

Spring 2019

Perceptions of Rural High School Professional School Counselors Regarding the Impact of Strategies to Help At-Risk Learners Graduate

Beth Duvall Fleming

Western Kentucky University, bethduvallfleming@gmail.com

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PERCEPTIONS OF RURAL HIGH SCHOOL PROFESSIONAL
SCHOOL COUNSELORS REGARDING THE IMPACT OF
STRATEGIES TO HELP AT-RISK LEARNERS GRADUATE

A Dissertation Presented to
The Faculty of the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky


In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

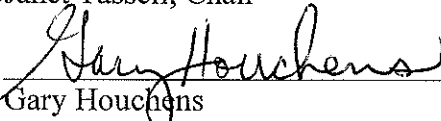
By
Beth Duvall Fleming

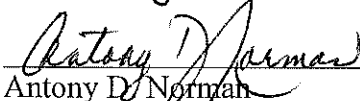
May 2019

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SCHOOL COUNSELORS REGARDING THE IMPACT OF
STRATEGIES TO HELP AT-RISK LEARNERS GRADUATE

Date Recommended 4-8-19


Janet Tassell, Chair


Gary Houchens


Antony D. Norman

 4/23/19
Dean, The Graduate School Date

I dedicate this dissertation to all my kids: the three who call me Mom, the hundreds who stepped through my classrooms as elementary and middle school students, and the thousands of high school students who I have had the privilege to serve as their school counselor. This dream of mine to pursue the doctoral degree seemed so far away; yet, the process has taught me more about educational leadership than I could have imagined. To students who struggle through life having been dealt a set of challenging circumstances, I will continue to advocate for support services for you, as I see your full potential and understand the value of education in your life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could never have completed this dissertation without the loving family, supportive friends, and understanding colleagues. My past and present colleagues saw a potential in me to do more than teach, and for that I am grateful. My husband, Damon Fleming, and children Nolan, Samuel, and Makynlee offered unwavering confidence and support through this process. My parents, Jackie and Germa Duvall, taught me at a young age that hard work is required to be successful in any endeavor and education is the key to unlocking promises of the future. I also thank all who listened to me talk endlessly about my study, as your insights and support are appreciated. I thank God for the servant's heart He bestowed upon me at birth. His guidance and strength to pursue this career as a school counselor and the goal of the doctorate are evident in my heart. Although the journey as a school counselor is often filled with grief, turmoil, and frustration, He has given me the assurance that this life was not meant to be perfect and my role is to share His love, grace, hope, and strength.

The most incredible committee gave me grace when my family expanded, and I had the need to be a mom instead of a student. Their professionalism, confidence, insight, and unconditional support when the time was right for me to complete the dissertation motivated me to finish.

I would also like to thank the participants in this study, and all school counselors who work each day to provide the support services students need. Without you, school counselors, education would not be as successful for some students and outcomes would be less positive.

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PERCEPTIONS OF RURAL HIGH SCHOOL PROFESSIONAL
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STRATEGIES TO HELP AT-RISK LEARNERS GRADUATE

Beth Fleming

May 2019

144 Pages

Directed by: Janet Tassell, Gary Houchens, and Antony D. Norman

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Western Kentucky University

The purpose of this research was to study the perceptions of school counselors regarding the impact of the school counseling program, interventions, and other strategies to help at-risk learners persist to graduate. A qualitative research design employing an interpretive phenomenological analysis methodology was used. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed the respondents to share insights into the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of their individual experiences as school counselors. The results suggest students with various risk factors choose not to persist to graduate, transferring to homeschool or withdrawing from school as a dropout. Academic deficiency, severe misbehavior, poor attendance, and social challenges were found to impact persistence to graduation. Educators must strategically develop programs, policies, and actions to promote persistence to graduation. School counselors play an integral role in the academic, social, and career development of students, serving in a position to identify students who are not successful in school and provide an array of support services to strengthen students' desire to remain in school.

CHAPTER I: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Business and industry continue to establish high standards for employment. Possession of a high school diploma is required for most jobs, and individuals without a high school diploma are continually not hired for certain positions. The national dropout rate is an ongoing issue and limits the application pool for many careers. As the pool of dropouts expands, employment is limited because the labor force today requires increased literacy, technology skills, and the ability to be a lifelong learner. According to the U.S. Department of Education (USED), the nation had a 7% dropout rate for the year 2013 (USED, 2015). Dropping out of school greatly impacts an individual who does not attain a high school diploma and has an even broader impact on society (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006). There are many social, economic, and political costs related to dropping out of high school; many individuals without a high school diploma consume tax dollars through welfare and other social programs throughout their lifetime (Bost, 2007). Additionally, individuals without a high school diploma face a severe decrease in possible lifetime earnings. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2006), individuals without a high school diploma make an average of nearly \$10,000 less than graduates of high school. College graduates with a bachelor's degree earn an average of \$1 million more throughout their lifetime than individuals without a high school diploma, making the decision to leave high school before graduating a "million dollar mistake" (Amos, 2008, p. 11).

Background of the Problem

Extensive literature is available detailing the problem of dropping out of high school and strategies to address the issue. For decades, educators have sought to increase high school graduation rates. Most school districts focus on persistence to graduation, seeking solutions that will help keep students in school. Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act in 2001, commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), further raised awareness of high school dropout and graduation rates, as NCLB required districts to prepare and disseminate local report cards annually that included information about students' performance on state assessments and graduation rates for secondary school students. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law December 2015; as President Barack Obama proclaimed, "With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamentally American ideal—that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will" (ESSA, 2015). The message to stay in school is one that all students hear regularly, yet many students choose to quit school.

The obvious primary role of high school educators is to educate students. Students must meet coursework requirements for high school graduation. In Kentucky, high school personnel are supposed to ensure students meet the benchmarks of college and career readiness based on the state's accountability model. The No Child Left Behind Act provided federal support and sanctions for schools not meeting academic targets for student learning as a whole or students in subgroups such as minority, special needs, or low-income students. In December 2015, the Senate voted to end the No Child Left Behind Act and place educational control and policy back in the hands of states.

Regardless, educational reform will need to continue to be innovative as educators seek diverse ways to reach students.

An abundance of effective schools research exists; however, educational leaders must glean strategies applicable to their specific student population and culture in order to promote high school graduation for students. Much of the effective schools research has a strong focus on teacher-student interaction, as relationships are considered to be a strong key to effective student learning. Sergiovanni (2000) alleged

There is a growing consensus that whatever else is done schools must also become places where it is easier for students and teachers to know one another well and for students to connect to the school and its purposes. Schools in other words must be caring and learning communities (p. 158).

The Problem Defined

High school completion and dropout rates have an evident impact on society, influencing the local, state, and national economy. Dropout statistics reveal that over 500,000 students nationwide leave high schools each year, with 607,000 public high school students dropping out during the 2008-09 school year (USED, 2009). Individuals without a high school diploma are more likely to be unemployed, earn less salary, receive public assistance, and be incarcerated (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). The percentage of dropouts among 16- to 24-year-olds is known as the status dropout rate and has significantly decreased over the past 20 years, from 11% in 1993 to 7% in 2013 (USED, 2015). Individuals without a high school diploma do not typically find high paying employment, have reduced earnings in their lifetime, and have less opportunity for higher

education (Patterson, Hale, & Stressman, 2007). Morrow (as cited in Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998) described some different ways dropouts can be defined:

1. “pushouts:” undesirable students actively forced out of school by school personnel;
2. “disaffiliated:” students who lack a bond to school and school personnel and desire to leave school;
3. “educational mortalities:” students incapable of meeting the rigorous demands of school, sometimes having a disability;
4. “capable dropouts:” students who possess the skills to graduate but are not committed to the demands and value of graduation; and
5. “stopouts:” students who dropout and then return within a year. (p. 153)

The term *at-risk* identifies a variety of students, the majority of whom come from a low socioeconomic situation, a minority group, or both. For the purpose of this study, at-risk refers to students “at risk” of not graduating from high school. Education today focuses heavily on school accountability. Barriers exist for students and families of low socioeconomic status, such as limited access to resources including technology and the Internet. Inadequate parental supervision and financial resources become barriers for students as they strive to do well in school. The achievement gap grows, even though educators continually work to address student needs and to find strategies that effectively target at-risk students. Schools have elevated academic standards for every student regardless of background and resources. For all these and other reasons, educators search for effective intervention strategies to implement in schools and support students who are at risk. Several issues highlight gaps in the literature.

A Kentucky Context

Kentucky has been a forerunner in educational reform, beginning with the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA, HB 94), which altered the financing of education, curriculum, and school governance. KERA strongly focused on equality of education, achievement, finance, and opportunity. The Kentucky No Pass/No Drive law (HB 32) was implemented in August 2007, requiring all 16- and 17- year-old students to pass at least two thirds of their classes and have fewer than 10 unexcused absences each semester in order to be eligible to hold a driver's permit or license. Kentucky Senate Bill 1 was passed in 2007, implementing Kentucky's Unbridled Learning assessment system designed to ensure all Kentucky students reach their full academic potential and graduate from high school ready for college and careers. Recently, Kentucky's Senate Bill 97 raised the compulsory attendance age to 18 effective July 1, 2015. Kentucky's four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) for the 2013-14 school year was 87.5%, which was higher than the national average of 82.3 (USED, 2015). Because of these unique policy mandates, more research is needed to understand how these issues affect persistence to graduation in Kentucky.

Counseling At-Risk Students

Prior research consistently has identified the following student demographic factors as indicators of risk for dropping out of high school: single-parent family, low annual family income, parents without high school diplomas, having a sibling who dropped out, and limited English proficiency (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). When students are at risk due to barriers to learning, development, and teaching, counselors can address interfering risk factors and re-engage students in classroom instruction, focusing

on a range of learning supports available at the school (Adelman & Taylor, 2011).

Counselors can teach coping strategies to students with interfering risk factors such as mental illness, disability, low self-esteem, family struggles, identity struggles, low academic ability, poverty, and social pressures.

Minority students. A large volume of educational research has been conducted to identify student attributes of students who choose to leave high school. Minority dropout rates are typically higher than non-minority student dropout rates, so much research has been devoted to why minority students drop out of school. Minority students—especially African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American—have much higher dropout rates than non-minority students (USED, 2009). Studies of inner-city dropout epidemics characterize student dropouts and offer suggestions and strategies for keeping students in school. After much research regarding the impact of school guidance programs on students, Sink (2005) contended amassing an array of varied studies would further provide evidence around the impact of guidance programs on these minority students.

Low-achieving students. Some students struggle academically throughout their school experiences. Academic factors have been found to be predictors of student dropout (Battin-Pearson & Newcomb, 2000). Low achievement in school and being retained in school have been identified as student academic risk factors of dropout (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Low-achieving students may lack basic skills or lack motivation to fully engage in school. Some low achieving students exhibit low performance over a long period of time, making low grades, failing classes, and scoring low on standardized tests over a period of time.

Students with disabilities. Wilkins and Huckabee (2014) conducted a review of the literature published between 2004 and 2013 and found students with disabilities have much higher dropout rates, and, thus worse adult outcomes than nondisabled students, with a 75% graduation rate for all students in general and a 50% graduation rate for special education students. Dropout interventions for students with disabilities were categorized into three areas: mentoring, specific targeted interventions related to individual disability needs, and classroom setting options, with the authors attesting more research is needed in these areas.

Counseling Interventions

Professional school counselors have the training and skills needed to implement a variety of student services and interventions in the high school setting.

School counselors help students become more able learners, they assist parents in their supportive roles, and they enable teachers to provide beneficial instruction for all children. In sum, everything a school counselor does, every service rendered, aims at helping students, parents, and teachers in the process of human development and learning. (Schmidt, 2004, p. xxiii)

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2005) National Model recommends school counselors use developmentally-based interventions to assist students with academic, career, and personal/social issues and provides a helpful framework for delivering these services. Solution-focused brief therapy (SFBT) appears to be effective and efficient with students experiencing difficulties, as focusing on the student's strengths and what is working promotes positive outcomes (Bond, Woods, Humphrey, Symes, & Green, 2013). Group counseling for students who are lacking a

sense of connection and purpose can foster a sense of belonging and connection (Skudrzyk et al., 2009). School counselors also play a vital role in the implementation of a transition plan by involving families in the transition process. Following an analysis of counseling interventions, Whiston, Tai, Rahardja, and Eder (2011) highlighted the need for additional research that addresses what works, with what students, and under what circumstances.

Counselors and School Culture

A positive school culture leads to increased student achievement (Hoy, Smith, & Sweetland, 2003; Peterson & Skiba, 2001). Counselors, administrators, and teachers at effective schools collaboratively work to “bridge the academic and social elements” of education, creating a culture of personalization including looping, strong behavior management systems, and data-rich environments (Rutledge & Cannata, 2015). A school counselor’s specialized training and high level of inter- and intra-personal awareness enables them to facilitate caring environments in the school and community amongst all stakeholders (Hayes & Paisley, 2002). A school counselor is in a position to foster a positive, caring, and cohesive school culture. Research supports the importance of a positive school culture and climate in promoting academic achievement, school safety, dropout prevention, and well-being; yet, this larger sense of professional school counselors and the school environment has been insufficiently researched.

Purpose of the Study

This study brings together the issues described in the Problem Defined. First, starting with KERA in 1990 and continuing to the present, Kentucky has put in place numerous progressive policies addressing the dropout rate; research addressing these

mandates is needed. Second, there is need to examine professional school counselors' perceived implementation of strategies to promote graduation of all students, specifically different types of students at risk of dropping out of school. Third, counselors have school programs and strategies to improve the educational outcomes of at-risk students, but studies to address their effectiveness are needed. Fourth, the phenomenon of dropping out of high school appears to be impacted by numerous complex factors and is a culmination of a lengthy process of disengagement from school. The larger school culture is a key element in these students' disaffection, but research on counseling typically is targeted to individuals rather than this broader school environment. Research-based targeted interventions at the precise time could result in more students finding success in school and persisting to graduation.

Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study is to address possible influences on students' decisions to drop out of high school, specifically the role of professional school counselors in dropout prevention. The research design utilizes qualitative semi-structured interviews framed by an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). The population includes high school counselors in western Kentucky; those interviewed were selected based on purposeful sampling. Data collection included a demographic background questionnaire and individual interviews with the selected counselors. Analysis of the data followed the standard coding procedures within the prism of IPA. Thus, this leads to the central research question of this study: What are the perceptions of professional high school counselors regarding strategies that promote persistence to graduation for at-risk students?

Research Questions

The empirical questions that guide this research are as follow:

What are the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding:

- a. the problem of high school dropouts?
- b. counseling strategies and interventions to help at-risk learners?
- c. their school's implementation of best practices to help at-risk learners?
- d. the role of administrators in strategies to help at-risk learners graduate?
- e. the barriers to implementing strategies to help at-risk learners?

General Methodology

This qualitative study was designed using large public high schools and students in rural Kentucky, a moderate-sized southeastern state in the US. In conducting this study, evidence was collected in various ways to study the school characteristics, culture, climate, curriculum, and other items that may relate to student graduation and may contribute to students' decisions to stay in school. According to Patton (2002), "understanding prevention includes understanding what people think and do as a result of prevention efforts" (p. 167).

This study includes individual interviews in an effort to identify why students at that school who are at risk of dropping out of school persist until graduation. Professional school counselors participated in individual interviews in the school setting, and follow-up interviews were utilized as necessary. The researcher scheduled the interview sessions at the workplace of the participants and conducted face-to-face initial interviews. Data collection and analysis occurred in the traditional qualitative manner of coding; selecting

themes; and identifying categories, patterns, and relationships in the responses (Berg, 2008).

Significance of the Study

As school districts are being held accountable for student graduation rates, educational leaders need to understand the phenomenon of students dropping out of high school and effective strategies to promote completion of high school for all students. Federal education reform efforts hold schools accountable for graduation rates. In addition, Kentucky's system of accountability, "Unbridled Learning," holds Kentucky schools accountable for graduation rates. Kentucky's graduation rate increased from 69.8% in 2002 to 77.6% in 2009, which was higher than the nation's average graduation rate of 75.5% in 2009 (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2012). This study of professional school counselors' perceptions of the dropout problem in Kentucky makes several contributions to the literature in this field.

First, this study enabled the researcher to acquire detailed accounts about individual counselors' approaches to promoting high school completion, giving voice to these educators' understanding of high school dropout and sharing the dropout prevention efforts in their school. The knowledge gained from this study expands the information base regarding high school dropout prevention. The results of this study provide additional knowledge to educational administrators, district leaders, and policymakers as they develop effective intervention strategies for at-risk students.

Second, limited research has described\ professional school counselors' perceptions of high school dropout and dropout prevention. The qualitative method enabled the researcher to acquire these rich data to help bridge the gap in the field

regarding school factors impacting school graduation rates. School counselors operate in the nucleus of the school, have specialized training in the area of intervention, and may have insight regarding dropout that are not being considered.

Third, some of the schools chosen for this study have found success in graduating students despite numerous risk factors that have been identified in the literature. The student population exhibits diversity in terms of socioeconomic background but may not be ethnically diverse. Few studies have focused on the intervention needs of rural students and the efforts of educators who work to ensure students persist to graduate (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Government mandates for schools to maintain high graduation rates emphasize achievement for all students. Research regarding high school dropout has indicated students drop out of school for various reasons and solutions must be multidimensional (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2016). Fully implemented comprehensive school counseling programs with favorable student-to-school counselor ratios are associated with a range of positive student educational and behavioral outcomes (Carey, Harrington, Marin, & Hoffman, 2012). In general, school counseling interventions have a positive effect on students, though more research is needed and not all interventions appear to be equally effective (Whiston et al., 2011). Thus, exploring professional school counselors' perceptions of high school dropout and prevention efforts may clarify the individual process students experience and related interventions.

Limitations of the Study

This study examines dropout prevention efforts and barriers from the perspective of professional school counselors. Several limitations to the research follow. First, the

study does not examine the perspectives of students, parents, community members, teachers, or other school personnel. The study describes the phenomenon of dropping out of high school from the viewpoint of professional school counselors and the interventions aimed at ensuring all students persist to graduation using only one data source.

Additionally, the nature of self-reporting itself is a limitation of this study. The data from this study were collected from interviews with professional school counselors. Some information may have been omitted by the interviewee who was concerned about revealing negative information about their school. Interviewees may have embellished or omitted information that might appear negative regarding themselves or their school. Given the limited amount of research specifically in this area, even findings from a limited population represent important contributions to the field.

Definition of Terms

The terms reviewed in this section are related to the research cited in this study. These terms are commonly used in the field of school counseling.

Alternative School: KRS 160.380(1)(a) - "Alternative Education," a program that exists to meet the needs of students that cannot be addressed in a traditional classroom setting but through the assignment of students to alternative classrooms, centers, or campuses that are designed to remediate academic performance, improve behavior, or provide an enhanced learning experience (Kentucky Department of Education [KDE], 2016).

At-Risk Student: A student who is vulnerable to academic failure or dropping out of school. This term can be used to apply to a student who possesses characteristics or is in circumstances that might jeopardize their academic success, such as homelessness, disability, low test scores, pregnancy, retention, disciplinary problems, and other factors.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): Federally-mandated annual school requirements for student achievement, graduation rate, attendance, safety, and highly qualified teachers.

American School Counselor Association (ASCA): A professional organization whose members are school counselors with unique qualifications and skills to address all students' academic, personal/social, and career development needs (ASCA, 2010). ASCA is a division of the American Counseling Association.

ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs (2003): Standards based blueprint of a developmental, comprehensive, data-driven school counseling program (ASCA, 2004).

Dropout: The National Center for Education Statistics (USED, 2015) defines a high school dropout as one who was enrolled in high school the previous year and is not enrolled the following year who has not graduated from high school and does not meet any of the exclusionary conditions: transfer to another school, temporary absence due to suspension or school-approved illness, or death.

Dropout Prevention: An improvement plan including strategies to have a positive impact on the dropout rate. Effective strategies typically overlap and work together in a comprehensive way

Focus interview: Research technique involving collection of data from a single individual in an uninterrupted, private setting conducive to thinking about and responding to the issues raised (Bailey, 1994).

Graduation Requirements: The set of mandatory coursework, credits, and standardized testing required to complete high school.

High School Dropout: A student who withdraws from high school before graduating.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): The 2002 update of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which increased the level of involvement of the federal government in accountability for education of students. NCLB mandated the narrowing of achievement gap between poor and minority students and their peers, put more focus on educating special education students, and contained provisions to cut Title 1 funding for noncompliant states (Klein, 2015).

Persistence to Graduation Tool: An early warning indicator system for identifying students who might be off track for promotion or graduation by assigning every student a risk value score based on a research-based indicator. This tool can reveal information to educators regarding specific students in need of intervention and support, based on student data from the Infinite Campus student information system used by numerous school districts nationwide (KDE, 2016).

Summary

This chapter began with a discussion of the problems dropping out of high school pose for society and individuals. The goal of educating all students is not being met, as students continue to drop out of high school. When students choose to leave high schools, their futures become more uncertain, and statistics show their overall earning potential drastically decreases. In response to No Child Left Behind, Kentucky has made strides in the area of dropout prevention, mandating interventions for at-risk learners and raising the age of compulsory attendance to 18.

Empirical studies have revealed numerous factors associated with student risk of dropping out of high school, particularly student demographic factors, academic factors, and behavior factors. Extensive literature has profiled characteristics of students who

drop out (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007). The high dropout rate is evidence of the problem of high school dropout and the need for dropout prevention (Wilkins & Huckabee, 2014). Kentucky education reform efforts include interventions to promote persistence to graduation.

Through qualitative methods including individual interviews, this research describes the perspectives of professional school counselors in large rural schools regarding their personal and professional experiences, role in dropout prevention, and details of their efforts to keep students in high school until graduation. To explore the experiences and perceptions of the participants, the data were gleaned through two main sources: a demographic background questionnaire and individual interviews. This study contributes to the literature in the field of education and counseling, as a deficit of research exists in the area of school counselors' perceptions of dropout prevention and their role in intervention. There are essentially no previous studies that have been conducted in Kentucky detailing school counselors' perceptions of strategies to help at-risk learners graduate.

In summary, the purpose of the current study is to explore the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding high school dropouts. Utilizing semi-structured interviews of high school professional school counselors from western Kentucky, the study addresses the central research question: What strategies promote persistence to graduation for at-risk students?

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

For decades, educators have sought to increase high school graduation rates. Most school districts focus on dropout prevention, seeking solutions that will help keep students in school. The message to stay in school is one that all students hear regularly, yet many students choose to quit school. A long history of research has indicated students who do not graduate from high school experience much lower lifetime earnings, as well as much higher rates of unemployment and incarceration, than high school graduates (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013). One study estimated each high school graduate would lead to more than \$200,000 in government savings over that individual's lifetime (Belfield, Levin & Rouse, 2007).

The purpose of this study is to discover the perceptions of high school professional school counselors regarding the high school dropout problem, at-risk factors, and interventions to keep students in school. This study investigates strategies used by professional school counselors to promote graduation for students at risk of dropping out of high school.

High School Dropouts

There has been much in-depth study of who drops out of high school and why. Efforts have been made to profile students with risk factors characteristic of students who drop out of school. Hoyle and Collier (2006) described accounts from the Children's Defense Fund that every nine seconds a student drops out of school. Students drop out of school for various reasons; those who believe school will be instrumental in helping them to reach their personal goals and who value school are more successful. Students who

struggle with school may have a lack of information, psychological problems, negative parental influence, low self-esteem, a poor home or school environment, or an external locus of control (Parrot, 2000). Students who have personal connections to school through a positive culture and climate, extracurricular activities, and commitment to personal goals are more likely to persevere to graduate.

Students Who Drop Out of School

The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) collects, analyzes, and reports data related to education. The NCES (2015) report, *Dropout Rates in the United States—School Year 2013-14*, indicated the national dropout rate was 6.8%. The data showed no measurable differences in dropout rates between males and females but showed differences for race/ethnicity and family income. Students living in low-income families are six times more likely to drop out than those living in high-income families (8.9% as compared to 1.5%, respectively). Black (7.3%) and Hispanic (11.7%) students are more likely to drop out than White students (5.1%) and Asian/Pacific Islander students (1.6%). Descriptive comparisons show gender is not related to dropping out, while socioeconomic status (SES) and academic background were associated with dropping out (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Hubner and Wolfson (2001) reported students from low-income families are 2.4 times more likely than students from middle class families to drop out of school. NCES (USED, 2010) reported 25.5% of high school dropouts in 2009 had low-income families, while 7.9% had high-income families. Pharris-Ciurej, Hirschman, and Willhoft (2012) found students from a low-income background and minority students have much lower graduation rates than students from higher income families. The graduation rate for students in general is 89%, while the

graduation rate for special education students is 50% (USED, 2010). In Kentucky, the graduation rate for the 2013-14 school year was 87.5% for all students, 84% for economically disadvantaged students, and 70.8% for students with disabilities (USED, 2015). Understanding the characteristics of students who do not persist to graduate can be part of the solution to increase the graduation rate.

Factors Contributing to the Dropout Problem

Hammond, Linton, Smink, and Drew (2007) reported that most reasons given for dropping out of school are school related, as 51% of dropouts reported they did not like school and 40% were failing classes. Other factors were reportedly job related, family related, and other related. The literature has reported drug abuse, attendance, behavior problems, illness, disability, lack of parental involvement, high mobility, lack of relevant curriculum, lack of counseling, lack of support, and criminal activity to be some of the factors reportedly contributing to the decision to leave school by individuals who did not graduate (Suh & Suh, 2007). Misbehavior and being held back in school are strongly related to school dropout (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Bridgeland et al. (2006) studied dropouts at 25 locations throughout the US and found one third of the dropouts reporting no one in the school cared about them, and 43% claiming there was no adult at school with whom they could talk about school problems, with boredom cited as the most significant factor in students' decisions to drop out. Educators, however, attribute dropping out to absenteeism and lack of family support (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Balfanz, 2009).

Family factors. Low levels of parent education, single-parent household, and parents not checking homework have a greater relationship to high school dropout rates;

and working more than 20 hours a week also increases the likelihood of students dropping out (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). Residential mobility can be associated with school mobility and can disrupt relationships for students, thus leading to risk factors of dropping out of school (Ream, 2005). Students who attend the same school for long periods are more likely to graduate high school than students who changed schools (Rumberger, 2006). Individual student factors often are risk factors for students.

Retention. Goldschmidt and Wang (1999) found retention is a very important predictor of dropping out, especially for early dropouts. Students who have been held back in school are more likely to drop out early, but older students who remain in the 11th and 12th grade are less likely to drop out (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999). According to Gleason and Dynarski (2002), being retained in the ninth grade is the biggest risk factor of dropping out of high school. Being over-age as a result of retention or enrolling late in school has been found to be a consistent predictor of whether students will graduate but does not establish a causal relationship (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Student achievement. Hernandez (2011) reported students who do not read proficiently by the third grade are four times more likely not to graduate on time. Numerous studies have found academic achievement has a statistically significant effect on the high school dropout problem, and poor grades were found to be a more consistent predictor of dropping out rather than low test scores (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Balfanz et al. (2007) found in a study of over 10,000 Philadelphia students over a few years that 60% of students who dropped out could be identified by one or more of the following indicators in the sixth grade: failing English, failing math, attending school 80% of time or less, and receiving at least one out-of-school suspension.

Rural factors. In a report by Johnson and Strange (2007), Kentucky is listed as critical in the concentrated poverty gauge. The percentage of rural adults with a high school diploma was 74.6% of the lowest level of rural adult educational attainment in the US (Johnson & Strange, 2007).

Truancy. Students with excessive absenteeism are more likely to drop out of high school by the next year (Heck & Mahoe, 2006). Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich (2008) also substantiated this, noting dropouts average missing “three quarters of an academic year” (p. 11) before they reach high school. Research has found truancy correlates with four categories of risk factors: family factors, school factors, economic factors, and student factors. Truancy impacts academic achievement, leading to lower grades, retention, dropping out, expulsion, and other negative factors.

Misbehavior. Graduating from high school requires much determination, commitment, and focus for students; unfortunately, some students engage in behaviors in school and outside of school that increase their risk of leaving school before completion. The research has shown engaging in deviant behaviors, such as school misbehavior, sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, and criminal behavior, increases students’ risk of dropping out of school (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Sweeten (2006) reported being arrested and involved in the court system is a stronger predictor than misbehavior in general. Harlow (2003) reported 75% of prison inmates in the US do not have a high school diploma, while 59% of federal prison inmates do not have a high school diploma. Addressing disruptive classroom behaviors and youth self-concept provides an opportunity for school counselors to promulgate advocacy and social justice in their work

to advance equitable access and success for all students (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007).

Risk-producing conditions. Adelman and Taylor (2011) categorized various “risk-producing conditions that can be barriers to learning” on a spectrum from environmental conditions to individual factors. Neighborhood conditions range from extreme economic deprivation, community disorganization, violence, drugs, crime, and lack of positive youth opportunities. Family factors include poverty, domestic violence, family substance abuse, family mental illness, family problem behavior, abuse, and inadequate childcare. School and peer factors include poor quality school, negative encounters with teachers, negative encounters with peers, and high levels of student disengagement. Individual factors that can be barriers to learning might include medical problems, low birth weight, neurodevelopmental delay, psychophysiological problems, adjustment problems, negative temperament, inadequate nutrition, and inadequate healthcare (Adelman & Taylor, 2011). These factors can be apparent at any given point and impact student learning and engagement.

Dropping out of school is a complex process without a single explanation. The decision to leave high school often is made as a culmination of years of disengagement and academic failure (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Some students decide by the eighth grade they will not persevere to graduation, yet most students who drop out of school do so between Grades 10 and 12 (Lee & Burkham, 2003). Although research has highlighted characteristics of the “typical” dropout, some students who did not graduate did not appear to be at risk of dropping out. Risk factors can point to student characteristics to be

recognized early for intervention, which can be part of the solution to increasing the graduation rate.

Interventions for Dropout Prevention

School improvement involves a holistic approach to school reform, and Comprehensive School Improvement Plans document individual schools' efforts to address the needs of all students. According to the Association for Effective Schools (1996), the seven common attributes referred to as correlates of effective schools include clear school mission, high expectations for success, instructional leadership, opportunity to learn and time on task, safe and orderly environment, positive home-school relations, and frequent monitoring of student progress. Sagor and Cox (2004) defined "at-risk students" as unlikely to graduate on schedule with the skills and self-esteem necessary to have options in work, culture, civic affairs, and relationships. At-risk students pose the most "pressing instructional and behavioral problems for today's teachers" (p. 1). Research has shown indicators such as poor attendance, misbehavior, and course failure as early as middle school can be used to accurately predict a student's likelihood of dropping out of high school (Moore, 2014). Every school faces a myriad of concerns related to improving students' achievement and well-being, including poverty, disability, bullying, misbehavior, disconnected students, nonattendance, dropouts, teen pregnancy, suicide prevention, substance abuse, violence, and learning problems; however, many districts lack sufficient supports to enable such at-risk students to succeed in school and persevere to graduation (Adelman & Taylor, 2011). Based on a qualitative case study of a group of high school students at risk for dropping out but still in high school, Knesting (2008) noted four factors emerged as critical to a student's persistence: listening to

students, communicating caring, the school's role in dropout prevention, and the student's role in dropout prevention. A comprehensive support system addresses factors interfering with learning and engagement, reengaging students who have been disconnected from instruction and “unifying all direct efforts to address factors interfering with learning and teaching” (Adelman & Taylor, 2011, p. 10) and weaving together families, school, and resources.

Compulsory School Attendance

The compulsory school attendance age varies from state to state and ranges from 16 to 18. During the 19th century, statewide policies of compulsory schooling contributed to significant increases in educational attainment (Stephens & Yang, 2014). Furthermore, 63 % of states with graduation rates above the national average have a compulsory school age law of 17 or 18 (Balfanz et al., 2012). Some states, including Tennessee and Kentucky, have linked satisfactory academic progress with driving privileges. The research by Stephens and Yang (2014) did not find increased compulsory schooling age to 17 or 18 years generates increased educational attainment but recommended future research in the area. Evidence suggests increased compulsory school attendance age requirements have a significant negative effect on property and violent crime arrest rates for 16- to 18-year-old individuals, meaning when required to remain enrolled in school, 16- to 18-year olds commit fewer crimes (Anderson, 2014).

School Accountability

The field of education maintains a strong emphasis on “high stakes” (Isaacs, 2003, p. 290) testing to verify and improve student achievement. The NCLB legislation enacted in 2001 required all states to implement accountability systems. Senate Bill 1,

passed in the 2009 session of the Kentucky General Assembly, details Kentucky's Unbridled Learning system of accountability, which includes accountability measures of graduation rate and retention rate. School districts are accountable for subgroup growth and performance; thus, intervention plans must be implemented for students who do not meet proficiency benchmarks. As the pressure for higher standards is evident, schools must monitor student performance consistently and target students who need additional help meeting the standards. At this time there is no uniform measure of high school graduation rate, as various districts and states measure it differently (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Thus, data reported regarding high school dropouts are not always comparable, and it becomes difficult to discern factors that make completion of high school a local, state, and national issue. These issues are important because of graduation being an important predictor of employment and earning potential over one's lifetime and the effect on students' personal development and well-being.

Dropout Prevention

Successful dropout prevention programs address multiple risk factors and incorporate numerous strategies to address risk factors. The National Dropout Prevention Center (2016) has studied the issue of school dropouts since 1986 and accumulated resources regarding successful practices and effective strategies for dropout prevention programs. Such strategies can be used as components of school improvement programs to improve student academic achievement and graduation rates. Fifteen strategies that impact the school dropout rate have emerged and are categorized in the Effective Strategies section into recommendations of Early Interventions, Basic Core Strategies, Making the Most of Instruction, and Making the Most of the Wider Community. Early

Intervention involves robust family involvement, a sound early childhood education program, and an effective reading and writing program that targets all students. The Basic Core Strategies that complement a strong curriculum include mentoring/tutoring, service learning projects, alternative schooling, and out of school enhancement. Making the Most of Instruction incorporates teacher professional development, openness to diverse learning styles and multiple intelligences, instructional technologies, and individualized learning. Making the Most of the Wider Community involves taking advantage of Systemic Renewal, Community Collaboration, Career Education and Workforce Readiness, and Conflict Resolution/Violence Prevention.

School culture. Research has shown an engaging school culture has a positive impact on student achievement and prevents dropping out (Williams, 2014). DuFour and Eaker (1998) described culture as “founded upon the assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norms for that organization—norms that shape how people think, feel, and act” (p. 131). Cultural change tends to be the most needed in schools but also is the most difficult to achieve (Whitaker, 2010) Administrators and teachers create a culture of engagement by enhancing school spirit, creating opportunities for student success, shared leadership, and genuine display of concern for student well-being (Williams, 2014). Studies have found a significant relationship exists between school culture and graduation/dropout rates (Pearson, 2015). Deal and Peterson (2009) confirmed a relationship between positive school culture and a reduced dropout rate. Findings suggest a positive school culture is related to improved effective school teaching practices, improved student achievement, and reduction of negative behaviors.

School improvement/reform. Marzano, Walters, and McNulty (2005) identified

11 elements of their Comprehensive School Reform model:

- School-level factors: Guaranteed and viable curriculum, challenging goals and effective feedback, parent and community involvement, safe and orderly environment, collegiality and professionalism.
- Teacher-level factors: Instructional strategies, classroom management, classroom curriculum design.
- Student-level factors: Home environment, learned intelligence and background knowledge, motivation. (pp. 76-97)

The elements of this model seem closely aligned with school culture, and it is evident school improvement efforts must be comprehensive in nature in order to impact student achievement.

At-risk students need the support of a caring teacher or other staff member, as positive relationships are critical. Banchemo (2000) concluded positive student-teacher relationships promote increased student achievement and persistence to graduation. Several types of school programs including supplemental; whole-school restructuring; therapy; intervention team approaches; and partnership programs among community, home, and school address the needs of at-risk students (Marzano, 2003). Research has highlighted factors such as extracurricular activities and clubs as reducing students' odds of dropping out of school (Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Solberg, Carlstrom, and Jones (2007) ascertained curriculum strategies focusing on dropout reduction should foster stronger student, peer, and teacher relationships; promote academic confidence and school relevance; and include stress and health management.

Research (Balfanz et al., 2007; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Rumberger & Lims, 2008) has provided evidence that schools impact students' decisions to dropout, and students do not drop out merely due to their individual and family characteristics and circumstances. A study of individuals who previously dropped out revealed over 80% of respondents felt the inclusion of more real-world and work-related learning would have contributed to an increased chance of staying in school and graduating (Bridgeland et al., 2006). To address the transition to high school from middle school, which can present students with numerous challenges, some schools offer programs and increased support to incoming freshmen. Allensworth and Easton (2005) asserted students who remain "on track" after their freshman year are significantly more likely than their peers to graduate from high school in four years. Pharris-Ciurej et al. (2012) pointed out the significance of "the 9th grade shock" (p. 2)—a sharp decline in academic performance as students enter high school sometimes leading to retention or dropping out (p. 2). Being on track involves accumulating five credits and having not more than one F in a core subject during the freshman year. Researchers have shown that improving student performance in the ninth grade can lead to significant improvements in graduation rates (Roderick, Kelley-Kemple, Johnson, & Beechum, 2014).

Response to Intervention (RTI)

The personal, social, and economic costs of academic underachievement are extensive and increasing (Christenson & Havy, 2004). School districts use various means of early identification of students at risk of dropping out of high school. Data are gathered, even at the elementary grades, for educators to use to target interventions to at-risk students. Research has indicated the best strategy to increase a student's chance of

graduating includes early intervention on basic skills, bringing the student to grade level by the end of third grade (Sagor & Cox, 2004). Bowers et al. (2013) found various early warning systems are used to profile potential students at risk of dropping out of high school, as educators seek to identify students at risk of dropping out and to intervene. However, some of this profiling can lead to inaccurate results, so it is important for educators to carefully consider individual interventions based on student need rather than anticipated risk. Balfanz et al. (2007) found five indicators to be successful in making a strong impact on student achievement for students perceived to be at risk of dropping out of school: teacher support, teacher and peer expectations, parental involvement, the extent to which students feel the math they are studying will be useful to them later in life, and students' intrinsic interest in math. School-wide reform, individual "shepherding" of students who need various supports, and intensive efforts involving specialists such as counselors and therapists for students most at risk are strongly recommended as part of keeping students on target for graduation.

Student Engagement

Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, and Hall (2003) identified low levels of school engagement and lack of enthusiasm for school to be factors contributing to dropping out. Adolescents often experience a decrease in academic achievement and motivation, as well as an increase in delinquent behavior and substance use (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Suh and Suh (2007) described school engagement as an expectation and commitment to return to school each year and eventually complete high school. Increasing student engagement is more than just promoting school completion and involves supporting students in meeting academic, social, and behavioral standards. Increasing student

engagement supports the movement to offer targeted interventions, promote challenging courses in high school, and focus on individual student needs of high school students.

The Education Commission of the States in 2007 found schools can exert important organization effects on students' decisions to drop out or stay in school. These effects include progress monitoring and early intervention; targeting of attendance, behavior, and school engagement; ensuring a strong school focus on academics; and reviewing the school structure. Plank, DeLuca, and Estacion (2008) found a link between career development and retention, suggesting a reduced risk of dropping out for students who participate in career development combined with a rigorous academic program of study. Alternative schools or alternative education generally serve a special population, such as teen parents, students with disabilities, students in trouble with the court system, and violent students (Koetke, 1999). Williams (2014) found effective strategies for dealing with discipline problems in at-risk students at alternative school include scheduling regular meetings with students, modeling appropriate behavior, communication with parents, and developing relationships with students.

Cassidy and Bates (2005) found student achievement to be positive in alternative schools with a focus on relationships and caring for students with a history of misbehavior and were at risk for dropping out of school. Caring relationships may help at-risk students persist to graduation, as they see a connection between support from adults and their student achievement. Suh and Suh (2007) found that factors influencing persistence to graduation vary for different types of risk factors, recommending a range of prevention strategies be implemented for increased results. Lessard, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, and Royer (2009) found at-risk students who persist to graduate from high school

typically had a meaningful relationship with a teacher, counselor, or other adult who helped them be resilient and graduate. Lessard et al. (2009) also found, in their qualitative study of high-risk students who possessed academic resilience and graduated, that specific attributes were evident. Similarly, Plunkett, Henry, Houltberg, Sands, and Abarca-Mortensen (2008) found a positive relationship between strong academic resilience and support from the parent of the opposite sex.

School structure. School size and school structure are not to be overlooked when discussing high school dropout. Schools with enrollment less than 1500 students have significantly higher graduation rates than larger schools (Lee & Burkam, 2003). The findings of Klima, Miller, and Nunlist (2009) identified school restructuring efforts, such as “schools-within-schools,” as having overall positive effects on dropping out, achievement, and attendance. Lee and Burkam (2003) emphasized both quantitative and qualitative studies suggest students who drop out of high school cite lack of positive relationships and social support as reasons for leaving. Students are more likely to persevere to graduate in schools where positive relationships exist between students and teachers. Lee and Burkam ascertained high schools’ organization in terms of structure, academic organization, and social organization contributes to students’ decisions to leave or it promotes persistence to graduation for at-risk students (2003). Diplomas Now is a dropout prevention program focused on tiered student supports for at-risk students, incorporating teacher teams and small learning communities (SLCs) in an effort to better teach and support at-risk students (Sepanik et al., 2015). SLCs are purposefully structured schools within schools in an effort to improve graduation rates and better prepare students for college and careers; however, more research is needed regarding effective

implementation of this concept (Oxley & Luers, 2010). The SLC or “school within a school” concept can increase the likelihood of more personalized relationships, greater participation, and less alienation.

Career and technical education (CTE). Researchers agree the high school dropout problem arises from an interaction of various personal and environmental factors (Rumberger, 2006). Strong evidence that Career and Technical Education (CTE) can contribute to higher graduation rates can be found in numerous studies of CTE, career academies, and career pathways. Maxwell and Rubin (2000) studied three cohorts of students and found career academy students dropped out at rates less than half of non-academy students, a rate of 7.8% versus 18%. Similarly, Elliott, Hansler, and Gilroy (2001) studied two cohorts of Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps Career Academy (JROTCCA) students and found students in the JROTC academies had much higher graduation rates than non-academy students. In several multi-year studies, Kemple and Snipes (2000) found at-risk students’ dropout rates were significantly lower for students participating in a career academy. Following a longitudinal study of over 10,000 students, Plank (2001) reported the dropout rate was highest for students who had taken no CTE courses and lowest for students who had taken three or more CTE courses. CTE programs promote student engagement and workplace skills development, linking the classroom environment to real-world situations and careers (Plank et al., 2008). Stone and Alfeld (2004) cited a study indicating students participating in career academies were 2.5 times less likely to drop out of school. There appears to be strong statistical evidence that CTE plays a role in reducing dropout rates, especially among at-risk students.

Alternative education programs. The General Education (GED) is awarded to individuals who pass a graduate equivalency examination, but it is not generally perceived as highly as an actual high school diploma (Smith & Thomson, 2014). Alternative education programs are individualized opportunities for students at risk of school failure. Within the past twenty years, a rise in the number of alternative high schools has occurred, as school districts seek ways to operate schools differently and separately from traditional schools (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Focused mentoring and careful monitoring of student progress appear to be characteristics of successful dropout prevention and alternative education programs (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Some alternative schools incorporate a standards-based curriculum and promote close relationships with students and faculty in a highly structured environment (Smith & Thomson, 2014). Research has shown effective alternative schools are very personal environments, incorporating curriculum modification and individualized instruction in a smaller environment with high standards for behavior, attendance, and performance (Smith & Thomson, 2014). Ormrod (2004) stressed that students in an alternative school environment experience success and gain confidence, thus improving self-efficacy and persistence to graduation. Likewise, Franklin, Streeter, Kim, and Tripodi (2007) found in a quasi-experimental study that at-risk students in a solution-focused alternative school earned more credits, enabling them to graduate from high school over time.

Dropout Prevention Tracking System

Numerous factors can be monitored that have been linked to dropping out. Student at-risk characteristic monitoring systems can be used to monitor students' academic performance and social engagement to identify students who may require

intervention to remain on track for graduation (Dynarski et al., 2008). Students who are failing academically exhibit disruptive classroom behaviors frequently, and experience disciplinary referrals resulting in detention or suspension are more likely to drop out of school (Bidell & Deacon, 2010). Kentucky educators utilize the Persistence to Graduation Tool as a part of the Infinite Campus student information system, which uses predictor factors such as absences, grades, test scores, and behavior to assign an at-risk value to students identifying those who may be off track for promotion or on-time graduation (KDE, 2016). Centralized tracking systems are being used to monitor students' progress and intervene appropriately. Early warning indicators and intervention systems have grown into a powerful idea as a part of school reform.

There is no magical, quick-fix solution to the dropout problem. The problem is complex and requires a complex array of solutions involving many agencies and institutions. The National Dropout Prevention Center (2016) has identified effective strategies based on research, many of which overlap and combine to be a school improvement effort. Evidence suggests educators can make a difference in the phenomenon of high school dropout and provide positive educational experiences for students. Professional school counselors, especially, who understand characteristics of potential dropouts and effective interventions, can promote student resiliency, engagement, and achievement in school and increase the graduation rate.

School Counseling Programs

Professional school counselors are in a position to support student learning as they collaborate with teachers, parents, staff, community, and students. Professional school counselors in rural areas face unique issues, sometimes serving as the only mental health

professional in their area (Duncan, 2003). Professional school counselors are widely involved with school initiatives, including RTI, school-wide positive behavioral supports and interventions, health services, instructional support services, special education, family resource centers, foster child and homeless student education, and other student assistance programs (Adelman & Taylor, 2011). The profession of school counselor has been reported by researchers as commencing from a reaction to child labor and for the purpose of helping students choose occupations through which they could become contributing members of society at the turn of the 19th century (Myrick, 1997). Those early concerns have expanded tremendously. Currently, small group counseling in the area of social skill development with at-risk students can be an effective intervention to foster social competencies (Bemack, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabado, 2005). School counselors can impact the achievement gap by examining school-wide data and using the information to deliver an effective group intervention (Bruce, Getch, & Ziomek-Daigle, 2009). Carey et al. (2012) found it possible to determine the measurable impact of comprehensive guidance programs and counselor student ratios. Additionally, improved attendance, graduation, and discipline rates were found in schools with better student-school counselor ratios. Lapan, Gysbers, Stanley, and Pierce (2012) also reported students who have greater access to school counselors and comprehensive school counseling programs are more likely to succeed academically and behaviorally in school. This was found to be more evident in high-poverty schools. The ASCA (2004) defines the role of the school counselor as follows:

The professional school counselor is a certified/licensed educator trained in school counseling with unique qualifications and skills to address all students'

academic, personal/social and career development needs. Professional school counselors implement a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes and enhances student achievement. Professional school counselors serve a vital role in maximizing student achievement. Incorporating leadership, advocacy, and collaboration, professional school counselors promote equity and access to opportunities and rigorous educational experiences for all students. Professional school counselors support a safe learning environment and work to safeguard the human rights of the school community. Collaborating with other stakeholders to promote student achievement, professional school counselors address the needs of all students through prevention and intervention programs that are a part of a comprehensive school counseling program. (p. 18)

The ASCA Model

The ASCA (2004) position statement on the prevention and intervention of student behaviors that place students at risk clearly defines the school counselor's role for working with potential student dropouts. The role of the school counselor has changed several times during the past century, shifting from strictly a vocational guidance focus to a comprehensive student focus. The ASCA National Model has been revised during its use since 2003, impacting students, teachers, and school counselors in positive ways (Bryant & Constantine, 2006). The latest addition of the ASCA National Model (2012) includes that school counseling programs are to be data-driven, comprehensive, preventive, and developmental in nature to promote student achievement. The ASCA National Model also makes a recommendation of 80% or more of the counselor's time designated with students, while the remaining 20% should be spent with program

management and school support. States and districts in the US have adopted the use of the ASCA standards-based school counseling models (Hatch & Bowers, 2002).

Researchers in the field of school counseling ascertain certified professional school counselors contribute to positive learning environments when they have the resources, time, and structure of the comprehensive school counseling program (Lapan, Gyspers, & Petroski, 2001). Studies have shown the implementation of the ASCA National Model has positive student learning outcomes, including improved reading achievement (Edwards, Thornton, & Holiday-Driver, 2010) and closing the achievement gap (Holcomb-McCoy, Gonzalez, & Johnston, 2009). Burkard, Gillen, Martinez, and Skytee (2012) found a comprehensive school counseling program is associated with higher graduation rates, higher reading achievement, and lower retention rates. Studies from Washington State (Sink & Stroh, 2003) concluded maintaining a comprehensive guidance program for five or more years shows much higher academic achievement than schools without a continuing comprehensive guidance program.

Career Counseling

Based on research, Corey (2009) ascertained effective counselors have an identity, appreciate themselves, are open to change, make choices that are life-oriented, are sincere, have a sense of humor, admit mistakes, live in the present, appreciate the influence of culture, have a sincere interest in the welfare of others, possess effective interpersonal skills, become deeply involved in their work, exhibit passion about helping others, and maintain healthy boundaries. Comprehensive school counseling programs incorporate numerous intervention strategies, including individual counseling, small group counseling, classroom interventions, consultation with stakeholders, and

coordination of school-wide activities (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Individual counseling is the most widely used counseling intervention and can be effective even when brief (Whiston & Quinby, 2009). Career counseling and career development work well as an integrated strategy to foster student achievement and understanding of the world of work. Whiston, Sexton, and Lasoff (1998) found individual career counseling to be more effective than career classes, workshops, and other career counseling methods. Evidence suggests career development programs can impact students in their education and persistence to graduate (Hooley, Marriott, & Sampson, 2011). Extensive student support services, including real-world conversations aimed at preparing students for college and careers, can foster successful dropout prevention (Chmelynski, 2006). Lemon and Watson (2011) studied psychosocial variables such as wellness, stress, mattering, and at-risk status, finding school counselors should utilize skills and interventions to help at-risk students stay “intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally engaged in the learning process” (p. 17). Professional school counselors can promote the self-confidence, self-worth, and adjustment of at-risk students, providing interventions in areas of career decision making, survival skills, stress reduction, social skills, assertiveness, and time management in an effort to increase persistence to graduation (Praport, 1993).

Challenges of School Counselors

In general, school counseling interventions have a positive effect on students, though more research is needed and not all interventions appear to be equally effective (Whiston et al., 2011). School counselors serve as advocates for students, and it is important to identify and discuss challenges faced in order to meet better the needs of students. An increased emphasis on school counselor training is evident (Rowell, 2005).

McMahon, Mason, and Paisley (2009) affirmed school counselor training programs must take an “ecological perspective” (p. 123) and implement the same principles of collaboration and advocacy into their program to promote the transformation of the school counseling profession. Researchers have noted a lack of research in the area of school counseling. Bauman (2004) concluded research has not been “valued, emphasized, or endorsed as an important role function for school counselors” (p. 170). Some of the challenges of school counselors include counselor role ambiguity, diverse student needs, increased technological skill requirement, and emphasis on educational accountability (Baker, 2000; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). School counselors also encounter challenges in meeting the demands of multiple stakeholders in “an increasingly complex and political environment” (Paisley & McMachon, 2001, p. 106). Borders (2002) reflected on numerous articles regarding the role of the professional school counselor in today’s schools, interjecting the importance of counselors’ adaptability skills as they negotiate student needs in the school context. Professional school counselors who understand characteristics of potential dropouts, at-risk factors impeding student success, and effective interventions can help students persevere to graduate from high school.

School Counselors and Persistence to Graduation

Professional school counselors play a unique role in schools: counseling students, helping students improve and focus on academic achievement, fostering students’ personal and social development, and advising students in career planning and higher education. Numerous research studies have shown professional school counselors’ implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program can help students and maximize student achievement (Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Cook & Kaffenberger,

2003; Dahir & Stone, 2003; Fitch & Marshall, 2004). Professional school counselors can intervene on behalf of students to promote increased student achievement for at-risk students; likewise, counselors provide classroom guidance, individual and group counseling, consultation, collaboration and parental involvement, and career and educational planning.

Empirical Evidence

Vast research has detailed the problem of high school dropout and various dropout prevention methods; however, little research exists regarding how school counselors and administrators actually implement interventions to keep at-risk students in school. A meta-analysis of studies of dropout prevention, including an integrative review, highlights the need for more quality studies of dropout prevention/school completion, finding most studies focus on student factors rather than determining which interventions are most effective, with specific populations and in specific contexts (Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2003). Professional school counselors play a critical and necessary role in maximizing student success in school (Lapan, Gysbers, & Kayson, 2007). Gysbers (2001) asserted social advocacy “is the heritage of the profession” (p. 103).

The 1999 ASCA Position Statement regarding The Counselor and Dropout Prevention/Students-At-Risk states established the following philosophy of dropout prevention:

The school counselor provides consultation in defining and identifying at-risk students. The goal is to identify and intervene before they move through a continuum of self-destructive behavior. The school counselor provides responsive

programs, including short-term individual, group, family and crisis counseling; provides programs for individual planning to meet academic, educational and career counseling needs; provides curriculum programs to strengthen personal/interpersonal skills (choice, self-acceptance, feelings, beliefs and behaviors, problem-solving, decision-making); identifies suicidal students, counsels them and refers them to appropriate outside agencies; provides in-service support presentations to staff; provides referrals for additional specialized support services within the district and from other community resources; and provides consultation with and support for parents/guardians of at-risk students. The school counselor works as a member of a team with other student service professionals. (p. 109)

White and Kelly (2010) asserted school counselors play a key role in identifying, monitoring, intervening, and following up with at-risk students. Parrot (2000) stressed that effective counseling interventions with struggling students should be embedded with personal acceptance and reflective listening. Considering the family context can determine whether family should be explored in counseling. A professional school counselor's diligent and deliberate focus on encouragement and building self-esteem by assuring successful achievement can facilitate academic success. Other counseling areas to explore include study skills, class attendance, note taking, rewards, and tutoring. Contracts between student, teacher, and counselor can be a valuable tool for students, reinforcing an internal locus of control and self-confidence (Sagor & Cox, 2004).

School counselors can be a critical part of school improvement efforts in low-performing schools (Salina et al., 2013). High school students who have more access to

school counselors due to lower counselor-student ratios, and have access to related college and career counseling services, are more likely to graduate and less likely to have behavioral problems (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009). School counselors can impact the achievement gap by examining school-wide data and using the information to deliver an effective group intervention (Bruce et al., 2009). Williams (2008) asserted professional school counselors play an important role in dropout prevention, “providing intervention that will change student behaviors to affect student attendance, discipline, and academics” (p. 11). Howard, Solberg, and Scott (2006) stressed school counselors have the needed expertise to address students’ motivational and psychological difficulties related to academic difficulties and persistence to graduation. School counselors also possess the skills to address disruptive classroom behaviors and self-concept, advancing equitable access and success for all students (Ratts et al., 2007). Hines, Lemons, and Crews (2011) advocated school counselors are visionary educators who contribute to student success by their contribution on their school’s leadership team; analysis of academic and behavioral data; problem resolution skills; and collaboration with administrators, teachers, and parents.

Similarly, school counselors’ involvement in methods for analyzing school-wide student academic and behavioral indicators and engaging in data-based decision making have been promoted as a "new cornerstone of effective school counseling practice" (Poynton & Carey, 2006, p. 129). A growing area of research involves comprehensive, data driven school counseling programs that improve a range of student learning and behavioral outcomes (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012). Research has indicated schools with

“more fully implemented programs have better student outcomes than schools with a less programmatic approach to school counseling” (Whiston & Quinby, 2009, p. 271).

The ASCA National Model contains an instrumental description of the roles of professional school counselors (Bardhoshi & Duncan, 2009). The four ASCA National Models’ themes were used throughout this study to frame professional school counselors’ roles in dropout prevention: “leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change” (ASCA, 2012, p. 1).

Need for Qualitative Studies

There is a growing body of quantitative research regarding high school dropouts and the student’s role in the decision to drop out of high school (Wehlage, 1991). A definite need exists for qualitative research on the school counselor’s role in dropout prevention. Knesting (2008) summarized findings from a qualitative study and interjected: “A critical need exists for research on high school dropout that goes beyond the individual student characteristics to include the influence of school factors on students’ educational decisions” (p. 3). Further qualitative research in this area will inform educators regarding the school’s role in supporting student persistence to graduation.

Summary

The high school dropout issue is a complex problem for the nation. While there is no certain or single explanation of why students drop out, the literature points to various behavioral, sociological, cultural, and political explanations that may contribute to a student’s decision to drop out. Literature details an array of dropout prevention strategies and interventions for at-risk students. Educators continue to seek ways to engage

students, improve academic achievement, and improve school culture, resulting in reduced dropout rates. School completion and student success are contingent upon students receiving the necessary support and intervention from family and educators (Bradshaw, O'Brenna, & McNeely, 2008). School guidance programs are involved in numerous facets related to dropout prevention, providing and coordinating interventions for at-risk students.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Purpose

As educators strive to prepare all students for success, detailed attention should be focused on research of dropouts and recovery programs to assist them in completing graduation requirements (Groth, 1998). Dropping out of high school involves significant negative consequences for individuals and society: impacting the nations' competitive edge and workforce, reducing individuals' earning capacity and tax contribution, increasing health and criminal justice costs, reducing civic engagement, and further inflating the pool of individuals in need of welfare and public assistance (Dianda, 2008). High school dropout prevention efforts are underway nationwide, as educators enlist partnerships between business and industry, governors, mayors, state legislators, public health and welfare agencies, the justice system, and community organizations (Dianda, 2008).

Literature describes the phenomenon of dropping out of school as a complex process without a single explanation, often occurring as a culminating response to years of disengagement and academic failure (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). According to Patton (2002), qualitative data reveal a critical dimension to "prevention evaluations by finding out the extent to which desired attitude and behavior changes linked to prevention actually occur" (p. 166). With high stakes accountability measures in place for schools to be accountable for and increase graduation rates, a qualitative panoramic view and detailed description of school strategies to address the dropout problem is of great importance. Phenomenological inquiry emphasizing the guidance counselor's perception of dropouts and strategies that work to keep students in school may offer valuable insight

for school leaders to develop or redesign interventions. Straus (1990) described qualitative inquiry as “from its inception emphasized the necessity for grasping the actors’ viewpoints for understanding interaction, process, and social change” (p. 6).

This chapter describes the selection of an interpretive phenomenological approach as a form of inquiry for data collection. It also discusses important ethical issues considered while conducting this study. Through a series of interviews of 10 participants employed as guidance counselors in Kentucky high schools, this study identifies similarities and differences among perceptions of counselors regarding dropout risk factors and effective strategies used to encourage students at risk of dropping out of school to persevere to graduate. This chapter describes the research methods used to gather and analyze data to answer the research questions and how the researcher played a significant role in the collection of data and its interpretation. The general intent of this study was to explore and examine guidance counselors’ perceptions of factors influencing graduation rates and dropout rates in western Kentucky high schools. An exploration of guidance counselors’ perceptions of high school dropouts and dropout prevention is quite limited in the literature. Interviews were designed to address the central research question that guided this study: What strategies promote persistence to graduation for at-risk students?

Research Questions

The questions that guided this research were:

1. What are the perceptions of guidance counselors regarding:
 - a. the problem of high school dropouts?
 - b. counseling strategies and interventions to help at-risk learners?

- c. their school's implementation of best practices to help at-risk learners?
- d. the role of administrators in strategies to help at-risk learners graduate?
- e. the barriers to implementing strategies to help at-risk learners?

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to uncover strategies employed by counselors at high schools to address the needs of at-risk students, particularly those at risk of or contemplating dropping out of school. A significant attribute of this study was to acquire the perceptions of the participants (professional school counselors) about the dropout crisis and their efforts to promote persistence to graduation for all students. Qualitative research typically “takes place in the natural world, draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of the participants in the study, focuses on context, is emergent and evolving rather than tightly prefigured, and is fundamentally interpretive” (Marshall & Rossman, 2014, p. 2). This study utilized inductive analysis to build patterns and themes based on participant responses to the background questionnaire and interviews.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) referred to the term *qualitative research* as any type of methodological study that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other types of quantifications. Some information may be quantified and analyzed qualitatively, such as background information about the interviewees and schools studied, but most of the analysis is interpretative (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative research captures the experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge of individuals (Patton, 2002). An understanding of individuals' interpretations and perceptions is central to the investigation. Creswell (2012) emphasized the researcher should decide how and in what

ways his or her own personal understanding can be introduced into the study and analysis.

An interpretive phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study, as the goal of the researcher was to “understand and interpret participants’ experiences, to determine the meaning of the experiences” (Touhey, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013, p. 20).

Kim (2011) stressed the phenomenological interview should not inform participants of what the researcher wants to hear, which might not capture the whole experience. Rather, it should allow the interviewees to reflect the nature and essence of those experiences related to the interview topic. The analyses of this phenomenological inquiry “focus on the individual’s experience as opposed to environmental influences, that integrate disparate elements into a unified whole, and that provide insights into a larger group of which the individual is a representative” (Gergen, 2014, p. 54).

The Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in qualitative research is one of onlooker of an event. Qualitative methods facilitate study of issues in depth and detail, and “the researcher is the instrument” (Patton, 2002, p. 14). Such methods provide the researcher with an opportunity for in-depth understanding of complex factors, which influence the at-risk students’ disengagement from school and the interventions that promote persistence to graduation. The emic perspective means researchers develop an insider perspective (Patton, 2002) as they see, hear, and feel what is happening in the setting. Pike (1954) explained the etic perspective involves “standing far enough from or outside of a particular culture to see its separate events, primarily in relation to their similarities and

differences, as compared to events in other cultures” (as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 268).

The researcher must then record the data, consolidate and organize the findings, and communicate findings in a way to illuminate the results (Creswell, 2012).

The phenomenological approach emphasizes the meaning of reality is, in essence, in the “eyes and minds of the beholders” (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005, p. 243), the way the individuals being studied perceive their experiences. A phenomenological approach was well suited to studying high school dropouts, as individuals experience the phenomenon in a unique way based on prior experiences. According to Saldaña (2016), the primary task of the researcher in phenomenological inquiry is “researcher reflection on the data to capture the essence and essentials of the experience that make it what it is” (p. 8).

Interviewing was the primary research method of this study. Seidman (2013) suggested the phenomenological interview focus on the life history of the participant, the details of the experiences of interest, and reflections of the meaning of the experiences. This study used clarifying questions for exploration purposes. The researcher focused on what experiences and ideas participants have in common as they design, provide, coordinate, and witness interventions for at-risk students to promote persistence to graduation. The goal of the researcher in phenomenological inquiry is to “resist the common pursuit of prediction and control, in hopes of establishing genuine understanding between people” (Gergen, 2014, p. 51). In order to better explain the phenomenon of high school dropouts and dropout prevention, a phenomenology investigated experiences as expressed through participants who have directly experienced the phenomenon.

Population and Sample

The sample of participants consisted of eight high school professional school counselors at their respective high schools. Creswell (2012) recommended the sample range between 5 and 25 participants. Professional school counselors at large high schools in western Kentucky were invited to participate in this study. They were carefully chosen, as they needed to have experienced the phenomenon being studied. Seidman (2013) recommended the researcher choose participants not personally or professionally known, follow protocols of getting permission from superiors, and make every effort to protect participant anonymity. Professional school counselors from high schools were purposefully selected and contacted via their school e-mail.

Most of the schools were considered rural, as they are located in rural areas or most students attending the school live in rural areas. Urban locations are defined as having 50,000 or more people, and rural locations are those not included within an urban area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). School superintendents were informed about this research, since guidance counselors were going to be discussing their perception of high school dropouts and interventions to encourage students to persist to graduation in their high school. The recruitment of participants from all sites occurred during a period of one month after final approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) board at Western Kentucky University. An application was submitted to the IRB and research did not begin until the IRB approved the protocol of this research (see Appendix A). The IRB process assured subjects were ethically protected. Participants voluntarily decided whether to participate in the study. Transcripts were anonymous, and the identities of counselors and administrators involved in the study remained anonymous in the discussion of results, as

well as in future publications or professional presentations. Participants were provided with informed consent which explained their right to participate voluntarily and their right to withdraw from the research at any time (see Appendix B). Participants were encouraged to ask questions if something was not clear, and the researcher explained to them the right to obtain a copy of the results of this research. The researcher did not share information with counselors' supervisors and protected the counselors' anonymity. The sampling strategies were purpose sampling and criterion related. The sample met a specific criterion related to employment as a guidance counselor at a high school with a graduation rate above the state average.

Instruments

To explore the perceptions and experiences of the participants, the data were drawn from three main sources: (a) a questionnaire to collect demographic data and self-assessment of strategies used to help at-risk students; (b) the individual interviews; and (c) the supplemental notes gathered during the interviews. In preparation for data collection, the researcher developed two instruments: a background questionnaire and an interview guide containing semi-structured interview questions to be followed during the interview sessions. The questions were adapted from work found in research literature and from field testing the questions. New questions were constructed to address the research questions. The researcher also incorporated some prior experiences from the field into the questions.

A researcher-developed demographic background questionnaire was utilized to collect personal and professional characteristics of subjects. In this study the demographic characteristics of participants included age, gender, employment status,

educational preparation, years of experience in education, years of experience in counseling, strength of connection with the ASCA framework, and counseling theoretical orientation.

Interview Questions

The qualitative interview questions were constructed to give voice to professional school counselors and capture their experiences providing interventions to students at risk of dropping out of high school. The interview questions were categorized by research question parts to show how they corresponded, as depicted in Table 1. The interview questions also offered participants a chance to comment on the difficulty and challenges of their role in dropout prevention. Qualitative interviews are grounded in questions to produce details, evidence, and examples, which lead to coding data for category development and insights (Saldaña, 2016).

Procedures

This study examined practices put into place at high schools to help at-risk learners. This qualitative phenomenological study incorporated interviews to describe guidance counselors' perceptions of the problem of high school dropouts and strategies they use to promote graduation for all students. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to identify what the guidance counselors would do in various situations when working with a student at risk of dropping out of high school. Interview questions (Appendix C) included self-report data on professional school counselors' perceptions of high school dropout and dropout prevention efforts.

The semi-structured interview was conducted using a standardized open-ended set of questions that asked participants to reflect on strategies they use to promote graduation for all students and to discourage dropping out of school. Individual interviews were

Table 1

Correspondence of Research Question Parts to Interview Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
What are the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding:	1. Describe yourself as a professional school counselor and the work you do in your current position. What contributions do you believe school counselors make to the school district and community?
a) the problem of high school dropouts?	2. Describe the problem (or lack of problem) of student dropouts at your school. What are some reasons students do not persist to graduation?
b) counseling strategies and interventions to help at-risk learners?	4. Describe the counselor's role in persistence to graduation programs at your school? Please give some examples of how you demonstrate this role in dropout prevention. 5. Does your school have a formal structured plan detailing the activities, events, and interventions of the School Counseling Program? Describe how your counseling program has been successful in providing interventions to at-risk students. 6. Think of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model. On a scale of one to five (one being the lowest, five being the highest), how well do you think you have implemented a comprehensive school guidance program per the ASCA National Model?
c) their school's implementation of best practices to help at-risk learners?	3. What would students who are contemplating dropping out of high school change about your school? 7. Consider the following scenario: A teacher comes into your office with concerns that an eleventh grade student told her his plan to drop out of school. This student is failing classes, has frequent absences, and has a record of repeated misbehavior. Describe your action plan for this student. 8. What resources or strategies are in place at your school for students at risk of dropping out? Are these measures effective? 10. Everyone faces challenges. Describe a challenge you have recently encountered as you worked with at-risk students. How did you overcome the obstacles?
d) the role of administrators in strategies to help at-risk learners graduate?	9. What recommendations would you offer to new school counselors about working with at-risk students? What recommendations would you offer to new administrators about working with at-risk students?
e) the barriers to implementing strategies to help at-risk learners?	11. Describe some of the challenges school counselors, school administrators, and teachers face when identifying and working with students at risk for dropping out of high school. 12. In what ways did your counselor education program prepare you to design and implement interventions for at-risk students? Tell me some areas you would like further training. Is there anything else you would like to share?

conducted with each participant and audio recorded. While maintaining appropriate tones and a friendly demeanor, the interviewer diligently established a working relationship of comfort, security, and equity with the participants (Saldaña, 2016). Additional phone calls and e-mail contacts with respondents were made to check interpretations and to ask participants to respond to themes as they emerged. The interviews were recorded in order to have access to accurate participants' responses, yet careful consideration was taken to be unobtrusive during the recording (Seidman, 2013). The researcher received a copy of the transcript.

A research instrument should provide a confident expectation that the results will be reliable (Creswell, 2012). In a qualitative study, it is worthwhile to confirm the research instrument collects the data intended for the research questions. For the purposes of verifying the validity of the instrument, a peer review and pilot study was conducted. Prior to its use, the interview schedule for the individual interviews was evaluated by a pilot study. The demographic questionnaire and interview guide were sent to four counselors to review and provide feedback. The pilot study also consisted of interviews of two guidance counselors using the Interview Guide. An objective of the pilot study was to improve the quality and reliability of the data obtained in the study. Based on experiences from the pilot interviews, some of the interview questions for the study were modified to be broad enough for interviewees to detail their experiences while remaining open-ended. Questions that seemed leading were reworded to be more open-ended. The pilot participants indicated most questions were clear and did not need further elucidation.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is essential in any qualitative study, as honest data collection is essential. Such trustworthiness occurs after the formation of a relationship with the participants; therefore, the researcher diligently worked to make subjects feel unpressured and comfortable sharing feelings, experiences, and insights during data collection. The interviewer's attention to the relationship during the interview process allowed respondents to share rich, "illuminating views" (Gergen, 2014, p. 50). The interviewees reviewed the final transcript and verified their responses were accurately captured to ensure trustworthiness.

Data Analysis

The basic purpose of data analysis in a phenomenological inquiry is to collect data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develop a "composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals" (Creswell, 2012, p. 58). Following transcription of the interviews, the researcher in this qualitative phenomenological study analyzed "the data by reducing information to significant statements or quotes and combines these into thematic categories" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 33). The experiences of participants were "bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon" (Patton, 2002, p. 106). The process of rereading transcripts in order to ensure a clear understanding of responses also can ensure more accurate interpretations. Moustakas (1994) referred to this step as horizontalization, as the researcher reviews the interview transcripts seeking significant statements, words, or sentences that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. During this process, the researcher began to see commonalities with the

counselor's perceptions of the dropout problem. Data analysis in qualitative research includes a process of "categorization, description, and synthesis" (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005, p. 207). Open coding allowed the researcher to code, categorize, and organize similarities (Briggs & Coleman, 2007).

Before, during, and after data analysis, the researcher maintained a clear mindset and put aside prejudice. Phenomenological reduction helped to ensure a clear focus on the phenomenon being studied. Feelings, personal experiences, and viewpoints were set aside as the researcher attempted to understand the participants' point of view and experiences. The researcher valued neutrality in data collection and analysis during phenomenological inquiry, drawing closer to subjects to understand their experiences (Gergen, 2014).

The researcher applied interpretive analysis of the findings to refine understanding of the transcripts. Thus, the researcher was able to interpret and understand the professional school counselor's interventions with at-risk students and the experiences counselors faced during the process. Counselors who were interviewed provided details of their perspectives regarding high school dropout, interventions to help at-risk students succeed, and the experiences faced in providing and coordinating interventions. They provided information about why counselors feel students dropped out of high school and feedback on what they consider effective strategies to include in a high school dropout prevention plan. The ideas were based on counselors' personal experiences with at-risk students. Counselors also provided responses about strategies for a high school dropout prevention plan. Several themes were developed involving strategies.

Qualitative Analysis Framework

Interview data were used to establish context as participants discussed their perceptions of high school dropout and their role in dropout intervention. Self-reported counselor theoretical orientation and perception of impact of dropout intervention were used to identify questions and direction as well as to generate narrative categories (Creswell, 2012). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The data from transcription were put into categories for interpretation (Creswell, 2012). Data were collected and categorized as they emerged. The qualitative framework relied on inductive reasoning, as categories developed into themes based on the researcher's interpretation. The purpose was to understand the perspective of the interviewee and give them voice.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher remained aware of ethical issues throughout the study and adhered to ethical standards of research. Saldaña (2016) stressed “researchers need heightened attunement during all stages of a study to insure no harm and minimal discomfort come to anyone” (p. 25). Original records documenting contact, informed consent, and interviews were kept in a secure location.

Creswell (2012) presented a checklist of ethical issues in design, data collection, and analysis to be considered in establishing an ethical framework for a qualitative study, asserting the importance of anticipating the ethical dimensions of qualitative inquiry. Informed consent provided details regarding the purpose of collecting the information and a description of the study. The confidentiality of the respondents was protected through coded identifiers at the onset of the study. Participants were informed before and during the study verbally and in writing of their rights to anonymity and confidentiality.

The confidentiality of the interviewees will continue to be protected after the conclusion of the study.

The researcher complied with the human subjects board and its ethical standards. The Western Kentucky University IRB required completion of an on-line training course. The study was approved by the Human Subjects Review Board of Western Kentucky University. Copies of the approved letters can be found in Appendices A and B.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research methodology, the rationale for the research, the research design, and the purposeful sampling used to select subjects for the study of school counselors' perspectives of students dropping out of school. The purpose of the current study was to explore practices to help at-risk learners in large rural high schools. Because prior research has indicated effective strategies exist that have a positive impact on dropout rate and retention, those presumably effective strategies were identified as the theme of the research. The research protocol included the school counselors' questionnaire and the interview guide. The description of the process utilized to collect data in this study and the procedures of data analysis also were outlined in this chapter, as well as the ethical issues related to this study.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Introduction

Numerous efforts promote increased educational attainment; yet, some students choose not to persist to graduate from high school. An increased awareness of graduation rates and an array of interventions to promote persistence to graduation have led to increased interest in the educational community of solutions to this phenomenon. Interventions remain varied as school communities consider student factors and diversity issues when addressing persistence to graduation (Baker, 2000; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000).

The purpose of this study was to provide insight into the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding the phenomenon of students leaving high school before completion and strategies addressing the problem. School counselors provide a comprehensive school counseling program, collaborating with students, educators, parents, community members, and other professional communities to improve student achievement, develop and implement interventions, close the achievement gap, and address student mental health needs (Hayes & Paisley, 2002; Rutledge & Cannata, 2015; Schmidt, 2004). School counselors contribute to positive learning environments in schools, possessing a thorough insight into student needs due to the daily immersion in the school environment in a position to foster a supportive, positive school culture (Ray, Lambie, & Curry, 2007). Each participant reflected on past counseling experiences and articulated current perceptions related to the process of promoting persistence to graduation in large high schools.

The remainder of this chapter details the results of this qualitative study. Specific sections addressed include methodological considerations and findings, which are organized according to the five parts of the research question. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Methodological Considerations

This was a qualitative study that involved semi-structured interviews of professional school counselors. The researcher observed the participant's view (emic perspective), while maintaining the outsider viewpoint (etic perspective). The population consisted of eight professional school counselors from large rural high schools in western Kentucky.

Participant Description

The participants were employed as school counselors in large rural high schools in western Kentucky at the time of the study. Female participants outnumbered male participants in this study, as six were female and two were male. All the participants identified as white as an ethnic group. The participants had an average of seven years' experience as school counselors, and all counselors had at least two years' experience as a school counselor.

Instrumentation

A background questionnaire was completed by each participant. The interview questions were developed as a means to assess the individual's perceptions of the problem of persistence to graduation, strategies to help students persevere to graduate, and school factors that relate to the phenomenon. The interview schedule consisted of 12 open-ended questions. The dissertation chair also provided input during the drafting of

the instrument. The dissertation committee provided feedback as the instrument was developed.

Procedures

The procedures for this research were consistent with phenomenological inquiry. Approval was received from the IRB at Western Kentucky University. A pilot study was conducted to gain feedback on the instrument. The methods used to collect data for this study included semi-structured interviews and review of the background demographic questionnaire. The researcher digitally recorded and transcribed all interviews and notes and used structural coding to analyze the data relative to the following central research question: What are the perceptions of professional high school counselors regarding strategies that promote persistence to graduation for at-risk students? The empirical questions that guided this research are as follows:

What are the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding:

- a. the problem of high school dropouts?
- b. counseling strategies and interventions to help at-risk learners?
- c. their school's implementation of best practices to help at-risk learners?
- d. the role of administrators in strategies to help at-risk learners graduate?
- e. the barriers to implementing strategies to help at-risk learners?

Data Analysis

Each of the eight participants' responses to interview questions were read, reread, and analyzed for commonalities and themes that were presented in the transcripts. The initial reading served as a holistic analysis to gain an overall sense of the landscape of the data. The second reading of the data incorporated open coding to identify categories in

the data, as well as subcategories that were commonalities and patterns in the themes. A spreadsheet was made listing potential themes and tracking participants who mentioned that theme.

Research Question Part A: The Problem of High School Dropouts

The first part (PA) of the research question (RQ) in this study examined the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding students dropping out of high school. The interview protocol included the following open-ended prompts addressing this part of the research question:

- a) Describe yourself as a professional school counselor and the work you do in your current position. What contributions do you believe school counselors make to the school district and community?
- b) Describe the problem (or lack of problem) of student dropout at your school. What are some reasons students do not persist to graduation?
- c) What would students who are contemplating dropping out of high school change about your school?

After analysis of the interview data and demographic background questionnaire, two themes emerged describing the professional school counselor's viewpoint of persistence to graduation. Sub-themes revealed evidence that persistence to graduation continues to be a problem.

RQPA Theme 1: The professional school counselor believes high school persistence to graduation is a problem. Sub-themes included the following:

- a. Some students drop out of high school prior to graduating.
- b. Some students withdraw from high school as a transfer to homeschool.

RQPA Theme 2: Students who do not persist to graduate share common attributes or risk factors. Sub-themes included the following:

- a. Some students who do not persist to graduate lack academic success in school.
- b. Some students who do not persist to graduate have anxiety related to school.
- c. Some students who do not persist to graduate have family factors contributing to the decision to withdraw from school.
- d. Some students who do not persist to graduate lack a sense of belonging at school.

RQPA Theme 1: The professional school counselor believes high school persistence to graduation is a problem.

The phenomenon of high school dropouts has been a concern for educators and communities for decades, as increased educational attainment remains a common goal. Concerted efforts have been made to promote persistence to education. Often, predictors can provide early warning indicators of students who are at risk for leaving high school prematurely. Legislation, policies, and mandates have addressed graduation rates to ensure schools focus on graduation for all students. The majority of respondents recounted efforts from legislation and mandates to increase the high school graduation rate. They also described how Kentucky increased the dropout rate to 18% and the implications of that change. All participants contributed rich discussion of the problem of high school dropouts and expressed the challenges and frustrations associated with efforts to promote persistence to graduation.

RQPA Sub-theme 1a: Withdrawal from high school as dropout. The school counselors who participated in this study affirmed some students drop out of high school

rather than persist to graduate. A number of common descriptions were given of the process of dropout being a culminating event following years of school disengagement and lack of academic success. Likewise, most respondents recounted stories of individual students who lacked family support encouraging them to persist to graduation.

Participant 6 recounted the process of high school students dropping out prior to the age of compulsory education being raised from 16 years of age to 18, stating:

Before the dropout age was raised to eighteen, we had students drop out of school routinely when they were behind on credits, had a job and wanted to work, or became pregnant. Now students do not have that option until they are eighteen, so the process appears much different. What I notice instead is students who are severely truant until their eighteenth birthday when they drop out. And also, by the time they express interest in dropping out they are so far behind they cannot catch up.

Participant 3 stated, “There are obviously fewer dropouts since Kentucky changed the dropout age to 18. Schools are required to think outside of the box to determine how to help students who do not want to be in school,” adding that struggling students sometimes drop out of high school rather than persist to graduate. Additionally,

Participant 1 stated, “Students who are behind on credits often drop out because they give up on the possibility of graduating from high school and decided school is just not for them.” Participant 4 asserted students sometimes give up and feel defeated, leading to the decision to not persist to graduate.

Evidence suggests school counselors experience frustration and other emotions when some students choose not to persist to graduate. Participant 5 mentioned seeing

several students withdraw from school during the senior year and how devastating it is that the student had worked to get to that point in the senior year and did not persist to graduate. Participant 1 described how heartbreaking it is to a school counselor when students drop out on their 18th birthday or shortly thereafter, emphasizing that has happened repeatedly in the school in which she works.

Participant 8 emphasized dropping out is seen as an option by academically unsuccessful students who do not like school, and the desire to graduate is sometimes not strong enough to overcome the academic difficulty of school. Participant 2 said, “Some students do not like high school and it is not fun for them to be here. They feel as if they do not fit in or feel defeated.” Additionally, Participant 2 stated:

Passing grades are not required to advance to the next grade in middle school, so students who fail classes and are retained feel defeated early in high school as they are accustomed to being promoted with failing grades. They simply do not have the desire to put in the extra effort required for them to catch up and pass their classes.

Similarly, Participant 7 reiterated some students have the mentality to just quit when school is difficult, rather than look for ways to persist.

RQPA Sub-theme 1b: Withdrawal from high school as transfer to homeschool. Participants in this study ascertained numerous students withdraw from high school to homeschool and possibly do not finish an accredited homeschool program, becoming a persistence to graduation problem. Counselors accounted numerous students transfer from public schools to homeschool, and many of them do not complete their high school education. Most participants expressed concern that when the dropout age in

Kentucky changed to 18, students began transferring to homeschool more often instead of persisting to graduate. Participant 7 said:

The state changed the dropout age to 18 and that has help dropout rates, but some students just go to homeschool as a way to drop out. The court system does not seem as helpful as it once was, as there are not many consequences for truancy. Some students who are not happy at school just go to homeschool but that is really a way to drop out, and the court system is not as helpful as it once was at keeping students in school.

Participant 3 mentioned some struggling students under 18 now transfer from high school to homeschool, which she thinks is the new way to drop out, as homeschool completion is not monitored by the state and this process will contribute to lower educational attainment rates for communities. Participant 4 stated:

Students who have low academic performance, failing grades, low test scores, and don't promote to the next grade suffer from a lot of frustration and disappointment. Sometimes they just give up and continue failing because they are afraid to try and fail again. These kids have failed over and over in school. When these kids feel as though they do not have what it takes to be successful in school, they sometimes choose to go to homeschool to avoid the failure of school.

Participants 2, 5, and 6 also reported homeschooling is a current trend for students who do not want to be at school under the required dropout age of 18 to withdraw from school, and few students actually graduate from an accredited homeschool program.

Participant 5 also mentioned some students leave school by going to homeschool when they get upset about disciplinary consequences or low grades. Additionally, Participant 3

stated students sometimes transfer to homeschool and then return to public school, which can create a problem with attaining the credits needed to graduate from high school.

RQPA Theme 2: Students who do not persist to graduate share common attributes or risk factors.

Various attributes or risk factors were reported by participants as common for students who do not persist to graduate. Many respondents indicated schools play a role in the students' decisions to persist to graduate, as students sometimes leave high school due to school related factors. Additionally, student demographic and family factors impact students' persistence to graduation.

RQPA Sub-theme 2a: Lack of academic success. Most respondents emphasized students who drop out at their school often are behind on credits and have failing grades. All respondents identified a connection between poor attendance, low grades, and high school students dropping out. Failure to be promoted to the next grade level was identified as an indicator that a student may choose not to persist to graduation. Participant 1 stated being behind on credits is the most obvious predictor of a student being at risk of dropping out of school. Participant 2 stated for some high school students dropping out is always a choice they have; whereas, many students have parents who insist they persist to graduate from high school. Additionally, some students are so far behind academically and have not been promoted to the next grade level so graduation does not seem possible to them. Participant 2 also asserted students sometimes have the facade of being successful in middle school, where few students fail classes and all students are promoted to the next grade level; thus, the failure of classes the freshman year hits them very hard causing them to feel immensely defeated and giving up on being

successful in school due to lack of credits earned. Participant 8 stated parents sometimes allow the student to drop out rather than being persistent to improve the student's attendance. Furthermore, some students choose to leave high school, as they do not wish to conform to the norms and expectations. Participant 1 highlighted some students who drop out of high school are hopeful they can pass the GED examination.

RQPA Sub-theme 2b: Anxiety and social issues. Some participants mentioned anxiety as a reason some students choose to leave high school. Participant 8 stated school and social anxiety sometimes is a factor in the student's decision to drop out. Participants 5 and 6 also indicated some students who withdraw from high school are struggling with anxiety issues. Participant 4 stated:

Some students feel as if they do not fit in. They disengage from school to avoid any attention being paid to them. Sometimes they do not even attend school much, being absent a lot which also results in them failing more classes. Or they get in trouble in class because they are not showing interest and doing their work.

Overall some students have a lot of social problems.

Participant 1 shared some students are influenced to leave school due to bullying issues or feeling unsafe, which can cause social anxiety for some students. Interview transcripts indicated school counselors believe some students face challenges at school related to social issues and anxiety, impacting students' desire to persist to graduation.

RQPA Sub-theme 2c: Sense of belonging. The feeling of not belonging at school was mentioned by several participants. Participant 1 stated, "Most students who choose to drop out rather than graduate feel as if they do not fit in at school and they just don't want to be here." Participant 1 also mentioned the necessity in involving at risk

students in clubs and extracurricular activities to help them feel they belong at school. Likewise, Participant 5 mentioned most students who drop out do not feel they fit in, and one student even said during a meeting to withdraw, “This school is set up for the rich kids and nobody cares about me.” Participant 6 mentioned some students do not feel school is relevant to them and their situation, so they choose to leave and go to work.

RQPA Sub-theme 2d: Family factors. Family factors also were discussed by participants as a factor in students’ decisions to leave school before graduating, as students sometimes withdraw from school due to family related factors or monetary concerns. Participants 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8 discussed students becoming a parent as a factor in the decision to leave high school before graduating. Additionally, evidence shows some students must work to support family members or choose to stay home to take care of a sick family member. Participant 4 stated:

Students are often carrying part of the household financial burden for the family and say they must withdraw from school to work to meet the needs in the home.

Some of these students have children or their own mother is a single mom, so they want to work to provide for family members.

Students sometimes leave school due to employment related reasons, which often relate to family issues. Participant 1 shared a story about a student who earned \$12 an hour at a summer job and felt he must continue work in August rather than return to school for the senior year. Participant 3 stated, “Many students who drop out of high school do not have their basic needs met. They may be homeless or moving around a lot. Or they might not know where their next meal is going to come from so they feel pressured to get a job to survive.” Participant 2 reported most students who drop out from school do not have

family members who are involved in their education, and many of them at the age of 18 complete the withdrawal forms without a parent present. Similarly, Participants 1, 4, 7, and 8 ascertained students who withdraw from school lack parents who are supportive of their education.

**Research Question Part B: Counseling Strategies and Interventions
to Help At-Risk Learners Persist to Graduate**

The second part (PB) of the research question (RQ) in this study examined the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding counseling strategies, programs, and interventions to help at-risk learners persist to graduate. The demographic background questionnaire data were collected. The interview protocol included several open-ended prompts addressing this research question:

- a) Describe the counselor's role in dropout prevention programs at your school.
Please give some examples of how you demonstrate this role in dropout prevention.
- b) (Refer to the background demographic questionnaire. Connect the response to the question regarding the formal School Counseling Program.) Describe how your counseling program has been successful and/or what struggles and failures were experienced in providing interventions for students at risk of dropping out of high school.
- c) (Present the counselor a copy of the ASCA National Model and point out the standard related to students dropping out.) On a scale of one to five (one being the lowest, five being the highest) how well do you think you have

implemented a comprehensive school guidance program per the ASCA National Model. Why do you give this rating?

After analysis of the interview data and demographic background questionnaire, three themes emerged:

RQPB Theme 1: Positive relationships among educational stakeholders are very important in student success at school.

- a. Positive relationships with a trusted adult at school impact persistence to graduation.
- b. Parent engagement impacts persistence to graduation.
- c. Mentoring programs can be an effective intervention to promote persistence to graduation.

RQPB Theme 2: Alternative education can be an effective intervention to promote persistence to graduation.

- a. Alternative school placement can be an effective intervention to promote persistence to graduation.
- b. Online learning can be an effective intervention to promote persistence to graduation.

RQPB Theme 3: Counseling can be an effective intervention promoting persistence to graduation.

- a. Individual counseling promotes persistence to graduation.
- b. Academic advising promotes persistence to graduation.
- c. College and career counseling promote persistence to graduation.

RQPB Theme 1: Positive relationships among educational stakeholders are very important in student success at school.

Analysis of interview transcripts revealed evidence to support the theme that positive relationships among educational stakeholders are very important in student success at school. All participants discussed the importance of students having a positive relationship with trusted adults at school. Additionally, positive staff and parent relationships were described as an important part of engaging parents in students' success at school. Evidence revealed examples of ways to build positive relationships among educational stakeholders.

RQPB Sub-theme 1a: Positive relationships with trusted adult at school. All participants stressed positive relationships with a trusted adult are essential in order for all at-risk students to persist to graduate. Sub-themes showed various strategies, programs, and interventions are utilized at high schools to promote persistence to graduation. Participant 8 stated, "Building trust and relationship with the student is so important," as such relationships are imperative when students face obstacles. Participant 7 stressed counselors must make it a priority to meet with at-risk students and set goals to have a very solution-focused plan for each student, emphasizing the need for positive relationships, accountability, and student ownership of the intervention plan. Participant 7 stated students who are contemplating dropping out of school often talk with counselors or administrators about their desire to leave school, and they often talk to the one with whom they already have a positive relationship about the matter. Participant 1 emphasized, "Students must have someone to turn to when they are having an issue." Participant 4 asserted the importance of administrators, counselors, and teachers trying to

build positive relationships with all students so each student has someone to turn to for help. Participant 5 also mentioned the importance of building positive relationships with students and their families. Participant 6 emphasized counselors and teachers who have positive relationships with students will know if something is wrong at home or changing in their life and can then find interventions that work for the situation and the student. Participant 7 accentuated the importance of building and maintaining strong positive relationships with students, even though it takes a lot of work and effort to do so consistently.

RQPB Sub-theme 1b: Parent engagement. All participants referenced parent engagement as an important part of students' success in persistence to graduation.

Participant 2 stated:

Trying to get parents involved is a huge part of what we do, as we contact parents of struggling students and let them know we are worried about their child and what they do here. We inform parents about services we have to offer and check to see if there is additional information the parent can tell us to help better serve their child.

Participant 1 expressed the importance of positive parent contacts, as well as calling parents to inform them of academic deficiencies, attendance issues, and other student concerns. Participant 2 affirmed the importance of setting up parent-teacher conferences to foster the working relationship between the parent and teacher. Additionally, Participant 2 remarked calling parents and returning parent phone calls is an effective intervention in many situations. Participant 4 also mentioned the benefits of communicating with parents regarding positive and negative topics in order to gain the

parent support. Participants 6 and 8 stressed the importance of parent communication and emphasized the counselor's role in proactive parent communication. Participant 6 stated, "School counselors serve as a liaison between the parent and the school. Parents should be informed of their student's needs at school."

RQPB Sub-theme 1c: Mentoring programs. Participants 4 and 5 reported the importance of having mentoring programs in place, emphasizing the positive relationship with a caring adult over multiple years as a very effective way to help at-risk students set goals and be accountable for them. Participant 3 mentioned using a mentoring system for students who are failing a lot of classes, where administrators and teachers are paired with students to mentor to keep them on track. Participant 2 described a mentoring program through which students who are at risk for not graduating are paired with community members who meet with them regularly at school to encourage them to persist to graduate and discuss options for higher education after high school.

RQPB Theme 2: Alternative education programs can be an effective intervention to promote persistence to graduation.

Alternative education programs were described by all participants as an effective intervention for students who are not successful at a traditional high school. Alternative education programs provide an opportunity for a personalized educational program. The academic environment of an alternative school program sometimes includes smaller class sizes, integrated curriculum, and individualized instruction. Online learning can be a part of an alternative school program or a specialized program at a traditional high school. Participants also discussed the need for more alternative education options for students.

RQPB Sub-theme 2a: Alternative schools. Most participants discussed the value of the alternative school to promote persistence to graduation, as some students can find more success at an alternative school. Participant 8 accentuated the need for consideration of the alternative school when traditional classroom settings do not work for a student. Participant 7 mentioned, “At the alternative school, everything functions quite a bit different from the high school. Students are sent there for a variety of reasons, and most them don’t usually like school. The alternative school is a very important program.” Participant 4 noted students in the alternative school can attend half day or evening hours, which allows them to work or take care of a child. Participant 4 stated, “We find an alternative school is almost like getting a resource setting for students who need smaller classes and a smaller school, which can be very beneficial to some students.” Additionally, Participant 2 mentioned some students who are not doing well at the high school can be successful at the alternative school, where they get more individual attention with fewer distractions.

RQPB Sub-theme 2b: Online learning. Some counselors mentioned performance-based classes, such as online learning, can be a good alternative for students who are not successful at the traditional high school. Participant 2 stated, “Many of my struggling students like online classes, so if they could have the opportunity to do everything online in the home setting they would prefer that and could actually be successful in the online class.” Participant 6 stated:

Some students need a choice for how they learn and might need to go to an alternative school or virtual school to be more successful. We have an online program using Apex learning for credit recovery where students can earn credits

for failed classes. Students who are approved for the online learning at our alternative school can do all the work at home or just attend school for a few hours. This type of program keeps kids from dropping out because they have the option to just do the work online instead of coming to the high school.

Participant 5 also mentioned a credit recovery program using Apex, where students complete credits online, stating, “It is really amazing to see how online classes can motivate a child to try to finish their work and graduate. Most of them want to graduate but some are so far behind they feel it is impossible in regular classes at the high school.” Participant 7 also mentioned an online program available at the alternative school as positive for some students.

RQPB Theme 3: Counseling can be an effective intervention for students who are not successful in high school.

School counselors work closely with students and play an integral role in development in the areas of academic, career, and social development. All participants in this study served as school counselors in large rural high schools, and all expressed their perception of the benefit of school counseling programs. School counseling services include an array of interventions, programs, and strategies to assist students.

RQPB Sub-theme 3a: Individual counseling. Participant 1 expressed the benefits of individual counseling, stating students sometimes need to explore issues to determine the underlying problem that is holding them back. Participant 2 also stated individual counseling often is the best avenue for a student who is disconnected from school and needs a plan to be successful. Participant 6 stated a counselor can help students uncover their underlying problems and issues through individual counseling.

Participant 7 stated individual counseling can be an effective intervention for struggling students, and solution-focused counseling can help students find better alternatives to solve their problems.

RQPB Sub-theme 3b: Academic advising. Participant 3 stated, “Counselors serve as academic advisors, helping students choose courses in their schedule. Counselors also meet with students who are not successful academically and help them problem solve ways to improve grades.” Participant 4 described academic advising as an opportunity for the counselor to meet individually with students and help them make choices of coursework and guide them to find their interests.

RQPB Sub-theme 3c: College and career counseling. Participant 7 emphasized the effectiveness of college and career counseling to engage students in their education, as it can provide an opportunity for them to find school more meaningful and relevant. Participant 2 stated career counseling and career exploration activities can help students find purpose and work toward attainable goals. Likewise, Participant 5 emphasized the impact of career counseling and academic advising as interventions to support student success. Participant 8 shared, “I currently work with students a lot in the areas of college preparation, application, and scholarships. I help them schedule college tours and make decisions about which college they want to attend.”

Research Question Part C: School Counselors’ Perceptions of Implementation of Best Practices to Help At-Risk Learners Persist to Graduate at Their School

The third part (PC) of the research question (RQ) in this study examined the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding the school counselor’s perception of implementation of best practices to help at-risk learners persist to graduate at their

school of employment. The interview protocol included several open-ended questions regarding the counselor's role in student persistence to graduation. The interview protocol included several open-ended prompts addressing this research question:

- a) Consider the following scenario: A teacher comes into your office with concerns that an eleventh-grade student told her his plan to drop out of school. This student is failing classes, has frequent absences, and has a record of repeated misbehavior. Describe your action plan for this student.
- b) What resources or strategies are in place at your school for students at risk of dropping out? What makes these resources or strategies effective or ineffective?

After analysis of the interview data, themes emerged describing the professional school counselor's viewpoint of the counselor's role in persistence to graduation initiatives. Sub-themes showed various specific counselor roles and details. The participants shared a variety of roles they have related to persistence to graduation. All participants emphasized the school counselor serves as an advocate for all students. After analysis of the interview data and demographic background questionnaire, two themes emerged:

RQPC Theme 1: The school counselor provides student services to promote persistence to graduation.

- a. The school counselor provides data monitoring to determine at-risk indicators and student needs.
- b. The school counselor provides group activities promoting academic and career development.
- c. The school counselor provides counseling services to students.

- d. The school counselor provides academic advising to students.
- e. The school counselor provides crisis counseling to students.

RQPC Theme 2. The school counselor provides indirect services to students.

- a. The school counselor provides student referrals to other agencies.
- b. The school counselor provides student referrals to academic interventions.
- c. The school counselor collaborates with school faculty.
- d. The school counselor communicates with stakeholders.
- e. The school counselor provides positive transitions to and within high school.

RQPC Theme 1: The school counselor provides student services.

Analysis of interview transcripts and the demographic background questionnaire revealed evidence to support the theme that school counselors provide student services to support persistence to graduation. School counselors design, coordinate, implement, and monitor interventions to promote student success in school. Because some students face obstacles, hardships, and a variety of unpleasant circumstances, they often are in need of additional programs and interventions to help them overcome their barriers to learning and persist to graduate. School counselors identify students in need of services

RQPC Sub-theme 1a: Data monitoring to determine at-risk indicators and student needs. Most participants discussed some type of data monitoring regarding at-risk students to help target interventions to those students who need them. Participant 1 mentioned the need for counselors to “stay ahead of the game and use all data points to predict which students are less likely to be successful.” Participant 3 described the Persistence to Graduation Report in the student information system Infinite Campus as an important tool when working with students at risk of dropping out of high school, as it

generates a list of at-risk students based on indicators such as behavior, attendance, grades, and other factors. Participant 4 described the use of attendance, behavior, and academic data to target students who need interventions, as well as the use of the Persistence to Graduation report in Infinite Campus. Participant 2 described how helpful it is to look at prior years' grades and attendance when working with students to determine what needs they might have currently and offer services.

RQPC Sub-theme 1b: Counselor group activities promoting academic and career development. Several participants described their involvement in planning college and career activities with community members as an important part of the college and career advising work with students. Participant 4 shared:

I spend a lot of time planning workshops and seminars for students. I have monthly meetings with all the seniors and bring in guest speakers to help them with the college decision making process. I also plan lessons about financial aid for college and scholarships. Then I like to bring in motivational speakers, and sometimes I work with the Youth Service Center Coordinator on guest speakers to benefit the students.

Participant 2 stressed a lot of time, work, and collaboration with community members is needed to plan college and career fairs, and students find out the community supports them through these activities. Participant 7 stated, "We have a college and career counselors that helps with college access, and we really work hard schoolwide on soft skills." Participant 6 mentioned community members are invited to the school regularly to work with students on career planning activities. Participant 5 commented counselors

plan activities to promote citizenship and a good work ethic, including college and career fairs.

RQPC Sub-theme 1c: The counseling services. Participants described the benefits of school counseling as an intervention. Participant 3 shared:

As a school counselor the most important thing I do is counseling students. I help kids resolve personal or family problems. Sometimes students just need someone to listen to them when they are having a social problem or a relationship problem and do not need advice. I help them weight the pros and cons of situations to determine what they want to do in their relationships. Sometimes students are going through a divorce or the anniversary of a loved one's death. I help them cope and recognize their strengths and weaknesses.

Participant 7 emphasized the importance of stakeholders in understanding the counselor's mental health counseling preparation within the school counseling certification, which in fact prepares counselors for individual counseling. Participant 1 emphasized the benefit of individual counseling of at-risk students to explore personal issues and set goals for success. Participant 1 stated:

Hopefully I would already have built rapport with a student before the discussion of dropping out occurred. Just letting them know that someone does care about them, and that there are options available to them, can help so many of our students.

Participant 2 stated intense counseling is sometimes needed, and after a session or two sometimes it is necessary to refer a student to an outside mental healthcare provider.

Participant 5 stated that sometimes students just need someone to talk to about what is

going on in their life, and through counseling students often can make better choices. Solution-focused counseling was mentioned by Participant 7 as beneficial when addressing students who face problems, as they can realize their own strengths through counseling and face their struggles with more positive outcomes.

Findings from analysis of responses on the demographic background questionnaire indicate the participants spend an average of 24% of their time counseling students. Some participants' amount of time spent counseling students was significantly lower than others. The amount of time counselors reported being spent counseling students ranged from 10% to 40%.

RQPC Sub-theme 1d: Academic advising. Participant 1 shared her perception of working with students who are not successful academically in school:

The first step when I work with students who are failing academically is help them determine the reasons they are not successful, such as attendance and behavior. If I can motivate them to improve their attendance, we can usually bring the grades up with tutoring. The behavior is often a result of poor academic ability, so I teach study skills lessons to students too.

Similarly, Participant 3 stated:

If a student is failing multiple classes, I email their teachers and send them to academic enrichment time with that teacher. They can retake quizzes or make up assignments, and sometimes they show improvement after I meet with them to work out the plan of bring up their grades.

RQPC Sub-theme 1e: Crisis counseling services. Regarding these services, Participant 1 shared:

School counselors are involved with planning for school crisis and crisis plans.

We serve on committees ensuring we are prepared for anything, whether it be an earthquake, tornado, fire, death, bus wreck, or suicide. School shootings have been more common the last few years we also are a part of the crisis plans for lockdowns and active shooter events.

Participant 2 stated:

My days do not always work out as I plan them. I do a lot of crisis intervention. I meet with students who are having suicidal thoughts and do a lot of assessments with them. I also see students who are out of control with anger or anxiety.

Similarly, Participant 5 mentioned providing support to students and families during crisis situations, such as a death in the family or violence in the home. Participant 7 mentioned serving on the school crisis team, providing reassurance and counseling to students who are upset due to a death, severe weather event, or other crisis. Participant 8 stated:

I counsel several students each month who are thinking of harming themselves. Sometimes they have been abused or are having family problems at home. Other times they have a mental illness and are in crisis because of that. Sometimes I spend several hours with crisis intervention and getting the student the needed help.

RQPC Theme 2: The School Counselor provides indirect student services.

Analysis of interview transcripts and the demographic background questionnaire revealed evidence to support the theme that school counselors provide indirect student services to support persistence to graduation. Students transitioning to high school are

sometimes unprepared for the challenges they face academically, developmentally, and socially. As students persist to graduate, additional support services can be beneficial.

RQPC Sub-theme 2a: Referral to outside agencies. Several participants mentioned referring students regularly to outside mental health agencies. Participant 6 stated:

I counsel several students who are experiencing suicidal ideations. Sometimes these students already have an outside therapist or counselor, but if they don't then I refer them through our local Pennyroyal Respond hotline for an evaluation. Often students are hospitalized for an evaluation.

Participant 2 mentioned an outside mental health agency has a therapist who works at the high school, making it easier for students to get the counseling services they need. Additionally, Participant 1 mentioned students with severe mental health issues or emotional problems are referred to various mental health service providers when intensive services are needed.

RQPC Sub-theme 2b: Referral to programs. School counselors collaborate with educators regarding student success in the classroom and coordinate interventions for students who are not successful in the classroom. Several participants mentioned tutoring programs and extended school services (ESS) as interventions for at-risk students. Participant 1 discussed the benefit of before or after-school tutoring, Saturday school, and summer school for failing students or students who need additional instruction time. Participant 4 stated, "It is important to identify whether it is truly an academic need and the student needs help getting caught up or on basic skills, or whether there is another underlying need" and added individual tutoring can be helpful and gives

more information about the student's problems. Participant 5 stated, "When I am working with a student who is not successful academically, I make plans for them to attend ESS tutoring and follow up to see if it helps." Participant 6 refers students who are not successful academically to the ESS breakfast club, which is good for students who are missing assignments. Participant 7 stated, "Tutoring through ESS can be helpful for students failing classes or those who need to do credit recovery to make up a failed class, and we do our best to offer a wide gamut of choices during our academic period."

RQPC Sub-theme 2c: Collaboration of school counselors with school faculty to provide strategic resources. Several participants described the working relationship between the school counselor and principal as one that is very important when working with students at risk of dropping out of high school. Participant 5 stressed the importance of having a good working relationship with teachers, as they are the ones with students each day and the ones who refer students to see the counselor. Participant 3 emphasized the first step when working with a student often involves first working with the principal and teachers to get more information about the student and seeking input on the plan. Participant 1 mentioned the first thing she does after meeting with a student who mentions dropping out of school is e-mail the teachers to determine their concerns and ask for input.

RQPC Sub-theme 2d: Communication with stakeholders. Participant 2 shared, "When a student is having a problem, I often talk or email with parents, teachers, and administrators to inform them and seek their input." Participant 8 stated, "As a counselor I am often the main contact between school teachers and parents. Parents call to check on students' grades, and I call parents to inform them of problems students are having at

school.” Participant 1 shared, “When a student is having an issue, I often call their parents to inform them, as the student wellbeing is my main concern.” Additionally, Participant 7 emphasized the importance of hosting parent workshops as a time to communicate with parents, as sometimes parents benefit from encouraged involvement in students’ education.

RQPC Sub-theme 2e: Foster positive transition to and within high school.

Most counselors mentioned the importance of a smooth transition from middle school to high school and for each grade level. Participant 3 stated:

High school orientation activities are a very important part of students’ transition to high school. Counselors help parents with the transition by letting them know what to expect from their child’s high school experiences. Academics and choosing classes are important, but parents also need to know about the stressors of high school like social media. Counselors help parents be involved and know what services are offered to students. Parents can call counselors and discuss tutoring options or counseling needs for their student, and they need to know what counselors have to offer students.

Most participants also maintain lists of students who lack enough credits to promote to the next grade level and target those students for counseling services. Participant 2 mentioned calling the parents of students who do not promote to the next grade level, stating parents are not always aware of students’ failing grades. Additionally, the counselor informs students of credit recovery options for summer school or during the school year, as there are options to make up the missed credit and promote to the next grade level. Participant 1 also stated mailing letters home or calling parents of students

who are failing classes at the end of the semester is helpful, as some families are not aware of students' failing grades and credit recovery options.

Communication between staff regarding students' needs as they transition to the next grade or building can help counselors better target interventions. Participant 1 asserted the importance of the counselor communicating with the middle school staff regarding transition of eighth graders to high school, as this can help build the target list of students who need extra support. Likewise, Participant 4 mentioned an Excel spreadsheet is prepared by middle school staff detailing specific needs of at-risk students who have behavior problems, poor attendance, failing grades, and other risk factors high school administrators may need to know. Additionally, Participant 2 mentioned looking at prior data to determine which students were not successful in middle school when planning schedules and interventions.

Research Question Part D: School Counselors' Perceptions of the Role of School Administrators in Strategies to Help At-Risk Learners Persist to Graduate

The fourth part (PD) of the research question (RQ) in this study examined the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding the school administrator's direct role in strategies to help at-risk learners graduate. The interview protocol included open-ended questions regarding the school administrator's role in student persistence to graduation:

- a) What role do administrators in your building play in dropout prevention efforts?
- b) Describe effective and ineffective administrator strategies related to dropout prevention.

After analysis of the interview data, two themes emerged:

RQPD Theme 1: School administrators should work to build a positive school culture.

- a. School administrators focus on positive relationships with students and stakeholders.
- b. School administrators ensure students have a variety of options for curriculum in school.
- c. School administrators collaborate effectively with stakeholders.
- d. School administrators ensure resources are available to students.
- e. School administrators build strong community partnerships.

RQPD Theme 2. School administrators implement creative and effective interventions.

- a. Alternative learning programs are available to students who are not successful.
- b. Online learning options are available as an intervention.

RQPD Theme 1: School administrators should work to build a positive school culture.

Analysis of interview transcripts revealed evidence to support the theme that school administrators are key culture builders in a school. Participants identified some critical elements of building a positive school culture while promoting persistence to graduation. Building positive relationships with students and stakeholders, ensuring a variety of educational programs, collaborating with stakeholders, providing adequate school resources, and community were identified as strong ways to build a positive school culture while promoting persistence to graduation.

RQPD Sub-theme 1a: Foster positive relationships. Relationships were identified as very important as administrators work to build a positive school culture and

promote persistence to graduation. Participant 8 stated the most effective administrators who make the most impact with at-risk students are those who go the extra mile to help students and build a trusting relationship with the student. Participant 7 shared the importance of administrators helping students connect with other adults in the building, such as custodians, teachers, and cafeteria workers. Participant 6 stressed the importance of school administrators being visible throughout the day and always making time to talk to students. Participant 1 stated:

Everything is changing so we have to be up for changes. That is what I would tell administrators. Don't be so grumpy! Understand students! Smile! Don't be the enforcer all the time. Maybe show a little more compassion, because many students are facing terrible situations and need the positive relationship with you to help them through it.

RQPD Sub-theme 1b: Variety of options for students. Participants described the benefit of students having a variety of options to prepare for college and careers while in high school. Participant 2 pointed out the value of co-op or intern programs for at-risk students, where students gain relevant work experience. Several participants mentioned the value of an Early College program, where high school juniors and seniors who have met college benchmarks can attend college rather than spending the entire day at high school. Participant 2 stated some students attend the community college in a neighboring town and are not required to report to the high school, which gives them the option of working and attending college their senior year.

Similarly, participants also described the value of CTE for students who are not always successful in high school. Participant 7 remarked that many students who drop out

of school thrive in classes with hands-on learning and struggle with core classes; therefore, opportunities for additional technical programs and career training would benefit many students once they are identified as a hands-on learner.

RQPD Sub-theme 1c: Collaboration with stakeholders. Collaboration of stakeholders was viewed by participants as an essential part of dropout prevention, as administrators and counselors working together to help students persist to graduate is effective. Participant 3 stated, “We must work as a team, and everyone has to be held accountable and meet together to positively support one another and provide multiple opportunities to help our students.” Participant 4 emphasized the importance of counselors and administrators meeting together to discuss student needs and formulate an action plan, as often the students on the target lists need administrator and counselor support. Several participants discussed the role of the district administration, especially the Director of Pupil Personnel (DPP) in intervening to promote persistence to graduation. Participant 1 works in a district where students complete the withdrawal paperwork at the district office with the DPP, where all other options are discussed beforehand. Participant 7 stated, “We work closely with the DPP to identify students early who are considering dropout as an option, making a plan for next steps to help the student.”

RQPD Sub-theme 1d: School resources. School support personnel were mentioned as positive resources for students. Several participants mentioned the benefit of having a family resource or youth service center. Participant 4 emphasized there often is a need in the home, and youth service center personnel often are able to get to some of

the specific needs and provide much needed assistance. Participant 2 reiterated the student assistance coordinators function like therapists as well as advocates for families.

Participant 1 shared the benefit of the School Resource Officer when working with at-risk students, as they often can provide a clear picture of real-world opportunities, options, and consequences to students who are struggling. Additionally, Participant 1 discussed the recent school shootings and bullying issues, stressing school administrators face challenges in maintaining school safety while working to build a positive school culture.

RQPD Sub-theme 1e: Community partnerships. All participants emphasized the benefit of involving community members in the school. Participant 1 described opportunities for local business people to visit the school and eat lunch prepared by the culinary class as a positive experience for all. According to Participant 2, programs involving community members such as Reality Stores and Close the Deal generate a lot of interest with students and help them see the community's support in persistence to graduation. Several participants referenced the challenges for students who transfer from other schools. Participant 7 emphasized when students are repeatedly placed back into the high school from the alternative school, the students often feel as if they do not belong anywhere. Such students often are in trouble with administrators the first few days back at the regular school and make comments that no one wants them at either school.

RQPD Theme 2: District and school level administrators implement creative and effective interventions.

Analysis of interview transcripts revealed evidence to support the theme that school administrators impact persistence to graduation through the implementation of

creative and effective interventions for at-risk students. Evidence revealed examples of interventions school administrators can seek to address the needs of at-risk students. Participant 6 emphasized schools must have programs readily available, such as online programs, homebound, and alternative learning as students need appealing alternatives to regular high school to motivate them to persist because there will always be students who need interventions to persist to graduate.

RQPD Sub-theme 2a: Alternative learning. Several participants stressed the alternative school can be an effective school environment for students to recover credits and get back on track to graduate from high school. Participant 2 mentioned an online program housed at the high school, where high school seniors can complete the coursework through Odysseyware and then not be required to attend school the remainder of the year. Participant 8 reiterated the need to examine other options when the traditional high school setting does not work for a student, as some students are more successful at the alternative school where there are more performance-based learning options. Participant 4 stated, “The alternative school seems to better meet the needs of some students, as there are smaller classes and students are usually successful there.” Respondent 7 shared stories of several students who successfully persisted to graduate once enrolled in the alternative school program. Participant 2 reiterated the benefits of online learning, as some students prefer to take classes online where they do not face the social pressures of traditional high school.

RQPD Sub-theme 2b: Academic intervention. Participant 4 discussed the role of administrators and counselors looking at data, including grades and attendance, to determine student needs. Several participants described a daily academic intervention

period and its impact on at-risk students. Participant 8 described the intervention period as a time for at-risk students to attend a catch-up session to work on missing assignments or gain extra tutoring. Participant 7 stated the academic period is used for credit recovery, tutoring, making up missed assignments, clubs, and more.

RQPD Sub-theme 2c: Behavior interventions. Behavior interventions also were identified as an important role of administrators in persistence to graduation. Participant 2 mentioned the importance of school administrators looking at students holistically instead of their academic performance or behavior individually, as sometimes there is a reason they are acting out in class or not academically successful. Participant 6 emphasized the challenges of administrators when dealing with at-risk students, as their behavior sometimes destroys the learning environment of other students, yet the interventions influence the student's decision to drop out. Participant 5 reiterated some students who drop out of school are discipline problems, so it is important for administrators to look for the underlying problems when students are acting out regularly. Participant 4 asserted the importance of administrators enlisting help of the team of counselors and other staff when addressing discipline, as often misbehaving students have underlying needs and a team approach is beneficial to the student.

**Research Question Part E: School Counselors' Perceptions of Barriers to
Implementing Strategies to Promote Persistence to Graduation**

The fifth part (PE) of the research question (RQ) in this study examined the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding the barriers to implementing strategies to help at-risk learners persist to graduate. The interview protocol included

open-ended questions regarding the barriers to implementing strategies to help at-risk learners.

- a) Everyone faces challenges. Describe some of the challenges school counselors, school administrators, and teachers face when identifying and working with students at risk for dropping out of high school. How did you help overcome the obstacles?
- b) In what ways did your counselor education program prepare you to design and implement interventions for at risk students? Tell me some areas you would like further training.
- c) Is there anything else you would like to share concerning students at risk for dropping out of school or student dropout?

After analysis of the interview data and background questionnaire, four themes and related sub-themes emerged:

RQPE Theme 1: Time is a key factor in interventions for at-risk students.

- a. Early intervention is very important.
- b. Educator time is limited.

RQPE Theme 2: Students often have parents who are not engaged in the student's education.

RQPE Theme 3: Lack of centralized resources, information, and training can be an obstacle when working with at-risk students.

RQPE Theme 4: Career and college preparatory goals are not aligned to ensure students understand the relevance of coursework, as preparation for both requires similar skill sets.

RQPE Theme 1: Time is important.

In this study, participants described their experiences and challenges related to time. Despite the challenge of finding time to provide the needed interventions and follow up, participants reported ways in which they provided interventions to students who were struggling to persist to graduate. All participants shared the mindset that early intervention for at-risk students is critical, emphasizing a variety of interventions must be available and multiple stakeholders must be involved to ensure students persist to graduate from high school.

RQPE Sub-theme 1a: Early intervention. One common concept found throughout interview data was that participants see the immense need for early intervention for struggling students. Participants 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 affirmed the importance of intervening as early as possible, rather than wait until at-risk students are so far behind they cannot graduate. Participant 7 stressed early intervention and consistent interventions can help when a plan is made to address the problem and multiple stakeholders are involved in the plan, the interventions, and the follow up. Participant 4 emphasized intervening as early as freshman year is especially important, as students who are failing classes and are truant the freshman year likely will not improve without intense intervention.

Interventions also must be provided in a timely and consistent manner. Participant 1 mentioned by the time the program is offered to a student as an intervention, the student has sometimes decided to drop out and cannot be convinced to stay. Participant 2 expressed the difficulty of getting freshmen and sophomores into alternative school and

district online programs as a barrier, as sometimes these students drop out of school before being admitted to other programs when early intervention does not occur.

RQPE Sub-theme 1b: Lack of time to follow through with interventions. All participants reported on the background questionnaire they spend a lot of time working in the “other” category, which limits their time spent counseling students. Activities such as assessment coordinator; hall, lunch, and bus duty requirements; and master scheduling of students were reported to consume an abundance of counselor time. Respondent 7 mentioned the barrier of time to follow through with interventions, emphasizing administrators and counselors have the intentions of building more positive relationships, yet maintaining those relationships does not always occur due to the allocation of their time and focus in the work day. Participant 8 described that lack of time to counsel students individually to formulate plans for intervention is a barrier, as she is responsible for college access campaigns, grading, testing, and chairing meetings for special education students. Participant 1 reported the lack of time to counsel students individually as the greatest barrier encountered, as other duties take up so much of her time she does not spend much time daily counseling students.

RQPE Theme 2: Students at risk of dropping out of high school often have parents who are not supportive or engaged in their education.

Most participants reported working with a lot of students whose parents are not supportive of the child’s educational needs. Participant 5 stated, “In my area, a lot of parents do not respect education and do not feel it is important for their kids to go to school. A lot of times if a kid is absent a lot, their siblings are absent a lot as well.”

Participant 3 expressed the challenges of working with students whose families do not support educational attainment.

RQPE Theme 3: Lack of centralized resources, information, and training can be an obstacle when working with students.

Sometimes schools cannot do enough for some students to keep them in school, as they have multiple, interconnected challenges such as poverty, health issues, bullying, hunger, or housing issues leading to poor attendance and difficulty in school. Participant 7 stated, “The socioeconomic barriers of our students in my rural, poor school system are evident, and sometimes it is difficult to help a student enough to survive.” Participant 4 emphasized, “We can get kids many things they need through family resource centers, such as food, clothing, and bills paid, but we cannot help them with transportation issues to ESS or school activities.”

Evidence suggests the changes in the court system’s involvement in truancy also impact persistence to graduation. Respondent 7 stressed the court system does not support schools’ efforts for intervention for truant students to the degree it once did, which means there are few consequences for truancy. Participant 5 discussed a truancy diversion program at the school level but added there are some things that could be improved to offer more resources to students who are not attending school. Participant 2 mentioned the court system is not as helpful as it once was in addressing truancy, as students are now allowed to be truant without consequences, leading to low grades and missed credits.

Participant 1 mentioned the importance of looking at all school practices to determine whether they are in fact what is best for students, as sometimes school policies

can be barriers for students. For example, some students do not have a ride home and are unable to attend after-school tutoring or detention, leaving them in a situation where they face additional consequences. Participant 2 mentioned a policy requiring students to have certain attendance requirements to participate in the high school graduation ceremony, stating that each year someone drops out because they will be unable to walk in the graduation ceremony.

Participant 3 described the counselor education program as including a lot of instruction on theory and techniques, rather than practical strategies to help at-risk students persist to graduate and mentioned the high cost of attending specialized professional development. Participant 3 stated, “I wish there were more opportunities for me as a counselor to network with other counselors and see how they handle the day to needs of organizing the supports for students.” Participant 8 also stressed the counselor preparation program did not prepare her to implement interventions for at-risk students, and all had to be learned by trial and error. Participant 7 mentioned there are few community supports for drug addicts, and further training on addictions would be beneficial for counselors.

Additionally, participants reported on the demographic background questionnaire their desire for more training regarding delivery of interventions for at-risk students. Participants 2, 3, and 5 noted their school counselor preparation programs did not provide adequate training in counseling students with multiple risk factors and problems. Participants 1, 3, and 6 reported training to be a barrier, as they were not permitted or did not feel as if they should attend trainings outside of school regularly due to the students’ needs while they were out of the office.

RQPE Theme 4: Career and college preparatory goals should be aligned to ensure students understand the relevance, as preparation for both requires similar skill sets.

Participants described the barrier of perceived relevance of college and career preparation. Participant 1 observed that while some students do not perceive all coursework as relevant, academic coursework does in fact prepare students for careers. Likewise, career preparatory coursework prepares students to be more successful in college, as they learn the soft skills needed to survive in college and the workplace. This person stressed many students are seeking job training, as they want to be in a technical school type setting; and most students who choose to drop out of school do not see the value of remaining at high school, making it difficult for the counselor to persuade the student to finish high school. This is related to the issue Participant 6 pointed out where some students and parents do not see school as real-world application and think they can be successful in careers without the diploma. Adding to ideas, Participant 6 stated the need to involve the community more in career development activities for students. Participant 5 stated, “As a counselor, I feel like all I do is work with kids on college applications and scholarships, and I wish I had time to talk to ones who are not going to college about career pathways.” Several participants did not mention the word “career” at all, which may be a disconnect between their idea of what students need from them and the students’ actual needs.

Overall Findings

An analysis of participant responses resulted in several themes. During the coding process, the researcher compiled a list of strategies, programs, and other actions

mentioned by participants as promoting persistence to graduation for high school students. Evidence from the interviews and demographic background questionnaire suggests the participants in this study have similar perceptions regarding ways to intervene and the importance of early intervention.

Conclusion

In this study, the central research question examined the perceptions of school counselors employed at large rural high schools in western Kentucky regarding strategies that promote persistence to graduation for at-risk students. Without a high school education, individuals will face limitations in their life. Thus, school administrators, school counselors, and educators must focus on initiatives, programs, and strategies that assist at-risk students with persistence to graduation. Additionally, a strong focus on positive relationships, collaboration among stakeholders, and communication of stakeholders contribute to student persistence to graduation.

Research Question Part A investigated school counselors' perceptions of persistence to graduation in high school. Analysis of findings suggest withdrawal from high school as dropping out continues to be a problem, and risk factors often can be used to identify which students are struggling to persist to graduate. Additionally, participants articulated the increased frequency of students transferring to homeschool after Kentucky changed the age of mandatory compulsory attendance from 16 to 18. Findings suggest students who do not persist to graduate share common attributes or risk factors, including lack of academic success, poor attendance, anxiety, certain family factors, and a lack of sense of belonging at school.

Research Question Part B examined school counselors' perceptions of counseling strategies and interventions to help at-risk learners persist to graduate. Analysis of the findings suggests positive relationships among educational stakeholders are believed to be very important in student success at school. Alternative education programs can be an effective intervention to promote persistence to graduation. Findings also suggest school counseling can be an effective intervention promoting persistence to graduation and includes a range of student services.

Research Question Part C investigated school counselors' perceptions of implementation of best practices to help at-risk learners persist to graduate at the school in which they are employed. The study findings indicate the school counselor provides student services to promote persistence to graduation, such as data monitoring of student performance, classroom guidance activities, counseling, and academic advising. Additionally, the school counselor provides indirect services to students, such as referral to other agencies and interventions, collaboration with faculty, communication with stakeholders, and structured transition processes.

Research Question Part D examined school counselors' perceptions regarding the role of school administrators in strategies to help at-risk learners persist to graduate. Evidence suggests the school administrator's role in building a positive school culture contributes to students' persistence to graduation. Additionally, school administrators implement and monitor schoolwide intervention programs.

Research Question Part E investigated school counselors' perceptions of barriers to implementing strategies and programs to promote persistence to graduation. Findings suggest time can be a barrier, as intervening early is critical and allocating the time in the

student and educator schedule for the intervention can be difficult. Parents who are not supportive of students' educational needs were found to be an additional barrier.

Resources, information, and training were reported to be limited. Evidence also suggests college and career preparatory goals are not aligned in a way to ensure students understand the relevance of coursework.

The school counselor works collaboratively with educators, school administrators, parents, and the community to implement a school counseling program addressing students' academic, social/emotional, and career development. School administrators and school counselors work to build a positive school culture focusing on building positive relationships with all stakeholders. All schools have students who exhibit risk factors which may potentially impact persistence to graduation, such as poor academic performance, absenteeism, bullying, substance abuse, family hardship, and economic hardship. School counselors work to identify at-risk students and mitigate the risk factors by providing counseling services, interventions, and referrals to other agencies or programs. The school counselor also serves as an advocate for student needs, striving to overcome barriers related to attaining the needed resources and services for students. Early intervention continues to be a critical component of intervention programs, as well as allocating the time to provide and monitor interventions for students at risk of not persisting to graduation. In the next chapter, a discussion of major findings related to the literature on persistence to graduation provides implications for professionals in the field and recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of school counselors regarding strategies and interventions to promote persistence to graduation for students at risk of dropping out of high school. Previous research has shown various characteristics of students can be used to profile students most at risk of dropping out of high school rather than persisting to graduate (Balfanz et al., 2007). However, this study looked at school counselors' perceptions of the action plan needed to promote persistence to graduation for students who are at risk of not graduating from high school. If school counselors can work collaboratively with other stakeholders to provide interventions and activities to promote persistence to graduation, graduation rates can be improved and struggling students can persist to graduate (Adelman & Taylor, 2011; Balfanz et al., 2007; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Ratts et al., 2007; Rumberger & Lims, 2008). A plethora of research-based strategies, programs, and activities exist that cumulatively promote persistence to graduation (Balfanz et al., 2007; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Rumberger & Lims, 2008; Solberg et al., 2007). This study sought to answer the central research question: What are the perceptions of professional high school counselors regarding strategies that promote persistence to graduation for at-risk students? The following research question parts guided this study:

What are the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding:

- a. the problem of high school dropouts?
- b. counseling strategies and interventions to help at-risk learners?
- c. their school's implementation of best practices to help at-risk learners?

- d. the role of administrators in strategies to help at-risk learners graduate?
- e. the barriers to implementing strategies to help at-risk learners?

The data from this study provide a better understanding from the lens of school counselors regarding strategies, interventions, and the level of triage necessary to intervene with at-risk students to ensure persistence to graduation. The study was conducted at large rural high schools in central and western Kentucky. This chapter discusses the findings relative to the research question and its five parts and the literature reviewed.

Summary of Findings

This study sought to uncover factors and interventions related to at-risk students' decisions to persist to graduate from high school. School counselors from large western Kentucky high schools who participated in the study were asked 12 interview questions regarding their experiences working with high school students who were at risk of not persisting to graduate from high school and the measures taken to promote persistence to graduation. The findings indicate a solution-focused approach involving multiple stakeholders and interventions can benefit students and play a role in student persistence to graduation. Transcript findings illustrate several themes for each part of the research question and are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes and Sub-themes from Research Question, What are the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding:

Question Part	Question Theme	Question Subtheme
A. the problem of high school dropouts?	RQPA Theme 1: The professional school counselor believes high school dropouts are a problem.	1a: High school dropout 1b: Transfer to homeschool
	RQPA Theme 2: Students who do not persist to graduate share common attributes or risk factors.	2a: Lack of academic success 2b: Social anxiety 2c: Family factor. 2d: Lack sense of belonging at school
B. counseling strategies and interventions to help at-risk learners?	RQPB Theme 1: Positive relationships are very important.	1a: Positive student relationship with trusted adult at school 1b: Parent engagement 1c: Mentoring programs
	RQPB Theme 2: Alternative education can be an effective intervention.	2a: Alternative school placement 2b: Online learning
	RQPB Theme 3: Counseling can be an effective intervention for at-risk student.	3a: Individual counseling 3b: Academic advising 3c: College and career counseling
C. their school's implementation of best practices to help at-risk learners?	RQPC Theme 1: The school counselor provides direct counseling services to students.	1a: Data monitoring to identify at-risk students 1b: Counselor group activities promoting academic and career development 1c: Counseling services 1d: Academic advising 1e: Crisis counseling
	RQPC Theme 2: The counselor provides indirect services to students.	2a: Student referrals 2b: Referral to academic interventions 2c: Collaboration with faculty 2d: Communication with stakeholders 2e: Foster positive student transitions

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

D. the role of administrators in strategies to help at-risk learners graduate?	RQPD Theme 1: School administrators work to build a positive school culture.	1a: Foster positive relationships 1b: Variety of options for students 1c: Collaboration with stakeholders 1d: School resources 1e: Community partnerships
	RQPD Theme 2: School administrators implement creative and effective interventions.	2a: Alternative learning 2b: Academic intervention 2c: Behavior interventions.
E. the barriers to implementing strategies to help at-risk learners?	RQPE Theme 1: Time is a key factor in interventions for at-risk students.	1a: Early intervention is important 1b: Educator time is limited by busy schedules and multiple roles
	RQPE Theme 2: Students at risk of dropping out of high school often lack parental support of education.	
	RQPE Theme 3: Lack of centralized resources, information, and training can be an obstacle when working with students.	
	RPPE Theme 4: College and career preparatory goals for students should be aligned in a way to ensure relevance.	

Discussion

Review of the Findings: Central Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore the central research question: What are the perceptions of professional high school counselors regarding strategies that promote persistence to graduation for at-risk students? After analyzing numerous hours of interview data and reviewing the participants' responses to the demographic background questionnaire, findings from this study describe factors promoting persistence to graduation in high school. Findings reoccurred throughout several themes and sub-

themes related to the parts of the research question. Findings from this study accentuate the impact of positive relationships among administrators, counselors, educators, parents, and students resulting in persistence to graduation. Participants referenced the importance of building positive relationships much more than any other common theme. Findings also indicate a schoolwide plan for academic interventions is critical to the success of at-risk students. Additionally, monitoring of student factors predicting educational attainment adds a layer of protection for at-risk students needing intervention. Furthermore, school counselors are in a position to impact persistence to graduation and provide counseling services to students as an intervention to promote persistence to graduation. The results support other research studies' findings that professional school counselors' implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program can help students and can maximize student achievement (Brigman & Cambell, 2003; Cook & Kaffenberger, 2003; Dahir & Stone, 2003; Fitch & Marshall, 2004).

RQPA: The Problem of High School Dropouts

The key findings from Research Question Part A conclude high school dropout is a problem identified by professional school counselors as significant at their schools. Furthermore, counselors identified various attributes of students who choose not to persist to graduate from high school and effective strategies to promote persistence to graduation. The level of educational attainment greatly impacts an individual and has an even broader impact on society (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Katiwada et al., 2007). Attendance, grades, credits attained, behavior, mental health, lack of involvement in school activities, financial needs, and family factors were mentioned by multiple participants as at-risk factors for dropping out of high school. This is consistent with the

research showing persistence to graduation can be associated with level of socioeconomic status, academic background, the sense of belonging at the school, as well as other risk factors (Hubner & Wolfson, 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Participants stressed attention should be paid consistently and in a systematic way to these at-risk factors to ensure students get the needed interventions to persist to graduation. School counselors also perceive many students transfer to homeschool, as the age of compulsory attendance in Kentucky is now 18; furthermore, these students do not persist to graduation once they have left school.

School counselors believe high school students dropping out continues to be a problem in schools. Students who do not persist to graduate do so for various reasons, including lack of academic success, social anxiety, family factors, employment, lack of sense of belonging at school, and other issues. Thus, school counselors continue to look for ways to help students who are at risk of not persisting to graduate.

RQPB: Counseling Strategies and Interventions to Help At-Risk Learners Persist to Graduate

The key findings from Research Question 2 suggest interventions to encourage students to persist to graduate from high school. Relationship building is considered important by school counselors. These results confirm Lessard et al. (2009), who found at-risk students who persist to graduate from high school typically had a meaningful relationship with a teacher, counselor, or other adult who helped them be resilient and graduate. Additionally, parent engagement through parent communications can serve as an intervention. Mentoring programs can provide more intense goal setting and positive relationships.

These findings mirror prior research showing the Basic Core Strategies that complement a strong curriculum include mentoring/tutoring, service learning projects, alternative schooling, and out of school enhancement. Alternative education can be an intervention for students who are not successful in traditional high schools.

These results support Cassidy and Bates (2005), who found student achievement to be positive in alternative schools with a focus on relationships and caring for students with a history of misbehavior and at risk for dropping out of school. Counseling can benefit students as an intervention, as often students have numerous other problems that can be explored through solution focused counseling. The ASCA (2005) National Model recommends school counselors use developmentally-based interventions to assist students with academic, career, and personal/social issues and provide a helpful framework for delivering these services. Additionally, academic and career advising can help students connect the relevance of education to their future. These results illuminate findings by Lapan et al. (2012), who also reported students who have greater access to school counselors and comprehensive school counseling programs are more likely to succeed academically and behaviorally in school. Participants emphasized the importance of being proactive and seeking appropriate interventions for students and building a positive school culture.

RQPC: School Counselors' Perceptions of Implementation of Best Practices to Help At-Risk Learners Persist to Graduate at Their School

The third research question in this study examined the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding the implementation of best practices to help at-risk learners graduate at their school. After analysis of the interview data, themes emerged describing

the professional school counselor's viewpoint of persistence to graduation initiatives at their school. School counselors serve as an advocate for all students and often are in a position to help students holistically. School counselors collaborate with educators to provide strategic resources, monitoring academic interventions and support services. Absenteeism and discipline are predictors of academic failure; thus, administrators and school counselors should implement interventions and preventive measures to improve student success (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Because of the strong link between poor attendance and misbehavior to poor academic performance, and the impact of poor academic performance on persistence to graduation, school counselors should be proactive and monitor attendance and behavior. School counselors also collaborate with community members, providing college and career planning activities for students and engaging community members. Additionally, school counselors refer students to outside services, such as mental healthcare agencies. School counselors work with administrators, parents, teachers, and students with transitioning from grade levels.

These results agree with the ASCA's (2012) position statement that professional school counselors promote equity and access to opportunities and rigorous educational experiences for all students by collaborating with other stakeholders to promote student achievement. Professional school counselors address the needs of all students through prevention and intervention programs that are a part of a data-driven comprehensive school counseling program. The Persistence to Graduation report in Infinite Campus and other data are beneficial tools to identify at-risk students and recommend student support services.

These results agree with Bidell and Deacon (2010) who found centralized tracking systems to monitor student progress to be an important part of dropout prevention. Furthermore, when students are at risk due to barriers to learning, development, and teaching, counselors can address interfering risk factors and re-engage students in classroom instruction, focusing on a range of learning supports available at the school (Adelman & Taylor, 2011). Counseling can be a powerful intervention for at-risk students, as it can help them problem solve and overcome obstacles in a focused way. Additionally, school counselors serve as the gatekeepers for a variety of interventions and programs and can acquire the needed interventions and supports for students who need them.

RQPD: School Counselors' Perceptions of the Role of School Administrators in Strategies to Help At-Risk Learners Persist to Graduate

The fourth research question in this study examined the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding the role of administrators in strategies to help at-risk learners graduate. After analysis of the interview data, themes emerged describing the professional school counselor's viewpoint of the school administrator's role in persistence to graduation initiatives. All participants stressed the importance of administrators having positive relationships with students, teachers, parents, and counselors. School administrators have a key role in building and maintaining a positive school culture, which directly contributes to student success.

These results illuminate Williams' (2014) research showing an engaging school culture has a positive impact on student achievement and prevents dropping out. Additionally, implementation of helpful policies and procedures contributes to student

success in high school, as well as early identification and intervention of students exhibiting risk factors of not graduating from high school. Collaboration with all stakeholders also is a key role of administrators, fostering success for all students and seeking fair and equitable access to education for all students. Targeted interventions for students who struggle should include a variety of options, seeking additional resources as needed.

RQPE: School Counselors' Perceptions of Barriers to Implementing Strategies to Promote Persistence to Graduation

The fifth part of the research question in this study examined the perceptions of professional school counselors regarding the barriers to implementing strategies to help at-risk learners. After analysis of the interview data, themes emerged describing the professional school counselor's viewpoint of barriers related to persistence to graduation initiatives. All participants stressed the school counselor serves as an advocate for all students, yet this role is not always easy to accomplish due to barriers.

These results parallel themes in the literature regarding the challenges of school counselors, including counselor role ambiguity, diverse student needs, increased technological skill requirement, and emphasis on educational accountability (Baker, 2000; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000). The results of this study indicate school counselors struggle in allocating the needed time for individual services for all students who need interventions. This challenge becomes a barrier to student persistence to graduation initiatives, as the ASCA National Model makes a recommendation of 80% or more of the counselor's time be designated with students, while the remaining 20% should be spent with program management and school supports. The need for early intervention, the lack

of time to appropriately intervene, the difficulty of enlisting parent support, the lack of resources, and the perceived irrelevance of high school to careers were found to be concerns of counselors related to persistence to education.

Implications for School Counselors, School Administrators, and Researchers

The findings of this research have significant implications for school counselors and school communities. The findings also suggest the need for related research. Other research supports the notion school counselors are visionary educators who contribute to student success by their contribution on their school's leadership team, analysis of academic and behavioral data; problem resolution skills; counseling services; and collaboration with administrators, teachers, and parents (Hines et al., 2011).

Implications for School Counselors

School counselors can positively impact students through their initiatives to promote persistence to graduation, and the school counselor has a distinct role in dropout prevention. School counselors identified several factors and strategies that lead to student persistence to graduation. They include the impact of positive stakeholder relationships, early identification systems of students at risk of dropping out of high school, a variety of research-based strategies resulting in a student's persistence to graduate from high school, and a districtwide systematic approach to persistence to graduation and interventions. Knowing the factors that may lead to graduation and factors contributing to dropping out provides a clear depiction of the student population. District and school leaders must analyze their graduation rate data and create school improvement plans to promote persistence to graduation.

The results of this study show high school counselors recognize their importance in dropout prevention. Therefore, more emphasis should be given to developing the capacity of school counselors and administrators to identify students at risk of dropping out and use targeted interventions as early as possible. The school counselors can better understand their roles in interventions by becoming more familiar with the ASCA framework for school counseling, which is a proactive approach to providing counseling services in the area of academic, social/emotional, and career development. Implications also exist for school administrators and school counselors to reassess the amount of time school counselors spend working directly with students, as time must be maximized to meet individual student needs. School counselors must become advocates for their profession, providing opportunities for others to understand the ASCA model and the recommended framework for school counseling programs.

Implications for School Administrators

School administrators can positively impact students through their initiatives to promote persistence to graduation, and the school administrator has a distinct role in dropout prevention. Student engagement, school culture, academic achievement, academic programs, student support services, and attendance are elements related to persistence to graduation and are heavily influenced by school administrators. School administrators and educators create a culture of engagement by enhancing school spirit, creating opportunities for student success, shared leadership, and genuine display of concern for student well-being (Williams, 2014).

The results of this study provide additional knowledge to school administrators as they develop effective intervention strategies and assess programs for at-risk students.

School administrators and educators can assess risk factors of students and work collaboratively with other stakeholders and counselors to ensure interventions are available and successful. The results of this study show school counselors and school administrators can address persistence to graduate as a collaborative team, communicating consistently about the progress of students. Additionally, school administrators assign roles and responsibilities to school counselors and can advocate for school counselors to have more time for school counseling. As school administrators are expected to do more with less funding and continue to increase student achievement, school administrators may use the results of this study when assigning roles and responsibilities to school counselors. School administrators can become more familiar with the ASCA model and its recommended roles for school counselors.

Implications for Policymakers

This study supports the need for the development, implementation, evaluation, and research of intervention strategies and programs to promote persistence to high school graduation. It is of utmost importance that early intervention of at-risk students be a priority of educators and policymakers, as an abundance of negative implications exist for students who do not persist to graduate from high school. Policymakers at all levels can consider the benefits of school counseling programs for at-risk students and advocate for increased time for direct counseling services. The age of compulsory attendance in Kentucky was changed to 18 in July 2015, meaning a student cannot withdraw from school as a dropout until the age of 18. This study found school counselors in western Kentucky are concerned some students under 18 who do not want to persist to graduation are withdrawing from high school to homeschool and not following through with

obtaining a high school diploma. While withdrawal to another school or homeschool does not impact graduation rates used by the federal and state government for school accountability purposes, the policymakers should be concerned with follow up of homeschool students to promote persistence to graduation and educational attainment.

Implications for Researchers

This study contributes to the body of literature on persistence to graduation. The results suggest the need for potential future studies. Research design limited this study to eight school counselors employed in large, rural western Kentucky school districts. Further research could be expanded to include more participants. Additionally, perspectives of participants from various subgroups such as teachers, administrators, and counselors could be studied. School administrators' perceptions of the role of school counselors in persistence to graduation efforts could be studied, as well as teacher perceptions of interventions to promote persistence to graduation. Further research also could also investigate the dynamics of school leadership teams working toward school improvement and increased graduation rates.

Several recommendations for future research can be ascertained from the results of this study. For instance, it is important to note this study examined school counselors' beliefs about strategies to impact persistence to graduation, not the *accuracy* of their perceptions or the *actual reasons* students at their high school choose not to persist to graduate. Future research could explore whether these perceptions are accurate compared to actual causes of dropping out.

Further research could be conducted on students who persist to graduate despite numerous risk factors. Such students could shed additional insight into the factors

influencing students' decisions to persist to graduate. Factors relating to school, family, community, and social concerns could be further explored to determine how to negate risk factors.

Additionally, further research of alternative schools and potential benefits could add to the limited research base. Alternative programs have evolved in recent years, incorporating online education and flexible scheduling, and such programs could be reviewed to ascertain the effectiveness to promote persistence to graduation. Case studies of effective programs could shed light on effective strategies and interventions to promote persistence to graduation for students with risk factors.

A quantitative study that may provide additional insight to the field should include a survey of school counselors working in schools with high graduation rates. An additional qualitative case study of high schools with high graduation rates also might provide additional evidence of strategies, programs, and interventions promoting persistence to graduation.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths. The findings complement prior research, providing a current perspective of the topic from school counselors who are directly involved with students who do not persist to graduate. The topic is very relevant and practical, as school counselors face students who routinely choose not to persist to graduate. School counselors also have access to an enormous amount of data that can be used to determine risk factors of students who might need additional supports to persist to graduate. Through subjective and direct responses, the researcher gained relevant individual responses through broad inquiry from participants who are immersed in the

setting being studied (Patton, 2002). The “human factor” (Patton, 2002, p. 433) can be viewed as both a strength and a limitation of phenomenological qualitative inquiry and analysis.

All studies have limitations. This study had a relatively small sample size of eight school counselors, which could be seen as a limitation. The participants were from a fairly small geographic region. Patton (2002) described this type of sampling as a potential limitation. School counselors sampled from other districts outside western Kentucky may have different results. The ethnic diversity of participants also was limited, which may not be representative of the diversity among school counselors in Kentucky. Additionally, the self-reported data from interviews could be seen as a limitation. Including the viewpoints of other stakeholders could offer additional perceptions. Efforts were made by the researcher to make participants feel comfortable and safe to speak freely. However, participants’ responses could have been guarded due to lack of anonymity in the interview process, even though the reported results protect their anonymity.

Summary and Conclusion

This study provides the viewpoints of eight professional school counselors regarding why some students persevere to graduate while others do not. The data were gathered through individual interviews and a demographic background questionnaire. Based on the results of this study, the holistic experience of the educational process leads students to make the decision to persist to graduate or leave school. The results of this study provide some insight on possible interventions to help students persist to graduate.

This study asked a central question related to the current perceptions of key educators regarding the persistence of education of students at risk of dropping out of high school. The overarching conclusion is that professional school counselors advocate attention must be given to implementing a wide array of strategies and services to ensure all students persist to graduate, and all stakeholders must diligently work together to build positive productive relationships to ensure student success. This study allowed the participants to reflect on their contribution in the area of dropout prevention and to articulate key ideas educators, administrators, and counselors can consider when working with at-risk students. Additionally, collaboration and communication with all stakeholders were identified as themes.

These professional school counselors ascertain more work is needed in the area of dropout prevention; and administrators also must allocate time, funding, and planning in order for all students to have the supports needed to persist to graduate. Students endure more challenges and demands than ever before, potentially placing them in circumstances interfering with their desire to persist to graduate. While some educators focus on building strong relationships with students, others who are not focused on individual student success create roadblocks for students or are unaware of the support services needed. Additionally, counselors must have a systematic guidance plan to tackle the needs of all students. An array of academic, behavior, and counseling interventions should be utilized to best meet all students' needs, and support services should be available to students who need them. Administrators and counselors must work to ensure school counselors have adequate time for direct counseling services with students, as well as to ensure interventions occur early and are monitored. Additionally, administrators and

counselors must advocate for accessibility of support services, ensuring supports are available to students when needed. School counselor preparation programs and professional development opportunities remain a critical component of persistence to graduation, as school counselors must be trained in the skills and knowledge base needed to provide effective interventions to at-risk students.

The current study found school counselors perceive academic and counseling interventions can be successful in promoting persistence to graduation of high school for students. Additionally, school counselors ascertain data are readily available detailing which students are most at risk of dropping out of high school, and such data should be used to target interventions for students. Results of this study also provide some examples of strategies and interventions that appear to successfully discourage or prevent students from dropping out of high school. The study provides further evidence to support the importance of positive relationships of stakeholders; student and parent engagement; and collaboration of all stakeholders in interventions, programs, and activities to promote persistence to graduation of all students. National and state mandates will continue to promote persistence to graduation for all students. It would be advantageous of districts to make every effort to identify students who are at risk and develop intervention plans focused on students' academic, social, and developmental needs. Through an increased amount of time allocated to direct counseling services, school counselors may intervene in ways that might not occur otherwise. An intentional endeavor to promote persistence to graduation for at-risk students will benefit our students, communities, and nation.

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APPENDIX A: IRB Approval Letter



*INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY*

DATE: October 23, 2017

TO: Beth Fleming, MA
FROM: Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1035999-1] Perceptions of Rural High School Professional School Counselors Regarding the Impact of Strategies to Help At-Risk Learners Graduate

REFERENCE #: IRB 18-131
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: October 23, 2017
EXPIRATION DATE: May 1, 2018
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of May 1, 2018.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Paul Mooney at (270) 745-2129 or irb@wku.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Document

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: High School Counselors' Perceptions of Strategies to Promote Persistence to Graduation

Investigator: Beth Duvall Fleming, WKU Educational Leadership Doctoral Program
beth.fleming556@topper.wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.
You must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research study.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

- 1. Nature and Purpose of the Project:** The purpose of this qualitative study is to address possible influences on students' decisions to drop out of high school, specifically the role professional school counselors play in dropout prevention and persistence to graduation.
- 2. Explanation of Procedures:** You are asked to participate in an interview process that will take 60-90 minutes of your time. Data collection includes a demographic background questionnaire and individual qualitative semi-structured interviews. The central research question of this study is "What are the perceptions of professional high school counselors regarding strategies that promote persistence to graduation for at-risk students". Individual interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Data collection and analysis will include traditional qualitative coding, selecting themes, and identifying categories, patterns, and relationships in the responses.
- 3. Discomfort and Risks:** The researcher will remain aware of ethical issues throughout the study and adhere to ethical standards of research, making efforts to insure no harm and minimal discomfort.
- 4. Benefits:** Research-based targeted interventions could result in more students finding success in school and persisting graduation. Contribution to research in this area would be beneficial to the profession and to student outcomes.

APPENDIX C: Interview Guide

1. Describe yourself as a professional school counselor and the work you do in your current position. What contributions do you believe school counselors make to the school district and community?
2. Describe the problem (or lack of problem) of student dropout at your school? What are some reasons students do not persist to graduation?
3. What would students who are contemplating dropping out of high school change about your school?
4. Describe the counselors' role in persistence to graduation programs at your school. Please give some examples of how you demonstrate this role in dropout prevention.
5. Does your school have a formal structured plan detailing the activities, events, and interventions of the School Counseling Program? Describe how your counseling program has been successful in providing interventions to at-risk students?
6. Think of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model. On a scale of one to five (one being the lowest, five being the highest) how well do you think you have implemented a comprehensive school guidance program per the ASCA National Model.
7. Consider the following scenario: A teacher comes into your office with concerns that an eleventh grade student told her his plan to drop out of school. This student is failing classes, has frequent absences, and has a record of repeated misbehavior. Describe your action plan for this student.
8. What resources or strategies are in place at your school for students at risk of dropping out? Are these measures effective?
9. What recommendations would you offer to new school counselors about working with at-risk students? What recommendations would you offer to new administrator about working with at-risk students?
10. Everyone faces challenges. Describe a challenge have you recently encountered as you worked with at-risk students. How did you overcome the obstacles?
11. Describe some of the challenges school counselors, school administrators, and teachers face when identifying and working with students at risk for dropping out of high school.
12. In what ways did your counselor education program prepare you to design and implement interventions for at risk students? Tell me some areas you would like further training. Is there anything else you would like to share?

APPENDIX D: Demographic Background Questionnaire and Related Information

Name: _____

Gender: _____ Age: _____ Ethnicity: _____

Employee: _____

Position: _____

Colleges Attended, Major/Minor, Degrees Awarded:

Work Experience:

Number of years as a school counselor: _____ Grade level(s) of assigned students: _____

Familiarity with ASCA Model: _Unfamiliar _Somewhat familiar _Familiar _Very

Counselor Time Usage (total must equal 100%) Note: Based on ASCA National Model, presented as a reference.

Guidance Curriculum _____%

Individual Student Planning _____%

Responsive Services (Counseling) _____%

System Support _____%

Other _____%

Briefly describe your work you consider as "Other"

APPENDIX E: Email Invitation to Prospective Participants

Dear School Counselor,

My name is Beth Fleming and I am a Doctoral Candidate at Western Kentucky University. I am seeking interested high school counselors who would be willing to participate in an individual interview regarding strategies to help at-risk high school students persist to graduation. This study, *Perceptions of Professional School Counselors Regarding the Impact of Strategies to Help At-Risk Learners Graduate*, will be used for my dissertation.

Each interview will take approximately 30 minutes. Each participant will be assigned a number code to ensure personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis of the study.

Please respond via email if you would be willing to participate in this study. If you have any questions, please ask.

Thank you,

Beth Duvall Fleming
Doctoral Candidate
Western Kentucky University