

Leading Women to STEM Careers



Once they hit middle school, girls often move away from STEM-related careers. School counselors can help middle and high school girls keep all their options open.

Careers in STEM exert significant influence and power, shaping nearly every aspect of our lives. Yet, women (diverse in race, ethnicity, class, age, gender identity, abilities, and other historically marginalized identities) are underrepresented in the field. And, even when present, they may find themselves in unwelcoming cultures that impede their participation as innovators, leaders, and researchers who are shaping the future.

Most college students majoring in STEM make that choice during high school. Unfortunately, despite the increasing demand for professionals in the field, some young women don't automatically think of STEM careers when planning their future.

Students who lack a strong STEM role model in their life or who haven't had access to adequate STEM learning may not automatically consider a career in STEM. Further, self-doubt can arise for students who don't have confidence in themselves and their abilities. Questions — “Can I be competitive with peers in this major? Is there a place for me in this field?” — may loom in their minds. Such students' paths can be influenced by the help of a school counselor.

A school counselor's role

“As part of their commitment to equity, school counselors work to raise awareness and encourage students to explore all avenues for their future careers, not just those that are stereotypically gendered,” said Jill Cook, executive director of the American School Counselor Association.



School counselors actively advocate for equitable policies, procedures, practices, and attitudes, embracing equity in opportunities and access to resources for all students and colleagues. School counselors are vigilant in countering the harmful effects of stereotypical gender-role expectations. “Persistent, subconscious images of male mathematicians and scientists that start at the earliest ages may be one explanation why girls enter STEM fields at dramatically lower rates than boys,” according to Edutopia.

School counselors are essential allies for bridging this gap in information and experience, providing career-shaping information to students and their families. School counselors provide and advocate for individual students’ college and career awareness, exploration, and postsecondary planning and decision making, which support the students’ right to choose from the wide array of options when students complete high school. By focusing on a growth mindset, school counselors help students understand that, “their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work,” according to Carol Dweck, author of the book *Mindset*. “Brains and talent are just the starting point.”



But school counselors can also influence school leaders on which courses to offer and evaluate how the courses match the existing experiences of students. “I set about identifying the changes I could influence. It became evident that the overarching themes were equity and access to classes that could have an impact on postsecondary plans. By looking at class enrollment data, we made intentional changes to the master schedule, dropped outdated prerequisites, and monitored for our implicit bias,” said Jennifer Correnti, a school counseling director in New Jersey.

Addressing comfort

School counselors can also help teachers address unconscious bias in the physical environment of classrooms. “The physical environment conveys messages to students about who belongs in computing and who doesn’t. Rooms decorated with images and objects associated with geeky stereotypes are typically less appealing and welcoming to women than are gender-neutral rooms. Knowing this, you can craft an environment that makes a broad range of people feel welcome,” according to The National Center for Women in Technology.

When school counselors have training and expertise in creating inclusive spaces where all students feel welcome, comfortable, and supported, they can help other educators improve their physical spaces.

By actively advocating for equitable policies, procedures, practices, and attitudes and embracing equity in opportunities and access to resources for all students and colleagues, school counselors can help young women interested in STEM careers reach their goals.



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