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Virtual Counseling for Students Enrolled in Online Educational Programs

Nikki S. Currie

Virtual schools are increasing in popularity as a method of providing formal education for a growing number of students in the United States (Appana, 2008; Clark, 2001; Bazin & Burke, 2009; Hipsky & Adams, 2006). The economy, coupled with technological advances and parental demand for a more personalized, innovative, individually tailored, and high quality education alternative for their children has led to the increase in enrollment of K-12 children in virtual schools (Chaney, 2001; Bazin & Burke, 2009). Realistically, this proliferation of distance education programs—or virtual schools—is here to stay (Appana, 2008; Clark, 2001; Hipsky & Adams, 2006).

The term 'virtual school' is defined as education delivered through various technological methods to learners who are typically separated from their instructors (Clark, 2001). Benefits of an online delivery method include, but are not limited to, the following: regularly updated course material; student anonymity which in some cases increases student participation; availability of rich resources for learning; reduced cost factors and budget constraints; reduction in student social distractions; flexibility; acceptance for special needs students; individualized education; modifications and adaptations for special needs students; absence of boundary limitations; students being able to take courses for credit recovery; and the broad range of courses offered (Appana, 2008; Bazin & Burke, 2009; Groves, 2006; Hipsky & Adams, 2006).

Virtual schools, however, are not without limitations: for example, funding; time limiting factors; student readiness, enjoyment, and motivation to study effectively online; organization and administration of the program; facilitator ability to replace non-verbal cues with textual techniques; technological training and support; and providing comprehensive student services such as counseling. The aforementioned factors affect the success of virtual school educational programs (Appana, 2008; Dennis, 2003; Liu, 2005). A study conducted by the Distance Learning Resource Network (Clark, 2001) provided insight into some of the trends of K-12 virtual schools in the United States. Findings addressed context factors of virtual schools such as funding, curriculum, teaching, assessment, policy and administration, marketing and public relations. In addition, the study focused on the critical need to find a means of providing student services such as

counseling. Student services for virtual learners should be equal to services traditional face-to-face learners receive; however, the delivery of these student services creates challenges and in some case ethical dilemmas for administration and guidance personnel. A comprehensive framework for providing counseling services beyond the typical use of technology by school counselors needs to be developed to meet the personal/social, academic, and career needs of students enrolled in on-line educational programs.

Current Use of Technology by Counselors

Currently, school counselors typically use computer technology in a variety of ways. School counselors provide direct channels of communication with students and parents through e-mail and posting electronic counseling newsletters that provide information to the larger audience in an expedient, cost-free manner. Counselors use technology to develop on-line guidance calendars with additional links and Web pages that provide information for parents and the community about guidance department activities and opportunities, as well as to assist in defining the role of the school counselor. Finally, technology is used by counselors to manage data on assessments which drive whether or not standards are being met (VanHorn & Myrick, 2001; Wall, 2004). The role of school counselors in virtual schools is presently vague in counseling literature, and examples of guidance programs are limited.

Virtual School Counseling as a Reality

This paradigm shift to support distance learning as a reality will change the role of school counseling and school counselor training for counselors who work in schools utilizing an online delivery system. A framework for providing counseling services for students enrolled in online educational programs presently varies considerably with some virtual schools providing online counseling and others arranging face-to-face services; however, a program model needs to be developed with clear guidelines for confidentiality, security of technology, resources, programming, and specialized training for those who deliver the guidance program (Clark, 2001). The traditional face-to-face meeting of counselor and student to discuss personal/social, career, or academic concerns during counseling sessions will need to be replaced with technology alternatives. Virtual school administrators and guidance personnel can gain information from practice and protocol utilized in online mental health counseling to design and provide student services such as virtual school counseling.

Online Mental Health Counseling

Discussing the history, benefits, and limitations of online mental health counseling is one of the first steps in assisting virtual school guidance personnel and administrators in designing counseling services for students enrolled in online educational programs. Using counseling methods devoid of face-to-face contact is not new to the profession. Counseling by indirect methods dates back to psychotherapists who communicated with clients through letter writing. The first mental health service utilizing the Internet was established in 1995 by Sommers, while online self-help support groups were the precursor to online therapy (Skinner & Zack, 2004).

Cyber or online counseling is defined as counseling where a licensed practitioner uses technology to deliver mental and behavioral health services to a client who is in a separate location (Mallen & Vogel, 2005; Maples & Han, 2008; Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004). The use of technology to address clients' needs through online

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counseling include telephone contact, video-link, interactive audio and video, chat rooms, asynchronous e-mail, synchronous chat, on-line support groups, and therapeutic software aligned with various theoretical approaches (Mallen & Vogel, 2005; Mallen et al., 2005; Maples, & Han, 2008; Wilczenski & Coomey, 2006). Asynchronous e-mail is characterized by communication which occurs when the client and counselor choose to respond while synchronous e-mail is 'real time' e-mail correspondence (Rochlen et al., 2004).

The prevalent use of the Internet to provide direct client service provides assistance to clients who are unable or unwilling to access services due to cost, distance, scheduling, inability to meet in person due to illness, physical limitations, issues with transportation, family obligations, or lack of available resources (Barak & Doley-Cohen, 2006; Barnett, 2005; Layne & Hohenshil, 2005; Mallen & Vogel, 2005; Mallen et al. 2005; Maples & Han, 2008; Robinson & Serfaty, 2003; Rochlen et al., 2004; Rochlen et al., 2004; Sampson, Kolodinsky, & Greeno, 1997; Sampson & Lumsden, 2000). Some clients gravitate toward utilizing online counseling services when they choose to remain anonymous (Robinson & Serfaty, 2003). According to Mallen et al. (2005), a reduction in clients' issues can be addressed effectively through online counseling. With the current trend towards online counseling, professional associations such as the American Counseling Association (1999), American Mental Health Counselors Association (2000), and National Board for Certified Counselors (2001) have now issued ethical guidelines for practitioners to follow regarding online counseling; however, challenges still arise for practitioners which merit careful consideration.

One of the concerns with online counseling is in regard to confidentiality and protection of a client's privacy (Koocher, 2007; Maples & Han, 2008; Sampson & Lumsden, 2000). Counselors can implement measures to secure their computer files; however, control over the client's computer security and control over websites which hold messages is difficult to monitor (Frame, 1998; Robinson & Serfaty, 2003). Verifying the age, identity, and location of clients also presents challenges regarding confidentiality and liability for practitioners facilitating online counseling (Rochlen et al., 2004). Visual cues or body language that are integral to traditional therapy gleaned through face-to-face counselor/client contact is not present in most computer-aided counseling (Alemi, Haack, Harge, Dill, & Benson, 2005; Alleman, 2002; Bloom, 1998; Frame, 1998; Haberstroh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, & Gee, 2008; Mallen et al., 2005; Rochlen et al., 2004; Shaw & Shaw, 2006; Wilczenski & Coomey, 2006). Issues of counselor competence, informed consent, crisis or emergency procedures, licensure issues in regard to crossing jurisdictional lines, and lack of empirical research addressing both the efficacy and limitations of online counseling need to be researched in a comprehensive manner (Barnett, 2005; Bloom, 1998; Mallen et al., 2005; Shaw & Shaw, 2006). Finally, some therapeutic interventions do not lend themselves well to an online delivery; for example, play therapy techniques with children. (Koocher, 2007). According to Koocher (2007) practitioners need to focus on contracting regarding the nature of services, practitioner competence, confidentiality, and control in relation to licensure jurisdictions across state lines.

As we transition into the era of technology and information, it is important for practitioners to be prepared for the facilitation of counseling services and the effect on clients (Norcross, Hedges, & Prochaska, 2002).

Counseling Services in Virtual Schools

What implications does the current practice of online mental health counseling have for virtual school counseling? Limited information is available on how virtual schools address the counseling needs of students. Students who do not experience success in regular school due to behavior concerns, lack of motivation, bullying from peers, involvement with risky behaviors, poor social skills, and low academic skills, in addition to the previously mentioned reasons for virtual school enrollment, often look to online programs as an alternative. With this plethora of social and emotional needs, it is essential that virtual schools provide counseling services to address the domains of counseling, personal/social, career, and academic services; however, it has yet to be determined what the best framework is for providing these services.

Counselor Training

Another critical question to consider is how an online delivery system of student counseling services impacts counselor training and future research. Models of effective guidance programs for virtual schools are limited; however, administrators and counselors can adopt some components used in mental health online counseling to develop a comprehensive program for counseling students in virtual schools that address counselor training, technology, confidentiality, and methods. Licensed counselors in virtual schools need additional training or emphasis in online counseling, including how to communicate through text-based modes of delivery and how to mirror verbal encouragers in text-based communication. To improve communication in counseling sessions with students, counselors can describe their nonverbal reactions to the student (Mallen et al., 2005). Counselors can use capitalization and punctuation to communicate affect and empathy (Mallen et al., 2005). Finally, ongoing staff training and professional development needs to be provided for counselors in online educational programs.

Technology Considerations

A secure computer network, with encryption, and user verification software to protect the student's privacy should be used. The counselor, depending on his or her technological expertise, may need additional training, professional development, and the availability of tech support to address any problems with the technology itself.

Confidentiality and Student Privacy

To address confidentiality and student privacy, a signed informed consent should be administered, outlining the limits of confidentiality, counseling services provided, procedures for counseling including when or how often the counselor will respond, the risks and benefits of online counseling, emergency back-up procedures, and counselor credentials which helps the counselor be prepared for potential difficulties (Koocher, 2007; Roy & Gillett, 2008; Shaw & Shaw, 2006). If possible, an initial face-to-face meeting or telephone conversation with the student should occur prior to engaging in online counseling where the counselor gathers demographic information about the student, administers informed consent, discusses the limitation about online counseling such as absence of verbal cues, slower transmission of conversation, technical difficulties, and informs the student about confidentiality and privacy issues (Roy & Gillett, 2008). A plan to address crisis management should be explained and given to the student and parent in written form (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2006).

The counselor should be knowledgeable about local crisis resources and how to access them to make emergency referrals for students.

Components of Online School Counseling

Various types of online counseling can be used in virtual schools to address personal/social, career, and academic needs of all students.

Videoconferencing allows conveyance of both audio and video communication and can be used with students in counseling sessions. Two-way audio or video between the counselor and student is comparable to face-to-face counseling (Day & Schneider, 2002).

E-mail counseling, either asynchronous or synchronous where students can e-mail the virtual school counselor about concerns and issues and the counselor responds via e-mail can be used with students (Maples & Han, 2008).

One-on-one chat room counseling, where students can have an in-depth conversation with the counselor can be organized.

Group chat can also be used which involves conversation between two or more students and the counselor; however, issues of confidentiality should be addressed prior to engaging in group chat (Maples & Han, 2008).

Therapeutic software can be used to address student concerns.

Career software, videos, and virtual job shadowing can be used for career exploration and development. In addition, writing can enhance self-reflection for students if integrated into online counseling (Rochlen et al., 2004; Wilczenski & Coomey, 2006).

In order to work with parents, interactive conferences addressing the three counseling domains (personal/social, career, academic) between the counselor and students and their parents can be arranged on a scheduled basis.

Finally, continuous evaluation of the guidance program is essential to determine which components need to continue, be revised, and eliminated along with adherence to professional ethical codes which provide guidelines for online counseling. The American Counseling Association (1999) lists ethical codes for counselors who provide online counseling services that address benefits and limitations of online counseling, whether or not the delivery method is appropriate for the client, access of technology, observance of state laws and statutes, boundary jurisdiction, and informed consent and client privacy. Counselors in online educational programs should have a clear understanding and adherence to these ethical codes.

Counselor Training

In addition to programming and ethical issues, matters of counselor training and research are important considerations for counselors, and the counseling profession needs to address how technology fits into counselor education and training programs. According to Alleman (2002), providing online counseling services requires distinct competencies. Graduate programs should incorporate information regarding online counseling into programs of study (Alleman, 2002). Whether working with individuals or groups, counseling supervisors need to learn how technology can be utilized to accentuate both coursework and experiential counseling (Haberstroh et al., 2006). Supervisors who provide online supervision also need to be astute in the ethical and legal issues of online counseling (Layne & Hohenshil, 2005).

Students who plan to deliver counseling services online need additional training beyond regular counselor education programs. Advanced technological knowledge of computers and interactive potential, along with expertise in maintaining security of communication,

are essential components for counselor training. Advanced training in online communications and in textual—as opposed to verbal—communication needs to be a component of counselor education training for those counselors (public school or private) who are planning on facilitating online counseling (Alleman, 2002). Specific issues such as confidentiality, protection of client privacy, legal jurisdiction regarding licensure, and informed consent need to be included in counselor training.

Research Considerations

Research provides sparse direction for counselor educators who design and facilitate counselor training. There is little empirical information regarding the effectiveness of online counseling and the effects of relaying mental health information to consumers (Alleman, 2002; Chang, 2005; Rochlen et al., 2004). Comparing face-to-face counseling and online counseling is difficult and presents challenges for researchers (Barnett, 2005).

Continued research studies are needed to provide evidence of the appropriate type of client who can benefit from online counseling, to help establish professional standards for online counseling, to present information about online counseling, to enhance training for programs, and to advocate for funding issues and licensure of online counselors (Barnett, 2005). It would also be beneficial to conduct research studies with various cultural groups to determine if online counseling is beneficial for diverse clients. There is a lack of consistent evidence in this area (Sanchez-Page, 2005). Research should be conducted on the various forms of online counseling separately (Sanchez-Page, 2005). Research also needs to be conducted to provide evidence of the safety, legality, and efficacy of online counseling (Alleman, 2002). A final recommendation would be for university counseling departments to add to the existing body of research regarding online counseling by developing research protocols, providing online counseling, and evaluating the efficacy of online modes of treatment (Mallen & Vogel, 2005).

Discussion

As the trend toward online virtual educational programs continues to grow, attention to services such as student counseling merits careful consideration. Research studies and results can assist practitioners in developing comprehensive counseling programs for students in online educational programs in order to address program components, technology, counselor training, ethics, confidentiality and student privacy, and the most effective forms of online counseling in addition to benefits, limitations, and risks. Administrators and counselors in virtual schools can learn from research and programming in the area of online mental health counseling to help them develop successful counseling programs that meet the needs of all students enrolled.

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