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Abstract

Student attitudes toward accessing school counseling services were examined via a survey of 3,584 middle school and high school students. Respondents identified a number of barriers to seeking help from school counselors, including stigma, a desire to manage problems themselves, a lack of a positive relationship with their school counselor, and a concern that the counselor would not keep disclosures confidential. The impact of gender, age, and race/ethnicity on students' willingness to seek help from their school counselor was also examined. Implications for practice and future research are presented.

Keywords: Adolescents, help-seeking, school counseling, willingness, confidentiality, stigma

Spotlighting Stigma and Barriers: Examining Secondary Students'

Attitudes toward School Counseling Services

Considerable research has supported the value of counseling services for children and

adolescents in schools (Fox & Butler, 2007; Reback, 2010; Whiston, Tai, Rahardja, & Eder,

2011). For example, analysis of a large national sample of elementary-aged students found that

states with greater availability of school counselors, due to pro-elementary school counseling

state policies, were associated with higher third grade test scores in math and reading, as well as

lower levels of internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors among students (Reback,

2010). Furthermore, a meta-analysis of the effectiveness of 153 school counseling interventions

found a small to moderate effect size of $d = .30$, indicating that students who received school

counselor interventions have measurably higher outcomes across cognitive, behavioral, and

affective domains than students who do not receive those interventions (Whiston et al., 2011).

School counseling services have also proven effective for a range of more specific issues and

goals, from supporting immigrant students' career development (Watkinson & Hersi, 2014) to

decreasing the achievement gap by increasing the academic achievement of African American

high school students (Bruce, Getch, & Ziomek-Daigle, 2009). The broad finding is clear:

counseling in schools is an effective way to address a range of student issues (Reback, 2010;

Whiston et al., 2011).

Despite the proven effectiveness of counseling for middle school and high school

students, research has identified a consistent reluctance on the part of many adolescents to seek

and accept therapeutic help (e.g., Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006; Del Mauro & Williams, 2013;

Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010). In fact, researchers have found that the willingness of

youth with mental health issues to seek and accept counseling help dramatically decreases as

they move through adolescence (Cuffe, Waller, Addy, McKeown, Jackson, Maloo, & Garrison, 2001). Research inside and outside the United States (U.S.) reveals that over half of high school students may be reluctant to seek professional help for their problems (Heath, Baxter, Toste, & McLouth, 2010; Rughani, Deane, & Wilson, 2011). Reasons for this reluctance include the stigma surrounding mental health treatment, a fear that confidentiality will not be upheld, concern about being judged, a lack of faith regarding the effectiveness of counseling, and the belief that seeking counseling is a sign of weakness (Del Mauro & Williams, 2013; Fox & Butler, 2007; Gulliver et al., 2010; Rughani et al., 2011; Timlin-Scalera, Ponterotto, Blumberg, & Jackson, 2003). Adolescent boys—specifically African American boys—seem particularly reluctant to seek counseling services for social-emotional issues (Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006; Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010).

The findings above suggest that many adolescents are reluctant to seek help from counselors, even though counseling is a demonstrably effective service. While there is a moderate body of research on general help-seeking among adolescents (Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006; Eliot et al., 2010), minimal research has been conducted on middle school and high school students' attitudes toward services provided by school counselors, and much more information is needed to better understand this phenomenon. An important step in delivering effective counseling services in middle schools and high schools is to better understand the reasons why students may be reluctant to see their counselor. The purpose of this article is to explore students' attitudes about school counseling services and examine barriers that may prevent them from seeking those services. To that end, we conducted a large, multi-state study in which middle school and high school students were surveyed on their attitudes toward school counselors and school counseling services.

Attitudes Toward Seeking Counseling Help Among Adolescents

A large body of research indicates that seeking professional help for social-emotional problems is difficult for adolescents (Chan & Quin, 2012; Corry & Leavey, 2017; Del Mauro & Williams, 2013; Fox & Butler, 2007; Raviv, Raviv, Vago-Gefen, & Fink, 2009). Survey research has consistently indicated that fewer than half of adolescents report being willing to seek help from a healthcare professional for a variety of emotional troubles (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006; Rughani et al., 2011). In a seminal study of 1,013 adolescents in Australia, Boldero and Fallon (1995) found that respondents were much more likely to seek help from friends (40%) or parents (36%), as opposed to a professional helper such as a doctor or counselor (12.7%). A more recent study of Australian adolescents found that only 17% of males and 29% of females were willing to seek help from a healthcare professional for emotional issues (Rughani et al., 2011). Chandra and Minkovitz (2006) found a similar pattern of results when surveying 274 eighth graders in the U.S., with respondents being over five times more likely to turn to friends when experiencing an emotional problem, as opposed to turning to a counselor. More recently, Corry and Leavey (2017) found through focus group research that adolescents reported a persistent lack of trust that served as a barrier to seeking help from medical professionals. Perhaps most concerning is the research finding that adolescents who have the highest level of suicidal ideation, and are consequently in the greatest need of professional support, are least likely to report an interest in seeking help from either professional or informal sources of support (Goodwin, Mocarski, Marusic, & Beautrais, 2013; Wilson, Deane, & Ciarrochi, 2005).

Barriers to Seeking Professional Help

Researchers have identified a number of barriers that interfere with adolescents' willingness to seek professional help for social-emotional problems helpers (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Chan & Quinn, 2012; Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006; Fox & Butler, 2007; Gulliver et al., 2010; Wilson & Deane, 2012). A consistent finding across studies is that adolescents often prefer to manage problems on their own, rather than turn to professional helpers (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Chan & Quinn, 2012; Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006). While part of the reason adolescents may avoid seeking help from counselors is that they are engaging in the normal and healthy process of developing a sense of personal autonomy and desire to manage problems on their own (Wilson & Deane, 2012), this tendency toward self-reliance can also be a contributing factor in inhibiting adolescents from seeking needed professional counseling help.

Research has also identified other barriers preventing adolescents from seeking counseling help (Chan & Quinn, 2012; Chandra & Mikovitz, 2006; Del Mauro & Williams, 2013; Fox & Butler, 2007). One such barrier is adolescents' sense that the counselor is a virtual stranger with whom they do not feel comfortable sharing problems (Fox & Butler, 2007). Another barrier identified in the literature is the stigma adolescents frequently associate with talking to a counselor (Chandra & Mikovitz, 2006; Fox & Butler, 2007; Gulliver et al., 2010). Chandra and Minkovitz (2006) found that 59% of eighth graders were too embarrassed to see a counselor because of what other students might say if they found out. Similarly, fear of being seen by other students entering the counselor's office has been identified as a barrier by other researchers (Fox & Butler, 2007).

Stigma may serve as a barrier for many adolescents, but even those adolescents who do not appear to stigmatize counseling help may still avoid seeking professional help. Focus group research with U.S. adolescents found that even if adolescents find value in counseling and would not judge peers who were in counseling, they would resist seeking professional counseling help for themselves (Del Mauro & Williams, 2013), a finding more pronounced for boys (Raviv et al., 2009). Adolescents tend to overestimate their ability to manage emotional problems, presuming they are better able to handle their own problems than may actually be the case (Raviv et al., 2009).

Another critical barrier that interferes with adolescents' willingness to seek help from professional counselors is a lack of trust in the counselor. Multiple studies have found that startlingly high percentages of adolescents do not trust counselors and do not believe counselors will keep their conversations confidential (Chan & Quinn, 2012; Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006; Del Mauro & Williams, 2013; Fox & Butler, 2007; Timlin-Scalera et al., 2003). For example, when Chandra and Minkovitz (2006) surveyed a group of eighth graders to identify barriers to seeking counseling help, 42.7% of the respondents indicated that they did not trust counselors. Conversely, research has indicated that adolescents who report higher levels of trust regarding counseling are more likely to seek counseling help (Biolcati, Palareti, & Mameli, 2018). A final barrier that may impact adolescents' desire to seek help from counselors is a fear of being judged; some studies indicate that adolescents may resist seeking counseling help because they are worried what the counselor will think about them and their problems (Del Mauro & Williams, 2013; Yap, Reavley, & Jorm, 2013).

Age, Gender, and Racial/Ethnic Differences in Help-seeking Behavior

Within the context of the broad finding that adolescents often are reluctant to seek help from counselors, research has also revealed differences in help-seeking patterns based on age, gender, and race/ethnicity (Cuffe et al., 2001; Heath et al., 2010). Age appears to be closely related to usage of mental health services. One longitudinal study found a striking decrease in usage of mental health services from early adolescence to early adulthood, with usage rates across the three data collection points falling from 24% to just 3% (Cuffe et al., 2001). Other survey research has found that middle school students are more likely to seek help from school-based programs for non-suicidal self-injury than high school students (Heath et al., 2010).

Research has also identified gender differences in help-seeking with findings consistently indicating that adolescent boys tend to be more reluctant to seek counseling help than adolescent girls both in school (Eliot et al., 2010) and out of school (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Chandra & Minkovitz, 2013; Cheung, Dewa, Cairney, Veldhuizen, & Schaffer, 2009). Among adolescents who experience suicidal ideation or attempts, boys are again substantially less likely to access mental health services (Cheung et al., 2009). While the broad finding is that adolescent boys are less likely to seek counseling help as compared to adolescent girls, there are more subtle gender differences revealed by the research. One study of over a thousand adolescents in Scotland found that boys were more likely to view going to counseling as a sign of weakness, while girls were more likely to question the value of counseling (Chan & Quinn, 2012). In addition, although girls are more likely to seek counseling, they are more prone to worry about being judged by the counselor (Yap et al., 2013).

The relationship between race/ethnicity and adolescent help-seeking has been examined by a number of researchers (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, Holcomb-McCoy, & Mitchell,

2009; Eliot et al., 2010; Ho, Yeh, McCabe, & Hough, 2007). Studies consistently reveal that race/ethnicity matters when examining patterns of help-seeking, but find that these relationships are complex and sometimes contradictory (Bryan et al., 2009; Eliot et al, 2010). As a case in point, a survey of over 7,000 ninth-grade students found that African American students were significantly less likely to seek help for bullying and threats of violence as compared to other racial groups (Eliot et al., 2010). Conversely, examination of a large national sample of 8th grade students in the U.S. found that African American students were substantially more likely to see their school counselor as compared to White students, though it was not clear how many of those students sought out their school counselor voluntarily (Bryan et al., 2009). Other research revealed lower mental health usage rates among Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander adolescents as compared to White and African American youth (Ho et al., 2007). Research has identified several factors that may help explain racial differences in help-seeking behavior, including cultural mistrust of majority helpers (Duncan & Johnson, 2007) and strong parental affiliation with an alternative culture (Ho et al., 2007). In sum, the existing research suggests that race is an important influence on students' willingness to seek counseling services, though the precise manner in which race is related to help-seeking is complex and not yet fully understood.

In order to further examine the issues above in the specific context of school counseling services, surveyed a large group of middle and high school students to assess their attitudes toward counseling and school counselors, with the ultimate goals of (a) identifying factors that feed the reluctance of middle and high school students to seek help from their school counselors and (b) developing recommendations to address these factors, thereby enhancing student willingness to access school counseling services. As a first step toward these larger goals, we designed the current study to seek preliminary answers to the following research questions:

1. What attitudes or beliefs do middle school and high school students hold that either

increase or decrease the likelihood they will seek help from their school counselor?

2. What is the impact of gender, age, and race/ethnicity on students' willingness to seek

help from their school counselor?

Method

Procedures

Upon receiving approval for the study from the Institutional Review Boards at our

respective institutions, we invited and received commitments from school counselors at 11

secondary schools ($N = 11$) in two Midwestern states to serve as site coordinators for the study.

Coordinators were not invited at random, but instead based on their existing relationships with

one or more of the authors, either as a graduate program alumnus or an internship site supervisor.

In exchange for a $100 stipend, coordinators were asked to distribute informed consent

documents, invite students to participate, and ensure a link to the online survey instrument was

distributed to willing participants in a manner convenient for students and staff. While each

coordinator used a slightly different method for survey administration, they most commonly

asked teachers to share the link with participants during a study hall, homeroom, or other non-

instructional time. Site coordinators were given freedom to invite groups of students to

participate according to school data needs and convenience. Ultimately, nine schools elected to

invite all students to participate, while two schools chose to invite selected grade levels. Site

coordinators worked with their building and district administrators to determine procedures for

parental consent, with all schools ultimately choosing to use a passive consent process. Site

coordinators reported that no parent/guardian chose to opt their student out of the project and no

student was unwilling to participate. This was confirmed by the researchers who discovered that

all students who accessed the survey answered "yes" to the informed assent statement signaling their willingness to participate.

Instrument

Unable to locate an instrument to measure all the variables in question, we created our own tool later named the *Barriers, Experiences, and Attitudes Towards School Counseling* (BEATS) survey. Design of the instrument began with a thorough review of literature related to adolescent help-seeking, specifically in school and professional counseling settings. As noted above, previous research on the topic has uncovered a number of reasons why some adolescents tend to avoid seeking help, and when they do, which persons in their life they are most likely to approach. Ultimately, the 51-item BEATS instrument consisted of five sections, each grounded in the literature and designed to gather data related to the research questions: (a) basic demographics (e.g., grade, ethnicity); (b) experiences with the school counselor (e.g., number of meetings this year, reasons for meetings); (c) willingness to see the school counselor for various academic, college/career, and social-emotional issues (e.g., "Change your schedule," "Explore college options," and "You've been feeling very sad lately.") provided on a Likert-type scale from 1, *Very Unlikely* to 5, *Very Likely*; (d) perceived barriers to seeing the school counselor for each issue above (e.g., "The counselor might tell someone what I said," "I don't know my counselor well enough to talk about this," and "I like to handle stuff like this on my own.") provided on a Likert-type scale from 1, *Definitely WOULD NOT Stop Me* to 5, *Definitely WOULD Stop Me*; and (e) open-response items (e.g., "What could the school counselors in your school do to be more helpful to students?").

Prior to the study, we pilot-tested the BEATS on seven willing adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18. Following completion of the survey, these participants were asked to provide

feedback on length, clarity, reading level, and content. Edits were made based on this feedback, and the survey was deemed acceptable for use in the study.

Participants

The study was carried out at 11 secondary schools ($N = 11$) in two Midwestern states. General characteristics of the schools were as follows: two large, public high schools with grades 10 – 12 (suburban); two medium-sized, Catholic high schools with grades 9 – 12 (one suburban and one medium-sized city); three small, public high schools with grades 9 – 12 (rural); one small, public secondary school with grades 6 - 12 (rural); one large, public middle school with grades 6 - 8 (medium-sized city); one small, public middle school with grades 6 – 8 (rural); and one small, public middle school with grades 7 - 8 (rural). Table 1 provides additional characteristics of the participating school sites, including student demographics.

A total of 3,584 students in grades 6 – 12 took the survey, with participants in grades 6 – 8 ($n = 1,287$) categorized as middle school (MS) students and those in grades 9 – 12 ($n = 2,287$) considered high school (HS) students. Ten participants did not indicate a grade level. Participants self-identified their gender in an open-response format and were categorized as male ($n = 1,731$, 48.3%), female (1,773, 49.5%), gender nonconforming (31, 0.9%), no response (21, 0.6%), or other response (28, 0.8%). Students similarly self-identified their ethnicity and were categorized as White ($n = 2,756$, 76.9%), African American (191, 5.3%), Latina(o) (158, 4.4%), Multiracial (135, 3.8%), Asian/Pacific Islander (121, 3.4%), American Indian (17, < 1%), no response (90, 2.5%), or other response (116, 3.2%).

Results

Basic Descriptive Statistics

Quantitative data were analyzed using the PSPP free statistical software package (GNU Project, 2016). Basic descriptive analyses revealed that the vast majority of students indicated knowing their school counselor's name (90.4%) and office location (88.3%), although a lower percentage reported knowing how to schedule a meeting with their school counselor (73%). Students reported meeting with their school counselor (defined in the survey as an individual or group counseling session) approximately 2 - 3 times in the past year ($M = 3.36$, $Mdn = 2$), although more than 20% of participants reported 0 meetings with their school counselor during that time. Academics were the most common reason for these meetings (46%), followed by college/career planning (29%), and social-emotional issues (18%). When asked to rate their willingness to seek help from their school counselor for specific issues across the academic, college/career, and social-emotional domains on a Likert-type scale from 1, *Very Unlikely* to 5, *Very Likely*, students reported being most willing to seek help for academic or college/career reasons, with the most likely scenarios being: "changes to your schedule" ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 1.50$), "exploring college options" ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.35$), and "deciding which classes to take" ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.36$). Students were least likely to say they would seek help for social-emotional reasons, with the lowest-rated scenarios being, "you've been feeling very sad lately" ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 1.20$), "ongoing problem with your parents or friend" ($M = 2.11$, $SD = 1.19$), and "anxiety or stress" ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.31$). Differences were detected by demographic variables on a number of items, as will be discussed below.

Barriers to Seeking Help from the School Counselor

To answer the first research question related to barriers to seeking help, students were

provided a list of eight reasons an adolescent might choose not to seek help from their school

counselor. As explained above, a small body of literature exists on general attitudes towards

help-seeking among adolescents, and the eight reasons selected for inclusion in this study were

drawn from findings that seemed common across previous studies. For the purposes of this

study, participants were asked to rate the degree to which each of these eight reasons would stop

them from seeing their school counselor for various academic, college/career, and social-

emotional issues and a Likert-type scale from 1, *Definitely WOULD NOT stop me* to 5, *Definitely*

WOULD stop me. Table 2 shows the results for this section of the survey. It is interesting to

note that regardless of the type of presenting concern, students consistently rated the following

reasons as the greatest barriers to seeking help from the school counselor: (a) "I would talk to a

parent, friend, or teacher about this instead."; (b) "I like to handle this stuff on my own."; (c) "I

don't know my counselor well enough to talk about this."; and (d) "The counselor might tell

someone what I said."

Differences by Developmental Level, Ethnicity, and Gender

To answer the second research question, we utilized chi-square and one-way ANOVA

analyses followed by post-hoc tests (Bonferroni method) to detect differences by developmental

level, ethnicity, or gender.

Differences by developmental level. Many differences were noted between middle

school (MS) and high school (HS) students, starting with the percentage of MS students (47.7%)

and HS students (17.3%) who reported no meetings with their school counselor in the previous

year. The reasons for meetings that did occur also differed, with MS students being much more

likely than HS students to report meeting with the school counselor for a social-emotional reason

(26.7% vs. 12.5%), while the opposite was true for academics (12.8% vs. 64.6%) and

college/career planning (2.5% vs. 44.3%). As illustrated by Table 3, these findings paralleled

student responses on items related to their willingness to seek help from the school counselor,

with MS students being more willing than HS students to seek help for all scenarios related to

social-emotional issues, but significantly less likely for all scenarios related to academics and

college/career planning (all differences significant at $p \leq .001$). For example, the two issues for

which MS students reported being most likely to seek help from the school counselor were, "A

friend told you they were thinking of harming themselves" and "Bullying," while these scenarios

rated only 7th and 8th most likely for HS students.

　　　Very few developmental differences were found regarding perceived barriers to seeking

help. Regardless of the domain of the scenario, both MS and HS students endorsed two reasons

far more frequently than others when asked what would stop them from seeking help from the

school counselor: 1) "I would talk to a parent, friend, or teacher about this instead" and 2) "I like

to handle this stuff on my own." Those barriers were followed in likelihood by "I don't know

my counselor well enough to talk about this" and "The counselor might tell someone what I

said," with the order of these two reasons differing slightly by developmental level and domain

of the presenting issue.

　　　Differences by ethnicity. Several differences were also noted by ethnicity, beginning

with the finding that many students of color did not know their school counselor's name.

Specifically, White students were statistically more likely to report knowing their counselor's

name (92.7%) than were Multiracial (83.7%, $p \leq .05$) and African American (79.1%, $p \leq .001$)

students. Despite this finding, no significant differences were detected by ethnicity with regard

to the number of reported meetings with a school counselor over the past year.

Chi-square analyses detected statistically significant differences ($p \leq .01$) by ethnicity

with regard to reasons given by students for meeting with their school counselor over the past

year. African American (15.7%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (10.7%) students were less likely

than all other groups to report meeting with a school counselor in the past year for social-

emotional reasons. This trend was also observed in student ratings on items related to their

willingness to seek help from a school counselor for specific scenarios involving social-

emotional issues. For example, when asked to rate how likely they are to seek out the counselor

for help with, "Ongoing problem with parents or friend" on a scale from 1 to 5, African

American ($M = 1.82$) and Asian/Pacific Islander ($M = 1.71$) students reported being significantly

less likely ($p \leq .05$) than White ($M = 2.11$) or Latina(o) students ($M = 2.24$).

Conversely, African American students were most likely of all groups to report meeting

with a school counselor for academic reasons (62.3%), and this was similarly reflected in their

willingness to seek help from the school counselor for issues such as, "Change your schedule"

($M = 3.66$) and "Learn about better ways to study," ($M = 2.69$). A final notable finding is that

while African American students typically reported being more willing than White students to

seek help for college/career planning, a smaller percentage of African American students

(26.2%) reported actually meeting with their counselor for this reason as compared to White

students (31.6%).

Differences by gender. Very few statistically significant differences were noted by

gender in this sample, as male, female, and nonconforming students reported both similar levels

of willingness to see the school counselor and similar perceived barriers to doing so. Differences

were noted in the number of contacts with a school counselor in the past year, with

nonconforming students reporting significantly more ($M = 8.68, p \leq .05$) than male ($M = 3.4$) and

female ($M = 3.27$) students. The reported reasons for these meetings also differed, with female

(22.3%) and nonconforming (45.2%) students reporting more meetings than males (12.1%) for

social-emotional issues. Given the literature on help-seeking and gender, the relatively sparse

differences detected in this sample were somewhat surprising.

Open-Ended Questions

Research trends are shifting to include qualitative data within quantitative studies as a

way to reveal themes and common threads in a specific area being studied, (Erwin, Brotherson,

& Summers, 2011), as well as to provide a broader and more holistic understanding of the

phenomenon (Wright, 2014). The primary purpose of qualitative questioning within a survey is

to gain insight into the participants' worldviews and capture their unique and authentic

experiences and interpretations of these experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Rubin &

Bellamy, 2013; Saris & Gallhofer, 2014).

To that end, the *BEATS* survey included the following four open-ended questions:

1.   What would be the biggest reason that would make you willing to see your school counselor

if you had a problem?

2.   What would be the biggest reason you would NOT choose to see your school counselor

when you had a problem?

3.   What could the school counselors in your school do to be more helpful to students?

4.   If you feel hesitant to see your school counselor, is there anything she or he can do to make

you more willing to go? If yes, what would that be?

To explore the meaning and synthesize the open responses, two members of the research team conducted a thorough review of the data set by reading and re-reading the text. Independently, the researchers carried out a descriptive content analysis of the data and determined main themes from the four open-ended questions. Next, the two authors came together and worked collaboratively to arrive at a consensus on the main themes and patterns that emerged from the data analyzed. This review of responses revealed a variety of clear themes and patterns, which are discussed below.

For question one, two main themes emerged, each illustrating a condition under which the students would be willing to see the school counselor: (a) For help with task-oriented items and (b) When their perceived safety is at risk or there is a feeling of crisis. With regard to the first theme, seeing the school counselor for schedule changes or college-related questions was commonly described. One student shared, "I would only see my counselor if it was about college prep, SAT/ACT testing, or about my schedule." These task-oriented meetings represent low-risk opportunities for quick interactions with the school counselor that do not require a prior relationship or put the student at risk of being judged. The second theme focused on safety concerns (bullying, suicide, abuse, etc.). Students reported a reluctant willingness to seek help in these cases, although seeing the counselor was clearly viewed as a last resort. For example, a student wrote that they would seek help, "If I had a serious problem like suicide, family problems, abuse, or severe bullying," and another shared, "[If] One of my friends was having a serious mental health issue." A number of comments portrayed seeing the school counselor as a last resort: "It would be that I cannot find any other way to solve it and no one else that knows better" and "If I could not get help anywhere else." These responses suggest many students see

school counselors as responsive services providers to be called upon only for simple tasks or during crises when nobody else can help.

The following five themes emerged across responses to question two, which asked students to identify the main reason they would not choose to see the school counselor: (a) concern about confidentiality, (b) lack of rapport/connectedness, (c) stigma associated with the school counseling, (d) counselor competence, and (e) prefer others/self as support. The most prevalent among these concerns was confidentiality. Many students were clearly worried about their privacy and did not believe conversations with their school counselor would be kept confidential. One student expressed the concern in this way: "The biggest reason I would not choose to see my school counselor would be if they told everyone what you two talked about in private." Another student shared a specific example of a breach of confidentiality: "Because of them telling about my family issues. They have done that before where they say things are confidential and then tell what I said."

A second barrier mentioned by many respondents was a lack of rapport or connection with the school counselor that resulted in students being less willing to seek out their school counselor for support. This was reflected in comments such as, "I don't take my problems to people I don't know" and "The biggest reason I would choose not to see the counselor would be that I do not know her very well and don't feel comfortable talking about my problems."

The third area that students discussed was the stigma surrounding school counseling. For example, one student stated, "My friends would think that I am weird if I go see the counselor." Others made similar comments such as, "I am afraid someone might find out and make fun of me and tell everyone and they would make fun of me" and "The biggest reason...would be that I would be embarrassed if my friends saw me going to the office. I wouldn't want other people

starting to talk about me and wondering what problems I have." These feelings seem directly

connected to a negative perception of entering the school counseling office and speak to how the

student body perceives the services offered as well as how "problems" are viewed in the school.

The final two themes were counselor competence and the preference to rely on others or

self for support. Student responses indicated a general sense that the problem would get worse if

they saw the school counselor or a feeling that the school counselor is not helpful or competent.

One student simply stated, "They don't know anything," which while harsh, accurately

represented a number of student responses. In a similar vein, another student wrote, "Our school

counselor never does anything about the situation until someone gets hurt," and another said, "It

might make the problem worse." One student simply shared, "She isn't very helpful." These

statements could indicate a lack of understanding of the level of training and scope of work of a

school counselor, as well as a sense that students were not satisfied with how a previous issue

was addressed. This might contribute to the finding that many students want to handle problems

on their own or with friends and family, rather than with a school counselor. This was summed

up by responses such as, "I like handling it myself or talking to my closest friends and family,"

and "Friends are easier to talk to and more accessible."

Four themes emerged from responses to the final two open-ended questions, providing

insight into how school counselors might be more helpful to students. These themes included (a)

provide more individual meetings; (b) increase accessibility; (c) explain the roles/responsibilities

of a school counselor: and (d) normalize help-seeking. Students repeatedly stated a desire for

school counselors to be more visible in the school, more involved in students' lives, and to

intentionally reach out to students. For example, one student noted that, "She [school counselor]

could meet us in class and show us how to plan a meeting and talk to us 1-on-1 about our

personal life." Other students suggested that counselors could "Socialize with the students more so they can get to know them better" or "Have more scheduled meetings for students who don't go and make appointments themselves" in order to build rapport and increase accessibility.

Interestingly, these sentiments seem to contradict the responses given to the previous questions when students reported a general distrust and lack of desire to seek help from school counselors. But when asked explicitly about how school counselors could be more helpful, many students stated that counselors should actively reach out to students and get to know them outside the counseling office. Students encouraged counselors to "just talk to us more" and "interact with more kids" as simple, yet effective examples of how to foster openness in the student-counselor relationship.

In addition to a better relationship, students reported needing to learn the basics about school counseling, including the name of their counselor, how to schedule an appointment, the services offered by the school counselor, and the roles and responsibilities of a school counselor (including confidentiality). The following are a few examples of participant responses related to this need: "Assure me that I don't need to be afraid to talk with them or other people;" "Make it more well known how to get in contact with them;" "Make it easier to set up appointments;" and "Email me or talk to me to see if I have problems" In summary, the suggestions offered by students reflect a genuine interest in connecting with their school counselor in a meaningful, intentional way.

Finally, it is very important to note that many students used the open-ended response items to state that their school counselor was doing a good job and should not change a thing (examples: "Keep being awesome;" "I think they're fantastic as it is"). While the spirit of constructive criticism inherent in academic research tends to pull researchers' attention toward

issues that are problematic, we want to acknowledge the impressive efforts of the school

counselors represented in our study, as well as those across the country, most of whom are doing

the best they can given their training, caseloads, and constraints of their work settings.

Discussion

The results of this study highlight many notable patterns in secondary students' attitudes

towards seeking help from a school counselor. One important finding supported by both

quantitative and open-ended responses was related to the reasons students choose not to see their

school counselor. First and foremost, it seems clear that secondary students would prefer to

solve all but the most serious problems on their own or with the help of a friend or family

member before turning to a school counselor. While the exact reasons for this are unclear, two

contributing factors could be concerns about confidentiality and a lack of rapport/relationship

with the school counselor, both of which were consistently expressed in quantitative and

qualitative responses. All of these barriers have been identified in previous studies on help-

seeking among children and adolescents (Del Mauro & Williams, 2013; Fox & Butler, 2007;

Rughani et al, 2011; Timlin-Scalera et al., 2003), so it is important to note that they also seem

relevant in the context of school counseling services.

This study also uncovered many differences by ethnicity and developmental level

regarding the reasons students will see their school counselor. High school students were much

more likely than middle school students to have met with their school counselor in the previous

year, although the reasons for these meetings differed greatly, with most high schoolers reporting

academics or college/career planning as the reason for seeing their counselor, while middle

schoolers were more likely to report social-emotional reasons. While this may be expected given

the nature of student development and concerns at various ages, a counselor working within a

comprehensive school counseling program would aim to provide students with needed services across all domains, and at the very least work to ensure that students feel equally comfortable seeking help from the counselor for a variety of issues. That said, in this particular sample, MS students indicated a far greater willingness to seek help for social-emotional reasons (e.g., "Bullying") than issues in the other domains, while HS students expressed the most willingness to seek help related to academics (e.g., "Change my schedule"). Similar differences were noted by ethnicity, with African American and Asian American students expressing less willingness than White students to seek help for social-emotional concerns. Very few differences were detected by gender in this sample, as male, female, and nonconforming students reported similar degrees of willingness to seek help from the school counselor and similar barriers to doing so.

The results of this study point to the importance of school counselors acknowledging and addressing student concerns and demographic differences through outreach, relationship building, and education on the role of the school counselor. Confidentiality weighs especially heavily on the minds of adolescents and is not a simple issue to address given the complexities of balancing student trust and relationship with the counselor's duty to disclose certain information when required by law or guided by professional ethics and decision making (Stone, 2017).

Limitations

Like all research findings, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution for a number of reasons, beginning with the fact that the participants in this study were not chosen at random, but out of convenience given their standing as students at a school where the school counselor had an existing relationship with the research team. This makes the results dependent on the work of just a few school counselors, all of whom were previously known to the researchers. Furthermore, the settings and demographics of these schools do not perfectly

represent the states in which they are located (let alone the country as a whole) and are therefore

not widely generalizable. Given the nature of survey research, it is also unclear to what degree

the participants' responses accurately represent their feelings and experiences, rather than a

pattern of social desirability. This is especially true in light of the findings regarding student

concerns about confidentiality. Another limitation is the *BEATS* instrument, for which

measurements of reliability and validity were not available since it was developed specifically by

the researchers for use in this study and tested on only a small pilot sample of adolescents prior

to deployment. Finally, given the length and quantity of open-ended responses provided by

participants, this data was not analyzed in a thorough, systematic manner which may raise

concerns about validity. While the results may be interesting to some and useful in supporting

quantitative findings, they should not be used to draw major conclusions. Finally, the overall

effectiveness of each school counseling program was not measured, including the degree to

which a comprehensive school counseling approach such as the ASCA National Model (ASCA,

2012) was being utilized. Research has shown that comprehensive school counseling programs

provide many benefits (Carey & Harrington, 2010a; Carey & Harrington, 2010b), and it is

possible the variables examined in this study might have been impacted by the degree of

structure within each school's counseling program.

Implications for Practice

As noted above, many differences were observed by ethnicity and developmental level.

It is critical that school counselors note these differences, reflect on possible reasons for them,

and develop strategies to address them. For example, middle school students in the sample were

far more likely and willing to see a school counselor for social-emotional reasons than were high

school students. Counselors at both levels might consider whether this is the case at their school,

and if so, why that might be. Are high school counselors doing enough intentional outreach,

education, and prevention on social-emotional development and wellness? Conversely, are

middle school counselors doing enough work related to academic planning and college/career

readiness? School counselors are in a position to be change agents who work to address equity

gaps and increase the multicultural competency of the faculty and staff. Effective

comprehensive school counseling programs cannot survive without great efforts on the part of

the school counselor to win the investment of the entire school community. School counselors

can no longer work in silos or wait for students to approach them for help. Instead, counselors

must take the lead in reaching out and educating students, teachers, administrators, families, and

the general public on the value and scope of school counseling programs, as well as the

importance of working collaboratively.

School counselors would also be wise to address the barriers to seeking school

counseling services noted by the students in this study, especially since these findings were

consistent with previous research on adolescent help-seeking behaviors. Concern about

confidentiality, the tendency to rely on self or family and friends for help, and a lack of trust and

rapport with the school counselor are issues that cannot be ignored if school counselors hope to

establish an environment in which students feel comfortable seeking help for a variety of issues.

Educating students and staff on the role of the school counselor and building an advisory council

(American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012) might be first steps towards addressing

these concerns. By widely educating stakeholders and convening a team who understand issues

such as confidentiality, program goals, and appropriate tasks and use of time, school counselors

help ensure they have the trust and time needed for direct services to build rapport with students

and establish a safe, secure environment in which all students feel comfortable seeking out

school counseling services.

To ensure school counselors have the opportunity to implement evidence-based programming and develop more comprehensive school counseling programs, it is critical they work closely with their building-level administrator to ensure a shared vision for school counseling services and clear roles and responsibilities for the school counselor (ASCA, 2012; Mallory & Jackson, 2007). In an effort to build support for a more comprehensive program, it may be helpful for school counselors to share with principals research demonstrating that students who feel their school counselor cares about them are more likely to feel connected to school in general, which in turn is associated with a host of positive academic and nonacademic outcomes (Lapan, Wells, Peterson, & McCann, 2014).

The ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012) provides a framework for school counselors to develop and deliver outcome-based services to address the academic, social-emotional, and college/career readiness needs of all students through a comprehensive program organized around four components: foundation, management, delivery, and accountability. All the while, school counselors are called to display the key skills, attitudes, and dispositions needed to be effective, including the four specific themes of the National Model (2012): leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change. While schools must examine solutions to the barriers identified in these research findings in the context of their specific settings and student populations, as a starting point suggestions are offered that align with the ASCA National Model (2012). As with any intervention, counselors should target each action towards a specific goal and measure the effectiveness of the response in impacting student outcomes.

- Implement looping (i.e., having school counselor move through the grade levels with the same set of students) to maximize the development of close student-counselor relationships. (Delivery, Collaboration, Advocacy)

- Hold regularly scheduled individual or small-group meetings with students to build trust and rapport. (Delivery, Collaboration, Leadership, Advocacy)

- Use technology to regularly communicate with students and make it easy to schedule meetings. (Delivery, Collaboration, Leadership)

- In schools with multiple counselors, allow students to see any counselor without an appointment for simple requests. Use technology to communicate the content of these meetings to the assigned counselor. (Delivery, Collaboration, Leadership, Systemic Change)

- Educate students and staff about school counseling. Possible topics include the training and expertise of school counselors; services provided; a typical meeting with the counselor; how to schedule appointments; and confidentiality. Reach out to students as early as possible, including at transition meetings, visits to other buildings in a district, and back-to-school events. Be proactive -- do not wait for students to find you. (Delivery, Collaboration, Leadership, Advocacy, Systemic Change)

- Seek regular feedback from students, staff, and parents regarding the effectiveness of the school counseling program, including barriers to seeking help. School counselors might use our study results as a starting point for surveying students on reasons they do (or do not) seek out their counselor. Keep an open mind and operate from a growth mindset when analyzing feedback. Remember that counselors are in schools to serve students, so we need to listen to their voices. (Management, Accountability, Systemic Change, Leadership, Advocacy)

- Keep the school website updated with information about the school counseling program and protocols such as scheduling appointments so it is easily accessible to students and stakeholders. (Foundation, Management, Leadership, Advocacy, Collaboration)

- Consider using volunteers for work that does not require access to confidential student information n order to free up time to meet face-to-face with students and build trust and rapport. (Delivery, Collaboration, Leadership)

Suggestions for Future Research

Further research is needed in the area of student attitudes towards seeking help from the school counselor. For example, researchers might consider replicating this study in different geographic locales and/or with demographic samples more representative of the national population. Qualitative researchers might build on the findings from the open-ended questions using smaller samples and more rigorous methodology. Additionally, researchers might gather data from other stakeholders such as school counselors, teachers, parents, and administrators to allow for comparison with student attitudes. Future studies might also use experimental methods to determine the effectiveness of specific interventions targeted at student concerns raised in this study (e.g., confidentiality, trust). It would be especially helpful if such interventions were embedded within a comprehensive school counseling program, such as one based on the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012) and studied longitudinally with an eye towards measurable student outcomes. Reviewing school counseling intervention research, particularly evidence-based programs that could be modified to address the needs of the school, might also be advantageous. For example, the All Hands On Deck program provides an excellent template showcasing a school counselor led initiative focusing on academic press, social support, and relational trust (Salina et al., 2013). Finally, interested researchers might include other variables

such as student-to-counselor ratio, degree and fidelity of implementation of a comprehensive

school counseling program, and type of student-counselor interaction to measure any differences

in student outcomes and attitudes.

Conclusion

School counselors provide essential support and services to students, but the results of

this study indicate that a variety of beliefs, attitudes, and barriers impede the ability and

willingness of students to seek help from their counselor. Finding ways to minimize these

barriers is critical so that students can receive the support and guidance they need. Some

positive steps in this direction are easy, such as ensuring students know how to access school

counseling services. Addressing other barriers, such as student concern about confidentiality, are

much more complex. School counselors need to find ways to educate students and other

stakeholders about the services they can provide, as well as reach out to students who may be

reluctant to seek help on their own. It is clear that further research is needed in this area.

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Table 1
Participating school characteristics

	General Information			Approximate Student Population (Ethnicity counts expressed in %)					
	Grade Levels	*Setting/ Type*	*School coun-selors*	*Total*	*White*	*Afr Amer*	*Latin a(o)*	*Asian/ Pac Isl*	*Amer Indian*	*Multi-racial*
School A	7-12	Rural/ Public	1	444	96.6	0.2	1.4	0.9	0.9	0.9
School B	6-8	Rural/ Public	1	298	78.2	2.0	17.8	0.6	0.3	1.3
School C	9-12	Suburban/ Private	4	732	91.8	0.8	3.1	1.1	0.1	3.0
School D	9-12	Rural/ Public	2	857	87.9	4.0	2.1	2.4	0.2	3.4
School E	9-12	Urban/ Public	9	2,388	25.9	51.5	14.7	1.1	0.1	6.7
School F	9-12	Rural/ Public	1	251	78.8	.8	19.5	.4	0	0
School G	9-12	Rural/ Public	1.3	509	83.1	.4	13.6	.2	.4	1.0
School H	6-8	Medium outstate city/ Public	2	888	84.0	8.0	3.4	2.1	.3	2.0
School I	10-12	Suburban/ Public	6	1,598	60.6	18.9	9.1	.1	.4	4.2
School J	7-8	Rural/ Public	.7	253	81.8	0	14.2	0	.4	2.8

| School K | 9-12 | Medium outstate/ Private | 1 | 137 | 91.2 | 1.5 | 2.2 | 0 | 0 | 2.9 |

Table 2

To what degree would the following reasons STOP you from seeing your school counselor for

help with each type of issue?

	Academic		College/Career		Social-Emotional/	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
I would talk to a parent, friend, or teacher about this instead	3.01	1.37	2.65	1.34	3.17	1.43
I like to handle this stuff on my own	2.89	1.36	2.53	1.33	3.15	1.42
I don't know my counselor well enough to talk about this	2.59	1.30	2.21	1.22	2.93	1.43
The counselor might tell someone what I said	2.57	1.38	2.11	1.25	2.89	1.46
I didn't know the counselor did stuff like this	2.25	1.14	2.05	1.10	2.47	1.35
I don't know how to make an appointment with my counselor	2.12	1.25	2.09	1.21	2.31	1.30
It's weak to get help for something like this	2.02	1.14	1.94	1.10	2.47	1.31
It's embarrassing or not cool to get help from the counselor for this	1.89	1.00	1.77	1.03	2.43	1.34

1 – Very unlikely   2 – Unlikely   3 – Undecided   4 – Likely   5 - Very likely

Table 3

How likely is it that you would go to your school counselor for the following issues?

	Middle School		High School	
	M	SD	M	SD
Change your schedule *	2.20	1.27	4.19	1.1
Exploring college options *	2.51	1.31	3.92	1.07
Deciding which classes to take *	2.42	1.28	3.83	1.13
Figuring out what jobs/careers you might like *	2.40	1.29	3.26	1.27
Learning how to pay for college *	2.29	1.23	3.17	1.24
Problem with a teacher *	2.59	1.38	3.05	1.35
A friend told you they were thinking of harming themselves *	3.36	1.59	2.93	1.45
Bullying *	3.19	1.53	2.60	1.38
Learning new or better ways to study *	2.28	1.23	2.44	1.23
Anxiety or stress *	2.56	1.41	2.17	1.24
Ongoing problem with your parents or friend *	2.50	1.31	1.89	1.07
You've been feeling very sad lately *	2.39	1.35	1.75	1.05

1 – Very unlikely   2 – Unlikely   3 – Undecided   4 – Likely   5 - Very likely

*Significant at $p \leq .001$