

School Counselor Satisfaction with their Graduate Training:

A Survey of East Kentucky Counselors

Professional school counselors assume a myriad of roles (Baker, 1996) and consequently need an extensive training background in many areas. In Eastern Kentucky, the issues of poverty and lack of funding in school districts make the counselor's job even more crucial and challenging (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 1998). Since the counselor's role is complex and multifaceted their confidence in their professional training becomes highly significant. However, the training satisfaction and professional development needs of the regional school counselor is relatively unknown. The role of the school counselor must be clearly established before assessing their training satisfaction.

The Role of the School Counselor

Role statements for school counselors stem from several sources. The American School Counseling Association publishes a role statement written by top professionals in school counseling (ASCA, 1999). This statement helps those who train counselors and those who outline state standards of practice. State role statements usually come from the particular state's education department. For example, in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, the New Counselor Standards (Kentucky Educational Professional Standards Board, 1996) have been published to give districts an outline of essential services performed by school counselors. Finally, professional literature in counseling offers role statements for counselors. Several authors (Baker, 1996; Ballard & Murgatroyd, 1999; Schmidt, 1999) have discussed the utilization of the professional school counselor in books and journal articles. Common threads are seen from all of these resources. It appears that there is a high level of agreement with regards to the role of the school counselor among the professional resources

Three roles that were evident in all these resources were {a} counseling, {b} consulting, and {c} coordination (ASCA, 1999; Schmidt, 1999). Additionally several other functions have been promoted that will be discussed.

Counseling

McWhirter et al. (1998) reported that children and adolescents today face a myriad of problems that are creating an at-risk society. The problems they cited include high numbers of students living in poverty, over a million confirmed cases of children and adolescents being abused or neglected yearly, an increased divorce rate, drug and sexual behaviors starting at earlier ages, and suicide. The emotional distress resulting from these problems can cripple a student's ability to function in the classroom. According to the ASCA Role Statement (1999), professional school counselors provide services to help students learn more effectively. One way they remove barriers to student learning is through individual counseling.

The ASCA Role Statement (1999) defines individual counseling as "a personal and private interaction between a counselor and a student in which they work together on a problem." During this interaction problematic behaviors, affect, and thoughts are discussed and counselors provide feedback to increase skills and enhance the student's self-awareness. According to Schmidt (1999) counseling methods need to fit the developmental level of the student. For example, elementary school counselors may utilize play therapy more frequently to compensate for the lack of verbal skills in younger children (Rudolph & Thompson, 1996). Individual counseling is time consuming and can limit the ability of the counselor to offer services to many students. Group counseling offers more efficiency and allows to counselor to reach more students.

Schmidt (1999) and Baker (1996) promoted the utilization of group counseling and large group guidance in schools not only because of efficiency but also because group counseling may be a more effective intervention. Both authors distinguish group counseling from group guidance. While group guidance is more instructional and informational, group counseling is more likely to focus on personal relationships (Schmidt, 1999). Group sizes for children are usually limited to five while adolescent groups may be larger. Offering counseling groups has been identified as an essential service although many times the activity is absent in the schools.

Large group guidance activities focus on developmentally relevant themes. This activity helps the counselor provide services to many students and also helps them be visible in the school.

Consulting

The ASCA role statement (1999) defines consultation as “helping people become more effective in working with others.” It goes on to state it “helps individuals think through problems and concerns, acquire more knowledge and skill, and become more objective and self-confident.” For example, a teacher may need assistance designing a strategy for working with a child diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. The counselor may train the teacher to have the child use relaxing self-statements or calming breathing exercises.

Baker (1996) has outlined some basic consulting competencies for school counselors. First, school counselors need to know how to open consultation meetings properly. Effective facilitative skills help the consultee clarify the problem and form a working relationship with the school counselor. Problem identification is the next competency needed for successful consultation. For example, a teacher may have a problem handling a student who has been only recently acting out. The teacher initiates consultation with the school counselor and wants to

explore ways to address the new acting out behavior. Effective problem identification not only names the surface problem of acting out, but also examines underlying reasons for the problem. This particular child's parents may be going through a divorce and the child is acting out frustrations about conflict at home. Knowledge of these underlying factors to problems is essential for effective problem identification. Once a target problem is agreed upon, the consultant helps the consultee explore options and possible solutions. An approach is mutually agreed upon and the school counselor schedules a follow-up meeting to assess the results and modify the plan. Because teachers face a myriad of student issues that they are rarely trained to handle, consulting has been identified as a core component of a school counselor role and should not take second place to administrative and clerical duties. Although consultation activities do not usually directly involve the student, it helps teachers assist many students with similar concerns. Another function of school counselors that may or may not involve direct contact with students is coordination.

Coordination

The ASCA Role Statement (1999) defines coordination as "a counselor intervention of managing various indirect services that benefit students and being a liaison between school and community agencies." Keeping in mind that professional school counselors are interested in enhancing student success, they administer and conduct developmentally appropriate programs to help students achieve academic, social, and vocational goals.

School counselors can reach a wide range of students through programming efforts. Program may be school-wide or may target special populations of students. Offering a career fair is an example of coordination efforts. Although the counselor may not offer direct services to the students, they provide a students a chance to interact with people from various vocations.

Another example of program coordination would be implementing a peer mediation program within the school. The school counselor would need to research effective programs, plan training for school personnel, name program leaders and trainers, and design an assessment procedure. Obviously, coordination efforts can be laborious and they offer little direct contact with students. However, these efforts reach a broad range of students and they are supported by national and most state school counselor role statements. Counseling, consulting, and coordination have been identified as the major components of a comprehensive school counseling program (Gysbers & Henderson, 1994). However, several other functions have also been promoted as appropriate roles for the school counselors

Other duties promoted

As part of the coordination function, school counselors have been encouraged to assist in testing and appraisal services. Although the ASCA Role Statement (1999) does not place this function as a major role of the school counselor, several authors and state standards have named this function. School administrators often assume that school counselors are responsible for being the site coordinator for standardized test. This notion is not endorsed in the professional literature or in some state standards. For example, the New Counselor Standards used in the Commonwealth of Kentucky states that school counselors assist in test coordination it does not specifically name them as site test coordinators. To be congruent with state and national standards, school counselors would assist mainly in test selection and interpretation, not administration.

The professional literature and some state standards also have listed several other functions as important to school counselors. A few of these include: {a} school-to-work transition programs, {b} financial aid and scholarship programs, {c} community referrals networks, {d} in-service training and professional development, and {e} student record keeping. Ideally, school administrators would be in congruence with professional standards with regards to the listed essential roles of the school counselor. With the support of the administrative leadership these activities should comprise the bulk of the school counselor's function. If school leaders do not view these functions as primary and above administrative and other tasks then counselors will spend little time on their essential duties.

Common counselor duties not promoted

Baker (1996) and Ballard and Murgatroyd (1999) listed several duties that school counselors often perform, although they are not overtly endorsed or published counselor role statements. Performing these roles represent a threat to the essential services of school counselors. It is important to be aware of how administrators view these outside functions with regards to the role of the counselor.

Scheduling

Course scheduling is an arduous task. High school counselors often claim they spent more time scheduling than any other function. However, scheduling is not specifically outlined in the ASCA role statement nor is it named as the primary responsibility of the counselor in state standards. It is simply a task that traditionally has been assigned to counselors by default. Although school counselors should assist in the overall functioning of the school, the weight of scheduling needs to be distributed equally

among school personnel. Baker (1996) suggested a team approach makes more sense for scheduling. Since teachers are most directly affected by scheduling, they should be involved in the process. Needless to say, if high school counselors spend a majority of their time on this administrative function, they are not fulfilling their primary duties of counseling, consulting, and coordinating. Additionally, if scheduling conflicts frustrate teachers then counselors can be viewed in a negative light. Using a team approach would help alleviate many of these concerns.

Disciplinary functions

Students often experience tension and anxiety when they approach school counselors because students often view them as disciplinarians (Baker, 1996). The roles of disciplinarian and counselors are mutually exclusive because counseling is based on trust and open communication. Lecturing and punishing are acts that undermine the counselor's relationship with students and are incongruent with the counselor's role. However, if administrators do not recognize this conflict they will often send students to counselors to be reprimanded. Counselors, who recognize their employment is often linked to a good relationship with the principal, agree to meet the expectations of their chief administrator.

Clerical duties

Maintaining student records, assisting with transcript requests, and collecting and organizing program materials are among some of the many clerical tasks that school counselors conduct. Without clerical support the school counselor's role can be restricted to providing only these laborious tasks. Considering the amount of time spent on

specialized training, and the lack of training in clerical activities, this appears to be an inefficient use of the counselor's energy.

Summary

Identifying the role of the school counselor is crucial before assessing the training needs and satisfaction with training outcomes. Counselor role statements stem from the professional literature, state endorsed standards, and from professional organizations such as the American School Counselor Association. Three main roles have surfaced from these resources. First, providing individual and group counseling services, second, providing consultation with parents and teachers, and third, coordinating programs to promote the well-fare of students. The confidence that school counselors have in their training is important because it reflects their ability to serve students in our region. Perceived weaknesses in their development as a counselor, once established, can be addressed with post-graduate training. The results will also help guide counselor educators with new directions for training focus.

Methods

The overall purpose of this study is to investigate how high school, middle school, and elementary counselors in the region of Eastern Kentucky rate their satisfaction with their master's level counselor training, regardless of what program from which they graduated. This is a regional analysis of what factors school counselor's view as strengths and weaknesses of graduate programs in counseling. The results can be used to determine in-service training needs for local school counselors and to give feedback to graduate programs on program effectiveness.

The Kentucky State Department of Education publishes a list of all state school. A

sample of 150 schools of all grade levels were mailed the School Counselor's Satisfaction with Graduate Training Survey (SCSGT). This survey was developed by the researcher to identify the major areas of practice of school counselors. The survey was developed by examining The New Counselor Standards published by the Commonwealth of Kentucky and ASCA standards and including items based on those standards. The researchers gave a pilot survey to 15 school counselors and requested them to make any revisions. Several items were changed or clarified based on their responses.

Descriptive statistics for each variable will be obtained using . Means and standards deviations will be obtained for each variable.

Results

Of the 150 mailed surveys 12 were returned because the school address had changed or the school had been closed. A total of 46 of the remaining 138 surveys were returned show a response rate of 33%. There were 43 women and 3 men in the sample making it 93% female. Only one respondent was identified as African-American while 45 were labeled as Caucasian (98%). No other ethnic background was listed by the respondents. The ethnic makeup of the sample is highly heterogeneous, however, it accurately represents the demographic structure of the region. A majority of the participants were elementary school counselors (n=22) (49%), middle school counselors were next (n=13) (28%), and high school counselors were least represented (n=11) (24%).

Table 1.

Means and Standard Deviation of School Counselor Satisfaction with Training

Variable	Mean	SD
ETHICS	4.26	.93
INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING	3.91	.86
GROUP COUNSELING	3.67	.99
INTERPRETING ACHIEVEMENT TEST	3.65	1.20
INTERPRETING INTEREST INVENTORIES	3.65	.99
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	3.63	1.04
CAREER COUNSELING	3.57	.89
CLASSROOM GUIDANCE	3.52	1.13
PLANNING GUIDANCE PROGRAM	3.50	1.17
NEEDS ASSESSMENT	3.48	.98
PROGRAM EVALUATION	3.33	1.03
CRISIS COUNSELING	3.28	1.11

Table 1 continued.

Means and Standard Deviation of School Counselor Satisfaction with Training

Variable	Mean	SD
TRANSITION COUNSELING	3.13	.93
TEACHER CONSULTATION	3.13	.96
PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP	3.07	1.04
COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL AGENCIES	3.00	1.03
PARENT CONSULATATION	2.96	1.05
ADMINISTRATIVE	2.87	1.47
COMMUNITY COLLABORATION	2.85	.92
COORDINATION	2.83	.93

SA=satisfaction with graduate training in that task

Table 2.

Means and Standard Deviation of Significance of Tasks

Variable	Mean	SD
ETHICS	4.41	.86
PARENT CONSULTATION	4.22	.99
INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING	4.22	.89
PLANNING GUIDANCE PROGRAM	4.13	.86
CRISIS COUNSELING	4.11	.95
INTERPRETING ACHIEVEMENT TESTS	4.09	.86
TEACHER CONSULTATION	4.07	.95
CLASSROOM GUIDANCE	4.00	1.01
NEES ASSESSMENT	3.93	.83
PROGRAM EVALUATION	3.89	.82
COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL AGENCIES	3.83	.88

Table 2 continued.

Means and Standard Deviation of Significance of Tasks

Variable	Mean	SD
GROUP COUNSELING	3.80	.91
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	3.76	1.04
TRANSITION COUNSELING	3.76	.87
ADMINISTRATIVE DUTIES	3.74	1.00
COORDINATING PROGRAMS	3.67	.99
COMMUNITY COLLABORATION	3.67	.97
CAREER COUNSELING	3.63	1.00
INTERPRETING INTEREST INVENTORIES	3.58	.99
PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP	3.52	.96

SG=significance of task

Top 5 significant tasks or issues

The most significant task or issue was ethical responsibility. Fortunately a vast majority of regional school counselors viewed ethics and a very significant issue. For school counselors ethics reflects a code of conduct relating to confidentiality, dual relationships, duty to warn, and promoting the welfare of clients. Second, parent consultation and individual counseling tied for 2nd place in significance. Parent consultation usually involves parent skills training, behavioral modification programs, academic reporting, and career or vocation counseling. Fourth, school counselor rated planning as a highly significant duty. The planning responsibilities of counselors include school calendar preparation, assessing the goals of the counseling program, deciding what classroom guidance programs are needed and when to do them, and scheduling achievement testing, career fairs, and other related events. And finally, the 5th most significant task involved crisis counseling. Although crisis counseling is not a daily function of the school counselor it is still one of the most important roles. For example, school counselors must know how to address suicidal ideation, threats to harm others, psychiatric crisis, and student losses.

Top 5 most satisfied in training

The 1st rated item for training satisfaction was the areas of ethics. Evidently, regional graduate training programs place a great emphasis on ethical training. Ethical training is typically integrated into every class in the graduate curriculum. This integrated effort may explain the satisfaction students communicated in the survey. The 2nd rated item was individual counseling which was followed by the 3rd item, group counseling.

These two tasks are considered to be two of the most significant by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA). The 4th and 5th rated items relate to interpreting tests, achievement and career related interest inventories. Test interpretation typically entails explaining results to students and parents and discussing the implications of these results. Most graduate training programs offer assessment courses as well as career counseling courses. Once again, an integration effort is seen in this training component. It appears that several items the participants rated as pleased with their training were addressed in several classes.

Least satisfied with training

Participants rated the following five items as the ones they were least satisfied with their graduate training. The 1st item is collaborating with local agencies. School counselors work with child protective services, juvenile courts, and police department frequently. Maintaining ties with these agencies requires planning and motivation. The 2nd item was parent consultation. This item being rated low in training satisfaction signals a warning flag. Parent consultation was rated as one of the top five duties in significance, however, was rated in the bottom five in training satisfaction. The 3rd item rated as least satisfied in training was administrative duties. Unfortunately, many school counselors spend more time on administrative functions than they do counseling. Greater training efforts in administrative duties can help counselors be more efficient and will allow more time for other duties. The 4th item is community collaboration. This might include PTA, working with business groups, and connecting with volunteer groups. The 5th and final item is coordination. School counselors need better training in coordinating career fairs, peer mediation programs, and other related programs.

Implications

1. Training needs to be greater emphasized in the area of parent consultation and teacher consultation. A separate consultation course could be added to the core program, or consultation components need to be integrated more in the current courses. Training should include conceptual models of consultation as well as skills training in the form of vignettes and role playing.
2. School counselors in the region need more training in crisis counseling. A separate crisis course could be added or it could be greater emphasized in current classes. Practicum courses and school counseling programs courses can highlight crisis management more effectively. Focus is needed in specific skills needed for different types of crisis.
3. Graduate programs in the region need a greater emphasis in planning guidance programs. This could include mock calendars, shadowing activities, strategic planning portfolios, and coordination activity lists.
4. Graduates from school counseling programs need a greater level of interest in professional leadership. This could be addressed by a more active CSI program, linking students with mentors for local leadership position, creating activities for legal activism, showing the relevance of leadership in the areas of professional standards, roles, and promotion of the profession.
5. Maintain a focus on counseling skills and bridge the gap from theory to practice.
6. Use professional school counselors as liaisons with graduate programs for assessment and planning.

7. Highlight the significance of k-12 career counseling. Many elementary school counselors rated this activity as low in significance. Graduate programs need to increase their awareness of the relevance of early career attitudes.

References

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Appendix A

Elementary School Counselors Satisfaction with Training

Task or Issue	N=22	Mean	SD
ETHICS		4.18	1.14
INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING		3.77	.69
INTERPRETING INTEREST			
INVENTORIES		3.73	.77
CAREER COUNSELING		3.59	.80
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT		3.50	.91
ASSESSING NEEDS		3.45	.86
GROUP COUNSELING		3.41	1.01
INTERPRETING ACHIEVEMENT			
TESTS		3.36	1.14
CLASSROOM GUIDANCE		3.36	1.18
PLANNING		3.36	1.09
CRISIS COUNSELING		3.18	1.14
TEACHER CONSULTATION		3.18	.91
PROGRAM EVALUATION		3.14	.94
TRANSITIONS		3.00	.87
PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP		2.86	.77
ADMINISTRATIVE DUTIES		2.86	1.46
PARENT CONSULTATION		2.86	.89
COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL			
AGENCIES		2.82	1.01
COMMUNITY COLLABORATION		2.82	.73
COORDINATION		2.68	.95

Appendix B

Training Satisfaction for Middle School Counselors

N= 13.00

Variable	Mean	SD
ETHICS	4.23	.73
INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING	4.15	.80
GROUP COUNSELING	4.00	.91
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	4.00	.82
INTERPRETING ACHEIVEMENT TESTS	4.00	1.22
CLASSROOM GUIDANCE	3.85	.90
PLANNING	3.85	.90
PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP	3.85	.80
ASSESSING NEEDS	3.77	.83
INTERPRETING INTEREST INVENTORIES	3.69	1.03
CAREER COUNSELING	3.69	.85
PROGRAM EVALUATION	3.69	.95
TRANSITIONS	3.62	.77
CRISIS COUNSELING	3.38	.96
TEACHER CONSULATION	3.31	.85
PARENT CONSULTATION	3.31	1.11
COORDINATION	3.23	.83
COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL AGENCIES	3.23	.93
COMMUNITY COLLABORATION	3.15	.80
ADMINISTRATIVE DUTIES	3.15	1.46

Appendix C

Satisfaction with training for High School Counselors

N= 11.00

Variable	Mean	SD
ETHICS	4.45	.69
INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING	3.91	1.22
GROUP COUNSELING	3.82	.98
INTERPRETING ACHEIVEMENT TESTS	3.82	1.25
INTERPRETING INTEREST INVENTORIES	3.45	1.37
CLASSROOM GUIDANCE	3.45	1.29
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	3.45	1.44
CRISIS COUNSELING	3.36	1.29
CAREER COUNSELING	3.36	1.12
PLANNING	3.36	1.57
PROGRAM EVALUATION	3.27	1.27
ASSESSING NEEDS	3.18	1.33
COLLABORATING WITH LOCAL AGENCIES	3.09	1.22
TEACHER CONSULATATION	2.82	1.17
TRANSITIONS	2.82	1.08
PARENT CONSULTATION	2.73	1.27
COORDINATION	2.64	.92
PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP	2.55	1.29
COMMUNITY COLLABORATION	2.55	1.29
ADMINISTRATIVE DUTIES	2.55	1.57
