

Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2006-07 Edition

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Counselors

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Significant Points

- School counselors must be certified, and other counselors must be licensed to practice in all but two States. A master's degree generally is needed to become a licensed counselor.
- Job opportunities for counselors should be very good because job openings are expected to exceed the number of graduates from counseling programs.
- State and local governments employ about 4 in 10 counselors, and the health services industry employs most of the others.

Nature of the Work



Counselors assist people with personal, family, educational, mental health, and career decisions and problems. Their duties depend on the individuals they serve and on the settings in which they work.

Educational, vocational, and school counselors provide individuals and groups with career and educational counseling. In school settings—elementary through postsecondary—they usually are called school counselors, and they work with students, including those with academic and social development problems and those with special needs. They advocate for students and work with other individuals and organizations to promote the academic, career, personal, and social development of children and youths. School counselors help students evaluate their abilities, interests, talents, and personality characteristics in order to develop realistic academic and career goals. Counselors use interviews, counseling sessions, interest and aptitude assessment tests, and other methods to evaluate and advise students. They also operate career information centers and career education programs. High school counselors advise students regarding college majors, admission requirements, entrance exams, financial aid, trade or technical schools, and apprenticeship programs. They help students develop job search skills, such as resume writing and interviewing techniques. College career planning and placement counselors assist alumni or students with career development and job-hunting techniques.

Elementary school counselors observe younger children during classroom and play activities and confer with their teachers and parents to evaluate the children's strengths, problems, or special needs. In conjunction with teachers and administrators, they make sure that the curriculum addresses both the academic and the emotional development needs of students. Elementary school counselors do less vocational and academic counseling than do secondary school counselors.

School counselors at all levels help students to understand and deal with social, behavioral, and personal problems. These counselors emphasize preventive and developmental counseling to provide students with the life skills needed to deal with problems before they occur and to enhance students' personal, social, and academic growth. Counselors provide special services, including alcohol and drug prevention programs and conflict resolution classes. They also try to identify cases of domestic abuse and other family problems that can affect a student's development. Counselors interact with students individually, in small groups, or with entire classes. They consult and collaborate with parents, teachers, school administrators, school psychologists, medical professionals, and social workers in order to develop and implement strategies to help students be successful in the education system.

Vocational counselors who provide mainly career counseling outside the school setting are also referred to as *employment counselors* or *career counselors*. Their chief focus is helping individuals with career decisions. Vocational counselors explore and evaluate the client's education, training, work history, interests, skills, and personality traits, and arrange for aptitude and achievement tests to assist the client in making career decisions. They also work with individuals to develop their job-search skills, and they assist clients in locating and applying for jobs. In addition, career counselors provide support to persons experiencing job loss, job stress, or other career transition issues.

Rehabilitation counselors help people deal with the personal, social, and vocational effects of disabilities. They counsel people with disabilities resulting from birth defects, illness or disease, accidents, or the stress of daily life. They evaluate the strengths and limitations of individuals, provide personal and vocational counseling, and arrange for medical care, vocational training, and job placement. Rehabilitation counselors interview both individuals with disabilities and their families, evaluate school and medical reports, and confer and plan with physicians, psychologists, occupational therapists, and employers to determine the capabilities and skills of the individual. Conferring with the client, they develop a rehabilitation program that often includes training to help the person develop job skills. Rehabilitation counselors also work toward increasing the client's capacity to live independently.

Mental health counselors work with individuals, families, and groups to address and treat mental and emotional disorders and to promote optimum mental health. They are trained in a variety of therapeutic techniques used to address a wide range of issues, including depression, addiction and substance abuse, suicidal impulses, stress management, problems with self-esteem, issues associated with aging, job and career concerns, educational decisions, issues related to mental and emotional health, and family, parenting, and marital or other relationship problems. Mental health counselors often work closely with other mental health specialists, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, clinical social workers, psychiatric nurses, and school counselors. (Information on [physicians and surgeons](#), [psychologists](#), [registered nurses](#), and [social workers](#) appears elsewhere in the *Handbook*.)

Substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors help people who have problems with alcohol, drugs, gambling, and eating disorders. They counsel individuals who are addicted to drugs, helping them to identify behaviors and problems related to their addiction. They also conduct programs aimed at preventing addictions from occurring in the first place. These counselors hold sessions designed for individuals, families, or groups.

Marriage and family therapists apply principles, methods, and therapeutic techniques to individuals, families, couples, or organizations in order to resolve emotional conflicts. In doing so, they modify people's perceptions and behaviors, enhance communication and understanding among family members, and help to prevent family and individual crises. Marriage and family therapists also may engage in psychotherapy of a nonmedical nature, make appropriate referrals to psychiatric resources, perform research, and teach courses about human development and interpersonal relationships.

Other counseling specialties include gerontological, multicultural, and genetic counseling. A gerontological counselor provides services to elderly persons and their families when they face changing lifestyles as they grow older. A multicultural counselor helps employers adjust to an increasingly diverse workforce. Genetic counselors provide information and support to families who have members with birth defects or genetic disorders and to families who may be at risk for a variety of inherited conditions. These counselors identify families at risk, investigate the problem that is present in the family, interpret information about the disorder, analyze inheritance patterns and risks of recurrence, and review available options with the family.

Working Conditions



Some school counselors work the traditional 9- to 10-month school year with a 2- to 3-month vacation, but increasing numbers, especially those working in middle and high schools, are employed on 11-month or full-year contracts. They usually work the same hours as teachers, but may travel more frequently to attend conferences and conventions. College career planning and placement counselors work long and irregular hours during student recruiting periods.

Rehabilitation counselors usually work a standard 40-hour week. Self-employed counselors and those working in mental health and community agencies, such as substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors, frequently work evenings in order to counsel clients who work during the day. Both mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists also often work flexible hours to accommodate families in crisis or working couples who must have evening or weekend appointments.

Counselors must possess high physical and emotional energy to handle the array of problems that they address. Dealing daily with these problems can cause stress. Although the risk of litigation is relatively low, it is still prudent for counselors in all fields to hold some form of personal liability insurance. Because privacy is essential for confidential and frank discussions with clients, counselors usually have private offices.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement



All States require school counselors to hold a State school counseling certification and to have completed at least some graduate course work; most require the completion of a master's degree. Some States require public school counselors to have both counseling and teaching certificates and to have had some teaching experience before receiving certification. For counselors based outside of schools, 48 States and the District of Columbia have some form of counselor licensure that governs their practice of counseling. Requirements typically include the completion of a master's degree in counseling, the accumulation of 2 years or 3,000 hours of supervised clinical experience beyond the master's degree level, the passage of a State-recognized exam, adherence to ethical codes and standards, and the completion of annual continuing education requirements.

Counselors must be aware of educational and training requirements that are often very detailed and that vary by area and by counseling specialty. Prospective counselors should check with State and local governments, employers, and national voluntary certification organizations in order to determine which requirements apply.

As mentioned, a master's degree is typically required to be licensed as a counselor. A bachelor's degree often qualifies a person to work as a counseling aide, rehabilitation aide, or social service worker. Some States require counselors in public employment to have a master's degree; others accept a bachelor's degree with appropriate counseling courses. Counselor education programs in colleges and universities usually are found in departments of education or psychology. Fields of study include college student affairs, elementary or secondary school counseling, education, gerontological counseling, marriage and family counseling, substance abuse counseling, rehabilitation counseling, agency or community counseling, clinical mental health counseling, counseling psychology, career counseling, and related fields. Courses are grouped into eight core areas: Human growth and development, social and cultural diversity, relationships, group work, career development, assessment, research and program evaluation, and professional identity. In an accredited master's degree program, 48 to 60 semester hours of graduate study, including a period of supervised clinical experience in counseling, are required.

Graduate programs in career, community, gerontological, mental health, school, student affairs, and marriage and family counseling are accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). While completion of a CACREP-accredited program is not necessary to become a counselor, it makes it easier to fulfill the requirements for State licensing. Another organization, the Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE), accredits graduate programs in rehabilitation counseling. Accredited master's degree programs include a minimum of 2 years of full-time study, including 600 hours of supervised clinical internship experience.

Some counselors elect to be nationally certified by the National Board for Certified Counselors, Inc. (NBCC), which grants the general practice credential "National Certified Counselor." To be certified, a counselor must hold a master's degree with a concentration in counseling from a regionally accredited college or university; must have at least 2 years of supervised field experience in a counseling setting (graduates from counselor education programs accredited by CACREP are exempted); must provide two professional endorsements, one of which must be from a recent supervisor; and must have a passing score on the NBCC's National Counselor Examination for Licensure and Certification (NCE). This national certification is voluntary and is distinct from State licensing. However, in some States, those who pass the national exam are

exempted from taking a State certification exam. NBCC also offers specialty certifications in school, clinical mental health, and addiction counseling, which supplement the national certified counselor designation. These specialty certifications require passage of a supplemental exam. To maintain their certification, counselors retake and pass the NCE or complete 100 credit hours of acceptable continuing education every 5 years.

Another organization, the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification, offers voluntary national certification for rehabilitation counselors. Some employers may require rehabilitation counselors to be nationally certified. To become certified, rehabilitation counselors usually must graduate from an accredited educational program, complete an internship, and pass a written examination. (Certification requirements vary according to an applicant's educational history. Employment experience, for example, is required for those with a counseling degree in a specialty other than rehabilitation.) After meeting these requirements, candidates are designated "Certified Rehabilitation Counselors." To maintain their certification, counselors must successfully retake the certification exam or complete 100 credit hours of acceptable continuing education every 5 years.

Other counseling organizations also offer certification in particular counseling specialties. Usually, becoming certified is voluntary, but having certification may enhance one's job prospects.

Some employers provide training for newly hired counselors. Others may offer time off or provide help with tuition if it is needed to complete a graduate degree. Counselors must participate in graduate studies, workshops, and personal studies to maintain their certificates and licenses.

Persons interested in counseling should have a strong desire to help others and should possess the ability to inspire respect, trust, and confidence. They should be able to work independently or as part of a team. Counselors must follow the code of ethics associated with their respective certifications and licenses.

Prospects for advancement vary by counseling field. School counselors can move to a larger school; become directors or supervisors of counseling, guidance, or pupil personnel services; or, usually with further graduate education, become counselor educators, counseling psychologists, or school administrators. ([Psychologists](#) and [education administrators](#) are covered elsewhere in the *Handbook*.) Some counselors choose to work for a State's department of education. For marriage and family therapists, doctoral education in family therapy emphasizes the training of supervisors, teachers, researchers, and clinicians in the discipline.

Counselors can become supervisors or administrators in their agencies. Some counselors move into research, consulting, or college teaching or go into private or group practice.

Employment



Counselors held about 601,000 jobs in 2004. Employment was distributed among the counseling specialties as follows:

Educational, vocational, and school counselors	248,000
Rehabilitation counselors	131,000
Mental health counselors	96,000
Substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors	76,000
Marriage and family therapists	24,000
Counselors, all other	25,000

Educational, vocational, and school counselors work primarily in elementary and secondary schools and colleges and universities. Other types of counselors work in a wide variety of public and private establishments, including healthcare facilities; job training, career development, and vocational rehabilitation centers; social agencies; correctional institutions; and residential care facilities, such as halfway houses for criminal offenders and group homes for children, the elderly, and the disabled. Some substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors work in therapeutic communities where addicts live while undergoing treatment. Counselors also work in organizations engaged in community improvement and social change, drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, and State and local government agencies. A growing number of counselors are self-employed and work in group practices or private practice, due in part to new laws allowing counselors to be paid for their services by insurance companies and to the growing recognition that counselors are well-trained, effective professionals.

Job Outlook



Overall employment of counselors is expected to [grow faster than the average](#) for all occupations through 2014. In addition, numerous job openings will occur as many counselors retire or leave the profession. While job prospects will vary with location and specialization, opportunities generally should be very good because the number of job openings that arise should exceed the number of graduates of counseling programs. Rehabilitation counselors and substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors, in particular, should experience excellent prospects.

Employment of school counselors is expected to grow with increases in student enrollments at postsecondary schools and colleges and as more States require elementary schools to employ counselors. Expansion of the responsibilities of school counselors should also lead to increases in their employment. For example, counselors are becoming more involved in crisis and preventive counseling, helping students deal with issues ranging from drug and alcohol abuse to death and suicide. Although schools and governments realize the value of counselors in helping their students to achieve academic success, budget constraints at every school level will dampen job growth of school counselors. However, Federal grants and subsidies may help to offset tight budgets and allow the reduction in student-to-counselor ratios to continue. Job prospects should be more favorable in rural and inner-city schools.

Demand for vocational or career counselors should grow as multiple job and career changes become common for workers and as workers become increasingly aware of the counselors' services. In addition, State and local governments will employ growing numbers of counselors to assist beneficiaries of welfare programs who exhaust their eligibility and must find jobs. Other opportunities for employment counselors will arise in private job-training centers that provide training and other services to laid-off workers and others seeking to acquire new skills or new careers.

Demand is expected to be strong for substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors because drug offenders are increasingly being sent to treatment programs rather than to jail. Mental health counselors will be needed to staff statewide networks that are being established to improve services for children and adolescents with serious emotional disturbances and for their family members. Under managed care systems, insurance companies are increasingly providing for reimbursement of counselors as a less costly alternative to psychiatrists and psychologists.

The number of people who will need rehabilitation counseling is expected to grow as advances in medical technology allow more people to survive injury or illness and live independently again. In addition, legislation requiring equal employment rights for people with disabilities will spur demand for counselors, who not only help these people make a transition into the workforce but also help companies to comply with the law.

Employment of mental health counselors and marriage and family therapists will grow as more people become comfortable with seeking professional help for a variety of health, personal, and family problems. Employers are also increasingly offering employee assistance programs that provide mental health and alcohol and drug abuse counseling. More people are expected to use these services as society focuses on ways of developing mental well-being, such as controlling stress associated with job and family responsibilities.

Earnings



Median annual earnings of educational, vocational, and school counselors in May 2004 were \$45,570. The middle 50 percent earned between \$34,530 and \$58,400. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$26,260, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$72,390. School counselors can earn additional income working summers in the school system or in other jobs. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest numbers of educational, vocational, and school counselors in 2004 were as follows:

Elementary and secondary schools	\$51,160
Junior colleges	45,730
Colleges, universities, and professional schools	39,110
Individual and family services	30,240
Vocational rehabilitation services	27,800

Median annual earnings of substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors in May 2004 were \$32,130. The middle 50 percent earned between \$25,840 and \$40,130. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$21,060, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$49,600.

Median annual earnings of mental health counselors in May 2004 were \$32,960. The middle 50 percent earned between \$25,660 and \$43,370. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$20,880, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$55,810.

Median annual earnings of rehabilitation counselors in May 2004 were \$27,870. The middle 50 percent earned between \$22,110 and \$36,120. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$18,560, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$48,130.

For substance abuse, mental health, and rehabilitation counselors, government employers generally pay the highest wages, followed by hospitals and social service agencies. Residential care facilities often pay the lowest wages.

Median annual earnings of marriage and family therapists in May 2004 were \$38,980. The middle 50 percent earned between \$30,260 and \$49,990. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$23,460, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$65,080. Median annual earnings in May 2004 were \$33,620 in individual and family social services, the industry employing the largest number of marriage and family therapists.

Self-employed counselors who have well-established practices, as well as counselors employed in group practices, usually have the highest earnings.

Related Occupations



Counselors help people evaluate their interests, abilities, and disabilities and deal with personal, social, academic, and career problems. Others who help people in similar ways include teachers, [social and human service assistants](#), [social workers](#), [psychologists](#), [physicians and surgeons](#), [registered nurses](#), members of the clergy, [occupational therapists](#), and [human resources, training, and labor relations managers and specialists](#).

Sources of Additional Information



Disclaimer:

Links to non-BLS Internet sites are provided for your convenience and do not constitute an endorsement.

For general information about counseling, as well as information on specialties such as college, mental health, rehabilitation, multicultural, career, marriage and family, and gerontological counseling, contact:

- American Counseling Association, 5999 Stevenson Ave., Alexandria, VA 22304-3300.
Internet: <http://www.counseling.org>

For information on school counselors, contact:

- American School Counselors Association, 1101 King St., Suite 625, Alexandria, VA 22314. Internet: <http://www.schoolcounselor.org>

For information on accredited counseling and related training programs, contact:

- Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, American Counseling Association, 5999 Stevenson Ave., 4th floor, Alexandria, VA 22304. Internet: <http://www.cacrep.org>

For information on national certification requirements for counselors, contact:

- National Board for Certified Counselors, Inc., 3 Terrace Way, Suite D, Greensboro, NC 27403-3660. Internet: <http://www.nbcc.org>

State departments of education can supply information on those colleges and universities offering guidance and counseling training that meets State certification and licensure requirements.

State employment service offices have information about job opportunities and entrance requirements for counselors.

OOH ONET Codes



21-1011.00, 21-1012.00, 21-1013.00, 21-1014.00, 21-1015.00, 21-1019.99

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