

2014 Great Lakes Conference Paper Symposium Proposal:

“Analysis of Electronic Listserv Interactions among Indiana School Counselors”

General Summary:

School counselors have a variety of tasks to accomplish. They must respond to the mental health needs of their students, as well as the guidance activities, such as testing, scheduling, college placement, career counseling, and a myriad of other activities. At the same time, they must deal with suicide attempts, bullying, conflict management, anger issues, and many other mental health issues. There have been numerous theoretical articles regarding the role of counselors, as well as surveys asking counselors to list their activities. This study makes use of a state-wide listserv, CounselorTalk that serves virtually every counselor in the State of Indiana, as well as other interested individuals. A study incorporating six critical months in the school year has been reported. It was decided to complete a full year's analysis, and contrast it with data from the next year. The results of the two-year study will be presented.

CounselorTalk: What Counselors are spending their time on

The majority of Indiana school counselors communicate with each other via a 1000 plus member listserv, CounselorTalk. They communicate in order to receive official announcements, professional support, ask questions, and share important information via email. This study is different from those that theorized about counselor activities in that data is collected from school counselors' actual interactions. Being able to identify the school counselors' needs and activities based on their real life experiences is the major rationale for the study. To have a more specific and comprehensive conception of school counselors' situation and counselors' interactions, the data is collected directly from the school counselors emails for a two year period. The data is categorized based on topic, school levels and time periods such as back -to-school, mid-semester, end-of-semester, end-of-year etc. Differences between various time periods of the academic year and between elementary, middle, and high school counselors' questions and responses will be reported.

Counselors' are responsible for a variety of tasks including scheduling, testing, college preparation, guidance activities, and being available to students for emotional and social issues. The listserv interactions are coded according to topics that correspond with these tasks. The topic frequency is then compared between months, and years to determine how counselor focus on that topic changes throughout the school year. Given counselors' limited availability, and multitude of responsibilities, only so many tasks can be prioritized. The study documents how counselors' spend their time and prioritize their many responsibilities.

Changing Focus: Changes in School Counselor's Priorities throughout the school Year

The differences between the reported years will demonstrate how counselors' needs, interactions, and roles change from month to month, as well as from year to year. The change in frequency of the different topics, such as ACT/SAT discussions, Mental Health/Behavioral comments and questions, and questions concerning graduation requirements, provide a quantifiable way to measure how counselors' major foci within the school shifts between time periods, as well as identifying any patterns in foci changes. Changes in foci between time periods in the school year determine the availability of counselors' to attend to their many responsibilities, as well as to their student's emotional and mental health needs.

The constant reprioritizing that has to be done by the counselor dictates how much of the counselors' time is actually spent in mental health or counseling related activities with students. There is a substantial difference between elementary, middle, and high school counselors, and the time they have to spend on mental health, behavioral, and student wellness related activities. As students get older, their counselor have less time to help them with their problems or issues, and must spend more time on administrative and guidance activities such as standardized testing, curriculum changes/concerns, and scholarship/college related concerns. Changes in Indiana state graduation and curriculum requirements means that for the next month the majority of the CounselorTalk discussion will be related to the changes and their implications. In addition to the constant issues such as testing, graduation requirements, and mental health problems, the interactions are heavily dependent on what seems to be the important topic of the moment.