors can provide opportunities for students to participate in educationally beneficial activities, the ability of those students to do so ultimately depends on the extent to which they can recognize, understand, and gain access to such opportunities.

Barriers to social capital-building

Social Capital Development by Counselors Depends Upon Their Working Conditions. For example, a high ratio of students per counselor limits the potential for developing continuous relationships with students and developing plans that are based upon an understanding of each child as an individual. The amount of time available to provide direct services may be impacted by scheduling issues, testing requirements, and compliance/ administrative tasks in addition to the aforementioned (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2025; Donohue et al., 2022; Hilts et al., 2023). This is important, as establishing relationships with students and building external partnerships requires long-term commitment. In order for counselors to establish effective partnerships beyond the school setting, they must have a sense of who each student is as an individual and also have time to establish such networks (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2025; Donohue et al., 2022; Hilts et al., 2023). Therefore, schools wishing to enhance the role of counselors in terms of social capital should consider providing counselors with manageable caseloads, decreasing their non-counseling responsibilities, and providing them with adequate training and resources from administrators to facilitate partnerships with colleges/universities/community employers.

A social capital framework for school counseling

The primary process of how school counselors develop social capital for students using this model can be illustrated as follows:

Relationship → information → connection → opportunity → outcome: School counselors build a relationship with students that includes mutual trust and open dialogue. In doing so, they gather student interests, needs, and goals. This information enables them to provide relevant and applicable information about their school environment and beyond. Following that, they can connect students to others (programs, organizations, etc.) that will assist them in achieving their objectives and/or accessing opportunities (dual-enrollment, college application process, scholarship applications, internship opportunities, mentors, researchers, explorations of careers). Student participation in these opportunities may lead to various

outcomes, including academic success, post-secondary educational options, and developmentally related successes.

Implications for Practice

A social capital approach allows counselors to assess the information and network resources that students have available. Strategies counselors may use to assist in this area include proactively identifying opportunities for advancement into advanced academic programs, assisting with early college and career planning, providing education to families about post-secondary options, establishing mentorship programs, creating partnerships with post-secondary institutions, developing relationships with employers, and conducting targeted outreach efforts to students who would otherwise rely on other individuals to find them (Brookover et al., 2022; Fletcher et al., 2025; Poynton et al., 2021). In addition to providing these services, counselors will want to assist students in developing the ability to establish their own networks by teaching students how to initiate communication with institutions, seek out mentors, formulate informed questions, and ultimately build professional relationships. By doing so, counselors extend the benefits of the work they do beyond the walls of secondary schools (Kraft et al., 2023; Stone, 2022).

School administrator's role

Counselors' success is often evaluated based upon factors such as whether they meet scheduled appointments, administer assessments, complete administrative duties, or provide documentation that indicates students have graduated. However, school administrators need to recognize that the degree to which counselors help students obtain access to meaningful educational experiences represents a vital service provided by counselors (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2022; Hilts et al., 2023; American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2025).

DISCUSSION

The literature analyzed in this study provides substantial support for a core conclusion: School Counselors serve as Institutional Agents who create opportunities for students to obtain access to resources unavailable to all Families, Schools and Communities. As such, the greatest value added by this meta-analysis is not simply that Counselors have provided students with informational resources. Instead, according to the literature, Counselors can assist students in making informational resources useful to them by locating informational resources within the boundaries of their trusted relationships with students and linking students to specific actions they can take based upon that information. College knowledge, Mentoring, First Generation Students, and College Going Culture studies demonstrate that providing Guidance has been far more effective when students were able to apply institutional expectations to their own experiences; received personalized encouragement from an adult or organization; and had access to adults or organizations that could assist them in applying the information/knowledge they obtained (Poynton et al., 2021; Brookover et al., 2022; Gast, 2022; Kraft et al., 2023; Waalkes et al., 2023). These findings can explain why the same formally available opportunity can be both accessible and unobtainable depending on the student.

This study also expands our existing empirical understanding of school counseling by integrating multiple research domains that have traditionally been examined independently. For example, research examining the impact of counselor-student relationships focused primarily on establishing trust and providing personalized support; college access research focused primarily on students' levels of college knowledge and availability of advising; family engagement research emphasized the importance of communication and shared understanding among family members; and organizational research focused on developing partnerships between schools and external entities to expand schools' access to resources and advising capacity. According to social capital theory, each of these is an interrelated process rather than independent functions. Specifically, the creation of social capital through the development of counselor-student relationships enables information to flow between students/families/schools/community

organizations; the availability of social capital facilitates brokering information/knowledge/advice among different individuals/organizations; brokering information/knowledge/advice increases access to additional individuals/institutions; and increased access to additional individuals/institutions potentially results in greater participation in educational opportunities. Further evidence supporting this interpretation includes recent research demonstrating that schools can expand their access to external resources and advising capacity via partnerships with post-secondary institutions, employers, and community organizations (Antonio et al., 2023; Bridwell-Mitchell et al., 2023). Therefore, the counselor role can be conceptualized not only in terms of individual counseling sessions but also in terms of networks connecting students, families, schools, post-secondary education institutions, employers, and community organizations.

To the extent possible, these conclusions generally align with Bourdieu's assertions about the existence of differing student networks and institutional resources; Coleman's and Putnam's assertions regarding trust and relational ties as factors facilitating the transmission of information and support; and Stanton-Salazar's assertion regarding the existence of institutional agents (i.e., those positioned formally to advocate on behalf of others). However, the proposed framework represents a practice-based extension of these theories in a school counseling context by defining a sequential model of how counselor-generated social capital may function (Relationship->Information->Connection->Opportunity->Outcome). However, the review also presents limitations of interpretations of social capital. Counselors will never fully replace the structural inequalities inherent in unequal funding of schools, labor market conditions, parental income, transportation obstacles, etc. Thus, social capital can certainly aid students in navigating such structures, but social capital should not be interpreted to transfer the burden of addressing structural inequality onto either individual counselors or families.

Finally, the review highlights important constraints and unanswered questions. For example, high counselor caseloads, counselors being assigned non-counseling roles/duties/testing responsibilities/lack of professional networks may limit counselors' abilities to engage in long-term relational work or to establish external partnerships (Hilts et al., 2023; Donohue et al., 2022; ASCA, 2025); and communication patterns among families may vary greatly; and there are many cultural nuances to counseling including recognizing students' existing social/linguistic/familial/resistant forms of capital (Cavazos Vela et al., 2024; Brown et al., 2024). To better understand this, future research should test the proposed framework using longitudinal/multilevel designs to determine if trust in the counselor-student relationship predicts students' access to information/knowledge/advice and if subsequent relationships with students predict students' participation in higher-level courses/financial aid completion/college applications/enrollment/scholarships/ internships/career opportunities. Using network analytic methods, researchers can assess if forming partnerships between counselors and colleges/universities/businesses/community organizations changes the types/resources available to students in schools. Finally, comparative studies can assess if the proposed framework works differently depending on setting/rural/suburban/urban/high vs. low caseloads/first generation/English language learners'/immigrant status/poverty/historically underrepresented groups.

CONCLUSION

School counselors provide an opportunity to develop social capital among students due to their position connecting students and families to various sources of education such as schools, colleges, employment, and community organizations. As reported in the literature, counselors can act as a trusted source of institutional knowledge that translates complex information and connects students to new educational opportunities. Additionally, counselors can assist in developing trust-based relationships with students, families, and other institutions, which ultimately will enable the counselor to act as an agent that brokers information from one institution to another, thereby providing students with the ability to capitalize on opportunities previously unknown to them (Fletcher et al., 2025; Gast, 2022; Kraft et al., 2023; Brookover et al., 2022). Three core research questions used throughout this study collectively lead to the conclusion that counselors generate social capital within students through building trust relationships, acting as an intermediary for information, advocating for students, engaging with families, and establishing partnerships with other external agencies. In addition to generating social capital, counselors are capable of transforming

the social capital generated into opportunities for students. This transformation occurs when the social capital developed transforms into connections, which then lead to opportunities for educational advancement. Moreover, these functions are likely to be particularly valuable for students whose families and/or communities lack direct access to professionals/colleges/institutions.

However, there are factors that impact a counselor's ability to effectively utilize the aforementioned functions. Factors include high caseloads, administrative duties, limited time, and inequality in funding between schools. All of the aforementioned factors are detrimental to the development of social capital as well as limiting a counselor's ability to establish and maintain the type of relationships necessary for creating social capital (Hilts et al., 2023; Donohue et al., 2022; ASCA, 2025). The School Counselor Social Capital Framework illustrates the function of the counselor in the development of social capital as follows: Relationship -> Information -> Connection -> Opportunity -> Outcome. The main significance of this framework lies in illustrating that simply disseminating information is insufficient. Information dissemination results in educational social capital only when a trusting relationship facilitates it and enables the student to understand the relevance of the information received, connect with individuals/institutions related to it, and take action based on it. Therefore, for the purposes of practice, this implies that school counseling programs should be judged not merely upon the distribution of information or the fulfillment of administrative tasks; rather, upon the extent to which they foster relationships, increase networks, and enhance equitable access to educational opportunities. Similarly, for research purposes, the framework provides a testable format for determining how social capital is developed through the activities of counselors, identifying those students that derive the greatest benefit from social capital developed by counselors, and determining under what circumstances and to what degree school conditions either facilitate or impede the development of counselor-created social capital.

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Ethical statement

This study is a systematic review of previously published literature and did not involve human participants, animals, or the collection of primary data. As such, ethical approval and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval were not required for this research.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conceptualization, study design, literature selection and screening, data synthesis, thematic analysis, theoretical framing, ethical analysis, interpretation of findings, and methodological review, as well as drafting, editing, and critically revising the manuscript. The author reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability

Data sharing does not apply to this article, as it is a conceptual paper and no new data were generated or analyzed. All sources supporting the discussion of school counselors' role in building students' social capital are cited in the reference list.

AI disclosure

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025) to assist with grammar, wording, and clarity during the revision process. The author reviewed and edited the text to ensure accuracy and accepts full responsibility for the final content.

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