

GUIDANCE COUNSELOR JOBS: GUIDANCE COUNSELOR JOB DESCRIPTION

Few careers can be as rewarding and as frustrating as being a guidance counselor. It is rewarding to help guide and structure children's educational and vocational direction as they pass through an unstable and confusing time of their lives; it is frustrating because you will have limited authority to make students follow your advice, and often you will face students "who don't want to think about the day after tomorrow," as one counselor put it. A guidance counselor helps students determine courses of study and potential vocations they may lead to. Counselors who are most successful get to know what motivates each student as well as his skills and desires. "When you're doing things right," wrote one, "it's like you're another parent, except they trust you a little more." The relationship can be very charged and intense, and those who aspire to enter the field should understand that emotional as well as intellectual demands are part of the occupation.

As most guidance counselors spend over a third of their time in consultations with students and parents, prospective counselors should be comfortable with teenagers and have excellent communication skills. Another 25 percent of a guidance counselor's day is spent administering and evaluating tests and reviewing their results. While this may seem a large amount of time to spend on tests, guidance counselors use them to provide context for existing records of academic performance, teacher evaluations, and personal understanding of students' needs.

Some guidance counselors call the continuing education they receive from students they work with the most interesting feature of the profession. "I learned more from them than from any class in college," wrote one enthusiastic counselor, "I learned more in the first day." Not all are as ebullient as this, but the level of satisfaction guidance counselors recorded was one of the highest of any career in this book. Of course, those who don't love the profession usually leave quickly; guidance counselors have one of the highest initial attrition rates of any profession in this book, a staggering 60 percent within the first two years. Careers that require this degree of emotional commitment can be rough on those who are not prepared to make one on a regular basis.

Paying Your Dues

A bachelor's degree is required to become a high-school guidance counselor, and some states require that the candidate have a Master's degree. Coursework should include social studies, psychology, and communications work, with an emphasis on public speaking. Courses dealing with education are important too; many schools require that guidance counselors teach courses in addition to their counseling duties. A background in statistics and mathematics is important for evaluating students on their standardized tests. By far the most important skill a potential guidance counselor can bring to this profession is the ability to relate to students. This skill requires a combination of the ability to listen, honesty, an open mind, and a sense of humor. Those who succeed in this profession communicate well with students; those who fail, don't.

Associated Careers

People become guidance counselors because they want to help students, and those who leave find many other ways to satisfy that desire: They return to school and become therapists, they head up substance abuse programs, they run educational centers and programs, they become teachers without counseling duties and they even become tutors. Some decide that they would like to continue helping people, but in a different age range, and they become professional career advisors, recruiters, and human resource personnel.

Past And Future

Guidance counselors were first introduced in the United States in the Northeast in the early 1900s, but these positions didn't experience any significant growth until the end of World War II. Pushed by the Department of Education, school systems across the country soon "strongly encouraged" the position in every public and private school.

Guidance counselors face daunting tasks every day, but their roles at the center of youth education have never been more important. The job market for guidance counselors should be full of opportunity for the next ten years or so as enrollment remains constant in United States school systems. The problem is that institutional support for guidance counselors is waning. Guidance counselors are some of the first personnel to face the budget ax since there is no way to quantifiably measure their impact or progress, or a way of professionally evaluating their skills or the cost-effectiveness of their positions.

Quality of Life

Two Years Out

These are the most trying years for guidance counselors, as the ones in which the full emotional impact of helping guide teenagers through difficult personal decisions and life-changing options hits the new hire. Many opt for different occupations after the first couple of years. Those who remain must learn to keep personal and professional decisions separate while maintaining warm relationships with students. This juggling act is difficult to manage, particularly in the first few years when older students are making critical decisions but have no context in which to trust in your ability to help them.

Five Years Out

Those who've survived five years as guidance counselors face a much more stable work environment, from which less than five percent leave each year. Counselors learn to interpret standardized tests and hone their communication skills with students. Many become involved in conferences, lectures, and conventions where issues about vocational and academic counseling are discussed. Hours decrease and pay increases, but administrative duties may increase also. Many schools like to see a continuous evolution of guidance counseling programs, so creative thinking is a must.

Ten Years Out

Ten-year veterans, for the most part, have found positions where they are happy and satisfied. Pay levels off and, unless they want to assume additional duties, guidance counselors can expect only cost-of-living salary adjustments. Guidance counselors continue in the same roles as before, but many exercise their seniority to initiate parent/teacher programs which provide a further safety net for troubled teens.

Professional Profile

# of people in profession	100,000
% male:	80
% female:	20
average hours per week:	40

Professionals Read

Journal of Higher Education
College Board Review

Books, Films and TV Shows Featuring the Profession

Pretty In Pink
Say Anything
Look at the Sky

Major Employers

NYC Board of Education 65 Court Street Brooklyn, NY 11201 Tel: 718-935-2299 Fax: 718-935-5472 Contact: Personnel	Texas Education Agency 1701 North Congress Avenue Austin, TX 78701 Tel: 512-463-9734	Los Angeles Unified School Districts 450 North Grand Avenue Room 102 Los Angeles, CA 90012 Tel: 213-625-6000
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You'll Have Contact With

Psychologists
Students

University Administrators
Vocational Testing Consultants

Major Associations

American School Counselor Association	National Board for Certified Counselors
5999 Stevenson Avenue	3 Terrace Way
Alexandria, VA 22304	Suite D
Tel: 703-823-9800	Greensboro, NC 27403
Contact: Virginia Moore	Tel: 910-547-0607

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