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Good Counsel

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DePaul’s award-winning school counseling program sets out to change the world

by Marilyn Ferdinand
It’s 7:45 a.m. when our prototypical school counselor—let’s call her Keisha—walks into her office at Our High School. She got a late start because she was up past midnight preparing for the next day’s student appointments and updating the annual needs assessment she presented to the principal and senior staff a month earlier. They asked her to expand the financial literacy unit she proposed for the curriculum to include a section on college debt. She’ll meet with them at 1 p.m. to discuss her suggestions.

Even though Keisha missed her Starbucks stop to get to school before the first bell, she feels alert when Ramone, a junior, comes into her office just after homeroom to discuss his spotty attendance. Ramone explains that his unemployed mother has tapped him to babysit his 4-year-old sister whenever she has a job interview. Keisha asks Ramone for his ideas about how he can keep up with his schoolwork, works out a plan with him and promises to talk with his teachers about offering him make-up assignments. She makes a note to contact his mother to discuss alternatives to interrupting Ramone’s school schedule.

A quick look at her Outlook calendar reminds Keisha of an appointment she has with the food service manager to discuss catering the spirit rally next week. She also has a meeting with the PTA president to go over the agenda for the fall parents’ night, where she gives her annual talk about the services she can offer to them and their children.

**Beyond the “G” Word**

Keisha’s day is a pretty typical one for a school counselor, but it sounds radically different from the counselors of the past, whose main job was to help with college selection and course prerequisites.

“We used to call them guidance counselors, and we now say, ‘Oh, no, the G word,’” Associate Professor of Counseling Melissa Ockerman says with a querulous look on her face. She explains, “We’re not just guiding students. We really think about students holistically, and the idea is we can help students academically, socially, emotionally and with college and career. But we see those things as really intersecting.”

Education in the United States has changed, and the role of school counselors has had to change to meet the demands of a more competitive, complex environment. The master’s in counseling program at the College of Education (COE) is more than meeting the challenge.

**Evolution of a Revolution**

Back in the early 1980s, when COE’s program was called “human services and counseling,” faculty began exploring ways to work innovatively with children and families, and started integrating into the coursework clinical experiences in marriage and family agencies and outreach to underserved communities.

“Vincentian values are definitely something that are not only talked about in class, but you can see across DePaul’s campus.”

Megan Buoniconti, counseling student
When the State of Illinois passed a bill in 1998 with detailed requirements for licensed professional counselors and licensed clinical professional counselors, the college revamped its program to meet the requirements.

Today, the college offers master’s degree tracks in school counseling, college counseling and student affairs, and clinical mental health counseling. In 2019, all three specialty areas were accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, a major achievement by a program known for its rigorous pursuit of excellence. Among its many successes, the program boasts two alumni, Kirsten Perry (MEd ’11) and Brian Coleman (MEd ’14), who were named National School Counselor of the Year by the American School Counselor Association in 2018 and 2019, respectively (see sidebar, “Counseling Kudos”).

**Turnaround Leader**

Kirsten Perry’s story began as one of struggle: “I was an off-track kid. I got into using drugs and alcohol in middle school.” In high school, things got worse, and Perry found herself pregnant at 18 by a man who was in and out of jail. Perry worked to turn her life around, went to college and earned a bachelor’s degree. Still, she found herself in her late 20s with no real career.

She remembers thinking, “I want to do something in my life that has meaning.” She investigated different master’s programs, and “school counseling kept standing out to me.” Familiar with DePaul because two of her siblings were alumni, Perry gravitated to COE’s counseling program. After graduation, she quickly found work in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system, first at Walsh Elementary in Pilsen and then at Rogers Elementary in Rogers Park.

When Perry became the school counselor at CPS’s Lawndale Community Academy on the Near West Side, she thanked her lucky stars for those previous experiences. At the time, the K–8 school had a Level 3 rating, the lowest in the system. Although Perry had been happy working at Rogers, one of CPS’s highest-performing schools, she says, “There was something inside of me that said, ‘I need to go do this.’”

Perry knew the dynamics of Lawndale Community Academy were far different from multicultural Rogers—Lawndale’s students are 98 percent African American, the faculty and administration are majority African American, and she is white. “I didn’t come in with this idea that I’m going to be the ‘white savior,’” she explains. “The strength is in the community and in the school. I don’t need to do anything but ask people—students are actually the best people to ask—what needs to be done.” Her ability to adopt a servant-mindedness helped her gain the confidence of the community.

“There was something inside of me that said, ‘I need to go do this.’”

Kirsten Perry (MEd ’11)
“Aligning myself to a mission and vision that really meant something to me was very, very important. DePaul could name that in a way that I found really profound.”

Brian Coleman (MEd ’14)
with students about their gender and sexual identities a life-changing experience that made him rethink his career goals.

“I found myself at an educational professional crossroads where aligning myself to a mission and vision that really meant something to me was very, very important. DePaul could name that in a way that I found really profound,” Coleman recalls.

Jones enrolls students from across Chicago, creating a highly diverse student population—racially, ethnically and socioeconomically. Coleman outlines the challenges the students face: “Many were one of [the top students], if not the top student, in their eighth-grade class, and now they come into a high school with a lot of students from a lot of different areas, a lot of different backgrounds, who were also the top students at their schools.” To ease the transition, Coleman co-leads a mentorship program at the school that operates not only during the year, but also over the summer to orient incoming freshmen to the climate and culture at Jones.

The counseling curriculum offers every student at least three 90-minute lessons with a counselor during the school year on subjects such as financial aid, the application process, course scheduling, academic support, time management, study strategies and social-emotional learning. Parents and guardians are informed about what was covered so that they can be involved in the learning process.

Coleman has also been instrumental in moving from a specialist counseling model by grade level to a generalist model “with all of the counselors working with all students so that we can sustain a comprehensive, holistic relationship with students and parents all the way through high school.”

“The DePaul Experience

DePaul’s counseling faculty have a passion for helping their students change lives. Ockerman says, “We do that with a strong intentionality around giving them skill sets, including leadership, advocacy, collaboration and learning how to use data to effect change. We talk a lot about having courageous conversations to help disrupt a pattern that has produced inequitable outcomes for kids.”

“We learned how to fix complicated problems and help raise up a generation of students.”

Josh Stober (MEd ’19)

Josh Stober (MEd ’19), who now works as district college and career counselor for Community Unit School District 300 in Algonquin, Ill., says, “We learned how to fix complicated problems and help raise up a generation of students, whether they are at a low-resource urban school or at an incredibly well-resourced, suburban private school. They all need support and help.”

Megan Buoniconti, who has completed two years of the program, says “At DePaul, I really feel a strong sense of community. Vincentian values are definitely something that are not only talked about in class, but you can see across DePaul’s campus as well.”

“DePaul taught me how data supports the work of counselors, even designing a comprehensive counseling program from scratch,” Coleman remembers. “An amazing course in multicultural competency really helped me understand myself in context as a black man, a cisgender man, as a gay man. I always knew I wanted to work with a diverse student population, and I felt that course really gave me an insight on how to do that work in an intentional and meaningful way.”

“We don’t prepare mediocre school counselors here,” Ockerman asserts. “We believe that school counselors can change the world, and if you don’t believe that, you need to find another program. We will teach you and give you the skills and experiences so that you are well prepared to go into the world and hopefully set it on fire.”

Recent graduate Josh Stober talks more about the counseling program at depaulmagazine.com.

Counseling Kudos

• Kirsten Perry (MEd ’11) and Brian Coleman (MEd ’14)—2018 and 2019 National School Counselor of the Year, respectively

• Kathleen Styzek (MEd ’18)—2018 Illinois Elementary School Counselor of the Year

• Alicia Funes (MEd ’15)—2019 College Board Counselor Recognition Program exemplary school counselor

• Beth S. Kainic (MEd ’07)—one of nine recipients of the 2019 Counselors That Change Lives Awards

• Dustin Seemann (MEd ’15)—twice a semifinalist for National School Counselor of the Year

• Associate Professor Melissa Ockerman—2012 and 2018 Illinois School Counselor Educator of the Year

• Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs accreditation in 2019

• Largest counseling program in Illinois with the most master’s degrees in counseling conferred across all minority groups

• Largest provider of internships for Chicago Public Schools

• 90 percent employment of students upon graduation in a variety of counseling positions

• One of only 24 companion schools in the Education Trust’s National Center for Transforming School Counseling Initiative