
Counselors

(O*NET 21-1011.00, 21-1012.00, 21-1013.00, 21-1014.00, 21-1015.00, 21-1019.99)

Significant Points

- A master's degree generally is required 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.
- The health care and social assistance industry employs about 47 percent of counselors, and state and local government employ about 11 percent.

Nature of the Work

Counselors assist people with personal, family, educational, mental health, and career problems. Their duties vary greatly depending on their occupational specialty, which is determined by the setting in which they work and the population they serve.

Educational, vocational, and school counselors provide individuals and groups with career and educational counseling. School counselors assist students of all levels, from elementary school to postsecondary education. They advocate for students and work with other individuals and organizations to promote the academic, career, personal, and social development of children and youth. School counselors help students evaluate their abilities, interests, talents, and personalities 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. Often, counselors work with students who have academic and social development problems or other special needs.

Elementary school counselors observe 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 developmental needs of students. Elementary school counselors do less vocational and academic counseling than high school counselors.

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.

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 worsen 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 as an entire class. They consult and collaborate with parents, teachers, school administrators, school psychologists, medical professionals, and social workers to develop and implement strategies to help students succeed.

Vocational counselors, also called *employment or career counselors*, provide mainly career counseling outside the school setting. 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. They may arrange for aptitude and achievement tests to help the client make career decisions. They also work with individuals to develop their job-search skills and assist clients in locating and applying for jobs. In addition, career counselors provide support to people 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 other causes. 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 with physicians, psychologists, occupational therapists, and employers to determine the capabilities and skills of the individual. They develop rehabilitation programs by conferring with clients; these programs often include training to help clients 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 mental health. They are trained in a variety of therapeutic techniques used to address issues, including depression, addiction and substance abuse, suicidal impulses, stress, problems with self-esteem, and grief. They also help with job and career concerns, educational decisions, issues related to mental and emotional health, and family, parenting, 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 psychologists, registered nurses, social workers and physicians and surgeons, which includes psychiatrists, 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. Counseling can be done on an individual basis, but is frequently done in a group setting. These counselors will often also work with family members who are affected by the addictions of their loved ones. Counselors also conduct programs aimed at preventing addictions.

Marriage and family therapists apply family systems theory, principals and techniques to individuals, families, and couples to resolve emotional conflicts. In doing so, they modify people's perceptions and behaviors, enhance communication and



Counselors often work with clients one-on-one to assist with personal, family, educational, and career problems and decisions.

understanding among family members, and help to prevent family and individual crises. Marriage and family therapists also may engage in psychotherapy of a non-medical 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 people and their families as they face changing lifestyles. 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, interpret information about the disorder, analyze inheritance patterns and risks of recurrence, and review available options with the family.

Work environment. Work environment can vary greatly depending on occupational specialty. School counselors work predominantly in schools, where they usually have an office but also may work in classrooms. Other counselors may work in a private practice, community health organization, or hospital. Many counselors work in an office where they see clients throughout the day. Because privacy is essential for confidential and frank discussions with clients, counselors usually have private offices.

The work schedules of counselors depend on occupational specialty and work setting. Some school counselors work the traditional 9- to 10-month school year with a 2- to 3-month vacation, but increasing numbers, are employed on 11-month or full-year contracts, particularly those working in middle and high schools. They usually work the same hours as teachers, but they 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 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.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Education and training requirements for counselors are often very detailed and vary by State and specialty. Prospective counselors should check with State and local governments, employers, and national voluntary certification organizations to determine which requirements apply.

Education and training. Education requirements vary based on occupational specialty and State licensure and certification requirements. A master's degree is usually required to be licensed as a counselor. 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 are often 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 therapy, substance abuse counseling, rehabilitation counseling, agency or community counseling, clinical mental health counseling, career counseling, and related fields. Courses are often 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.

Some employers provide training for newly hired counselors. Others may offer time off or tuition assistance to complete a graduate degree. Often counselors must participate in graduate studies, workshops, and personal studies to maintain their certificates and licenses.

Licensure. Licensure requirements differ greatly by State, occupational specialty, and work setting. Many 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 school counselors to be licensed, which generally requires continuing education credits. Some States require public school counselors to have both counseling and teaching certificates and to have had some teaching experience.

For counselors based outside of schools, 49 States and the District of Columbia have some form of counselor licensure that governs the 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. However, counselors working in certain settings or in a particular specialty may face different licensure requirements. For example, a career counselor working in private practice may need a license, but a counselor working for a college career center may not. In addition, substance abuse and behavior disorder counselors are generally governed by a different State agency or board than other counselors. The criteria for

their licensure vary greatly and in some cases, these counselors may only need a high school diploma and certification. Those interested in entering the field must research State and specialty requirements to determine what qualifications they must have.

Other qualifications. People interested in counseling should have a strong desire to help others and should be able 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.

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.

Certification and advancement. Some counselors elect to be certified by the National Board for Certified Counselors, Inc., which grants a general practice credential of 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; have at least 2 years of supervised field experience in a counseling setting (graduates from counselor education programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs are exempted); provide two professional endorsements, one of which must be from a recent supervisor; and must have a passing score on the board's examination. 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. The board also offers specialty certifications in school, clinical mental health, and addiction counseling. These specialty certifications require passage of a supplemental exam. To maintain their certifications, counselors retake and pass the exam or complete 100 credit hours of acceptable continuing education every 5 years.

The Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification offers voluntary national certification for rehabilitation counselors. Many State and local governments and other employers require rehabilitation counselors to have this certification. To become certified, rehabilitation counselors usually must graduate from an accredited educational program, complete an internship, and pass a written examination. Certification requirements vary, however, 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. 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 job prospects.

Prospects for advancement vary by counseling field. School counselors can 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.

Some marriage and family therapists, especially those with doctorates in family therapy, become supervisors, teachers, researchers, or advanced clinicians in the discipline. Counselors may also become supervisors or administrators in their agencies. Some counselors move into research, consulting, or college teaching or go into private or group practice. Some may choose to pursue a doctoral degree to improve their chances for advancement.

Employment

Counselors held about 635,000 jobs in 2006. Employment was distributed among the counseling specialties as follows:

Educational, vocational, and school counselors.....	260,000
Rehabilitation counselors.....	141,000
Mental health counselors	100,000
Substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors	83,000
Marriage and family therapists	25,000
Counselors, all other	27,000

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 people with addictions 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

Employment for counselors is expected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations through 2016. However, job growth will vary by location and occupational specialty. Job prospects should be good due to growth and the need to replace people leaving the field.

Employment change. Overall employment of counselors is expected to increase by 21 percent between 2006 and 2016, which is much faster than the average for all occupations. However, growth is expected to vary by specialty.

Employment of substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors is expected to grow 34 percent, which is much faster than the average for all occupations. As society becomes more knowledgeable about addiction, it is increasingly common for people to seek treatment. Furthermore, drug offenders are increasingly being sent to treatment programs rather than jail.

Employment for educational, vocational and school counselors is expected to grow 13 percent, which is about as fast as the average for all occupations. Demand for vocational or career

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2006	Projected employment, 2016	Change, 2006-2016	
				Number	Percent
Counselors.....	21-1010	635,000	771,000	136,000	21
Substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors.....	21-1011	83,000	112,000	29,000	34
Educational, vocational, and school counselors.....	21-1012	260,000	292,000	33,000	13
Marriage and family therapists	21-1013	25,000	32,000	7,400	30
Mental health counselors	21-1014	100,000	130,000	30,000	30
Rehabilitation counselors.....	21-1015	141,000	173,000	32,000	23
Counselors, all other	21-1019	27,000	32,000	4,500	17

NOTE: Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

counselors should grow as multiple job and career changes become common and as workers become increasingly aware of counseling 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 of 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 careers. Demand for school counselors may increase due in large part to 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. Federal grants and subsidies may help to offset tight budgets and allow the reduction in student-to-counselor ratios to continue.

Employment of mental health counselors is expected to grow by 30 percent, which is much faster than the average for all occupations. 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 families. Under managed care systems, insurance companies are increasingly providing for reimbursement of counselors as a less costly alternative to psychiatrists and psychologists.

Jobs for rehabilitation counselors are expected to grow by 23 percent, which is much faster than the average for all occupations. 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 to the workforce but also help companies to comply with the law.

Marriage and family therapists will experience growth of 30 percent, which is much faster than the average for all occupations. This is due in part to an increased recognition of the field. It is more common for people to seek help for their marital and family problems than it was in the past.

Job prospects. Job prospects vary greatly based on the occupational specialty. Prospects for rehabilitation counselors are excellent because many people are leaving the field or retiring. Furthermore, opportunities are very good in substance abuse and behavioral disorder counseling because relatively low wages and long hours make recruiting new entrants difficult. For school counselors, job prospects should be good because many people are leaving the occupation to retire; however, opportunities may be more favorable in rural and urban areas, rather than the suburbs, because it is often difficult to recruit people to these areas.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of wage and salary educational, vocational, and school counselors in May 2006 were \$47,530. The middle 50 percent earned between \$36,120 and \$60,990. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$27,240, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$75,920. 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 were as follows:

Elementary and secondary schools	\$53,750
Junior colleges	48,240
Colleges, universities, and professional schools	41,780
Individual and family services	32,370
Vocational rehabilitation services	31,340

Median annual earnings of wage and salary substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors in May 2006 were \$34,040. The middle 50 percent earned between \$27,330 and \$42,650. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$22,600, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$52,340.

Median annual earnings of wage and salary mental health counselors in May 2006 were \$34,380. The middle 50 percent earned between \$26,780 and \$45,610. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$21,890, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$59,700.

Median annual earnings of wage and salary rehabilitation counselors in May 2006 were \$29,200. The middle 50 percent earned between \$22,980 and \$39,000. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$19,260, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$53,170.

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 wage and salary marriage and family therapists in May 2006 were \$43,210. The middle 50 percent earned between \$32,950 and \$54,150. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$25,280, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$69,050. Median annual earnings were \$36,020 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, occupational therapists, and human resources, training, and labor relations managers and specialists.

Sources of Additional Information

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. 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 mental health counselors, contact:

➤ American Mental Health Counselors Association, 801 N. Fairfax Street, Suite 304, Alexandria, VA 22314.

Internet: <http://www.amhca.org>

For information on marriage and family therapists, contact:

➤ American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 112 South Alfred Street, Alexandria, VA 22314

Internet: <http://www.aamft.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.

Internet: <http://www.nbcc.org>

State departments of education can supply information on 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.