EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF SCHOOL COUNSELING:

VOICES FROM RURAL ALASKA

By

Christine Rojas Cook

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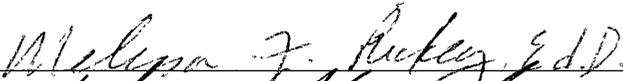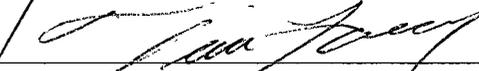
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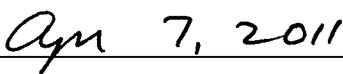
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EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF SCHOOL COUNSELING:

VOICES FROM RURAL ALASKA

A

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty

of the University of Alaska Fairbanks

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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By

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Abstract

School counselors in rural locations deal with many of the same issues and concerns of those in most urban areas, but have several additional challenges due to the geographic and demographic characteristics of their populations. The research in this dissertation investigated the specific challenges experienced by school counselors in the state of Alaska. All school counselors working in a rural public school were surveyed to determine what challenges they experienced, what resources they utilize, what additional resources they would like, and to discuss any information they believed would be helpful for a counselor about to enter the rural school setting. From the original 93 survey responses, 24 counselors were interviewed to provide further depth to the investigation.

Analysis revealed similar challenges as discussed previously in the literature regarding rural counselor practice, but highlighted crisis situations, isolation variables, limited community resources, multiple roles, rural culture issues, and cultural issues. Alaska school counselors currently utilize a variety of resources to help them address the concerns in their communities. They did not request anything different than the resources they currently access, but rather wanted more of those resources. Recommendations are made for school counselors, school districts, state organizations, and counselor education training institutes.

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Acknowledgements

Completing a dissertation is always a journey. As I near completion of my goal, I am reflecting back on the journey and realize that I could not have reached this destination if it were not for the support and guidance of many friends, colleagues, and family members. It is now that I would like to publicly acknowledge those individuals and groups.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Counselors in rural locations deal with many of the same issues and concerns of those in most urban areas, but have several additional challenges due to the geographic and demographic characteristics of their populations. Depending on the location and economic prosperity of the rural community, there may not be resources available to meet the needs of their residents. Likewise, counselors working in the state of Alaska have many of the same concerns as counselors in the other 49 states, but due to its vast differences in geographic and environmental conditions (i.e., remoteness of villages, extremes in temperatures, periods of light and darkness) often times there are specific issues that arise that are unique to working in this setting. Along with the unusual geographic conditions in Alaska, there is a unique demographic population. Cross-cultural variables need to be considered due to the high percentage of minority individuals, mainly from indigenous native populations, that are living in rural Alaska. Essentially, rural may not constitute the same meaning in Alaska as it does in other areas.

In helping to provide a glimpse in to the environment of the rural school counselor, this research will first review the components of rural communities in the United States focusing on aspects related to K-12 education and the population it serves. It will then focus on the components of rural Alaskan communities and overview the counseling concerns of residents in those communities, with attention given to those aspects related to children and adolescents.

After exploring the basic components and needs of rural communities, in general, a discussion regarding the need for counselors in the state of Alaska will ensue. Additionally, the intended role of the school counselor based on the American School Counseling Association national model will be described (ASCA, 2008). Community mental health professionals and school counselors share many of the same characteristics, but each has a different professional role. By clearly describing the role of the school counselor, readers will be able to more clearly understand which specific counseling needs may be addressed by the school counselor.

After the introduction to the rural environment and the need for school counselors is described in chapter one, a literature review regarding how the rural context influences a school counselor working in a rural setting will be included in chapter two. An examination of the most salient issues facing practitioners in rural settings, and more specifically rural Alaskan communities, will provide individuals unfamiliar with these areas a view in to the world in which the school counselor in rural Alaska works.

An adequate foundation regarding the context of rural school counseling needs to be laid prior to entering in to the present research study. The current study intends to further the research base regarding the experiences of the rural school counselor. The purpose is to determine what rural Alaskan school counselors perceive as the main challenges of working in rural schools. Furthermore, the research is intended to reveal what resources they currently use to help them overcome these challenges, what resources they feel would help them deal with the challenges even more, and finally, what information they feel is important to know when working as a school counselor in rural Alaska. It is hoped that this information can assist new counselors intending to work in rural settings, but also may be able to aid current school counseling professionals working in rural Alaska by providing them useful ideas to support them in dealing with the challenges of working in a rural context.

Rural School Composition in the United States

The Rural School and Community Trust [RSCT] (2005), reports that 19.1 percent of public school students are enrolled in rural schools and 30.3 percent of public schools are located in rural areas. Although 30.3 percent of public schools are in rural areas, only 18.5 percent of the nation's overall K-12 funding goes to rural schools (RSCT, 2005). The percentages indicate that schools in rural areas are operating with fewer resources than schools in non-rural locations.

The National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, (2003) reports that in the United States there were 12,423,861 rural elementary and secondary students in the year 2000. Rural students make up 26.7 percent of the total population of students. According to NCES, rural is defined as a school or district that is physically located in a place outside

of a metropolitan statistical area and has a population of fewer than 2,500 persons, or is located in a place inside a metropolitan statistical area and has a population of fewer than 2,500 persons.

This study will be using the most current definition of rural from the Office of Management and Budget which looks at rural in relation to metro and nonmetro status (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2003). Rural status is determined based on the population size of the Metropolitan Statistical Area of which they are a part. Nonmetro counties are classified according to the aggregate size of their urban population. There are three main urban size categories, each of which is then further divided in to three categories based on whether or not they are adjacent to a metro area. This results in nine codes to determine rural status. For example, a code of 9 is the most rural and is equal to a population of less than 2,500, which is not adjacent to metro area.

The following are specific code listings in the state of Alaska (USDA, 2003). Ten counties in Alaska received a code of 9: Aleutians East, Bristol Bay, Dillingham, Haines, Lake and Peninsula, Prince of Wales/Ketchikan, Skagway, Valdez/Cordova, Wade Hampton, and Yakutat. A code of an 8 is equal to a population of less than 2,500, which is adjacent to a metro area. In Alaska this includes Denali, Southeast Fairbanks, and Yukon-Koyukuk. A code of a 7 is an urban area of 2,500 to 19,999, population that is not adjacent to a metro area. This would include Aleutians West, Bethel, Kenai, Ketchikan, Kodiak, Nome, North Slope, Northwest Arctic, Sitka, and Wrangell. All the other codes are not considered rural, although Juneau received a code of 5 (population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area), Fairbanks received a code of 3 (metro area with a population fewer than 250,000), and Anchorage and Matanuska-Susitna received codes of 2 (metro area with 250,000 to 1 million people). Due to the high numbers of students living in and attending schools in rural locations, attention needs to be given to the make-up of these communities and the needs they exhibit.

One of the highest risk factors for rural students is the issue of poverty.

> The negative influence of poverty manifests in multiple ways – e.g., the economic well-being of families is closely related to the preparedness level of children

entering school, while the economic well-being of communities (as reflected in local property values) is associated with the ability of the community to generate revenue to support its schools. (RSCT, 2005, p. 5)

There are many indicators of poverty. The Rural School and Community Trust (2005) uses 5 indicators to gauge poverty level: percentage of rural students who are eligible for subsidized meals; percentage of families with school-age children who are living below the federal poverty line; percentage of rural female-headed households with preschool-age children who are living below the federal poverty line; rural per capita income; and rural per pupil property wealth.

The first indicator (percentage of students eligible for subsidized meals) is the most common measure of student poverty, but it does have limitations (RSCT, 2005). It only counts those students whose family actually applies for meal programs. The application procedure may be limited depending on the paperwork and procedures required of the schools. Families may not complete the paperwork due to language barriers, immigration concerns, lack of knowledge or assistance, or issues regarding the stigma of receiving this type of assistance. Regardless of the limitations involved, more than one third (37.4 percent) of all rural school students qualify for free or reduced priced meals (RSCT, 2005).

A related statistic is the percentage of rural families with children living below the poverty line. The federal poverty line is calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau each year based on income and size of the family unit. To provide a context, the 2009 poverty guideline for a family of four is $22,050 per year, although in the state of Alaska it is a bit higher at $27,570 (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). The criteria for living below the federal poverty line is much more narrow than being eligible for subsidized meals, therefore the percentage of rural students living below the poverty line (11.8 percent) is much lower than those eligible for subsidized meals (37.4 percent).

The next indicator is intended to illustrate the needs for one of the most at-risk populations – those children under the age of 5 whose income is below the poverty level

and who have a female-headed household. In the United States, 35.5 percent of rural female-headed households with preschool-age children are living below the poverty line. Children at this age level need more educational support and therefore strong preschool/early childhood education programs are necessary to meet the inherent challenges this populations faces (RSCT, 2005).

The final two indicators offer a glimpse in to the economic well being of the people living in the rural areas. The fourth indicator is the rural per capita income as measured by the US Census Bureau which is $19,285. The final indicator is the rural per pupil property wealth "which is the total value of all owner-occupied property in rural areas divided by the total enrollment of rural students in regular elementary and secondary schools" This is used "as a measure of the property tax base available to communities for generating local revenues for schools" (RSCT, 2005, p. 7). The rural per pupil property wealth in the nation is $151,164.

Although poverty is one of the major issues facing rural communities and thus rural students, there are other specific challenges that are also linked to educational outcomes. One of the barriers for children and their families is in regards to language. Teaching children who do not hold English as their native language requires specialized training for educators – which may be lacking in many rural communities. The percentage of the rural population aged 5 or older who speak English less than very well serves as a measure of the English Language Learner (ELL) population in rural communities – for the nation as a whole this percentage is 2.4 percent (RSCT, 2005).

A related variable is the percentage of rural school students who are minorities (according to the NES designation of: Black, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaskan Native) as a percentage of the total population of students in rural public schools. According to the RSCT (2005), "the track record for schools in meeting the needs of minority students is not good. Achievement gaps between white and non-white students" persist (p. 9). A high percentage (22.2 percent) of rural students are minorities and therefore educational and counseling programs need to take this in to consideration when developing appropriate curriculum plans and guidance lessons.

An additional educational challenge comes with teaching children with exceptional needs. In the nation, 14.2 percent of rural students receive special education services (RSCT, 2005). Again, teachers need specialized skills, materials, and technology to adequately teach children with special needs, which may not be available in all schools.

The level of adult education is also connected to educational achievement for students. "In places where there are low levels of educational attainment, there is likely to be less interest in and/or support for public schools" (RSCT, 2005, p. 9). It has also been shown that adults with a higher level of education tend to be more involved in their child's education and attend more school events such as planned teacher meetings (RSCT, 2005). In rural areas, 21.2 percent of adults aged 19 or older have not earned a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED). This gives an indication of the level of educational attainment of adults in rural areas and possibly their interest and support for public schools.

Four-year graduation rates give a specific output variable that can indicate educational achievement of students in rural schools. Although graduation rates are calculated in many different ways, the RSCT (2005) divides "the number of graduates in any given year by the number of potential graduates in the 9th grade class four years earlier" (p. 13). This calculation does not take in to consideration migration issues and declining enrollments, but is a good indicator of student's abilities to complete at least a high school educational level. In the nation the rural four-year graduation rate is 70.5 percent.

The overall rural populations statistics, poverty indicators and other challenge factors provide a picture of some of the obstacles children and adolescents in rural areas must face just due to the location in which they live. Many of the factors discussed are specific risk factors for children and adolescents in terms of educational attainment and emotional wellbeing. Next, the specific rural context of Alaska will be explored.

Alaskan Rural School Composition

Alaska is the largest state and is approximately one-fifth the size of the lower 48 states combined (State of Alaska Department of Commerce Community and Economic Development, n.d.). It has a landmass of 571,951 square miles, which is equal to

approximately 1.1 person per square mile (one of the lowest population densities in the world). In comparison, the overall rate for the United States is 79.6 (US Census, 2009). The total population of the state of Alaska is 686,473 people. The preponderance of the state's residents live in one of the three major urban areas – Anchorage, Fairbanks, and the state capital of Juneau. Additionally, there are 20 smaller towns and approximately 180 villages. The urban areas of Alaska are similar to other cities found in the lower 48 states – they have well-developed transportation systems, fully equipped homes, and extensive educational facilities. In contrast, most villages in Alaska are accessible only by air and in some cases also by water (UAF School of Education, 2004).

The majority of residents living in rural Alaska are Alaska Natives who live in villages with populations ranging between 25 and 5,000 (Barnhardt, 2001). Approximately 15.2 percent of the population is Alaska Native, 14.3 percent speak a language other than English at home, and 26.3 percent of the population is under the age of 18 (US Census, 2009). Delivery of school counseling services in Alaska may "take place in a large urban counseling center or in the corner of a library in a rural village. Itinerant counselors may fly or snowmachine to Bush communities in all kinds of inclement weather" (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development [ADEED], 2001, p. 1).

In the state of Alaska there were 133,933 students, with 32,844 of those students attending school in a rural location. The percentage of rural students was 24.5 percent (NCES, 2003). Of the 54 public school districts, 43 are listed as rural (42 of those are remote rural), 8 are listed as being in remote or distant towns, 1 is suburban, and 2 are listed as being in a city. The approximately 500 public schools in Alaska vary greatly in size – with schools in Anchorage serving more than 2,000 students, and many rural schools serving less than 20 students in a variety of grade levels (ADEED, n.d.). Additionally, "they may be many miles from population centers and services, and accessible only by aircraft or boat. In remote villages, schools often serve as centers of community activity" (ADEED, n.d., ¶ 3).

As stated earlier, poverty tends to be an issue in rural communities. This is also true in Alaska, where the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced meals was 51 percent in the year 2002 (RSCT, 2005). Additionally, 12.5 percent of rural Alaskan children under the age of 18 live below the poverty line. These are critically high rates of poverty, which greatly impacts the educational achievement of students in the rural schools of Alaska. Furthermore, 14.2 percent of adults living in rural Alaska have not attained a high school diploma or equivalency.

In addition to the high poverty rates and lower educational attainment of adults in rural Alaska, there are other challenges facing the rural schools. Of the total population of Alaska's 2002 rural public school students, 52% belong to a minority group (RSCT, 2005). In comparison 22.2% of elementary and secondary school students in the United States as a whole are classified as minorities. "Typically, a high percentage of rural minority students indicates a large at-risk population in a state's rural schools" (RSCT, 2003, p. 5). Furthermore, of the children 5 years of age and older, 5.3 percent speak English "less than fairly well". Additionally, 12 percent receive some form of special education services. Together, the basic demographics of the population of rural Alaska put many children at risk of academic failure. This appears to be true for the state of Alaska when you look at graduation rates. In the year 2001-2002, the rural four-year graduation rate was only 57 percent as compared to 70 percent in the United States as a whole (RSCT, 2005).

In addition to educational issues, there are other concerns for rural Alaskan children. These areas will be looked at a bit more closely in the next section, as they tend to highly impact the children and families in the schools, and thus the school counselor.

Counseling and/or Mental Health Issues in Rural Alaska

There are many issues related to social, behavioral, and personal development that impact children and their abilities to function in a school setting. These include, but are not limited to, concerns such as dealing with substance use; Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS); sexual experimentation and teen pregnancy; domestic violence; child abuse and

neglect; children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), children with Autism; or issues of suicide. Each of these areas will be discussed further in this section.

Substance use. One particular issue facing rural communities is the use of substances including alcohol, marijuana, inhalants and amphetamines. Studies have shown that "adolescent substance use in U.S. rural communities is now equal to or greater than urban use for many substances" (Shears, Edwards, & Stanley, 2006). For example, according to the National Center of Addiction and Substance Abuse (NCASA, 2000) rural eighth graders were 34 percent more likely to smoke marijuana and 29 percent more likely to drink alcohol than those in urban communities. Turner (2000), Director of Alaska's Division of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, in his Testimony to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs discussed the specific need for counselors who can work with substance abusers. He stated, "Alcoholism and alcohol abuse is a leading killer of Alaska Native men, women and children in rural Alaska" (p. 1).

According to the State of Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) results (2009), 47.5% of ninth through twelfth grade students have tried smoking, 66.6% consumed alcohol, and 44.5% have tried marijuana. In addition to cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana, students have used several other types of drugs. For example, 13.6% used chewing tobacco, snuff or dip in past 30 days, 7.4% have used any form of cocaine, 9.8% sniffed glue, breathed the contents of aerosol spray cans, or inhaled any paints or sprays to get high, 3.3% have used heroin, 3.6% have used methamphetamines, 7.1% have used ecstasy, and 20.9% used a prescription drug without a doctor's prescription (State of Alaska DHSS, 2009). Additionally, 24.8% of students were offered, sold, or given an illegal drug by someone on school property during the past 12 months. Although use may or may not occur on school property or during school hours, it is clear that substance use is an issue for the students in Alaskan communities.

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is directly related to the use of alcohol. The actual prevalence of FAS in the United States is uncertain as records may not be accurate and diagnosis is not always consistent (Harvard Medical

School, 2004). Nevertheless, estimates show there are nearly 12,000 children born each year with FAS, which is approximately 1 percent of the population. Additionally, this rate is 10 to 15 times as high among Native Americans. More specifically, according to the State of Alaska Maternal Child and Family Health's Epidemiology Unit (MCFH), approximately 126 infants born each year in Alaska are identified as having been affected by maternal alcohol use during pregnancy (Schoellhorn & Podvin, 2002).

On the positive side, during 1996-2002 there was a 32 percent decrease in FAS birth prevalence from 19.9 to 13.5 per 10,000 live births. The estimated FAS prevalence rate in Alaska was 63.1 for Alaska Native children, 3.7 for non-Native children, and 19.9 overall during the 1996-1998 time period (Schoellhorn, 2010). These rates fell to 32.4 for Alaska Native children, was 6.1 for non-Native children, and was 13.5 for Alaska overall from 2000-2002. According to Janine Schoellhorn, a state epidemiologist, between 1996 to 2002 there was an average of 180 children born with FAS, whereas that number declined to 130 in the most recent year studied (Shinohara, 2010).

Children with FAS have specific physical characteristics, but also emotional and intellectual limitations (Harvard Medical School, 2004). Although symptoms vary for each individual, there are some classic characteristics such as impaired learning, memory, judgment, and impulse control. Individuals with FAS may have a problem understanding the consequences of their behavior and have trouble acting appropriately in social situations. As adolescents and adults, they may become isolated and/or depressed, and many will eventually need mental health treatment (Harvard Medical School, 2004). Due to the high prevalence rates, school counselors in rural Alaska will more than likely be working with children having FAS, and possibly also parents that have FAS.

Sexual experimentation and teen pregnancy. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (State of Alaska DHSS, 2009), 43.5% of students in 9th through 12th grades have had sexual intercourse, and 17% of those students had intercourse during the past 3 months. Of those who had intercourse during the past 3 months, 17.1% drank alcohol or used drugs before their last intercourse, 62.2% used a condom (68.9% of males and 55.9% of females), and 26% reportedly used birth control pills. Although a

significant percentage of those having sexual intercourse do use some form of protection, there are still many who do not which can result in pregnancies or sexually transmitted infections.

The State of Alaska Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) Division of Public Health (DPH) Bureau of Vital Statistics (BVS) reports that teenagers (females age 15 to 19) accounted for almost one of every nine births (11%) from 1993-2002 (State of Alaska DHSS DPH BVS, 2005). In 2002 there were 1,067 total births to teen mothers; 424 of these births were to Alaska Native teens. The teen birth rate has decreased from 60.7 births per 1000 teens in 1993 to 41.7 in 2002. Although this decrease is significant, there are still many Alaskan adolescents giving birth, which not only impacts the teen and her baby, but society as a whole.

> The number of teens births is important since it is an indicator for the amount of special services that may be needed to support the teen mother and her child. Public assistance expenditures, lost tax revenues, foster care costs, and health care for children of teen mothers are all part of the cost of teen births. (State of Alaska DHSS DPH BVS, 2005, p. 3)

Another factor to take in to account is the number of unintended pregnancies that result in termination. "Induced termination of pregnancy refers to the purposeful interruption of pregnancy with the intention other than to produce a live-born infant or to remove a dead fetus, and which does not result in a live birth" (State of Alaska DHSS BVS, 2005, p. 14). In Alaska, 39.7% of all pregnancies that resulted in a live birth were unintended during 2008, and 1,875 induced terminations were reported in Alaska during 2009 (this does not include those terminations that occurred outside the state of Alaska by Alaskan women, and approximately 200 Alaska women on average obtained induced terminations out of state). Of those induced terminations, 17.5% (326) were to individuals age 15 to 19; 6% (113) were age 15 to 17; and 7 terminations were for females under the age of 15. Of all women receiving induced terminations in 2009, 54.3% were White, 23.8% were Alaska Native, 8.4% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 6.8% were Black, and 6.7% did not state their race. Although specific rural statistics on

pregnancies and terminations were not available, it is clear that this issue will affect adolescents living in rural Alaska.

Along with pregnancy, another possible consequence of engaging in sexual activity is contracting a sexually transmitted infection/disease. Among people 15 to 24 years of age in Alaska, there were 3,230 reported cases of Chlamydia and 303 cases of Gonorrhea – the majority of these cases were reported in rural communities (DHHS CDC, 2009). Additionally, from 1982 through 2007, there were 1,206 cases of HIV reported in the state of Alaska – 190 were recent cases (2003-2007), and 37 were reported as a new diagnosis in 2007 (Rosier, Boyette, & Craytor, 2008). Although 83.9% of traditional high school students state they have been taught in school about AIDS or HIV (State of Alaska DHSS, 2009), approximately 6% of recent cases were found to be diagnosed in individuals between the ages of 15 and 19 (Rosier et al., 2008).

Domestic violence. Rates of violence and sexual assault in Alaska are among the highest in the nation. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV) reports that the Alaska rape rate is 2.5 times the national average and the child sexual assault rate is almost six times the national average (NCADV, n.d.). Additionally, in 2005 there were over 6000 reported cases of domestic violence in Alaska. These issues are directly affecting the children and adolescents attending our schools. For example, among students in Alaska public high schools, 10 percent had been physically forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to and 13 percent were hit, slapped or physically hurt intentionally by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the prior year (State of Alaska DHSS, 2009). The Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (CDVSA), reports similar statistics when they state that in 2006, "23% of Alaskans reported having had an intimate partner who hit, slap, punch, kick, choke, hurt or threatened them" (State of Alaska Department of Public Safety, CDVSA, 2008, p. 2). According to the Alaska Network on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (ANDVSA), 74.7 percent of Alaskans have experienced or know someone who has experienced domestic violence or sexual assault (ANDVSA, 2006).

Furthermore, Alaska has the highest rate per capita of men murdering women (NCADV, n.d). In 2003, the homicide rate was 2.87 for single female victims by a single male offender in the state of Alaska. Between 2003 and 2005, 117 homicides were reported in Alaska, and 22 percent of those were related to intimate partner violence (State of Alaska DHSS, Division of Public Health, 2008). Of the 13 homicides reported in 2008, 69 percent were related to domestic and/or sexual violence (State of Alaska CDVSA, 2008).

These statistics show the pervasiveness of domestic violence occurring in the state of Alaska, and unfortunately there are not enough services to assist the victims, particularly in rural areas. "The extreme remoteness of many Alaskan communities, (including travelling to access services), remains the major obstacle to providing services to victims in these areas" (NCADV, n.d., p. 1). The NCADV further reports that almost 30 percent of Alaskans were not able to access services because there were not services available in their area at the time. More specifically, the National Network to End Domestic Violence (2009) reported that in Alaska, 68% of the unmet requests were from victims seeking emergency shelter or transitional housing.

Children and families in Alaskan schools are experiencing this violence and bring these experiences with them to the school setting. For example, Litrownik, Newton, Hunter, English and Everson (2003) state that domestic violence affects children on multiple levels and can lead to unhealthy behaviors. Some of the behaviors one might see in the school setting from children who are exposed to domestic violence are aggressive behaviors towards staff and peers, lower ability to concentrate, diminished self-esteem, relationship issues with peers, and deterioration in academic work (Bryne & Taylor, 2007). The effects of witnessing domestic violence not only affect children at the current time, but will continue affecting them and perpetuate the cycle of violence for these families and communities. The NCADV (n.d.) states, "Boys who witness domestic violence are twice as likely to abuse their own partners and children when they become adults" (p. 1). School counselors may be one of the few mental health workers in the

area, and therefore they may be dealing directly with the children and families in these situations.

Child abuse and neglect. Another issue affecting children and families in Alaska is child abuse and neglect. According to the State of Alaska's Department of Health and Social Services, Office of Children's Services (DHSS OCS) there were 5,596 allegations of child abuse and neglect in the 2009 calendar year (State of Alaska DHSS OCS, 2010). If you take out the urban populations of Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau, this number falls to 2,698 total allegations in the rural communities of Alaska. Of those allegations, there were 3,395 unique victims with at lease one allegation substantiated, 1,846 of those occurred in Alaska's rural communities.

Maltreatment is divided in to several types: neglect, mental injury, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. According to the Child Welfare League of America (2006), child abuse refers to "the act of physically, psychologically or sexually harming a child under the age of 18. Neglect refers to inadequately meeting a child's needs" (p. 1). In Alaska, the majority of substantiated allegations fall in the category of neglect – 2,739 overall cases with 1,037 of those occurring in rural areas (State of Alaska DHSS OCS, 2010). The next frequent type is mental injury (666 cases overall; 552 in rural areas), followed by physical abuse (438 cases overall; 200 in rural areas), and then sexual abuse (108 cases overall; 57 cases in rural areas). The Child Welfare League (2006) reports that minority children are disproportionately represented in the welfare system. Specifically, they state that in 2003 American Indian-Alaska Native children had the highest rates of victimization at 21.3 children per 1,000.

The consequences of maltreatment can be severe. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) describe consequences of maltreatment in a variety of realms including physical, psychological, and behavioral (CDCP, 2009). Physical abuse can affect brain formation, which can impact cognitive development, language development, socio-emotional development, and mental health. Specific consequences may include sleep disturbances, conduct disorder, hyperactivity, or attention difficulties. Physical consequences can even be as severe as death – for example, in 2007 1,760 children in the

United States died from abuse or neglect (CDCP, 2009). Psychologically, problems include depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and suicide attempts. Behavioral responses include an increased risk for smoking, alcoholism, drug abuse, delinquency, sexual promiscuity, teen pregnancy, low academic achievement, and suicide. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2008) states that the effects of child abuse and neglect,

> vary depending on the circumstances of the abuse or neglect, personal characteristics of the child, and the child's environment. Consequences may be mild or severe; disappear after a short period or last a lifetime; and affect the child physically, psychologically, behaviorally, or in some combination of all three ways. (p. 6)

It is clear that child abuse and neglect has a negative impact on children, families, and their communities. Abuse is reported for children under the age of 18, and therefore school counselors are working with a high percentage of the population at-risk for abuse. Of the 768 reported cases screened in Alaska during January of 2010 (State of Alaska DHSS OCS, 2010), 432 were for children between the ages of 6 and 17 plus, which is school-age.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The State of Alaska Epidemiology Unit looked at the rates of ADHD service and pharmacy claims for children ages 4 to 19 between 2002 and 2005 (Goldsmith & Gessner, 2007). They defined ADHD using the guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics (2000), and discuss ADHD as "a neurobehavioral disorder with symptoms that include an inability to focus and maintain attention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity" (Goldsmith & Gessner, 2007, p. 1). The data showed the overall rate in Alaska was 3.6% in 2002 and incrementally rose to 4.1% in 2005 (this compares to the U.S. overall rate of 4.3% in 2003). In 2005, the highest rates were for children aged 9 to 12 (6.2%) followed by those 13 to 17 (3.8%), 4 to 8 years (3.1%), and finally 18 to 19 year-olds (1.8%).

The researchers (Goldsmith & Gessner, 2007) also broke down the results for urban (Anchorage, Eagle River, Chugiak, Wasilla, Palmer, Fairbanks, and Juneau) and rural Alaska Native and non-Native populations. The data showed the highest rates for Alaska

Native urban children (6%), followed by non-Native urban children (5%), non-Native rural children (3.8%), and then Alaska Native urban children (1.6%). Although the rates in Alaska are not extremely high, there are still many children affected by this disability and it will impact them in the school environment. For example, students with ADHD,

> are more likely to develop conduct, emotional and social problems, and as many as 20-25% of adults abuse alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs. Individuals with ADHD are also at greater risk of illiteracy, unemployment, social maladjustment, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder and other mental and physical disorders. (State of Alaska DHSS Women's Children's & Family Health, 2005, p. 1)

Again, although rural Alaska does not have high rates of ADHD, rates are still the highest for children of school age, and thus school counselors will be working with children affected by this disorder.

Autism. Although Alaska does not have a system for identifying the prevalence of Autism, there are some indicators showing the general presence in Alaska. For example, according to the State of Alaska DHSS Council on Disabilities and Special Education (CDSE) (2006), the Center for Disease Control and Prevention states that 1 in 166 children are thought to have an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Since approximately 10,000 babies are born each year in Alaska, the rates suggest that about 60 babies per year will eventually be identified as having ASD. Additionally, 477 children in Alaska enrolled in special education were classified as having autism – an increase of 1200% from 1994 (State of Alaska DHSS, CDSE, 2007).

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH),

> All children with ASD demonstrate deficits in 1) social interaction, 2) verbal and nonverbal communication, and 3) repetitive behaviors or interests. In addition, they will often have unusual responses to sensory experiences, such as certain sounds or the way objects look. Each of these symptoms runs the gamut from mild to severe. They will present in each individual child differently. For instance, a child may have little trouble learning to read but exhibit extremely poor social interaction. Each child will display communication, social, and behavioral

patterns that are individual but fit into the overall diagnosis of ASD. (NIMH, 2008, p. 5)

School counselors may not be the main resource for children with Autism, but they should certainly be among the providers involved. Especially considering "that workforce development will be a barrier, especially in rural Alaska" (State of Alaska DHSS, CDSE, 2007, p. 12). School counselors may become involved in many areas. For example, NIMH (2008) suggest that instruction in elementary ages should include learning skills to interact in social situations and making friends, and during the middle and high school years, instruction could be in the practical areas of work, and learning skills important in community living – areas in which counselors often are involved.

Suicide. Of Alaska's traditional 9th through 12th grade high school students, 16.7% agree or strongly agree that they feel alone in their life, and only 54% of students feel like they matter to the people in their community (State of Alaska DHSS, 2009). If students do not feel connected to others, or feel like they matter, they may be more willing to contemplate or even act on suicidal ideations. In fact, according to the State of Alaska DHSS Statewide Suicide Prevention Council (SSPC) (2008), suicide is the leading cause of death for Alaskan youth aged 10-24 years (28%).

Looking again at students in 9th through 12th grades, 13.9% seriously considered attempting suicide in the last 12 months, 11.7% made a plan, and 8.5% actually attempted suicide one or more times (State of Alaska DHSS, 2009). More specifically, from 1997 to 2006, there were 1,256 reported suicides in the state of Alaska. Of those, 358 suicides were reported for people under the age of 24: 166 among those 15 to 19; 20 for those 10 to 14; and 2 for children under the age of 10. Additionally, it was found that alcohol or drug use was found in 72% of the cases tested from 2003 to 2006 (State of Alaska DHSS, SSPC, 2008). Even though rates of alcohol and drug use by Alaska Natives was exactly the same as for non-Natives, the suicide rate for Alaska Natives was more than twice as high.

Total suicides were also broken down by region in Alaska. The majority of suicides in the state of Alaska occurred in region 8, which includes Mat-Su, Anchorage, and the

Kenai Peninsula – 591 suicides between 1997 and 2006 (State of Alaska DHSS, SSPC, 2008). The other more urban regions include region 10 (Yukon-Koyokuk, Fairbanks, and Denali), and region 11 (Haines, Juneau, Ketchikan, Sitka, Wrangell-Petersburg, and Skagway) – together they had 289 suicides. The remaining 379 suicides occurred in the more rural regions of Alaska. It is clear from the above statistics that suicide is a very serious concern in the state of Alaska. When a suicide occurs in a rural setting, it affects everyone, and therefore school counselors will be faced with this issue.

In reviewing some of the counseling related issues described above, it is shown that there are many concerns for the children and adolescents of rural Alaska. "By addressing risk behaviors early and providing support and guidance, schools will provide students with a much greater opportunity to succeed in school and beyond" (State of Alaska DHSS, 2003, p. 1). School counselors are in a position to help provide this support. The next section will discuss the need for counseling professionals in the state of Alaska.

Assessment of the Need for Counselors in the State of Alaska

The above statistics show that there are many academic, behavioral, and mental health concerns for the children and adolescents of rural Alaska. According to a study completed by the Institute of Social and Economic Research, Center for Cross-Cultural Studies at the University of Alaska (1985), rural school districts in Alaska have many problems to overcome. In addition to those cited above, they include: a limited variety of courses, teachers, and activities; the lack of specialized vocational courses; inadequate preparation for college; low achievement test scores; insufficient opportunities for rural students to become competent and confident in the world beyond their villages; and difficulties in making the critical transition to adulthood after graduation. School counselors could help students and their families deal with and overcome some of these problems.

The Behavioral Health Workforce gathered in May of 2004 to discuss the need for counseling services in the state of Alaska (Behavioral Health Summit, 2005). The vision was to create a system that is client and consumer centered in which there are no barriers to access. Additionally, the system should be continuous and comprehensive to meet the

diverse needs of the people of Alaska. Finally, the components of the system would be provided by a "skilled, competent workforce grown in Alaska" ((Behavioral Health Summit, 2005, p. 3).

Participants were asked what graduates needed to know to assist in recruitment and retention of behavioral health professionals. One theme highlighted was the need for professionals to have a belief system compatible to the native community they are serving. Additionally, people not familiar with Alaska need to know what they are getting in to when working in a rural village. People from outside have a period of disbelief in a rural setting, which adds to high turnover rates. According to the Alaska Education Funding Task Force (2001), although Alaska's college and universities supply about 30 percent of new educators in the state, more than two-thirds come from out-of state.

The Alaskan professionals met again at the Behavioral Health Programs Symposium ((Behavioral Health Summit, 2005) held in Anchorage, Alaska and it was found that there is a high need for the continued training of both school and community counselors. In fact, 72 percent of those surveyed (approximately 120 participants including mental health professionals, commissioners, members of the Alaska Mental Health Trust, and education professionals) said that present programs either need to be maintained or increased to meet the current needs for qualified counseling professionals in the state of Alaska. Currently, counseling positions are being filled by either appropriately trained counselors, individuals on conditional contracts (i.e., they need to be enrolled in a licensure program), or non-certified people. The reason that conditional contracts and non-certified people are allowed to take on these positions is that there is a chronic shortage of trained counselors in the state of Alaska. Additionally, some of these positions tend to be filled by out-of-state and itinerant people who may only stay for a short time period.

According to the Institute of Medicine, National Academy Press (1997, as cited in ACA, 2005b) counseling services are a necessity in schools. They report that "mental health and psychological services are essential to enabling many students to achieve

academically, these services should be considered mainstream, not optional services" (p. 1). Slade (2003) concurs when he states,

> mental health problems are associated with substantial impairment in child functioning in school settings, many children have unmet need for mental health counseling and access to specialty mental health services, and there is robust evidence that many mental health services are both efficacious and effective for children. (p. 391)

It is clear that rural communities have many of the same problems as urban communities, and that counselors in the school will be working directly with these issues.

Role of the School Counselor

The role of the school counselor is different than that of a private practitioner. School counselors tend to focus on short-term goals whereas community counseling may be therapeutic in nature. Although both professionals depend on a positive rapport and relationship with the child, therapy may involve a longer commitment by the client and counselor and may involve a higher level of training in a specific domain area. "The focus of counseling with students is to address prevention, intervention, and developmental concerns, assist with mild disorders in educational or developmental settings, and engage students in dealing with personal, social, emotional career, and educational decisions and behaviors" (Stone & Dahir, 2006, p. 33). When the issues exhibited by students in the school setting appear to be outside the realm of the school counselor, or outside the scope of their professional competencies, counselors should refer students to appropriate mental health professionals.

Gysbers and Henderson (1994) discuss the necessity for creating a counseling program that provides a balance between curriculum (small group, large group, or classroom guidance), individual planning (individual counseling), responsive services (activities to meet immediate student needs including counseling, consultation, referral, peer facilitation or information), and system support (management and coordination activities that establish, maintain, and enhance the total school counseling program). The first three components fall under the realm of direct services to students, parents,

teachers, and the community, whereas system support falls under indirect program services. Counselors need to spread their time across the components, but the majority of time should be spent on direct services.

In individual counseling, the counselor meets with individuals to help them resolve, cope with, or mange their interpersonal problems and developmental concerns to achieve self-efficacy and self-sufficiency (Gysbers & Henderson, 1994). Group counseling will allow the counselor to work towards these same goals but with the added emphasis of developing interpersonal skills and reaching more students at any given time. Large group or classroom guidance lessons are designed to foster students' academic, career, and personal/social development. These activities tend to be preventative in nature and address universal issues. Prevention efforts focus on stopping behaviors before they occur, delaying the onset of behaviors, reducing the impact of existing problems, and to strengthen knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that promote emotional well-being (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 2004).

In consultation the counselor works collaboratively with parents, teachers, staff, administrators, school specialists, social workers, social services, the health department, physicians, mental health professionals, and other community resources to plan and implement strategies to help students be successful (Gysbers & Henderson, 1994). The counselor needs to assist students and parents in obtaining needed services through referral and follow-up processes and serves as the connection between the school and community agencies. Finally, coordination and systems support involves the role of the school counselor in managing and evaluating the school counseling program. This includes determining the needs of the students in the school through an initial and follow-up needs assessment, and evaluating the counselor's effectiveness with an evaluation survey.

In understanding their basic professional roles and standards, school counselors should become familiar with the appropriate professional organizations performance standards and codes of ethical conduct (Gysbers & Henderson, 1994). These include, but may not be limited to, the Alaska School Counselor Association Performance Standards for

School Counselors, the American School Counselor Association National Model, the Ethical Standards for School Counselors, the State of Alaska Code of Ethics of the Education Profession, the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics, the Association for Specialists in Group Work Best Practice Guidelines, and the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct. Additionally, the school counselor needs to become familiar with state statutes applicable to working with minors as a helping professional and any necessary federal regulations such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

School counselors have the advantage of working closely with students for the majority of the school year (approximately 180 days). They have access to students and can monitor their progress in a variety of educational and personal arenas. Although the focus of the school counselor is to "assist students with developmental tasks, particularly in elementary, middle and high schools. School counselors offer services to students, parents, and teachers, so that students have equal opportunity to reach their educational goals, choose an appropriate career direction, and develop as fully functioning members of a democratic society" (Schmidt, 2003). In doing so, school counselors may be the first counseling professional to intervene on the behalf of students regarding issues of academics, substance use, sexual activity, depression and suicide. Although long-term counseling is outside the scope of the school counselor, they can consult with other providers and help develop appropriate treatment interventions for a variety of issues faced by the children and adolescents in the rural school system.

Summary

Rural school counselors in the state of Alaska need to be prepared to face many issues. There are the general rural aspects such as poverty, limited educational attainment, and having to serve English Language Learners, minority individuals, and those with exceptional needs with limited funding or trained personnel. Additionally, they need to address these needs with few counseling personnel. According to the American School Counseling Association (2010), the maximum recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250 students to 1 counselor. In the state of Alaska the ratio for the 2008-2009 school

year was approximately 467 students for each counselor (ASCA, 2010). Nevertheless, school counselors also have to address the specific issues prominent in the rural communities they serve. These may include aspects of substance abuse, FAS, teen pregnancy, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, ADHD, autism, and suicide.

The rural towns and villages in the state of Alaska vary greatly, but it is clear that all the public school systems would benefit from a trained school counselor who is prepared to work in these communities. Having knowledge of the rural environment and the needs of the people in their communities is one step in the right direction towards meeting the needs of the populations they intend to serve. The discussion above is just a glimpse in to the world in which the school counselor in rural Alaska may work. The next section will review the literature in regards to the challenges associated with working in a rural environment. School counselors will need to learn to negotiate these challenges to be able to serve the students and families in their communities. These challenges can fall in several realms, including isolation, lack of privacy, limited resources, ethical dilemmas, role ambiguity, and the norms and values of the rural community. These issues will be explored further in chapter two.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Literature will be reviewed regarding the challenges for helping professionals that work in rural areas. Additionally, due to the high number of indigenous populations living in rural Alaska, publications regarding counseling multicultural populations will be considered. Next, research looking at the recommendations for counselors working in rural environments will be examined, and finally, the need for future research will be explored.

Challenges for Rural Helping Professionals

Literature in the field suggests several challenges are prominent for rural providers. Due to the scarcity of research strictly related to rural school counselors (Baldo, Quinn, & O'Halloran, 1998; Drew & Breen, 2004; Esposito, Srebaulu, Roberti, & Oberman, 2003; Hines, 2002; Kendrick, Chandler, & Hatcher, 1994; Lund, 1990; McConnell, 1994; McIntire, Marion, & Quaglia, 1990; Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006; Morrisette, 1997, 2000; Pearson & Sutton, 1999; Ritchie & Partin, 1994; Saba, 1991; Sutton, 1988; Sutton & Pearson, 2002; Sutton & Southworth, 1990; Webber, 2004; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992), and the fact that much of the research that has been done was completed in the 1990s, information was gathered from research related to other rural helping professions. A broader perspective was used in order to provide a thorough description of the challenges of working in a rural environment.

The research reviewed on the topic encompasses a variety of rural helping fields including: community counselors (Bull, Krout, Rathboen-McCuan, & Shreffler, 2001; Bushy, & Carty, 1994; Erikson, 2001; Nickel, 2004; Wihak & Merali, 2007); marriage and family therapists (Hovestadt, Fenell, & Canfield, 2002; Morris, 2006), mental health professionals (Beeson, 1999; Ciarlo, Wackwitz, Wagenfeld, & Mohatt, 1996; Faulkner & Faulkner, 1997; Gibb, Livesey, & Zyla, 2003; Hargrove, 1986; Mathews-Cowey, 2000; Pulakos, 1983; Roberts, Battaglia, & Epstein, 1999; Smith, 2003; Wagenfeld, Murry, Mohatt, & DeBruyn, 1997; Weist, Myers, Danforth, McNeil, Ollendick, & Hawkins, 2000; Womontree, 2004), psychologists (Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003; Harowski, Turner, LeVine, Schank, & Leichter, 2006; Helbok, 2003; Schank, 1994, 1998), psychiatrists

(Berntson, Goldner, Leverette, Moss, Tapper, & Hodges, 2005; Coyle, 1999), school psychologists (Clopton & Knesting, 2006; McLeskey, Waldron, Cummings, & Huebner, 1988; Reschly & Connolly, 1990), social workers (Gumpert & Saltman, 1998), vocational rehabilitation counselors (Arnold, Seekins, & Nelson, 1997), teachers or other school personnel (Brewster & Railsback, 2001; Collins, 1999; Hill & Hirshberg, 2008; Monk, 2007), or research addressing other providers or more than one type of helping professional such as counselors, mental health clinicians, physical health practitioners, private practitioners, and social workers (Breen & Drew, 2005; Brems, Johnson, Warner, & Roberts, 2006a, 2006b; Chipp, Johnson, Brems, Warner, & Roberts, 2008; Drew, 2004; Jensen & Royeen, 2002; Johnson, Brems, Warner & Roberts, 2006; McFarland, 1999; Merrell, et al., 1994; Reilly, 2003; Roberts, Johnson, Brems, & Warner, 2007; Warner, Monaghan-Geernaert, Battaglia, Brems, Johnson, & Roberts, 2005; Weigel, 2002). The research will be summarized to provide a general review of challenges inherent in working within a rural environment. The most commonly cited challenges fall under the topics of: isolation, lack of privacy or anonymity, limited resources, ethical dilemmas, role ambiguity, and rural community culture issues. These areas and their underlying components will be discussed in the next section.

Isolation. The principal reasons teachers and/or administrators leave rural areas are isolation – social, cultural, and professional (Brewster & Railsback, 2001; Collins, 1999). These concerns are similar to the aspects counselors cite as challenges of working in a rural location (Baldo et al., 1998; Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003; Berntson et al., 2005; Bushy & Carty, 1994; Drew, 2004; Drew & Breen, 2004; Morrisette, 2000; Pearson & Sutton, 1999; Schank, 1994; Sutton & Southworth, 1990). Morrissette (2000) breaks the categories of isolation in to the physical, personal or psychological, and the professional, and therefore each of these areas will be reviewed in more depth.

Physical isolation. Physical issues of isolation are aspects including distance, transportation, and weather (Drew, 2004). Morrissette (2000) described poor road conditions, hazardous terrain, and the distance to urban centers as contributing to a school counselor's physical isolation. Beeson (1999) specifically mentions the environmental

realities that affect rural health care delivery. He discusses distance as an issue – "the distance between where people live and the service they may need is one factor, and the distance between a given mental health care service and other mental health care services is also a factor" (Beeson, 1999, p. 36). Additionally, Beeson mentions weather as a factor that compounds the distance issues, which may then further add to the sense of isolation of the helping professional. Barbopoulos and Clark (2003) and Gumpart and Saltman (1998) agree that a scattered population, large distances to travel, lack of transportation, time necessary for traveling, along with weather conditions which make it difficult to travel, are problems in rural practice.

Time for travel was also an issue cited by rural psychologists (Clopton & Knesting, 2006; McLeskey et al., 1988). Clopton and Knesting (2006) found that "over half of the respondents spend over 30 minutes in their car each day, with 21% spending more than an hour. An hour a day in the car amounts to spending at least 12% of the work week in a vehicle" (p. 7). Wagenfeld et al.'s (1997) literature review discussing the large service areas of rural community mental health centers, and Weigel's (2002) research finding that rural counselors "were responsible for providing services to significantly larger catchment areas than urban counselors" (p. 154), support the idea that counselors would need time for travel to those out lying areas. Schank (1994) found similar results stating "geographical distance and demands on their time were identified by research participants as limiting their opportunities for colleagues, consultation, participation in professional organizations, and professional training and development" (p. 122). All of these physical conditions added to the professional's sense of isolation.

Physical isolation may be even more salient for counselors in Alaska considering the extreme geographic conditions. In describing characteristics of rural areas (including Alaska), Ciarlo, Wackwits, Wagenfeld, and Mohatt (1996) state they are "characterized by considerable distance from central places, by poor access to market areas, and by people's relative isolation from each other in large geographic areas" (p. 6). Brems et al. (2006b) also discussed the geographic isolation issues in rural Alaska. These researchers found helping professionals viewed travel as burdensome in rural Alaska "where

providers have to make hazardous and costly trips from small communities to more remote communities by bush plane, snow machine, or small boat to reach patients" (p. 114).

Physical isolation was also a challenge when looking at services access. Smith (2003) defined accessibility as "whether individuals can actually receive existing services, including that they can get to and purchase the services" (p. 3). Brems et al. (2006b) found that rural providers reported a "lack of access to services due to transportation difficulties, travel distances, and healthcare costs" (p. 114). Although, these researchers did note that many residents in rural Alaska are Alaska Native and may be able to access healthcare free of charge or access travel funds for health related issues when the necessary resources are not found in their rural setting.

Personal isolation. Many counselors found that it was difficult to be accepted and integrate in to rural communities if one was an outsider, regardless of whether or not the counselor was sensitive to the local ways and expectations of the rural community people (Morrissette, 2000; Sutton & Pearson, 2002). This feeling of being an outsider can lead to a sense of community isolation for the professional.

The feeling of community isolation could be compounded if the counselor does not have a family or natural support system of their own in the community (Morrissette, 2000). "Moving into a new community often means starting a new personal life" (Barbapoulos & Clark, 2003, p. 420). It might be difficult to find people similarly trained or like-minded in which to develop relationships. Sutton and Pearson (2002) found that "counselors who viewed a rural/small town lifestyle as a valued facet of their work tended to be persons with established families" (p. 9). They stated that younger counselors reported that their need for socialization was difficult to meet, as there were few people their own age group and/or few available activities for their interests. Weigel (2002) concurred with this aspect. His research found that rural counselors "reported significantly less access to social opportunities (e.g., entertainment, restaurants, hobbies, etc.), than did urban NCCs. This item indicated a higher likelihood of personal isolation

among rural counselors" (p. 155). Other research found similar results (Drew & Breen, 2004; Morrissette, 2000; Schank, 1994).

On a different note, Barbapoulos and Clark (2003) discuss the drawbacks of having a social life in a rural community. Clients may view their counselors in various public venues – social events, a place of worship, exercise clubs, in a bar, etc. Information regarding the psychologist's personal life, whether single, homosexual, married, dating or divorced, can easily be known and could therefore affect treatment. Schank (1994) stated that rural psychologists "found themselves avoiding places or situations where they might be highly visible, both in their personal and professional lives" (p. 115). Additionally, Coyle (1999) discussed the fact that the pool of potential friends may be limited due to their possibility of becoming a client in the future. The professional may be less likely to engage in an active social life due to these issues and therefore may feel personally isolated.

Professional isolation. The issue of professional isolation is also an area of concern for rural counselors (Morrissette, 2000). Rural counselors are often the only trained counselor in their schools and/or districts and therefore often work in isolation (Drew & Breen, 2004; McIntire, Marion, & Quaglia, 1990; Pearson & Sutton, 1999). Brems et al., (2006b) found that rural practitioners "have extremely limited access to colleagues for consultations, referrals, and special expertise" (p. 113) – this finding was especially pronounced for rural mental health providers. The practitioners in Gibb, Livesey, and Zyla's (2003) research stated that "working in an environment where the practitioner has contact with other people is the single most reported factor that 'makes a difference' to sole practice" (p. 129). Therefore, feeling professionally isolated can have negative affects on the practitioners and clients.

A further aspect of professional isolation for rural counselors includes the fact that it can be difficult to attain appropriate supervision or consultation nearby (Coyle, 1999; Drew, 2004; Drew & Breen, 2004; Helbok, 2003; Merrell et al., 1994; Morrissette, 2000; Schank, 1994, 1998; Smith, 2003; Weigel, 2002). With the lack of colleagues to confer and plan, there are possible accountability issues (Pearson & Sutton, 1999). Helbok

(2003) states that "working in a rural area can lead to a sense of professional isolation and lack of ongoing feedback and learning that are inherent in one's relationships with peers and supervisors in rural areas" (p. 278). In the same realm, counselors expressed that there were few opportunities for professional development or training opportunities (Arnold, Seekins, & Nelson, 1997; Coyle, 1999; Morrissette, 2000; Smith, 2003; Weigel, 2002), and when available it may be a long drive (Drew & Breen, 2004; Schank, 1994). The lack of networking and training opportunities further adds to a counselor's sense of professional isolation.

Professional isolation not only limits a counselor's access to peer support, supervision and consultation, but also provides a challenge for research due to the lack of collaborators and mentors (Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003; Drew & Breen, 2004). Barbopoulos and Clark (2003) found that for rural psychologists there is a greater need for diverse professional activities including collaborative work with professionals having different orientations and beliefs, program development and evaluation. Pearson and Sutton (1999) found similar issues for counselors.

Lack of privacy or anonymity. Although being a visible part of the community is essential in rural areas, it can be seen as an intrusion on one's privacy (Bushy & Carty, 1994; Helbok, 2003; Schank, 1994; Sutton & Pearson, 2002). Some counselors found this lack of anonymity very disruptive (Baldo et al., 1998; Barbopouls & Clark, 2003; Drew, 2004; Morrissette, 2000). In Baldo et al.'s study (1998), all 16 school counselors noted they received evening and weekend calls and drop-ins from clients, and noted that their high visibility was an issue. Several of these counselors stated that there was pressure from the community to behave as a professional at all times – to be a role-model. McFarland (1999) also found that rural counselors felt they "always had to have their guard up and be seen as a professional counselor" (p. 248). Furthermore, counselors felt they were expected to have all the answers to anyone's questions at any time (Baldo et al., 1998), and found that people assumed they could call on them at any time of day or night (Sutton & Pearson, 2002).

The 7 school counselors interviewed in the Morrissette (2000) study also stated a lack of privacy and anonymity – they had a heightened visibility and professional reputation. The visibility and accessibility to the community allowed everyone to know the counselor and where they were located, which made it easy to build a reputation – positive or negative (Sutton & Pearson, 2002). Due to this high visibility, some counselors feel as if the are living in a fishbowl because everyone sees their every move (Beeson, 1999; Coyle, 1999; Morrissette, 2000; Roberts et al., 1999). Helbok (2003) and Barbopoulos and Clark (2003) noted a similar finding with rural psychologists. They found that in a rural community, clients know a great deal about the psychologist prior to even entering the therapeutic relationship. Counselors stated this high visibility curtailed their personal space and freedom, which could then become resented (Morrissette, 2000). Additionally, the lack of anonymity sometimes compromised confidentiality and at times boundaries needed to be created to protect their personal and professional space.

Limited resources. One of the chief complaints that counselors have about the rural setting are the limited resources available (Drew & Breen, 2004). For example, Arnold et al. (1997) stated that rural counselors are "expected to serve the same size caseload and close as many cases but work with distant providers, with consumers who are scattered around large catchment areas, and in areas with fewer jobs" (p. 3). The following section will discuss the challenges associated with limited resources in rural areas. These include, but are not confined to, a lack of practitioners or colleagues, limited referral options or specialists which necessitates the need for multiple roles or to be a generalist, the lack of training, education or professional development available, and other issues such as limited time, limited space, lack of funding, or lack of access to necessary materials or technology.

Lack of practitioners/colleagues. Many small communities have a lack of counseling or mental health related professionals (Coyle, 1999; Drew, 2004; Hines, 2002; Merwin, Hinton, Dembling, & Stern, 2003; Warner et al., 2005). In a survey completed by Johnson et al. (2006) it was found that there were 27 psychologists (1 per 9,470 residents), 8 psychiatrists (1 per 31,963), 91 social workers (1 per 2,810), and 74 mental

health counselors (1 per 3,455) working in rural Alaska. They also noted that "the ratios fail to reflect the greater geographic access challenges encountered by Alaskan rural residents..... care delivery has to be delivered in a much greater and more challenging geographic region in Alaska" (p. 506). These numbers reflect the limited availability of practitioners in rural areas, which is a challenge for professionals working in these communities. For example, rural school psychologists in Clopton and Knesting's (2006) study cited the limited availability of support services outside the school to be one of their main challenges. Weigel (2002) additionally reported that rural counselors had challenges accessing professional colleagues.

On a related note, Pearson and Sutton (1999) mention that having few counselors could bring up issues regarding the counselor's gender or age – if the counselor was female they may not be able to reach male students or vice-versa, and if they were young they may not be taken seriously. Having other professionals available would lesson this challenge.

Lack of referral options/specialists. "Economically speaking, sparseness of population limits the number and array of human/health care services in a given region" (Bushy & Carty, 1994, p. 3). "This is particularly true the more education and specialization is required of the care provider" (Johnson et al., 2006, p. 505). Other research also noted the lack of access to more highly qualified professionals having advanced education or specialization in rural areas (Brems et al., 2006a, b; Bushy & Carty, 1994; Hines, 2002; Mathews-Cowey, 2000; Schank, 1998; Weist et al., 2000; Womontree, 2004).

The lack of practitioners serving rural communities, combined with the lack of specialists, makes referral options very limited. Practitioners in several research studies stated the adequacy and availability of referral services to be a problem in rural locations (Baldo et al., 1998; Brems et al., 2006b; Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Drew, 2004; Helbok, 2003; Morrissette, 1997, 2000; Smith, 2003; Sutton, 1988; Sutton & Southworth, 1990; Weigel, 2002).

Not only is there a lack of specialists, but also a lack of specialized services and programs. For example, some providers found the lack of special education (Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Drew, 2004; McLeskey et al., 1988), or alternative education program options (Merrell et al., 1994) to be a challenge in rural schools. Barbopoulos and Clark (2003) noted "Rural settings lack such specialized services as speech and language specialists, women's shelters, programs for the elderly, and rural child care services" (p. 412). Other research noted the challenge of attaining specialized treatment for aspects such as eating disorders or sexual assault survivors (Schank, 1994), as well as resources for treating drug and alcohol abuse, resources for teen pregnancy, or psychiatric and neurological services (Drew, 2004). Furthermore, McIntire et al., (1990) found that along with providing fewer services rural schools have less specialized equipment, partly due to their lower funding base. Research also found there was a lack of diversity among professionals, which provided limited perspectives, limited experiences, and a general limitation of resources (Pearson & Sutton, 1999).

Multiple roles/generalist. Due, in part, to the lack of resources and personnel, the professional counselor is expected "to play multiple roles, serve a wide variety of needs, be readily available when the need arises, and be creative, highly skilled and flexible" (Breen & Drew, 2005, p. 247). Several researchers (Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003; Beeson, 1999; Bushy & Carty, 1994; Drew, 2004; Hargrove, 1986; Harowski et al., 2006; Helbok, 2003; Hovestadt et al., 2002; Lund, 1990; McConnell, 1994; Morissette, 2000; Pulakos, 1983; Reschly & Connolly, 1990; Schank, 1994; Wagenfeld et al., 1997) found that rural practitioners are expected to be generalists. Roberts et al. (1999) specifically define generalists as "characterized by individuals without specialty training who function in expanded roles to care for complex, multiproblem patients" (p. 501). For example, Baldo et al.'s (1998) study of 16 rural school counselors found that they considered themselves to be generalists and needing to know it all. Due to the lack of referral sources, counselors feel they need to be creative and flexible – to be a generalist to meet the needs of their communities (Morrissette, 2000). The counselors in Sutton and Pearson's (2002) research felt they were expected to fill the gaps in the community mental health system.

Working as a generalist can encroach upon concerns with competency, which will be discussed further when speaking about ethical issues in rural counseling practice.

Lack of training, education, or professional development. Several research studies found practitioners in rural areas had less access to professional resources such as libraries, trainings, or continuing education (Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Coyle, 1999; Morrissette, 2000; Schank, 1994; Weigel, 2002). Supporting this claim, Brems et al. (2006b) found that providers in smaller communities had less access to training due to time and staffing limitations. Smith (2003) agreed when she stated "rural mental health providers have fewer training opportunities because of their isolation, fewer colleagues with whom to discuss professional issues, and a greater variety of demands on their time" (p. 3).

Other limitation areas. Several other aspects related to limited resources were mentioned in the literature, but to a lesser degree. Several studies mentioned the general notion of a lack of time (Baldo et al., 1998; Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Drew, 2004; McLeskey et al., 1988; Saba, 1991), or a lack of funding (Baldo et al., 1998; Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Drew, 2004; McIntire et al., 1990; McLeskey, 1988; Merrell et al., 1994; Saba, 1991; Wagenfeld et al., 1997). In relation to funding, respondents in a survey of rural school psychologists "indicated that work space, literature on current intervention strategies, and current assessment materials were the three resources to which they most needed increased access" (Clopton & Knesting, 2006, p. 5). Lack of assessment tools or related materials was mentioned as a challenge in other research as well (McConnell, 1994; Merrell et al., 1994). Finally, limited access to technology (Baldo et al., 1998), limited career development options (Drew, 2004; Morrissette, 1997) and lack of bilingual counselors or translators (Drew, 2004) were also mentioned.

Ethical dilemmas. Ethical dilemmas arise in every work setting, but these issues can be enhanced when working in a rural environment. "Dilemmas or conflicts result from uncertainty or from conflict among values, principles, or obligations" (Schank & Skovholt, 2005, p. 9). Ethical codes of conduct were created by professional organizations such as the American Counseling Association (ACA) code of ethics

(2005a), the American Psychological Association (APA) code of conduct (2002), or the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) ethical standards (2004), to clarify the principles that define ethical behavior and best practices of association members and also to provide guidance for professionals to help protect the welfare of those utilizing counseling or psychological services. Although these ethical codes do serve as a guide for helping professionals, there are still times when situations arise that cannot be answered directly from the ethical codes. The next section will review the main ethical concern areas mentioned in the literature by rural helping professionals. These areas include the issues of: competency, maintaining boundaries and multiple relationships, confidentiality, and stress and burnout.

Competency. "Rural practice puts much pressure on psychologists to be generalists because of two basic considerations, a full spectrum of psychological needs and limited services" (Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003, p. 411). Professionals in rural settings may struggle with the ACA code of ethics of abandoning one's client (ACA, 2005a, A.11.a) versus practicing outside the scope of their competence (ACA, 2005a, C.2.a.). Both the APA and the ASCA hold similar codes in relation to competency (APA, 2002, 2.01.a; ASCA, 2004, E.1.a). Helbok (2003) clarifies this concern for rural psychologists:

> The dilemma lies in the psychologist's ability to determine how far outside his or her area of expertise he or she is practicing. The psychologist may choose to deny services, recognizing that psychologists can do harm if they work outside their area of expertise and that no treatment may be less harmful than the wrong treatment. However, psychologists my also violate the principle of making every effort to protect the welfare of their clients when they deny treatment when there are no accessible referral sources. (p. 377)

According to Barbopoulos and Clark (2003), the shortage of mental health services paired with high needs can put counselors in a bind. As one of the sole mental health practitioners in the community, counselors may feel it necessary to work in areas in which they have not been properly trained. Several research studies found that rural helping professionals were expected to counsel a person whose problems were beyond

their levels of competence (Baldo et al., 1998; Drew, 2004; Gibb et al., 2003; Hargrove, 1986; Kendrick et al., 1994; Schank, 1994, 1998; Sutton & Pearson, 2002; Weigel, 2002; Womontree, 2004). For example, Smith (2003) states, "therapists trained to work with individual adults may find themselves conducting couple or family therapy because there are no other options for those clients due to distance, finances and other barriers" (p. 4).

An additional dilemma for rural providers comes when they do decide it is best to provide services even when they are not adequately trained, but then do not have available supervision or consultation. The APA ethical code (2002) states: "Psychologists planning to provide services, teach, or conduct research involving populations, areas, techniques, or technologies new to them undertake relevant education, training, supervised experience, consultation, or study" (APA, 2.01.c). Unfortunately, a lack of appropriate supervision and/or consultation has been reported for rural areas (Brems et al., 2006b; Coyle, 1999; Drew, 2004; Helbok, 2003; McIntire et al., 1990; Merrell et al., 1994; Morrissette, 2000; Schank & Skovholt, 2005; Smith, 2003). To illustrate, 51% of the rural psychologists in Clopton and Knesting's research (2006) "indicated that at least one time per month they are in a situation where they need to consult but cannot find an appropriate professional" (p. 5).

Maintaining boundaries/multiple relationships. "Boundaries and 'boundary issues' refer to the fundamental aspects of the therapeutic relationship which clearly separate the individual providing care from the individual receiving it" (Coyle, 1999, p. 203). Due to the small size of rural communities, many researchers found that rural professionals had difficulties with establishing and maintaining boundaries (Breen & Drew, 2005; McFarland, 1999; Schank, 1994; Wihak & Merali, 2007). Roberts et al. (1999) state that rural clinicians "naturally function in a context of overlapping relationships, potentially conflicting roles, and altered therapeutic boundaries, which may be riddled with ethical problems" (p. 499). For example, rural communities make it more likely that clients and counselors will know each other and could easily be faced with accidental meetings (Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003). Warner et al., (2005) also found that clinicians in smaller communities interacted more with their patients outside of work.

Therefore, Helbok (2003) discussed the need to be clear with clients from the start regarding the boundaries of the professional relationship.

One of the primary boundary spanning activities for counselors are involvements in dual or multiple relationships. The APA code of conduct (2002) defines a multiple relationship in the following manner:

> A multiple relationship occurs when a psychologist is in a professional role with a person and (1) at the same time is in another role with the same person, (2) at the same time is in a relationship with a person closely associated with or related to the person with whom the psychologist has the professional relationship, or (3) promises to enter into another relationship in the future with the person or a person closely associated with or related to the person. (APA, 2002, 3.05.a)

ACA ethical guidelines (2005a) state, "nonprofessional relationships with clients, former clients, their romantic partners, or their family members should be avoided" (p. 5). Although helping professionals may be cognizant of these guidelines, "Realistically, refusing to treat any person with whom the practitioner may have non-clinical contact may eliminate most of the potential client population, especially if the community is remote, and the clinician lives and practices in the same locale" (Reilly, 2003, p. 51). Additionally, it is actually recommended that counselors or other helping professionals need to participate in the community in order to be effective (Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003; Jensen & Royeen, 2002; Morrissette, 2000). These conflicting messages can make counselors feel as if they are acting unprofessionally if they work towards becoming an integral part of the rural community.

Literature agreed that engaging in dual or multiple relationships was common in both rural school and community settings (Baldo et al., 1998; Barbapoulos & Clark, 2003; Beeson, 1999; Brems et al., 2006b; Coyle, 1999; Drew, 2004; Drew & Breen, 2004; Erikson, 2001; Faulkner & Faulkner, 1997; Hargrove, 1986; Helbok, 2003; McFarland, 1999; Morrissette, 2000; Nickel, 2004; Roberts et al., 1999; Schank, 1998; Schank & Skovholt, 2005; Warner et al., 2005; Weigel, 2002). For example, the school counselors in Baldo et al.'s study (1998) felt that dual relationships were inevitable in small rural

settings, particularly between counselors, teachers, parents and students. Schank and Skovholt (2005) list several areas of multiple relationships or boundary issues that rural practitioners might encounter, including:

> overlapping social relationships, overlapping business or professional relationships, the effects of overlapping relationships on members of the psychologist's own family, seeing more than one family member, or seeing people who have friendships with each other as individual clients, getting unsolicited out-of-therapy information about clients, high visibility and lack of privacy, collecting unpaid bills from clients, and bartering. (p. 78)

From this research, it is clear that "completely avoiding multiple relationships seems to be impossible in a rural community" (Helbok, 2003, p. 415), and is therefore one of the challenges for rural practitioners.

Confidentiality. The ACA (2005a) introduce confidentiality as a key concept in the counseling relationship. They state:

> Counselors recognize that trust is a cornerstone of the counseling relationship. Counselors aspire to earn the trust of clients by creating an ongoing partnership, establishing and upholding appropriate boundaries, and maintaining confidentiality. Counselors communicate the parameters of confidentiality in a culturally competent manner. (ACA, 2005a, p. 7).

Although the ethical code is clear, confidentiality issues were concerns for both rural school and community counselors. For example, Pearson and Sutton (1999) interviewed 19 school counselors and found that their offices tended to be in the middle of things. The counselors said this makes it easy to keep track of students, but also has the disadvantage of a lack of privacy for counselor and clients.

Baldo et al. (1998) noted that although school counselors could keep client information confidential, the clients might not and then the counselor could get blamed for breaking confidentiality. It may be that students share information with friends, or other staff share information regarding students. For example, counselors in the study by Pearson and Sutton (1999) mentioned "either concerns about, or instances of, a student's

privacy being compromised by a secretary who communicated information to relatives or friends" (p. 93). In general, "Teachers, administrators, and parents in rural settings are accustomed to 'knowing' and 'knowing about' students" (Drew & Breen 2004, p. 746). Due in part to these different views regarding confidentiality, counselors may be caught between school policy and the Code of Ethics.

Community providers also found confidentiality to be a challenge (Breen & Drew, 2005; Brems et al., 2006b; Bushy & Carty, 1994; Coyle, 1999; Faulkner & Faulkner, 1997; Gumpert & Saltman, 1998; Hargrove, 1986; Helbok, 2003; McFarland, 1999; Roberts et al., 1999; Schank, 1994; Smith, 2003; Warner et al., 2005; Weigel, 2002). Barbopoulos and Clark (2003) reported "privacy and confidentiality are more salient issues in the delivery of direct services to rural clients" (p. 414). Additionally, the rural counselors in Drew's (2004) study "viewed keeping client information confidential as a nearly impossible task". Another counselor in a rural community stated, "it is normal for everybody to know everything… the concept of having a confidential discussion doesn't make a lot of sense" (Wihak & Merali, 2007, p. 176). Counselors in the Wihak and Merali (2007) research were mainly working with Inuit clients. Roberts et al. (2007) also found that providers in rural areas working with minority patients/clients reported more problems with confidentiality than those in urban areas. This study included providers in the state of Alaska, which makes this issue a particular challenge to be aware of in rural Alaskan communities.

Stress and burnout. "One of the biggest challenges rural mental health practitioners face is not getting overwhelmed by their practice" (Beeson, 1999, p. 37). Stress and burnout can become an ethical issue if it starts to affect the ability of the practitioner in a counseling setting. The issue of impairment is addressed in the ACA ethical codes (2005a) in section C.2.f., which states "Counselors are alert to the signs of impairment from their own physical, mental, or emotional problems and refrain from offering or providing professional services when such impairment is likely to harm a client or others" (p. 9). Burnout is possible due to a variety of issues such as isolation, work overload, excessive responsibility, community pressures, role ambiguity, and

inadequate supervision, consultation, or mentors (Drew & Breen, 2004; Helbok, 2003; Kendrick et al., 1994; McIntire et al., 1990; Morrissette, 1997, 2000; Pearson & Sutton, 1999; Sutton & Southworth, 1990; Webber, 2004).

McIntire et al. (1990) found that "Educators in rural areas tend to be more vulnerable to community pressures than are those working in larger systems" (p. 169). Counselors do want to respond to the needs in their communities, but "responding to the needs of the community adds to the stress of working with individual clients" (Schank & Skovholt, 2005, p.109). Additionally, school counselors "were keenly aware that being looked upon as a community mental health resource could result in further demands being made on counselors who were already stretched thin to cover their school responsibilities" (Sutton & Pearson, 2002, p. 8). "Taken together, professional isolation, overlapping relationships with community members, immense clinical responsibilities, and emotional and physical exhaustion are a tried-and-true recipe for stress among rural providers" (Roberts et al., 1999, p. 502). It is clear from the literature that burnout and stress is another challenging issue for rural practitioners.

Role ambiguity. One issue that appeared particularly salient for rural school counselors had to do with the issue of role ambiguity. Sutton (1988) found "the pressure to perform a role with many facets was an issue for all counselors" (p. 20). Rural counselors are less apt to have a job description and thus are "jacks of all trades" with no opportunity to divide responsibilities and tasks or exchange ideas with colleagues (Sutton & Southworth, 1990, p. 177). Webber supported these findings when she states, "Without definitive standards and job descriptions, school counselors experience overwhelming job strain from role conflict and role ambiguity" (Webber, 2004, p. 1).

Pearson and Sutton (1999) found the school counselors they interviewed felt there was a lot of role confusion, particularly because the counselor is asked to do many non-counseling functions. Monteiro-Leitner et al. (2006) discovered that counselors and principals actually hold different perceptions regarding the activities of school counselors, which could add to the confusion regarding the specific role of the school counselor. Morrissette (1997) also found that school administrators may not fully

understand the role of the counselor, which could present challenges and eventually lead to conflict. Participants in Baldo et al.'s research (1998) also identified lack of role clarity to be one of their main obstacles.

School counselors in Morrissette's (2000) study felt their role was misunderstood and underestimated by other school personnel. These perceptions formed a distance between the counselors and teachers, and consequently resentment could "develop when counselors were perceived as having a less-demanding job, since they do not have to contend with large groups of students, grading, lesson preparation, and so forth" (p. 8). This distance could ultimately lead to isolation from one's peers, another challenge that was discussed pertaining to working in a rural environment.

Rural community culture issues. Several issues are discussed in the literature regarding the challenge of the rural community culture and its affect on providing behavioral health services. The main areas addressed include: aspects of poverty, issues regarding lack of trust and suspicion, rural values, the stigma of counseling, and the instability in the work force (i.e., aspects of retention). Thee issues will be reviewed in this section.

Poverty. Rural "communities tend to have scarce resources, high rates of poverty, lack of access to employment, lack of higher formal education, higher illiteracy rates, inadequate health services, limited insurance coverage, higher rates of disabilities, and fewer mental health resources" (Helbok, 2003, p. 368). More than 75% of the counselors in Drew's (2004) study stated that financial concerns were considered critical issues. Other researchers also discuss the issues for rural areas that are associated with poverty, such as fewer employment opportunities, higher rates of unemployment, lower education levels, lack of transportation, and underfunding of services (Arnold et al., 1997; Baldo et al., 1998; Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003; Bull et al., 2001; Ciarlo et al., 1996; Hines, 2002; Jensen & Royeen, 2002; McConnell, 1994; McIntire et al., 1990; McLeskey et al., 1988; Wagenfeld et al., 1997; Weist et al., 2000).

"Economic hard times, lack of job opportunities, and the loss of traditional sources of income for many of the rural areas created stress, problems with substance abuse, and

emotional and family problems" (Drew, 2004, p. 94). Other practitioners also found that the stress of a rural community can increase problems such as alcoholism, domestic violence, or suicide (Baldo et al., 1998; Hines, 2002; Ritchie & Partin, 1994; Roberts et al., 1999). Helbrok (2003) additionally noted that "rural residents experience mood and anxiety disorders; trauma; and cognitive, developmental, and psychotic disorders at rates at least as high as residents of urban areas" (p. 368). Dealing with these issues can be a challenge for rural practitioners.

Lack of trust/suspicion. Social workers in Gumpert and Saltman's (1998) study reported suspicion of outsiders to be a problem when working in the rural setting. Other research also found issues regarding mistrust of mental health professionals or outsides (Bushy & Carty, 1994; Coyle, 1999; Drew, 2004; Merrell et al., 1994; Nickel, 2004; Saba, 1991; Schank, 1994). For example, the participants in McLeskey et al.'s study (1988) generally agreed that "suspicion and resistance to change were problems faced by rural school psychologists" (p. 93). Baldo et al. (1998) found similar results for school counselors. Jensen and Royeen (2002) highlighted the need to build trust to help overcome these concerns.

Schank (1998) further illuminates the challenge of lack of trust when she states, "community values and expectations may become especially salient for non-Native counselors who are working with Native people, particularly in rural and remote areas. Historical mistrust and previous negative experiences may lead Native people to view non-Native counsellors with skeptiscism" (p. 277). This is another challenge that may be particularly important in regards to working in rural Alaska.

Rural values. Sutton and Pearson (2002) found that in rural/small town culture counselors "had to spend considerable time and energy early in their tenure, striving to learn and understand the local culture" (p. 5). The participants recognized the necessity of learning the culture of the area, but found this to be even more difficult if the counselor was not from the local area, or was from an unfamiliar racial, ethnic or religious group. Morrissette (2000) also reported the difficulty rural counselors may experience

integrating in to the rural community, whereas Drew and Breen (2004) discussed the fact that it takes time to get to know the people and become established.

Wagenfeld (2003) described rural values including "self-reliance, conservatism, a distrust of outsiders, religion, work orientation, emphasis on family, individualism, and fatalism". Other rural community values reported in the literature include: self-determination, independence, self-sufficiency and self-reliance, a highly developed sense of community, a strong work ethic, conservative values, a relationship with nature, and a commitment to tradition (Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003; Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Hargrove, 1986; Helbok, 2003; Gumpart & Saltman, 1998; Morris, 2006; Nickel, 2004; Smith, 2003; Weist et al., 2000). Although, Ciarlo et al. (1996) point out the difficulty in determining a set of rural values as it is not clear that all research found similar results nor did they determine whether "these differences reflect actual community differences or differences in demographic or socioeconomic composition of the communities" (p. 11).

Some of the reported values may become a challenge for helping professionals. For instance, the value of self-reliance may make it difficult for individuals in rural communities to ask for assistance (Bushy & Carty, 1994). Bushy and Carty (1994) also discuss the fact that residents may develop a tolerance towards certain activities, and mental illness may be seen as a family's weakness that needs to be kept secret. Similarly, Baldo et al. (1998) and Sutton and Pearson (2002) discuss the concern regarding the resistance to new ideas and the possibility of the rural community not acknowledging social problems. Finally, counselors in Drew's (2004) research found, "Traditional values, lack of worth placed on education, gender roles, lack of diversity, distrust of outsiders, mistrust or lack of information about counseling, and the pride placed in 'helping oneself' or 'one's own,' were all aspects of rural attitudes" that counselors felt challenged their work in rural settings (p. 112).

Stigma. Providers confirmed that patients in rural communities avoided care for various reasons, including stigma and embarrassment, more so than those in larger communities (Brems et al., 2006b; Warner et al., 2005). Additionally, Brems et al.

(2006b) found that this was more of an issue in regards to behavioral health care than physical health care, and thus speculated that mental illness was more stigmatized than physical illness. Validation regarding the stigmatization of mental illness was found in a study by Sirey et al. (2001). These researchers found that the majority of their clients held "disparaging views of people with mental illness" (p. 480). Furthermore, Bull et al. (2001) found that "elderly people and their families must be supported to move beyond the stigma of mental health service utilization that lingers throughout rural America" (p. 359). Smith (2003) discussed that the reason behind such stigma in rural areas could be due to a lack of understanding about mental illness or treatment. In agreement, Weist et al. (2000) did find that "poor knowledge of mental health services was reported to be a barrier" (p. 270). In sum, "the stereotypes associated with what a counselor is is still a barrier to overcome" (Baldo et al., 1998, p. 25).

Instability of the work force. Retention and recruitment of rural health and education professionals is challenging (Hines, 2002; Kilpatrick, Cheers, Gilles, & Taylor, 2009; Ricketts, 2005; Roellke, 2003). Esposito et al. (2003) reported that 25% of the school counselors in their study reported retention to be a problem. This also appears to be the case in rural Alaska, as turnover was reported to be about 22% in rural districts, but increases to 33% when looking at those with a year or less experience (Hill & Hirshberg, 2008). The principal reasons teachers and/or administrators leave rural areas are isolation – social, cultural, and professional (Collins, 1999; Brewster & Railsback, 2001) and job pressures (Howley & Pendarvis, 2002). These are the same aspects counselors cite as issues in working in a rural location.

According to the Alaska Education Funding Task Force (2001), although Alaska's college and universities supply about 30 percent of new educators in the state, more than two-thirds come from out-of-state. In relation to counselors, urban professionals who relocate to rural settings often experience culture shock and are likely to leave at the first opportunity (Morrissette, 2000). The high turnover rate adds to the instability of the rural culture and undoubtedly impacts the community residents. For example, family caregivers reported high turnover to have "a negative impact on the treatment and the

compliance to treatment by their relatives" (Mathews-Cowey, 2000, p. 269). Furthermore, Jensen and Royeen (2002) report "the instability of leadership and personnel turnover provide an additional challenge to building towards self-sufficiency" (p. 123). This turnover was particularly challenging in Native American health facilities, tribal colleges, and tribal governments. The rapid turnover (less than two years in the community) further limits counselor effectiveness (Rural Human Services Program, 2000).

Factors impacting the recruitment and retention of professionals in rural areas are diverse and may include high living costs, professional isolation, difficulties and costs of travel, limited access to medical care, limited availability of services, lower pay, confidentiality issues, lack of anonymity, lack of privacy, the need to deal with a wider range of needs, large case loads, and no back-up coverage (Bushy & Carty, 1994; Hill & Hirshberg, 2008; Hines, 2002; Howley & Pendarvis, 2002; Monk, 2007). To add further to the challenge, rural professionals tend to be younger, less educated, and less experienced (Hines, 2002; McIntire et al., 1990; Monk, 2007).

Summary of challenges. In sum, "health care providers in rural areas face a variety of barriers, including heterogeneity of rural inhabitants, economic impediments (e.g., distance, travel, and weather), financial constraints, cultural differences, lack of access to specialty care, and confidentiality concerns" (Chipp et al., 2008, p. 546). Given that few of Alaska's educators, including school counselors are from the area in which they work (Alaska Education Funding Task Force, 2001), it follows that they will need information regarding the environment in which they intend to be a professional. Input from other rural school counselors regarding the main challenges they may face, as well as specific techniques to help overcome these challenges, will help these professionals be better prepared for their working environment.

Cultural Considerations

Jensen and Royeen (2002) define culture "as a dynamic perceptual 'lens' through which individuals view and interpret the world." Further, they state "culture is a social construction of shared meaning through values, beliefs, symbols, and rituals" (p. 124).

According to Atkinson, Morten and Sue (1998), many research studies have found that minority clients, other things being equal, prefer a counselor who is ethnically similar and shares their cultural knowledge and background. For example, "Counsellors in general must acknowledge, understand and respect an individual's health beliefs in order to provide culturally meaningful care" (Bushy & Carty, 1994).

Despite the preference for an ethnically similar counselor, Baruth and Manning (2007) discuss how the multicultural composition of the United States will cause counselors to "increasingly counsel clients with differing customs, traditions, values, and perspectives toward life events and the counseling process" (p. 4). Furthermore, 83% of graduate students in counselor education programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) were reported to be White (Dinsmore & England, 1996). Moreover, only 15% of the faculty of these programs were "non-White, compared with a 25% non-White percentage in the general population" (p. 62). This data suggests that although the United States is culturally diverse, the counseling professionals are still predominantly White.

As stated previously, counselors that are not native to the rural area in which they work found that they had to spend considerable time and energy gaining an understanding and appreciation of the local culture regardless of whether or not the counselor was sensitive to the local ways and expectations of the rural community people (Hines, 2002; Sutton & Pearson, 2002). "Differing values and expectations between counsellors and Native clients and communities are issues that must be addressed and acknowledged if non-Native counsellors are to work successfully with Native people" (Schank, 1998, p. 277). On the positive side, once a counselor lives in an area a long time they truly get to know the people in their community which may allow stronger connections if one has a positive reputation (Sutton & Pearson, 2002). For communities with diverse cultural populations, such as Alaska, this understanding is a necessity.

Wihak and Merali (2007) discuss issues of which counselors should be aware when working with Native people. First, clients from collectivist cultures often expect counselors to interact with them socially, which could become an ethical challenge if

counselors do not set appropriate boundaries. Additionally, "ethical practice when working with Native clients involves considering clients' community obligations and ties when planning interventions, rather than focusing on clients' self-interest" (p. 170).

Roberts et al. (2007) state, "partly due to low levels of cultural competence of providers and partly due to discrimination, stereotyping, and other unconscious cognitive processes among providers and other members of the health care system," ethnic minority people often receive lower quality of interpersonal health care than White patients (p. 90). Consistent with this information, Sue and Sue (2003) reported that minority clients tended "to terminate counseling/therapy at a rate of more than 50% after only one contact with the therapist", in contrast to "a rate of less than 30% among White clients" (p. 43).

These same issues also affect the actual use of services by rural and ethnic minority populations. The research by Roberts et al. (2007) revealed that providers in rural areas reported more problems in caring for minority clients, specifically problems with treatment aherence, informed consent, and confidentiality. Brems et al. (2006b) report that utilizing alternative and complimentary care methods may better allow for the integration of culturally congruent healing interventions, and therefore enhance the quality of care received by rural patients.

Atkinson et al. (1998) reported, "an understanding of the client's cultural values and the willingness to engage in outreach activities in the community are qualities that American Indians expect from an effective counselor" (p. 164). Reimer, in *Counseling the Inupiat Eskimo* (1999), finds a similar viewpoint from discussions with Inupiat people in Alaska in regards to what they want from counselors serving their people. Many of the people Reimer interviewed mentioned that they would prefer a counselor from their own village – someone local. Counselors working with Inupiat people need to understand the culture and traditions and become a part of the community in order to be effective. Knowing the specifics of each village can give a counselor insight in to the village problems. Someone local would "share in the Inupiat worldview, traditions, and everyday life of the people" (p. 84). One individual stated, "I prefer someone I know, someone I

can confide in. But if there was a counselor in the village I would go to them, if they spring from village" (p. 69).

In discussing the necessity for trained counselors in the area of substance abuse in Alaska, Turner (2000) states, "in order to meet the needs we have to have trained, competent, culturally informed chemical dependency counselors" (p. 7). Additionally, these services should occur in the villages so that individuals will actually receive the help they need when they need it. Shutiva (2001) agrees when she states that "to provide effective and responsive career and academic guidance for American Indian and Alaska Native youth, teachers and counselors need to be aware of underlying cultural values and beliefs that can affect students' choice about academic success and pursuit of a career" (p. 1).

When looking at aspects of recruitment and retention, several researchers discuss the need to focus on candidates with rural backgrounds or with personal characteristics or education experiences that predispose them to live in rural areas or that are already living in rural areas (Collins, 1999; Howley & Pendarvis, 2002; Monk, 2007; Ricketts, 2005). Collins (1999) states, "the emphasis on background and experience is crucial for racially or culturally distinct communities" (p. 3). Kilpatrick et al. (2009) also discuss the prospect of recruiting locally. They espouse,

> providing 'a local' with skills on the job can result in a more sustainable team.... The additional benefits of recruiting from the community are that these people have the historical knowledge of community resources and trust of the community they serve and are passionate about the community they live in. (p. 289)

Not only is knowledge of the culture and background of the community and it's members crucial from the standpoint of the client, it is also an ethical standard to which counselors must adhere. The ethical codes of various professional organizations address the need for providing culturally appropriate services. For example, the ACA code of ethics (2005a) states in the preamble that "association members recognize diversity and embrace a cross-cultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts" (p. 1). ASCA (2004)

addresses diversity is section E.2. where it states, "The professional school counselor: a. Affirms the diversity of students, staff and families. b. Expands and develops awareness of his/her own attitudes and beliefs affecting cultural values and biases and strives to attain cultural competence" (p. 4). Whereas the APA (2002) code of conduct states,

> Psychologists are aware of and respect cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status and consider these factors when working with members of such groups. (p. 3)

To aid in these endeavors, the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development has published a set of multicultural counseling competencies (Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, Jones, Locke, Sanchez, & Stadler, 1996) to which all counselors should aspire. The three main tenets include an awareness of ones own cultural values and biases, an awareness of the client's worldview, and culturally appropriate intervention strategies. Each of these areas is further delineated in to the areas of beliefs and attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Although these competencies provide a guideline for counselors, they do not assist counselors regarding how to work with specific multicultural populations. As rural Alaska does have a high proportion of minority and indigenous cultures – 52 percent of Alaska's 2002 rural public school students belong to a minority group (RSCT, 2005) – having rural counselors discuss specific techniques that have aided them in overcoming the challenges of working in these multicultural communities will aid both current and future counselors.

Overcoming the Challenges of Working as a Rural Helping Professional

As shown by the above literature review, there is quite a bit of research discussing the various challenges of working as a helping professional in a rural community. Several of the research studies have provided recommendations regarding how to overcome the obstacles of working in a rural environment, but to date, little systematic research has been completed that has specifically asked rural helping professionals what they have done, or are doing, to overcome their rural challenges. The literature that does describe

strategies to help meet the challenges rural counselors experience was either based on personal reflection (Lund, 1990; McConnell, 1994), extrapolation from a research study (Baldo et al., 1998; Clopton & Knesting, 2006; McIntire et al., 1990; Monteiro-Leitner et al., 2006; Morrissette, 2000; Sutton, 1988), or from reviewing past literature (Drew & Breen, 2004; Hines, 2002; McIntire et al., 1990; Saba, 1991; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). This section will first describe the recommendations that have been made, then it will focus specifically on studies that actually asked rural helping professionals what they have done to overcome the challenges of working in a rural setting.

Recommendations for overcoming the challenges. Recommendations discussed regarding overcoming the challenges inherent in a rural environment fell in to the following general categories: define the role of the counselor, understand and appreciate the rural culture, build networks, enhance limited resources, maintain ethical knowledge and behaviors, and further education. Each of these areas will be described in the next section.

Define the role of the counselor. Several researches discussed the need to be clear about the role of the counselor. For example, Monteiro-Leitner et al. (2006) suggested counselors, "Offer in-service sessions defining the school counselors' role and how it enhances the teamwork that all do to promote education" (p. 251). Lund (1990) also discussed the necessity to explain the counselor's role with the teaching staff, principal, and superintendent, and to keep them current with the counseling program. To do this, counselors need to be educated on how to explain their role (Baldo et al., 1998), but also how to provide evidence regarding their effectiveness (Monteiro et al., 2006).

Understand and appreciate the rural culture. Rural counselors need to understand, appreciate, and become involved in the community (Breen & Drew, 2005; Hines, 2002; Hovestadt et al., 2002; McIntire et al., 1990; Morris, 2006; Smith 2003). By becoming involved in the community, the counselor will learn the cultural roles, norms, biases, and issues of the residents with whom they will be working (Hines, 2002, p. 193). Drew and Breen (2004) suggest that, "Getting to know and appreciate the unique aspects of rural culture will contribute to the effectiveness of the professional school counselor"

(p. 747). This appreciation should be gained in both the professional and personal realms. For example, Helbok (2003) recommends taking advantage of outdoor activities like hiking and camping that are available in rural areas.

Harowski et al. (2006), in discussing the skills necessary for rural psychologists, agreed with the belief that people preparing to work in rural environments need knowledge of the culture of the people, including the geographic diversity, and how it may impact the community and its residents. They specifically state,

> a respect for diversity as well as a grounding in rural culture is needed to understand the interplay among individual, family, heritage, church, community, work, socioeconomic factors, and isolation or remoteness from services that often play a role in health or illness in rural settings. (Harowski et al., 2006, p. 161)

It is not just enough to understand and appreciate the culture, according to Beeson (1999) the counselor must also accept the realities of rural life and rural practice and have a positive attitude towards the rural environment. Furthermore, Beeson (1999) states the counselor must be "genuinely interested in the people" (p. 38).

McLeskey et al. (1988) recommend practitioners clearly communicate respect and acceptance to clients, parents, teachers, and community members. Making personal contact could aid in reducing suspicion and resistance to change. Beeson (1999) and Jensen and Royeen (2002) also recommend face-to-face communication. As stated previously, there is still a stigma associated with mental health services (Baldo et al., 1998; Brems et al., 2006a; Sirey et al., 2001; Smith, 2003; Warner et al., 2005), and the counselor must help people move beyond the stigma (Brems et al., 2006a; Bull et al., 2001). Counselors who provide mental health care have a responsibility to inform not only the client system, but also the rural community. In preparing information regarding services, the practitioner needs to compose material at an appropriate reading level and present it in language that is culturally acceptable and meaningful for the community at hand (Bushy & Carty, 1994). In talking directly with consumers in an appropriate manner, counselors will convey an understanding and appreciation of the local culture.

Build networks. It was recommended that counselors build networks for themselves. These networks can come in a variety of forms. Counselors can identify and develop local support networks (Lund, 1990; McIntire et al., 1990), with neighboring schools (Drew & Breen, 2004), or community colleagues (Morrissette, 2000). Others recommend practitioners develop trusted relationships with local residents in the community (Brems et al., 2006b; Jensen & Royeen, 2002).

Additionally, counselors from rural areas can become involved in their state, regional, and national counseling organizations (Drew & Breen, 2004; Lund, 1990; Monteiro-Leitner et al., 2006). "In order to provide the best services for children, it would seem logical for guidance counselors to increase their affiliation with professionals outside their school system" (Sutton, 1988, p. 21). These networks can help counselors avoid isolation and burnout, keep counselors abreast of professional developments, and foster collaboration (McConnell, 1994; Morrissette, 2000; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992).

Counselors need to be able to utilize both formal and informal networks (Merrell et al., 1994). These networks include a wide variety of stakeholders such as schools, courts, churches, law enforcement, social service agencies, self-help groups, families, and other referral sources (Brems et al., 2006b; Hovestadt et al., 2002). Beeson (1999) also recommended the rural practitioner work with the entire network of health and social services in the community. In the same vein, counselors are recommended to be knowledgeable of available services and make appropriate referrals (Bushy & Carty, 1994; Drew & Breen, 2004). Building networks may provide a broader base of referrals and help alleviate the strain related to the lack of services available in the community (Clopton & Knesting, 2006).

Enhance limited resources. "Developing organizational strategies for partnerships among schools can often counter the effects of limited resources" (McIntire et al., 1990, p. 168). Additionally, Brems et al. (2006b) recommend providers be creative, flexible, and capable of collaboration. Other researchers (Drew & Breen, 2004; Hines, 2002; Gumpert & Saltman, 1998) recommend utilizing local resources by collaborating with the professionals in both the school and community. For instance,

"invite professionals from the community, county, state, and university or college faculty and graduate students to provide training, consultation, and services" (Drew & Breen, 2004, p. 747). Additionally, Weigel (2002) suggests "rural counselors become familiar with indigenous resources in rural settings and learn how to work cooperatively with pre-existing paraprofessionals" (p. 171). Other researchers (Drew & Breen, 2004; Hines, 2002; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992) recommend counselors involve the parents as both informational resources and volunteers.

Furthermore, it is recommended that counselors use regional programs to provide greater exposure to both professionals and students (Drew & Breen, 2004). Practitioners need to look at technology options such as online courses or other telecommunication models to help expand one's resources for aspects such as consultation, professional development, or maintaining listserves, chatrooms, or virtual teams with other rural professionals (Brems et al., 2006b; Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Drew & Breen, 2004; Gibb et al., 2003; Morrissette, 2000). The use of technology can help enhance communication, but is recommended that it should not be a replacement for essential face-to-face meetings (Jensen & Royeen, 2002).

Maintain ethical knowledge and behaviors. "Successful rural health practitioners are extremely sensitive to the presence of ethical issues and dilemmas and have worked hard at ensuring that their own conduct is ethical and above reproach" (Beeson, 1999, p. 38). Researchers have made a variety of recommendations to aid in this task. Suggestions included: to clarify roles, discuss multiple relationships and confidentiality, set clear boundaries, consult and seek supervision, follow an ethical decision making model, engage in professional development, practice personal stress management, learn to work with local attorneys and courts, and purchase malpractice insurance (Brems et al., 2006b; Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Coyle, 1999; Drew & Breen, 2004; Erikson, 2001; Hargrove, 1986; Harowski et al., 2006; Helbok, 2003; McFarland, 1999; Schank, 1998). Faulkner and Faulkner (1997) specifically recommended swapping offices one day each week with a neighboring professional to avoid needing to work with clients with whom the practitioner has a preexisting relationship. Nickel (2004) further discusses the need to

keep in mind community norms and expectations when determining appropriate courses of action.

Engaging in professional discussion regarding the practicalities of maintaining ethical standards in rural environments will aid counselors to determine courses of action (Schank, 1994), but will also help avoid counselor burn out (Baldo et al., 1998). To this same end, Helbok (2003) recommended psychologists have "one or two intimate friends in the community with whom to share personal problems, and to be friendly but more superficial with others" (p. 380). Although, he further discussed the need to be authentic in both the personal and professional realms. Jensen and Royeen (2002) also stressed the importance of authenticity and making a meaningful connection to the community. Finally, Weigel (2002) also recommended that ethical issues be addressed through employee orientations or counselor education programs.

Further education. Recommendations regarding education seemed to be not only for the counselors themselves, but also for counselor educators. Rural counselors need to engage in professional development to stay current in the field and help combat isolation (Monteiro-Leitner et al., 2006). Technology advances can assist rural counselors in obtaining continuing education, consultation, or professional development (Barbapoulos & Clark, 2003; Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Weigel, 2002), along with enabling work with special needs populations (Merrell et al., 1994). Additionally, students in training need to be taught how to access current literature from any work location.

As previously stated, rural counselors are expected to be generalists, and therefore training programs need to provide more general counselor training – such as courses on drugs and alcohol, behavioral management, family, children, crisis intervention, domestic violence, groups, etc. (Baldo et al., 1998; Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003; Harowski et al., 2006; Merrell et al., 1994; Morris, 2006; Smith, 2003). According to Kendrick et al. (1994), "school counselors should be fully trained mental health professionals capable of independently managing any counseling role that may present itself within their student population" (p. 4).

Saba (1991) also recommended that counselor educators could provide generalist training, but that they could also provide experiences in rural settings, provide rural mentors, consult and coordinate with rural counselors, build student's interpersonal skills related to the rural cultural setting, and encourage knowledge of ethics and clarification of personal values. Harowski et al. (2006) agree with Saba, but also recommend skills in outreach, community assessment, and program development and evaluation. Addressing general issues of rural challenges in training programs might better prepare people to work in rural settings (Weigel, 2002).

Finally, Berston et al. (2005) discussed the recommendation of on-site training in rural locations. This includes bringing training to the community (Brems et al., 2006b), but also sending counselors in training to rural communities. Although these programs may be costly, they give counselors exposure and experience in the rural setting. For example, a participant discussing an immersion experience stated, "the most profound experience was the reservation itself. With all of the different elements at work in the community and the Native American culture, it was nothing I had ever experienced" (Jensen & Royeen, 2002, p. 125). Jensen and Royeen (2002) further state, "by spending time in a cross-cultural setting, we believe students gain more insight into themselves and their own culture" (p. 125)

Other recommendations. A few other recommendations were made that did not seem to fit under any of the main theme areas. For example, Worzbyt and Zook (1992) recommended counselors set the example for leadership, plan small wins, recognize individual contributors, and celebrate accomplishments. Helbok (2003) recommended counselors take time for self and family care, keep a balanced caseload, and take urban vacations. In planning and scheduling follow-up care, Bushy and Carty (1994) recommended counselors consider the client's lifestyle and home situation, and also, that they delineate the procedure the counselor will pursue in the event that the client does not keep an appointment. Finally, Brems et al. (2006a) recommend building a diverse healthcare workforce to deal with language differences to assure clinicians can communicate with their patients without interpreters.

In sum, several recommendations have been made regarding how to overcome the challenges of a rural working environment. Although these recommendations may be beneficial for the rural professional, they did not come directly from asking practitioners in rural locations what they have done to overcome the challenges of the rural setting. The following section will discuss the few research studies that have talked with practitioners regarding this issue.

Recommendations directly from rural helping professionals. Few systematic research studies have been done that directly asked rural providers what they have done to overcome the challenges of working in a rural setting. This section will review four systematic research studies that directly asked counselors, either in survey or interview format, what they have done, or are currently doing, to help them overcome the challenges of working in a rural environment.

First, Womontree (2004) surveyed 16 small community and rural mental health practitioners (not including school counselors) in the states of Illinois and Missouri. Although she was trying to determine common ethical concerns these practitioners faced, she also asked the participants how they managed their ethical dilemmas. Results showed that practitioners found a lack of access to more highly qualified professionals, lack of funds for consultation, and a moderate expression of isolation. Additionally, those practitioners with larger families had more dual relationship issues. In order to help overcome these ethical concerns, practitioners mainly utilized trainings, peers, supervisors, or Internet resources. They did report a concern regarding the lack of geographic access, the need for confidential consultation services, and the need for more classes or workshops addressing the concerns of rural mental health providers.

Drew (2004) analyzed the interviews of 20 rural counselors (11 school counselors and 9 community counselors) from Pennsylvania, Vermont, Illinois, North Dakota, Washington, and Arizona. The communities in which the participants worked varied from 3,000 to 50,000 people. The participants were asked to tell about their rural area, discuss how the counselor is affected by the rural aspects, critical issues facing rural workers, skills they thought were needed in order to be effective, and to discuss possible

pre-service and in-service training needs. The counselors described benefits of their rural communities (i.e., familiarity, variety, importance), along with specific challenges (i.e., lack of resources, isolation, multiple roles, lack of privacy, ethical challenges).

The practitioners in the Drew (2004) study felt counselors should have particular skills to help them overcome the barriers they face working in rural areas. These skills included: an understanding of rural life and culture, an understanding of the problems of rural life, an appreciation for rural life, an understanding of the history and connections of the community, knowledge of oneself, the ability to network and participate in community involvement, ethical decision making skills, generalist skills (i.e., multi-tasking and flexibility), communication skills (i.e., advocacy and persistence), and administration and clerical skills. Additionally, both school and community counselors emphasized the need of a good support system which could include school staff, administration, other rural counselors, professional organizations, or supervision.

Next, Wihak and Merali (2007) interviewed 8 non-Native counselors that had previously worked in a rural Native Canadian community. Each of the counselors worked in the community a minimum of two years and had moved out of the community at least one year prior to the interview. The participants worked in different occupations as psychologists, social workers, or pastoral counselors, but none were school counselors. Participants were asked to discuss their experiences working and living in the Native community, but also to discuss the challenges that occurred, and the changes that they made to help them in their roles.

Qualitative data analysis showed three main themes regarding the adjustments the counselors made to respond to the community in which they worked: (1) the need to relax professional and personal boundaries, (2) establish confidentiality, and (3) redefine child maltreatment (Wihak & Merali, 2007). The counselors found they had to make home visits, build rapport through social interactions, and participate in gift giving as it was a cultural value of the Inuit (the indigenous population residing in the area). Additionally, the counselors found they needed to distinguish themselves from the Inuit professionals in order to help establish confidentiality. Essentially the concept of keeping

information confidential was foreign and was often found to be rude. If the counselors were seen as different than the Inuit, then it was acceptable to keep confidentiality. Finally, the counselors had to look at their views regarding child abuse and neglect. The Inuit people distribute childcare duties among the community, and therefore parenting was not the sole responsibility of the biological parents. Furthermore, cultural customs had to be kept in mind. One participant mentioned an incident where she was conducting a home visit and walked in to the house to see "a child sitting on the floor with a piece of seal on a chunk of cardboard and knife in their hand" (Wihak & Merali, 2007, p. 177). At first she was alarmed, but after discussion, realized the child was being taught how to prepare meals in a culturally appropriate manner. Changing their views on appropriate parenting helped the counselors respond to the cultural norms of the community.

The counselors in this study (Wihak & Merali, 2007) "identified ethically appropriate courses of action in specific situations by consulting with colleagues and community members, monitoring clients' reactions to their behavior, and negotiating mutually acceptable counselor responses, reflecting the use of a social constructivism approach" (p. 178). Specifically, after consulting with colleagues and Inuit elders, the counselors learned to be more flexible regarding their personal boundaries, as well as their professional boundaries. The counselors learned "that if they did not interact with clients outside of the counseling relationship, their clients would prematurely terminate counseling, or the therapeutic alliance might be ruptured" (p. 179).

Finally, Chipp, Johnson, Brems, Warner, and Roberts (2008) utilized surveys to determine what strategies rural behavioral and physical health providers (not including school counselors) used to overcome the barriers to ethical and effective health care. The authors surveyed 1,546 rural and urban health care providers working in the states of New Mexico and Alaska. Barriers discussed included "heterogeneity of rural inhabitants, economic impediments, geographic impediments, financial constraints, cultural differences, lack of access to specialty care, and confidentiality concerns" (Chipp et al., 2008, p. 546). They found that rural health care providers were more likely to: integrate community resources to address perceived barriers; individualize treatment

recommendations; adjust treatment styles; take special precautions to safeguard confidentiality; and take measures to broaden their own expertise. These authors felt that rural providers face different circumstances than their rural counterparts and therefore need to make specific adaptations to deal with their situations.

Few research studies were found that specifically asked counselors how they overcome the challenges of working in rural communities, and only one (Drew, 2004) specifically included school counselors as participants. Unfortunately, none of the school counselor participants were from the state of Alaska. The other three research studies included only other types of counseling professionals (i.e., mental health counselors, physical health care providers, pastoral counselors, psychologists, and social workers). One study only had participants from Illinois and Missouri (Womontree, 2004), whereas another (Wihak & Merali, 2007) only interviewed participants in northern Canada (although this study did include working with indigenous populations such as those in rural Alaska). The most recent study (Chipp et al., 2008) did utilize participants from Alaska, but unfortunately, as stated above, they did not include school counselors as participants. Therefore, it is clear that research in to the specific recommendations of school counselors in Alaska is needed to help determine alternatives for overcoming the challenges of working in rural Alaskan communities. The following section reviews literature from the field regarding the necessity for this type of research.

The Need for Further Research

Although there has been research highlighting the challenges of working as a helping professional in rural areas, none of the research has included school counselors in the state of Alaska. Furthermore, there has been only one research study (Drew, 2004) asking for input from rural school counselors regarding the experiences and techniques they have used to help them cope with the many challenges. McConnell (1994) stated that "telling other rural counselors what practices work in our own school or, perhaps, describing what alterations we have made to old practices provides consistency and strength to the role of the rural school counselor" (p. 126). More recent research also suggests a need to look further in to the practices of current practitioners.

According to Womontree (2004), "Literature suggest that future research should include exploration of how providers are currently managing the special dilemmas they face as rural practitioners" (p. 54). Clopton and Knesting (2006) concur that "an exploration of current strategies used" would be helpful for the field (p. 9). Furthermore, Schank (1998) states, "Hearing directly from rural counselors is the essential factor in accurately addressing relevant issues" (p. 281). Other researchers (Baldo et al., 1998; Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Drew, 2004; Morrissette, 2000; Pearson & Sutton, 1999; Saba, 1991; Sutton & Pearson, 2002; Weigel, 2002) agree with the need for further research in this area.

Saba (1991), after completing a literature review on the topic of the rural school counselor, found a need for additional research to confirm the experiences of the rural school counselor and the implications for dealing with the challenges in those settings. Likewise, Sutton and Pearson (2002; Pearson & Sutton, 1999) discussed the need for additional research looking at factors that will help counselors gain entry in to rural communities, deal with cultural differences, and preserve the benefits and overcome the challenges of working in a rural environment. They additionally felt a need to look at other areas regarding these issues as their research only covered school counselors in two Northeastern states.

Due to difficulties in generalizing results, researchers addressed the need for further studies in different states, as well as including a broader demographic pool, to help provide information about the experiences of other rural counselors (Baldo et al., 1998; Morrissette, 2000; Womontree, 2004). For example, Baldo, Quinn and O'Halloran's research (1998) interviewed sixteen rural counselors from four Midwestern states regarding their roles and obstacles working in their settings as well as their needs regarding training, but did not ask them what they had specifically done to help overcome the obstacles they discussed. Morrissette (2000) interviewed seven individuals regarding their experience as rural school counselors. Based on the information gained from the interviews, implications for counselor educators were discussed and it was noted that individuals need to be better prepared to work in rural locations. He suggested further

studies be conducted in different states to gain additional information regarding their experiences. Womontree (2004) surveyed community mental health professionals in Illinois and Missouri regarding the ethical challenges they face. She additionally recommended further research be conducted in other rural areas, as attempts "to generalize outside the Midwest, and particularly to remote frontier areas, would be risky" (Womontree, 2004, p. 120).

Other researchers (Drew, 2004; Weigel, 2002) noted the need to look more specifically at school counselors. Weigel (2002) surveyed 338 National Certified Counselors (only 12 held school counseling licenses) living in Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming regarding the differences between rural and urban counselors perceptions of job satisfaction and challenges in their work settings. He did find significant differences in the practices of counselors working in rural versus urban settings and recommended further research looking at specific specialty populations such as rural school counselors. Additionally, he recommended qualitative research be conducted to examine strategies counselors have developed to cope with the challenges in their settings.

Drew (2004) interviewed 20 counselors (11 of whom were school counselors) regarding their experiences as rural counselors and their recommendations concerning necessary skills and training to be effective. She recommended further research to determine recommendations of rural professionals regarding how to overcome their challenges. Additionally, she recommended assessing the needs of school counselors apart from community based or clinical counselors, as well as including a more diverse population.

Input from other rural school counselors regarding the main challenges they may face, as well as specific techniques to help overcome these challenges, will help professionals be better prepared for their working environment. DiAnne Borders (2002) sums it up when she states "Perhaps rather than continuing to try and debate who school counselors are and what they should be doing, the debate can be focused on more of 'how' school counseling is being done in a wide range of contexts by a variety of practitioners" (p.

182). It is this void that the current research hopes to fill by asking rural Alaskan counselors: What strategies do you use to help overcome the challenges associated with working as a school counselor in rural Alaska?

Chapter Three: Methodology

There are several research methodologies that could be utilized to expand on the knowledge base regarding the world in which the rural counselor works and techniques that could assist them in serving their populations. This section will begin with a general discussion of the reasoning behind the research design utilized in this study. This will be followed by a description of the survey materials and procedures used, including a description of the survey participants and the procedures used to analyze the survey data. Finally, it will review the aspects involved in the interview process, including interview question development, procedures, participants, and the process used to analyze the interview data.

Research Design

The main two research paradigms that are utilized in the social sciences fall under the broad topics of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative designs are grouped together "because the focus is on how much or how many and results are usually presented in numerical form" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). The purpose of quantitative methods is to study relationships and test hypotheses that are established in advance. In contrast, qualitative research is interested in how people make sense of and provide meaning to their worlds. "Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Like quantitative researchers, qualitative researches may use numbers to quantify certain types of data, but that is not their focus. "Qualitative research reports generally devote more space to people's descriptive accounts of their own experiences than to numbers that quantify these experiences" (McIntyre, 2005, p. 127). The primary goal is to uncover and interpret the meanings of participant's experiences (Merriam, 2009).

The current research question under investigation is focused on describing the experiences of the rural school counselor regarding the techniques they use to help them overcome the challenges of working in the rural environment. As this is primarily a descriptive question, it was determined that a qualitative research design would be more

appropriate. Additionally, as the population is a bounded system (i.e., there are a finite number of rural counselors in the state of Alaska), and their experiences are directly related to their environment, it was determined that the qualitative case study approach would be the most beneficial to investigate this topic with this population.

The survey method was first chosen to gather data to help further describe the topic. But, as the population is finite, and the geographic area of the population under study is very dispersed and diverse and includes a high proportion of indigenous people with different cultural backgrounds and beliefs, it was determined that it would be beneficial to also provide the opportunity for counselors to have their voices heard. Therefore, it was decided that a mixture of quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews) data collection methods would be used to investigate the current research question. The questionnaires would provide breadth to the study, whereas the interviews would allow for more depth in to the issues at hand. Mixed-methods approaches are seen as beneficial by allowing the strengths of each method to come to the forefront and further add to the research base (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Therefore, procedures outlined by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2009) regarding the use of surveys were followed, and methods outlined by Merriam (2009) were used for conducting and interpreting interviews.

Survey Materials and Procedure

As stated above, data was to be collected via both survey and interview methods. This section will describe the general survey development and implementation procedures. It will then describe the survey participants and discuss data analysis methods.

Survey development. The questionnaire was developed based on information obtained in the literature review and the specific purpose of the research study. An initial survey was developed and first reviewed by two faculty members employed in the Counseling department at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Revisions were made and then it was submitted to the initial four members of the dissertation committee. Again recommendations were made for revisions that were implemented before the final version was signed off by the current committee members (one initial member retired prior to the

final submission). It was then submitted to the University of Alaska Fairbanks Institutional Review Board (IRB), which approved the research study (see Appendix A).

There were four general sections included in the questionnaire for a total of 25 questions (see Appendix B). The survey was entitled "Perceptions of School Counselors in Rural Alaska". The first section was an introduction to the survey, which began by thanking the participants for taking the time to complete it. It then discussed the time requirements and basic information that would be asked, along with a statement regarding the voluntariness of participation, and the option to withdraw at any time. It also included the first question, which was the coded number that was filled in by the researcher prior to mailing. Participants that chose to participate online would need this code to access the survey.

The second section included demographic and school setting information. There were 18 questions in this section, and it began by stating that this information would help to understand whether or not there are differences in challenges and/or strategies based on different characteristics of the school counselor or the school setting. Additionally, it assured that all information would be aggregated and no individual participant or school data would be discussed to help ensure confidentiality. Questions included gender, age, and ethnicity. It went on to ask the type of setting the participant grew up in as research stated that counselors that already have predisposition to live in rural areas can positively impact retention (Collins, 1999; Howley & Pendarvis, 2002; Kilpatrick et al., 2009; Monk, 2007; Morrissette, 2000; Ricketts, 2005; Wihak & Merali, 2007). It asked about current partnership status and children they have with them in their rural setting. Again, research showed that people with family or natural support systems feel less isolation, whereas younger and/or single counselors had a harder time meeting their needs for socialization (Barbapoulos & Clark, 2003; Morrissette, 2000; Sutton & Pearson, 2002).

The next questions discussed academic training and additionally certifications and licenses they may hold. It then asked questions regarding the length of time they were a counselor in rural Alaska, years of experience as a school counselor, and years of experience outside the school setting. It specifically asked about the district in which

they were employed, their specific position, and how long they had been employed in that capacity. The next questions discussed aspects of their school setting, including the level of school they were assigned, the number of different schools they work with, and the number of counselors that work in their school. Finally, it asked whether they had obtained training in ethics or cross-cultural competencies in the past 3 years, as research discussed that these were necessary competencies for rural counselors (Atkinson, et al., 1998; Baldo et al., 1998; Brems et al., 2006a; Drew, 2004; Reimer, 1999; Roberts, et al., 2007; Saba, 1991; Schank, 1998; Shutiva, 2001; Weigel, 2002; Wihak & Merali, 2007; Womontree, 2004).

Section three focused on school counselor perceptions. The first question in the section (question number 20) asked the participants to mark whether they had experienced any of the challenges listed. The list included 17 general challenges based on the literature reviewed (Baldo et al., 1998; Barbapoulos & Clark, 2003; Brems et al., 2006a,b; Bull et al., 2001; Bushy & Carty, 1994; Chipp et al., 2008; Ciarlo et al., 1996; Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Coyle, 1999; Drew, 2004; Drew & Breen, 2004; Esposito et al., 2003; Gumpert & Saltman, 1998; Helbok, 2003; Hill & Hirshberg, 2008; Hines, 2002; Howley & Pendarvis, 2002; Jensen & Royeen, 2002; Kendrick et al., 1994; Kilpatrick et al., 2009; McLeskey et al., 1988; McConnell, 1994; McFarland, 1999; McIntire et al., 1990; Merrell et al., 1994; Monk, 2007; Nickel, 2004; Morrissette, 2000; Pearson & Sutton, 1999; Ricketts, 2005; Roellke, 2003; Roberts et al., 1999; Roberts et al., 2007; Saba, 1991; Schank, 1994, 1998; Schank & Skovholt, 2005; Smith, 2003; Sutton, 1988; Sutton & Pearson, 2002, Sutton & Southworth, 1990; Wagenfeld et al., 1997; Webber, 2004; Weigel, 2002; Weist et al., 2000; Wihak & Merali, 2007; Womontree, 2004). Examples were included in most categories to help clarify, but it was also stated that the specific situation did not have to be experienced to still mark it as a challenge. For example, one category was crisis situations and the examples were suicide or child abuse and neglect. There was an additional open-ended section that asked participants to expand on any of the listed challenges, or include any other challenge that was not stated.

The next three questions were also open-ended questions (numbers 21 to 24). The first asked the participants to describe any resources they use now to help them manage the challenges they experience. The next asked them to describe any resources, if available, that they think might help them deal with the challenges even more. The final question in the section asked them to include any other things they wished to share that they think would be useful for other counselors to hear in regards to working as a school counselor in rural Alaska.

The final section of the questionnaire thanked participants for their feedback, but additionally described the purpose and procedures of the follow-up interviews. If the participant was willing to participate in a follow-up interview, or had a recommendation regarding a rural school counselor that has expertise that they could recommend, they were asked to complete the final two questions asking for their contact information (i.e., name, school site, email, telephone, and preferred mode of contact), or that of the recommended individual. They were asked to return the information in the designated envelope provided to help ensure confidentiality of responses. Finally, the researcher contact information was provided if participants had any questions or concerns regarding the survey or the research in general.

Survey implementation procedures. The entire population of rural school counselors in the state of Alaska were recruited as potential survey participants. A list of all school districts in the state of Alaska was located on the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development website (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, n.d.). After taking out the 4 school districts that were not considered rural (Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, and Wasilla), the researcher contacted each of the 51 rural school districts. Each school was first contacted by email and then if necessary by phone to compile a list of the current school counselors. Several districts did not have a school counselor at the time of the study, and therefore the final number was 125 counselors in 41 districts.

Specific guidelines recommended by Dillman et al. (2009) in implementing mail or internet surveys were reviewed. Recommendations included the following: personalize

contacts to the extent possible; send a token of appreciation with the survey request; use multiple contacts; select mail-out dates with the population in mind; place information in the mailing exactly where it needs to be used; takes steps to ensure mailings will not be mistaken for junk mail; assemble mailings to maximize the appeal; ensure all addresses comply with current postal regulations; assign an individual identification number to each participant; establish procedures for dealing with undeliverable mail, returned incentives, and respondent inquiries, and evaluate early returns for problems that can be addressed. In addition to these guidelines for mail surveys, clear instructions for accessing the internet based survey need to be included in the initial and follow-up mail-outs.

In line with Dillman et al.'s (2009) recommendations, all counselors were sent an initial letter describing the purpose of the research study, requesting their participation, and explaining the procedures (see Appendix C). All letters were sent to the participant's home school site in mid April, and were addressed specifically to the school counselor by name and signed by the researcher. Letters were completed on official University of Alaska Fairbanks letterhead to help legitimate the mailing. In addition to the letter, there was the questionnaire, a postage-paid return envelope big enough for all possible return materials, a separate smaller envelope for their contact information if the counselor agreed to be a possible participant in the interview process, and a five-dollar bill. All materials were organized in the same manner with the letter facing outward as the first thing participants would view.

As surveys are a standard method of gathering information, people may not be inclined to respond to all surveys. Therefore, incentives may be offered to help encourage responses, and Dillman et al. (2009, p. 22) reports that people are more apt to respond when the rewards for their response outweigh the costs. Rewards are what will be gained from the response, whereas costs are what one will have to give to receive the rewards. Rewards do not necessarily need to be in monetary form, but rather in social response such as the gain of information upon completion of the research. Providing small tokens in advance may be one form of incentive, as this may motivate people to participate in order to reciprocate for the reward they received.

A problem with providing incentives is that it could add to the problem of nonresponse bias. "Nonresponse bias occurs when the participants who respond to the survey differ in characteristics from those who do not respond" (Erford, 2008, p. 143). Although using incentives is generally done to increase the response rate, and therefore lessen the chance of nonresponse bias, it is possible that there may be those people who choose to complete the survey just for the token incentive and therefore may differ from those who do not respond. Regardless of this concern, a five dollar incentive was included in all initial mail-outs as Dillman et al. (2009) found that "small token incentives provided with the request to complete the survey significantly improve response rates" (p. 22).

Although, participants were mailed their initial recruitment letters, questionnaires, and incentives, as recommended by Dillman et al. (2009), they were given the option of completing the survey either by mail or through the internet. It was decided that the use of both methods would be optimal as some participants may view the internet as the most efficient way to communicate, whereas others may not be comfortable with the technology or have adequate computer access to complete the survey in this form. Furthermore, the use of mail is necessary to deliver incentives, and Dillman et al. reports that response rates for mail surveys can be significantly higher than those obtained by web surveys. Although participants were provided instructions on how to access the internet option of the survey in both the initial and follow-up mailings, only one participant chose to respond through the online method.

All possible participants had been assigned a random identification number that was included on their questionnaire, and therefore after two weeks a follow-up letter was sent only to counselors who had not yet responded to the initial mail-out (see Appendix D). This letter, along with all the original materials aside from the initial five-dollar incentive, was sent out in early May. It was again directed specifically to the school counselor. Only two letters were returned undeliverable, but after contacting the sites directly it was found that both sites had recently changed postal codes. Once the address information was updated, both surveys were included during the second mailing. There

was no time to send out an additional follow-up letter as most schools in the state of Alaska end their school year in mid May. Despite only having two steps in the mail-out process, 93 of the participants returned their questionnaire, which resulted in a 74.4 percent response rate.

Survey participants. As mentioned previously, all rural public school districts in the state of Alaska were contacted to determine a list of current rural school counselors. This resulted in the original 125 potential survey participants. The following information applies to the 93 participants that returned their questionnaire. General demographic information found that 54 participants (58.1%) were females and 39 were males (41.9%). Only 86 people responded to the question about age. Of those who responded, ages ranged from a low of 23 to a high of 65, but the average age was 46-years-old. All participants responded to the ethnicity question, and 3 participants selected more than one category. Eighty-seven participants were Caucasian, non-Hispanic (93.5%), three were Alaska Native (3.2%), two were Native American (2.2%), two were African American (2.2%), one was Hispanic/Latino(a) (1.1%), and one was Asian/Asian American (1.1%). The ethnicity data is similar to information mentioned in Hanson and Stone (2002) that states, "the majority of school counselors are White" (p. 163).

Survey analysis. All questionnaire responses were input in to the online Survey Monkey tool. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze the initial demographic questions. Further cross-tabulations were completed on all demographic variables in order to determine if any variables were interrelated. The open-ended questions were analyzed following the procedures recommended by Merriam (2009) in regards to qualitative data analysis. The procedure is described in more depth when discussing the interview analysis.

Interview Materials and Procedures

The second half of the data collection procedure was to conduct follow-up interviews with a subset of the survey respondents. This section will first discuss the general interview questions and then describe the interview procedures. Next it will provide a

description of the interview participants, and finally discuss the interview analysis procedures.

Interview questions. Interviews were to be semi-structured and focus on the participant's experiences working in rural Alaska and their experiences coping with the challenges. A semi-structured interview process was utilized that asked participants eight open-ended questions. This procedure followed past research studies that had spoken to other helping professional regarding the challenges they faced (Drew, 2004; Wihak & Merali, 2007).

The first six research questions were adapted from previous research. Questions one through four were adapted from Drew's (2004) research in which she interviewed 20 counselors (11 of whom were school counselors) regarding their experiences as rural counselors and their recommendations concerning necessary skills and training to be effective. The first four questions were:

1. Tell me about the rural area in which you work as a school counselor (i.e., geographic, cultural, economic, historical aspects).

2. What are the main challenges working as a rural school counselor in your current setting? Are there others when you think of working in a rural school setting in general?

3. How is your work as a school counselor specifically affected by the rural setting?

4. Are there particular skills and/or understandings that school counselors working in rural settings need to be effective?

Questions five and six were adapted from Womontree's (2004) research that surveyed community mental health professionals regarding the ethical challenges they face. These questions included:

5. What resources do you use now to help you manage the type of challenges you described?

6. What resources, if available, do you think might help you deal with these challenges even more?

Question seven was included to specifically address issues in rural Alaska, whereas the final question allowed participants to discuss any other factors that may have been missed, or expand upon previous responses. These last two questions were:

7. Are there other things you want to share that you think would be useful for other counselors to hear in regards to working as a school counselor in rural Alaska?

8. Any other comments you would like to share?

An entire copy of the introductory script and interview questions can be found in Appendix E.

Interview procedures. It was decided that interviews would be conducted with a subset of the initial population determined after surveys had been completed. As discussed previously, the geographic area of the population under study is very diverse and includes a high proportion of indigenous people with different cultural backgrounds and beliefs. Due to these issues, once a list of those agreeing to participate in a follow-up interview was obtained, the intent was to select a stratified purposeful sample from those working in the different regions of rural Alaska. Regions were determined based on the Alaska School Counseling Association information found on their website (Alaska School Counselor Association, n.d.). The organization lists seven different regions in the state as follows: region 1 – the rural north; region 2 – Fairbanks and the interior; region 3 – southwest Alaska; region 4 – Anchorage; region 5 – southcentral and external areas; region 6 – the Kenai Peninsula and Kodiak; and region 7 – southeast Alaska. As region 4 is entirely urban, no participants were to be recruited from there.

Researchers may choose to interview participants via the telephone or by conducting face-to-face interviews. Both methods allow the researcher the ability to ask for clarification and provide follow-up questions (Erford, 2008). A benefit to telephone interviews is the ability to complete them fairly quickly with little additional costs, but a disadvantage includes the inability to observe participants. Face-to-face interviews have the advantage of allowing the researcher to better build rapport and engage the participant in the research. The limitations include increased costs and time.

When possible, interviews were conducted in person soon after the return of the surveys. Research funds had been secured from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, School of Education to help support the costs of the research, including travel costs to complete the interviews (see Appendix F). If face-to-face interviews were not possible, videoconferencing options were discussed, and phone interviews were the last option.

Of the 93 responses, 62 participants (67%) indicated they would be willing to participate in follow-up interviews, and 12 counselors were recommended as potential interview participants, of which 5 had indicated a willingness to be interviewed in their own survey response. Each person who stated that they would be willing to be interviewed was contacted via email to discuss interview possibilities (see Appendix G). The email initially thanked them for completing the survey, discussed the purpose of the interviews, and gave a possible time frame for the interviews (during the month of June if possible). It asked them to reply to the email, or to call the number provided, if they were still willing to be a participant, and to include the time frame that worked best for them.

Thirty-four participants initially replied to the email, with another reply in the fall after summer break. Of the original 34, 25 stated they were still interested and could interview during the time frame specified. Nine replied that they were still willing, but that they could not interview during the specified time frame. At that point, there were five possible participants from region 1, three from region 2, two from region 3, two from region 5, six from region 6, and six from region 7. Personal emails were sent to each of the participants thanking them for their response, and for those that agreed to be interviewed, further information was requested to set up specific dates and times for the interviews.

After the second emailed contact, a limited number of participants were actually able to schedule an interview in June. Of those, only one person in region 1, three participants in region 2, one participant in region 3, two participants in region 5, five from region 6, and five from region 7. Therefore, 17 participants were interviewed during the month of June. All of these interviews were conducted face-to-face, and most were completed in

the location of their school site. Four participants were not in their rural locations during the specified time frame, and therefore those interviews were conducted in other settings.

At the start of each interview, the purpose of the research was once again explained and each counselor was reminded that participation was entirely voluntary. Permission to record the interview was sought, but having the researcher take notes was also an option discussed if the participant was uncomfortable with recording the interview. Additionally, it was explained that no identifying information was to be used in the final data analysis, and only group data would be reported. Finally, each individual was provided a $25.00 dollar gift certificate to amazon.com to show appreciation for their participation. It was explained that the gift was theirs to keep regardless if they completed the interview process.

Each individual interviewed once again completed the demographic and school setting information found in section two of the surveys (questions 2 to 19), although a few participants asked that this information be taken from their original survey, which was possible due to the initial coding, and this was done for all interviews that were not conducted in person. It was found that information for question 19 (regarding training in ethics or cross-cultural competencies in the last three years) was not reported on the forms provided, and therefore information for this question was taken from participant's original surveys.

After reviewing the basic characteristics of the participants initially interviewed, it was determined that additional recruitment needed to be made. As stated previously, the demographics of the rural locations are so diverse that participants from each region were sought, but it was also hoped to find participants of different demographics (i.e., male/female; newer versus more experienced counselors). Participants were particularly needed from regions 1 and 3, but additionally from region 5. I was informed by the initial interviewees that many school employees in the rural areas, specifically the northern and southwestern areas, do not live in their locations the entire year. This meant that once school ended in mid May, they no longer were available until school returned in mid August. It was recommended to try and set up interviews during the first school in-

service meetings in August. Therefore, survey participants that indicated that they would still be willing to be interviewed but had not returned the second email contact, or who had said they were not available in June, were again contacted to determine if they could interview at a later date.

Six of the interview participants agreed to be interviewed in August. The final participant did not make contact until early September, and the interview did not take place until early November. Of these last seven interviews, four were conducted in person: two in the rural school sites, and two in other locations. One was completed utilizing videoconference methods, and two were completed over the phone. With the last seven interviews, it made a total of 24 interviews: 21 were conducted in person, 1 via videoconference, and 2 over the phone.

If consent was given, interviews were taped using a microphone on an iPod. This produced an individual voice note recording for each interview. Some interviews produced two voice notes if they were longer in length. Only one participant did not agree to be recorded, and therefore notes were taken during the interview. All voice notes were transferred to the researchers computer, which is password protected, and then later transcribed. Each participant was emailed their interview transcription to ensure that it was recorded properly. Participants emailed a response that included possible alterations, or just agreed to what was written. After hearing from each participant, the interviews were analyzed using the procedures recommended by Merriam (2009).

Interview participants. As stated previously, 24 rural Alaska school counselors were interviewed. Interviewees represented 15 different districts and all six regions: four from region 1, three from region 2, four from region 3, three from region 5, five from region 6, and five from region 7. General demographic information found that 13 participants (54.2%) were females and 11 were males (45.8%). Their age ranged from 23 to 65 with an average of 47 (although three participants did not respond to question regarding age). The majority of interview participants were Caucasian (87.5%), although three were from a different ethnic background. Due to confidentiality concerns specific ethnicities will not be provided.

Interview analysis. Procedures recommended by Merriam (2009) were followed to analyze the interview data. Merriam recommends to begin by creating a system for organizing the data. Once data is inventoried, it then needs to be organized and coded. "Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data" (p. 173). She recommends a step-by-step process that is inductive and comparative. Data analysis begins by identifying segments in the data set that are responsive to the research questions at hand. The researcher needs to determine categories or themes, which includes naming the categories and determining the number of categories that is manageable. Then the researcher needs to sort the categories in to meaningful units. In case study research, conveying an understanding of the case is of paramount importance.

First, after all interviews were transcribed and approval was received from interview participants regarding the content, each interview was read in its entirety. Then each question was reviewed separately. An initial interview was read for the first question to be analyzed (i.e., question 4 from interview transcript number 1). Themes were highlighted and entered in to an excel spreadsheet. Themes were listed on the left and the interview code was listed in a column on the right. A second interview was then read. If similar themes were discovered, that interview code was put in a column next to the original respondent. If a different theme was discovered, it was added to the list of themes on the left. This process continued until all interviews had been coded for that particular question. After the data for that question was inventoried, it was organized in to meaningful constructs. Themes were reviewed, and if necessary some were combined if it was determined that the themes were actually revealing the same content. Categories were then established to sort the data in to more meaningful and manageable units. When appropriate, categories were aligned to themes discussed in the literature review to help establish coherence and comparative analysis. This process was continued until each question had been analyzed separately.

After all interview questions had been analyzed, interviews were reviewed again to determine if responses for one question had actually been discussed in another question.

For example, if a participant discussed the challenges they found working as a rural counselor not only in the intended question (question number two), but also mentioned challenges answering question number one and question number eight. If this was the case, responses were added to the necessary question before tabulations were completed. This process continued until all interview data analysis was complete.

Methodology Summary

In summary, this research study utilized a qualitative case study approach to assist in expanding on the knowledge base regarding the world in which the rural Alaskan school counselor works, the challenges they face, and the techniques they use that assist them in dealing with these challenges so they can continue serving their populations. Both survey and interview data was collected to provide both breadth and depth to the research. Surveys yielded responses from 93 participants – a 74.4% response rate. From those participants, 24 school counselors from across the state were interviewed to follow-up on the information in the survey questionnaires. The next section will discuss the results of the data analysis.

Chapter Four: Survey Results

Results were analyzed according to the method of data collection, and then examined as a whole. This section will first review results of the surveys, initially looking individually at each question, and then discussing any relationships found among variables.

As discussed previously, 93 school counselors representing 34 rural Alaska school districts responded to the survey. Fifty-four (58%) were female, the majority (93.5%) were Caucasian, and their average age was 46. Survey analysis was broken down in to three major parts. First, the initial part of the questionnaire included close-ended questions looking at demographic and school setting information. This section was reviewed first. The next section focused on the perceptions of the rural school counselors through the use of 4 open-ended response questions. These questions were analyzed next. Finally, the responses in both sections of the survey were cross-tabulated to determine if any relationships existed among variables. This section will discuss results in relation to each segment of survey data analysis.

Survey Results – Closed Questions

This section will first describe the results of the demographic and school setting information in questions 5 through 19. These questions focused on the type of setting in which the counselor was raised, their relationship status in regards to marriage and children, their academic training and additional certifications, their years of experience, their position in the school, school level, and number of counseling colleagues at their site. It ended looking at the counselor's participation in recent trainings in ethics or cross-cultural competencies.

Type of setting. In response to the type of setting in which the participant grew up, 42 participants (45.2%) marked that they grew up in a non-rural setting outside the state of Alaska, whereas 6 participants (6.5%) indicated a non-rural setting in the state of Alaska. This data shows that a total of 51.7% of the participants grew up in a non-rural setting. Of the remaining participants, 51.7% stated they grew up in a rural setting: 34 (36.6%) grew up in a rural setting outside the state of Alaska, whereas 14 participants

(15.1%) grew up in a rural setting in the state of Alaska. For purposes of this question, a rural setting outside of Alaska is a location with a population less than 5,000; a rural setting in the state of Alaska is anywhere aside from Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, or Wasilla. The totals are a bit higher than 100% because three of the 93 participants chose more than 1 category (see Figure 1).
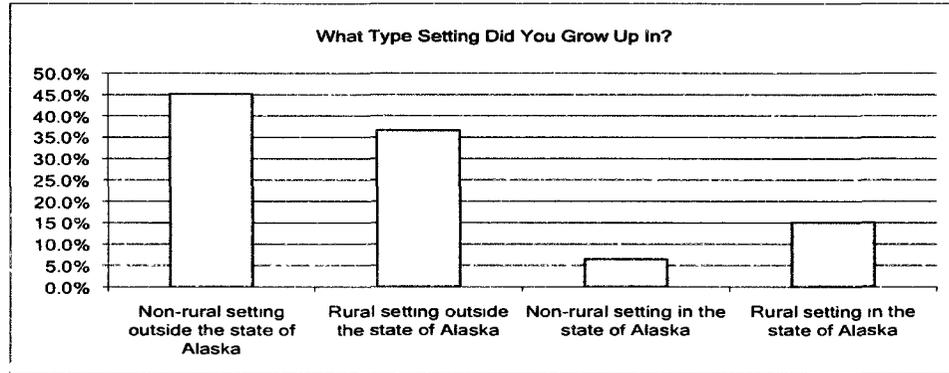
Figure 1: Type of setting in which survey participants grew up.

Relationships. In regards to relationship status, 22 participants (24.2%) indicated they were single, 6 (6.6%) were cohabitating in a domestic partnership, and 63 (69.2%) were legally married – 2 participants did not answer this question (see Figure 2).
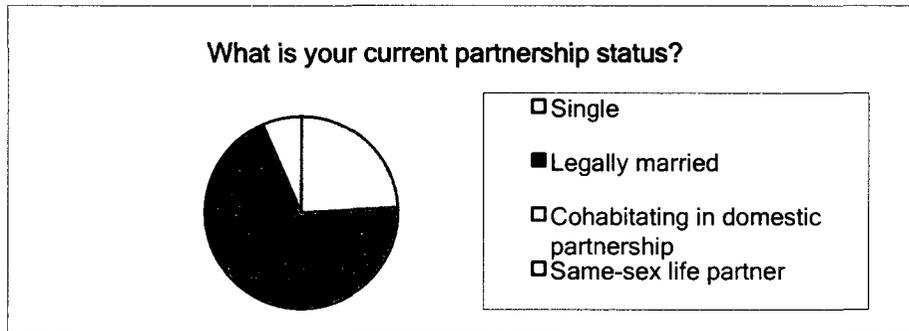
Figure 2: Partnership status of survey participants.

Furthermore, 52 participants (56.5%) indicated they did not have any children living with them in their rural setting, 20 (21.7%) had one child living with them, 10 (10.9%) had two children living with them, 8 (8.7%) had three children with them, and 2 participants (2.2%) reported that they had four or more children currently living with them (see Figure 3).
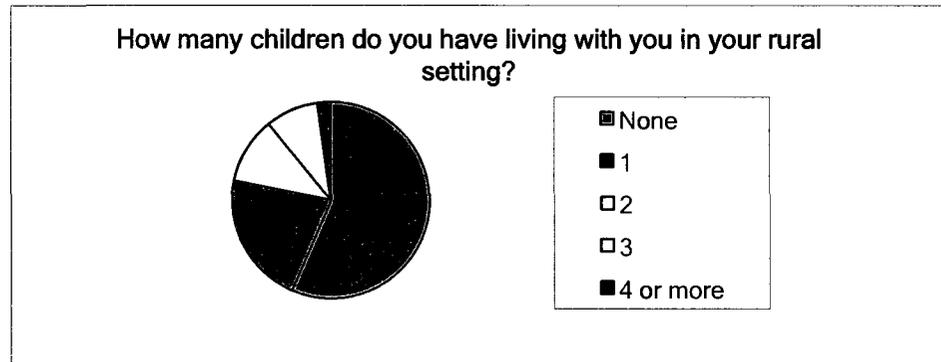
Figure 3: Number of children currently living with survey participants.

Training and certifications. The majority of participants indicated that their highest level of training is a master's degree (80 counselors; 86%), but one had a doctorate degree (1.1%), and 12 (12.9%) reported their highest degree was a bachelor's degree. Only 25 participants indicated they had additional certification, and 11 listed more than one additional certification or license. The most commonly reported was a teaching certificate (8 participants), followed by licensed professional counselor credentials (5 participants), national board certified counselor (4 participants), licensed master social worker (3 participants), and administration certification (2 participants). Several additional categories were listed by only one participant including play therapist, reality therapy certification, chemical dependency certification, school nurse, emergency medical technician, coaching certification, rehabilitation counselor certified, certified vocational evaluation specialist, and first aide/CPR.

Years of experience. Participants indicated a wide range of counseling experience. First, the majority of participants had little experience working as a counselor outside the school setting: 58 counselors (63%) reported under one year of experience – there was no option to mark no experience, 10 (10.9%), indicated one to two years, 10 more (10.9%) marked three to five years, 4 (4.3%) reported five to ten years, and 10 (10.9%) indicated they had more than ten years of experience as a counselor outside the school setting (see Figure 4).

How many years experience do you have as a counselor outside the school setting?

- ▣ Under 1
- ■ 1 - 2
- ❑ 3 - 5
- ❑ 5 - 10
- ■ More than 10
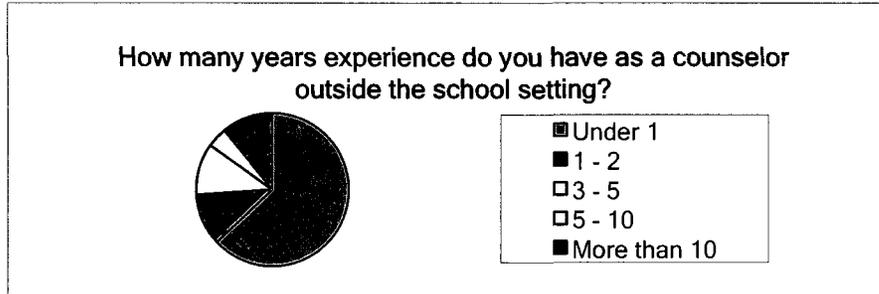
Figure 4: Years of experience as a counselor outside the school setting.

There was more diversity in the years of experience as a school counselor: 9 participants (9.9%) reported under one year of experience, 12 (13.2%) indicated one to two years, 16 (17.6%) marked three to five years, 18 (19.8%) reported five to ten years, and 36 participants (39.6%) indicated they had more than ten years of experience as a school counselor (see Figure 5).

How many years experience do you have as a school counselor?

- ▣ Under 1
- ■ 1 - 2
- ❑ 3 - 5
- ❑ 5 - 10
- ■ More than 10
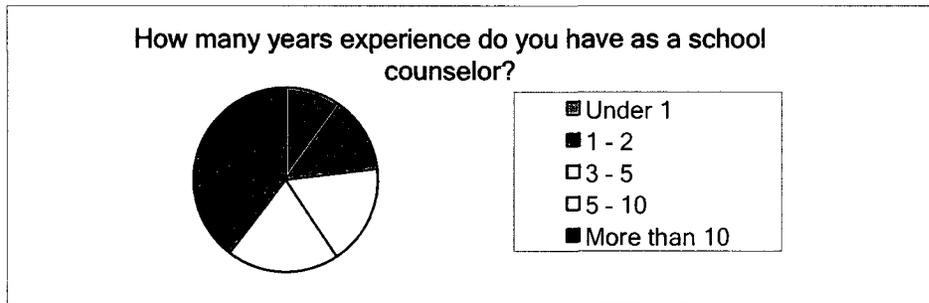
Figure 5: Years of experience as a school counselor.

Similar results were found when looking at specific experience as a counselor in rural Alaska: 10 participants (10.8%) reported under one year of experience, 19 (20.4%) indicated one to two years, 17 (18.3%) marked three to five years, 20 (21.5%) reported five to ten years, and 27 participants (29%) indicated they had more than ten years of experience as a school counselor in rural Alaska (see Figure 6).
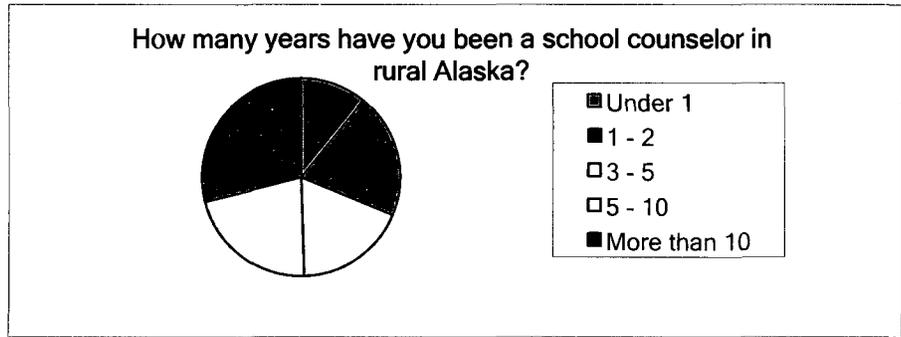
Figure 6: Years of experience as a school counselor in rural Alaska.

Of the 41 districts that were sent questionnaires, 34 were represented in the final results. Seventeen districts only had 1 participant, six districts had 2, four districts had 3, two districts had 4, two districts had 5, one district had 6, one district had 9, and the largest rural district had 17 respondents. The majority of the participants were certified school counselors (73.1%), but six (6.5%) were provisionally certified counselors, and ten held a joint appointment (10.7%) with positions such as test coordinator, teacher, administrator, social worker, or grant funded positions. Nine participants marked the other category and indicated advisor, social worker, administrator, or teacher. These participants were still included in the data analysis as their school sites considered them as being in the role of the school counselor.

Years in current role. Participants indicated a wide spread regarding the time they had been employed in their current position, with the largest amount (31.2%) having been in their position for one to two years, and an additional 19.4% for less than a year. Fifteen participants (16.1%) reported three to five years, 17 (18.3%) marked five to ten years, and 14 (15.1%) had been in their position for more than ten years (see Figure 7).
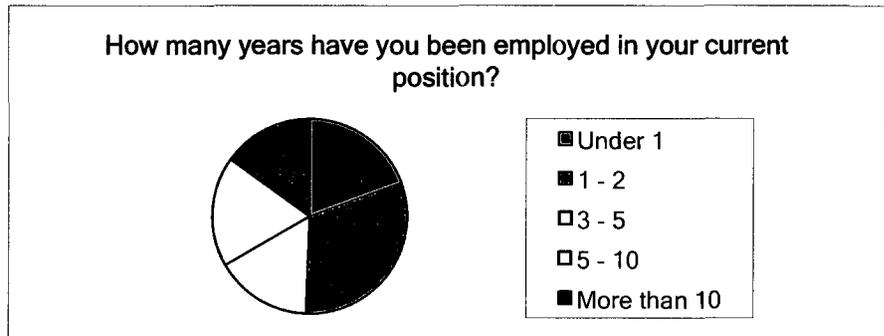
Figure 7: Years of experience in current position.

School level. Participants were assigned to a variety of school levels, and of the 93 respondents 20 marked more than one category (19 marked two categories and one marked four which is why there were 114 responses). Categories included elementary, middle/junior high, K-8, K-12, and other. The majority of participants (37; 39.8%) indicated they were assigned to a K-12 level school or schools. Three participants (3.2%) reported working with K-8 schools, 33 indicated working at the high school level, 24 (25.8%) marked the middle/junior high level, and 12 (12.9%) worked at the elementary level (see Figure 8). Five participants marked other: two specified being assigned to 5-12 level schools, one indicated Preschool to 12th grade, one said they have worked at all levels, and one wrote in itinerant. Of those who marked more than one category, the majority chose both middle/junior high and high school, which had not been a single category, but others marked combinations such as elementary and K-8 and one person marked all categories.
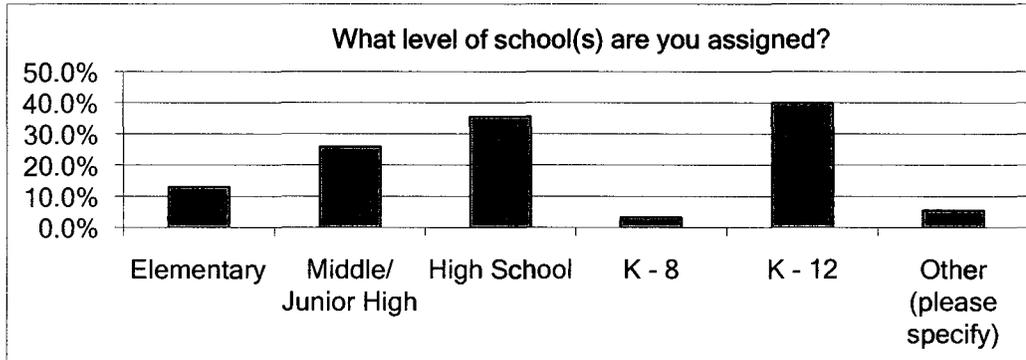
Figure 8: Level of school(s) to which the counselor is assigned.

Number of schools and counselors. The majority of participants (53; 57%) indicated they worked in only one school. Of those working in more than one school, 14 (15.1%) reported working in two schools, 8 (8.6%) indicated they work in three schools, 4 (4.3%) work in four schools, and 15 (15.1%) participants marked the category of other. The other category ranged from working in six schools to working in 14: 2 participants indicated six schools, 2 stated seven, 4 marked eight, 1 stated twelve schools, and 4 participants indicated they worked with 14 different schools.

A high percentage (69.6%) of respondents (64) indicated they are the only counselor that works in their school. Seventeen (18.5%) reported that two counselors worked in the school (including themselves), six (6.5%) indicated there were three counselors, and two reported having four counselors in their site. Twelve participants marked the category of other (although nine of these also marked another category). Several stated that other counselors worked in their schools that were not school counselors, but rather mental health workers on contract from community agencies. Other people mentioned their career counselor, counseling secretary, aides, advisors, or other counselors that are in the district. One mentioned that although there were two counselors at the time, the grant funding one of the counselors was to end at the close of the school year. One, who had indicated they were an itinerant counselor, stated they were unclear of the number of other counselors, and one participant did not answer this question.

Participant training. In regards to continuing education, 61 participants (67.8%) indicated that they had received training in either Ethics or Cross-cultural competencies. Of those who participated, 49 (54.4%) received training in Cross-cultural competencies, whereas 43 (47.8%) received Ethics training. Thirty-one counselors marked both categories, which indicated that 12 participants only participated in Ethics training and 18 participated only in Cross-cultural competencies training. Twenty-nine participants (32.2%) had not participated in these types of trainings in the past three years, and 3 participants did not respond to this question (see Figure 9).
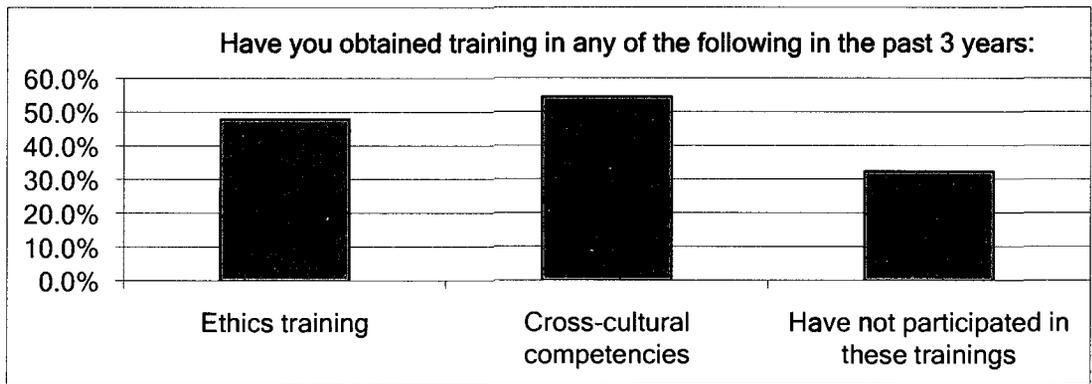
Figure 9: Participation in training during the last three years.

Closed-ended survey questions summary. In summary, 93 school counselors representing 34 rural Alaska school districts responded to the survey. Fifty-four (58%) were female, the majority (93.5%) were Caucasian, and their average age was 46. Half of the participants grew up in a rural setting, although only 15.1% grew up in a rural setting in the state of Alaska. The majority of participants were legally married (69.2%), and 56.5% had no children living with them. Seventy-three percent were certified school counselors, but the largest number of participants (31.2%) had only been in their position for one to two years. Additionally, the majority (63%) had little counseling experience outside the school setting, but there was a wide spread of experience as a school counselor with 39.6% having more than 10 years of experience, and 29% having ten or more years in rural Alaska. The highest percentage of participants (39.8%) worked in K-12 schools, although 57% indicated they only worked in one site, and 69.6% were the only counselor in their setting. Finally, 61 counselors had recently participated in training regarding Ethics or Cross-cultural competencies.

Survey Results – Open-ended Questions

The third section of the questionnaire looked at rural school counselor perceptions. This included one question (number 20) in a multiple choice type format with an open-ended follow-up option, and three questions, numbers 21 to 24, that were entirely in the open-ended format. The questions focused first on the challenges perceived by the counselors, then on the resources that were currently used to help manage the challenges experienced. Next, participants were asked to describe any resources they believed might further assist them in dealing with the challenges, and finally the last question asked participants to share anything else they thought would be useful for other counselors to hear in regards to working as a school counselor in rural Alaska.

Challenges. Question 20 asked participants to mark any challenges they experienced as a school counselor in rural Alaska. Seventeen possible options were listed including: confidentiality issues, crisis situations, cultural issues, lack of privacy or anonymity, lack of training, education or professional development opportunities, lack of role clarity, large caseload, limited professional resources, limited community resources,

maintaining boundaries, multiple roles, personal isolation, physical isolation, professional isolation, rural culture issues, scope of practice, and stress and/or burnout.

Results found that each response category was reported to be a challenge by a portion of the participants (see Table 1). The challenge that was most commonly reported was crisis situations, followed by multiple roles, lack of role clarity, confidentiality issues, limited community resources, limited professional resources, rural culture issues, and cultural issues. Less than half of the respondents marked the remaining choices.

Table 1: Challenges experienced working as a school counselor in rural Alaska.

Challenges	Response Percent	Response Count
Confidentiality issues	57.0%	53
Crisis situations (i.e., suicide or child abuse and neglect)	76.3%	71
Cultural issues (i.e., related to racial or cultural differences)	50.5%	47
Lack of privacy or anonymity	47.3%	44
Lack of training, education, or professional development opportunities	33.3%	31
Lack of role clarity (i.e., role of school counselor is misunderstood)	65.6%	61
Large caseload	43.0%	40
Limited professional resources (i.e., assessment materials, colleagues, referrals, specialists, translators, work space)	54.8%	51
Limited community resources (i.e., funding, housing, job or career development opportunities, transportation)	57.0%	53
Maintaining boundaries (i.e., dual or multiple relationships)	36.6%	34
Multiple roles (i.e., expected to perform a wide variety of roles - be a generalist)	68.8%	64
Personal isolation (i.e., lack of social activity, lack of personal support system)	24.7%	23
Physical isolation (i.e., geographic conditions such as distance, terrain, or weather)	29.0%	27
Professional isolation (i.e., limited contact with colleagues; lack of consultation, supervision, or professional development opportunities)	44.1%	41
Rural culture issues (i.e., poverty, lack of trust, value conflicts, stigma of counseling, unstable work force)	51.6%	48
Scope of practice (i.e., expected to attend to matters outside your competency or training)	43.0%	40
Stress and/or burnout	45.2%	42
N =		93

This question also included an open-ended response area for participants to expand on any of the challenges they marked, or to include any other challenges that were not found in the list. Thirty-seven participants chose to respond to the follow-up question; no one included any additional challenges, but rather they expanded on the challenges listed and provided specific information or examples of those challenges. The most commonly discussed challenges included lack of community resources, lack of role clarity, multiple roles, rural culture and large caseloads (see Table 2). Each of these challenges will be looked at more closely in this section.

Table 2: Challenges expanded upon by survey participants.

Challenges Expanded Upon	Response Percent	Response Count
Confidentiality issues	.08%	3
Crisis situations	.11%	4
Cultural issues	.03%	1
Lack of training, education, or professional development opportunities	.05%	2
Lack of role clarity	27.0%	10
Large caseload	16.2%	6
Limited professional resources	13.5%	5
Limited community resources	27.0%	10
Maintaining boundaries	.05%	2
Multiple roles	24.3%	9
Professional isolation	.05%	2
Rural culture issues	24.3%	9
Scope of practice	.03%	1
Stress and/or burnout	13.5%	5
N =		37

Lack of role clarity. In regards to lack of role clarity, participants looked at this in relation to their administrators, their colleagues, and their community members. For example, one participant stated, "Frequent turnover of administration leads to changing expectations for the counselor each time." A second participant went in to more depth stating,

> The most difficult aspect of this year has been the lack of role clarity. This
> position is fairly new at this school; parents and students were slow to accept both

me and the job that I do. The teachers were very receptive to what I brought to the school this year, but the principal had no interest in working with me on issues of discipline and school climate. Part of this was due to communication breakdowns, and partly due to the fact that he had never worked with a school counselor before so his expectations were very different from what my job actually was.

Multiple roles. Similar statements were found when looking at the issue of multiple roles. One participant stated, "One is expected to perform many roles. I am principal 40 days per year while the principal is traveling or sick." Another stated, you "must be ready to fill roles if/when people leave during the year; service more students, travel to more sites." Finally, several participants discussed the impact that multiple roles had on their ability to be a counselor. One counselor stated, the "School counselor role has been gradually diminished due to expectations and demands from other roles."

Roles were not just looked at in regards to the school setting, but also what activities were expected in the community as well. One participant stated, "As a school counselor, I am expected to represent the school on numerous committees. I feel I race from meeting to meeting and have to juggle multiple calendars, tasks, and responsibilities." Furthermore, one participant discussed how some of these other roles and duties were outside their scope of practice.

Limited community resources. Participants mentioned several different aspects in regards to limited community resources. Some participants focused on daily issues regarding lack of water, electricity, cell phone service, and housing; others focused on the lack of medical and dental services; and some focused on community services such as mental health resources, foster homes, or the police force. One response focused on the lack of community response stating, "outside agency support for students and families is lacking."

Limited professional resources. Some of these issues were also mentioned in relation to the lack of professional resources. For example, one participant stated, there are "limited professional resources: colleagues, referrals, specialists, work space." It was also mentioned that the lack of face-to-face contact could lead to feelings of professional

isolation. Additionally, lack of training opportunities was mentioned as a professional issue. One participant stated, "Training in various skill sets for counselors is terrible in Alaska. I always have to go outside. Most trainings are in Anchorage which is still too far to go for me."

Rural culture issues. Participant statements regarding rural culture issues focused on issues in the community as a whole. Participants mentioned poverty, an unstable work force, the apparent stigma of counseling, the lack of trust and value conflicts, and the apparent apathy of students/parents in regards to education. One counselor reported, "I've found itinerant counseling and village life quite supportive (from staff and Natives). It is in the cities and towns I have found territory issues, competition and political moves so 'insiders' maintain control and their jobs." Another participant provided a different view stating, "Building trust is a vital part of counseling. So many educators come and go in the bush it takes time to build trust."

Large caseloads. The issue of large caseloads was specifically expanded upon by six participants, although this was not generally looked on in relation to the large number of students, but rather the large number of schools. One participant mentioned that the "caseload is so huge it is difficult to fully address all client needs". These issues were addressed by another participant who stated, "when I was traveling as a counselor to 8 villages (by plane), I found I could not always be there when they needed me."

Stress and/or burnout. Large caseloads were also discussed in relation to stress and/or burnout. One participant stated, "I get weary of traveling every week; I serve seven small rural villages, and do not have enough time to develop relationships with the students, or to be an integral part of the structure of each school." Another participant voiced a similar idea stating, "You better love your role or you can become fatigued and overwhelmed with the endless lows and responsibilities."

Confidentiality and maintaining boundaries. The ethical challenges of confidentiality and maintaining boundaries were expanded upon by four different participants. One participant discussed boundaries in relation to professional and personal responsibilities with colleagues stating, "new staff adjusting to 'culture shock'

goes from social 'chit-chat' to pseudo counseling." Another summed up both issues by stating,

> Living in a rural community presents many difficulties in confidentiality because it seems everyone knows everyone else's business. Multiple relationships are also very difficult. There are many roles you have as a community member and school employee that cross over.

Crisis situations. In regards to crisis situations, three participants stated that their issues involved the use of drugs and alcohol in the families and the community as a whole. One stated that, "Suicide ideations is a major challenge along with drug and alcohol issues." The final crisis situation discussed was the issue of child abuse and neglect. One counselor stated, "My hardest challenge has been watching the cycle of child abuse, reporting and the child not having much help, lack of foster homes, continued chances for parents; the child seems to learn to stop talking about the abuse."

Summary of challenges. In summary, although all options provided were reported to be challenges when working as a school counselor in rural Alaska, some challenges were sited much more frequently. Crisis situations were most commonly sited, along with multiple roles, lack of role clarity, confidentiality issues, limited community resources, limited professional resources, rural culture issues, and cultural issues. Only 37 respondents provided follow-up information to expand on the challenges. Although almost all options were touched upon, participants focused on the topics of limited community resources, lack of role clarity, multiple roles, rural culture, large caseloads, limited professional resources, and stress and/or burnout.

Resources currently used. Question number 21 asked the counselors to discuss any resources they use now to help them manage the challenges they experience in their roles as schools counselors. Seventy-nine participants responded to this question. Responses were organized in to seven main categories (listed in order of response rate from highest to lowest): school resources, personal resources, community resources, technology resources, professional organizations and trainings, cultural resources, and

state or national resources (see Table 3). Each of these categories will be discussed in more detail.

Table 3: Resources currently used to help manage the challenges.

Resources Currently Utilized	Response Percent	Response Count
School resources	58.2%	46
Personal resources	32.9%	26
Community resources	30.3%	24
Technology resources	25.3%	20
Professional organizations & trainings	17.7%	14
Cultural resources	12.6%	10
State/national resources	7.5%	6
N =		79

School resources. The majority of respondents (46 of the 79) sited school resources as the most common resource utilized. Within this category, 30 participants stated that other counselors in the district or at other schools were their primary resource. Other school personnel mentioned as resources included teachers, principals and administrators, and other school staff such as the nurse, the Title VII specialist, or the intervention team. For example, one counselor stated, "I work closely with the principals in my school and get advise from them on situations. I have also talked with other counselors around the state and asked their advice."

Other people that were thought of as resources in the school included both students and parents. Students were utilized for cross-age tutoring, peer mediation, groups, and classroom lessons. Parents were discussed in a more general fashion for communication purposes. Finally, other resources found in the school setting included district forms (i.e., for release of confidentiality), as well as sources for curriculum development including texts, handbooks, journals, catalogs, and specific program manuals. One counselor summarized it by stating, "I have numerous guides, catalogs, and web resources for the myriad of situations for which I must remain up to date."

Personal resources. Personal resources were cited as the next most resource used by school counselors. These fell in to a broad array of categories including support systems such as friends, family members, and colleagues. One participant stated, they "frequently call trusted, lifelong friends and colleagues and loves ones for wisdom, laughter, connection...." Another cited, "Close relationships with family and friends" as the main resource that enabled them to manage the challenges they experienced.

Other responses focused on self-care activities such as exercise, recreation, or personal counseling. For example, one response stated, "Exercise, friendships, and outdoor activities are important to maintain self-care." Some participants discussed that they were themselves a resources and needed to draw upon themselves for humor, flexibility, patience and experience. Additionally, they needed to use personal organization and time management skills to help themselves be prepared. Finally, some participants focused on their religion as a personal resource that was utilized.

Community resources. Another category focused on community resources to help counselors manage the challenges. These responses focused on utilizing other community organizations such as the police, office of children's services, shelters, probation officers, advocates, mental health agencies, and medical services, as well specific community counselors. For example, one counselor mentioned working with other offices such as the "police, OCS, Youth Advocates, the Shelter, Juvenile Probation, etc.". Another counselor discussed using the counselors from the community and the Native clinic to "help with individual and group counseling in the schools." Additionally, a few participants mentioned utilizing supervision and/or professional consultation outside the school setting.

Technology. Technological resources were mentioned by several counselors. This included using the Internet for research, utilizing the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) website, using the Alaska Career Information System (AKCIS), using email and videoconference options such as Skype, and using the telephone. One counselor summed up their use of technology by stating,

Computers make my job possible. I rely upon the Internet constantly. I also use our phones to call universities, schools, and programs of interest. I use speakerphone to help students begin conversations and encourage students to make future calls on their own as needed.

Professional organizations and trainings. The next resource category involved utilizing professional organizations and trainings. Most of these responses centered around the resources made available from the Alaska School Counseling Association (AkSCA), the American School Counseling Association (ASCA), and the American Counseling Association (ACA). Additionally, several respondents specifically mentioned the AkSCA professional development conference (PDC) as a resource they utilize to help them manage challenges. One participant mentioned the PDC as a place that they were able to make "connections for support." Finally, other participants mentioned taking classes or attending other trainings and professional development opportunities in general.

Cultural resources. In regards to cultural resources, participants specifically cited getting to know the community leaders to utilize their knowledge and advice, to call on the local Elders, and to develop good relationships with the local tribal associations. One participant stated, "I have made it a habit to meet personally with all the professionals and community members that have an interest in helping individual students."

State and national resources. Finally, participants also utilized resources that were on the state and national level. Aside from the state and national professional organization mentioned previously, participants discussed utilizing the state alternative schools and treatment centers, along with remaining in contact with graduate school colleagues and professors from local and out-of-state schools.

Summary of resources used. In summary, 79 participants responded to the question asking about the resources they currently use to help manage the challenges they experience as a school counselor in rural Alaska. The majority of responses focused on school resources such as other counselors and school personnel, students, parents, and district materials. Personal resources were the next most cited resource. This included

support systems such as friends and family, self-care activities, religion, and personal characteristics and skill sets. Community resources included community counselors, community organizations, and professional supervision or consultation. Technology, such as the Internet, professional organization websites, videoconferencing options, and the telephone were all listed as resources currently utilized. Becoming a member of professional organizations, attending conferences, and participating in trainings and/or professional development opportunities to gain resources was also recommended. Cultural resources included getting to know the general community, but specifically utilizing the local elders and tribal organizations. Finally, state and national resources included alternative schools, treatment programs, and post-secondary school professionals. The next section will focus on those resources that counselors would like to have in addition to those already being utilized.

Additional resources desired. Question number 22 asked participants to describe any resources, if available, that might be able to help them deal with their challenges even more. Fifty-eight counselors answered this question and the responses fell in to five main categories: professional organizations and trainings, school resources, community resources, state or national resources, and cultural resources (see Table 4).

Table 4: Resources that would help counselors deal with challenges even more.

Resources Wanted	Response Percent	Response Count
Professional organizations & trainings	34.5%	20
School resources	34.5%	20
Community resources	31%	18
State/national resources	20.1%	12
Cultural resources	3.4%	2
N =		58

Professional organizations and trainings. Access to professional organizations and trainings was the most commonly sited resource that counselors stated would help them deal with the challenges of being a school counselor in rural Alaska. Most participants indicated that they wanted more professional development options that were

both relevant and accessible, although several mentioned specific training topics such as in crisis situations, how to work with at-risk teens, computer applications, or Alaska Native cultures. For example, one participant mentioned the need for more technology training and technological support. He specifically stated, "more training on Filemaker Pro would be good since so much of my effectiveness is tied to my ability to organize, sort and file data. I have to be able to recreate systems annually and databases can help with that."

Five participants specifically mentioned the ability to attend the AkSCA professional development conference, and two others sought to take on-line classes. In a similar vein, one participant thought it would be helpful to have "closer ties to university training". Although most participants looked at training in regards to themselves, one counselor reported the need for "professional development for administrators and staff to clarify the role of a school counselor."

School resources. There were a variety of resources sought that were within the school setting. People were the most wished for resources – this included other school counselors, a vocational or career person, and trained administrators. Additionally, district wide and/or regional counselor meetings were discussed as a way to connect with other counselors.

Curriculum materials, books, dvds specific to local issues (i.e., tobacco, chewing, safety issues), publications, counseling programs, and a resource directory were other materials mentioned that would be helpful in the school. For example, one participant stated that, "an up-to-date community guide listing resources, contacts, services provided, etc. is always great. Unfortunately with turnover these reference books seem to quickly become outdated." Additionally, one counselor mentioned that he would like resource pooling "so that we can share and not have to create everything."

One counselor stated that they would like a school policy that allowed suicide screenings – they specifically stated, "At the high school, a suicide screening is conducted with positive parent consent. There are students that might benefit from the screening, but we often don't get parental consent." Another mentioned the need for

"more options for students who don't fit in to the regular high school setting." Finally, two counselors mentioned the need for money – to buy curriculum or to participate in classes.

Community resources. As the communities were varied in the resources that were already available, community resources desired covered a wide variety of responses. Some participants focused on daily issues such as housing and Internet access at home. Other participants mentioned the desire for more community services such as mental health counselors, quality clinical supervision options, foster homes, safe houses, troopers, OCS services, and inpatient options. One respondent wanted more system support and community involvement. Another focused on the desire for "teen sites – places for teens to talk to other teens about issues in Alaska." Finally, one participant felt other church options would be helpful.

State and national resources. State and/or national resources were the next response category. The resource most commonly mentioned in this category was the need for counselor mentors. One counselor stated, "I would love to see school counselors be mentored like first year teachers. There is an Alaska Mentor Project that mentors administrators and teachers; it would be nice to add counselors to this project." Along the same lines, several counselors requested a statewide counseling network that could include components such as a forum site similar to ASCA Scene, monthly web designed interactions with school counselors, or regional meetings. Two counselors mentioned needing someone at the state level to help advocate for school counselors – "to bring back the position of 'School Counseling Specialist' to the Department of Education in Alaska." Also, three participants wanted state policies "governing the scope of counselor responsibilities." Finally, one counselors stated, "we need to be valued, with an understood role, as an equal educational team member."

Cultural resources. Only two participants mentioned the need for more cultural resources. One counselor mentioned the need for, "more outreach and cultural connection." The other discussed the desire for, "informational trainings on Alaska Native cultures."

Summary of resources desired. In summary, several resources were described that participants believe would further help them deal with the challenges of being a school counselor in rural Alaska. These resources included the ability to attend trainings and be involved in professional organizations, more school resources such as counselors and other school personnel, as well as school materials, community resources such as mental health counselors or troopers, state and national resources such as counselor mentors, and additional cultural resources.

Useful information. The final survey question asked participants to share anything they thought would be helpful for other counselors to hear in regards to working as a school counselor in rural Alaska. Sixty counselors responded and discussed a wide variety of information they felt would be useful for other counselors in rural Alaska. Comments tended to center around six main themes: personal characteristics, connect with others, cultural issues, professional development and training, counselor roles, and know what you are getting in to – be prepared (see Table 5).

Table 5: Useful information for counselors working in rural Alaska.

Useful Information	Response Percent	Response Count
Know what you are getting in to – be prepared	35.0%	21
Personal characteristics	33.3%	20
Connect with others	30.0%	18
Counselor roles	16.7%	10
Professional development & training	11.7%	7
Cultural issues	8.3%	5
N =		60

Personal characteristics. A wide variety of personal characteristics were mentioned as being useful in the rural setting. Although it was mentioned to just be yourself, counselors also recommended people be positive, open-minded, flexible, loving, appreciative of others, and willing to experience rural Alaska. For example, one participant commented, "be open-minded; it is not our place to change anything – only to be supportive." Additionally, counselors discussed the need to be healthy and watchful

for burnout. One counselor cautioned, "make sure to work through personal counseling issues prior to living in rural Alaska to make sure you are healthy and ready to support others to the best of your ability." Another commented,

> Be patient with chaos. You don't know what is in a sponge until you squeeze it. Pressures will come that bring out the best and worst in you. Look to these responses with honesty and grow from them. Share them with a trusted friend. Have at least one person in your life with whom you can be utterly real and transparent.

Two participants mentioned the need to learn to prioritize as all needs cannot be met, but also to "stand up for what is right; be professional and don't lower your standards."

Connect with others. Eighteen participants focused on the need to connect with others, both within the setting, but also to remain connected to others outside the community. For example, several participants mentioned the importance of making connections with the students and the teachers and emphasized the necessity of confidentiality to help build trust. Also, being visible in the community was seen as essential. To illustrate, one counselor commented, "I have gone to as many community events that I felt comfortable attending, and even some that I was not comfortable attending! Being visible and available are important."

The need to make connections through networking and collaborating with others was also emphasized by several counselors. One participant commented, "you don't have to know everything, but knowing you can call, email, or ask for help is what helps you stay sane."

Cultural issues. To aide in the endeavor of making connections, five counselors commented on cultural issues such as the necessity to be knowledgeable of cultural differences. One participant specifically commented on the need to be aware of the differences in nonverbal language. Another counselor commented on the necessity of adjusting the curriculum to meet the student needs; they stated, "most curriculum is not written for rural Alaska needs." In the same vein, another participant commented that, "It is almost impossible, or very overwhelming, to help a majority of the Alaska Native

students be successful with the current education model. The Native students are really struggling in/out of school."

Professional development and training. Having adequate training and attending professional development was commented on by seven of the counselors. Training was generally mentioned in generic terms, but one counselor recommend the Applied Suicide Interventions Skills Training (ASIST), whereas two counselors commented on the need to be well-rounded in other counseling approaches such as social-work interventions and home-visits. In relation to attending the AkSCA professional development conference, one participant commented,

> Rural counseling in Alaska is tough! Keep encouraging them to talk and get together at the counselors conference if at all possible. I think there should be a track at the conference for rural counselors along with more opportunities for them to meet together.

Counselor roles. The necessity to be knowledgeable of the counselor role was discussed by ten participants. One counselor commented, "be prepared to wear many hats, advocate for yourself and teach teachers and administration what your job roles are as counselor. Don't let yourself be put in to the role of disciplinarian (role conflict)." Some counselors further commented on the need to discuss the counselor role with principals or administration so that other duties will not get in the way of your counseling role. For example, one person stated,

> Get with your school administration and find out exactly what their priorities are for your job. It's too easy as a school counselor to get bogged down doing things not relevant to the counseling program. Also, insist on not doing things that will hurt your program such as discipline, secretarial duties, and subbing.

Another commented, "Many of the obstacles I've faced have resulted from administrators ignorance of a counselor's role and function. Principals should receive this training as a part of their program."

Although most of the comments in this section centered on the need to make sure others understand your role, one participant comment more specifically on making sure

the counselor themselves is aware of their primary role. The participant stated, "Be mindful of your role. Know what you can and can't do. Your field of vision can easily be consumed by what you think is needed." All of these comments emphasize that although you will be asked to cover multiple roles in rural settings, try to remain true to the specific counseling role.

Know what you are getting in to. The final, and most commonly reported, category of comments focused on the need to be prepared and know what you are getting in to. According to the responses, school counselors coming to rural Alaska should know that there is a lack of resources, that there are high needs that may appear overwhelming, and that longevity is important to gain the trust of the Native population. In light of that, one participant said to "expect great things – work hard to make it happen, but don't feel like a failure when progress is interminably slow."

Further in regards to the school, counselors should know that there is a high turnover rate, that they may not have adequate administration, that "classroom instruction is difficult, especially when crises come up each day", and that counselors tend not to be as valued by administrators as teachers are.

Two counselors specifically commented on issues of being an itinerant school counselor. One counselor commented on issues of travel as an itinerant: "As an itinerant, always travel with duct tape. Know that sleeping arrangement are iffy; traveling with counseling materials and records are a challenge – use strong luggage and brief cases." The other stated, "even as a high school itinerant counselor for years, I always had activities for K-8 and stayed at least two full days in a village."

Additionally, counselors reported that people should be aware of the climate issues and that fact that they may feel isolated. For example, one participant commented that one should "be prepared to live in small communities with strong climate changes." Also, another respondent reported that just "being a young, single woman in a remote village is extremely challenging." Finally, several participants responded that it is a rewarding experience. One counselor stated, "I can think of no more gratifying, interesting, and

challenging role than that of a rural school counselor. It's a unique profession whose rewards are endless."

Summary of useful information. In summary, the additional information shared by participants focused on the need to maintain positive personal characteristics, make and keep connections with others both personally and professionally, and be knowledgeable of the cultural characteristics of your community and it's people. Additionally, it was recommended that counselors attend professional development and training in a broad area of topics, and to be mindful of the counselor role. Foremost, counselors commented on the need for other counselors to come prepared and know what they are getting in to if they agree to be a counselor in rural Alaska. Although many of these comments focused on challenges, several mentioned that working as a school counselor in rural Alaska is a very rewarding experience.

Survey Results – Relationships Among Variables

Discrete survey question responses were cross-tabulated to compare the results of a particular question to other questions in the survey. Although all variables were analyzed, only those that appeared to have a relationship are discussed in this section. For this research, a relationship was determined if variables showed at least a 10% difference, or if a pattern was clearly shown. The variables of note include gender, age, type of setting the counselor grew up in (now labeled setting), partnership status, years as a school counselor in rural Alaska (now labeled experience), training in ethics or cross-cultural competencies (now labeled training), and challenges experienced. Each of the relationships will be discussed further in this section.

Gender. There appeared to be a relationship between gender and age. Age was initially a fill-in-the-box response, but to enable comparison among variables, categories were compiled. The categories included 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, and 60-69. Seven participants did not answer the question regarding age, and therefore in looking at these variables 34 participants were male and 52 were female. Overall, it appeared that female counselors were younger than their male counterparts (see Table 6).

Table 6: Comparison of gender and age of school counselors in rural Alaska.

Age		Male	Female
20-29		8.8%	19.2%
30-39		8.8%	25.0%
40-49		20.6%	21.2%
50-59		44.1%	23.1%
60-69		17.6%	11.5%
	N =	34	52

A relationship also was found in regards to gender and years of experience. Similar to the results discussed above, females appeared to have less experience than males. Although not consistent, this relationship was strongest in the extreme categories – under 1 year of experience and more than 10 years of experience (see Table 7).

Table 7: Comparison of gender and years of experience as a school counselor in rural Alaska.

Years of Experience		Male	Female
Under 1		5.1%	14.8%
1 to 2		23.1%	18.5%
3 to 5		10.3%	24.1%
5 to 10		25.6%	18.5%
More than 10		35.9%	24.1%
	N =	39	54

Similar numbers were found in regards to overall experience as a school counselor, as well as years of experience outside the school setting. Although this pattern did not appear in relation to the number of years in the counselor's current position.

The third area in which gender seemed to make a difference was in regards to the types of challenges experienced. Only a few challenges appeared to show any differences depending on gender, but the challenge of stress and/or burnout was noted as being experienced more often by female than male counselors by a margin of 29.2%.

Additionally, confidentiality issues appeared to be more of a concern for females than males as this showed a 23.1% difference (see Table 8).

Table 8: Comparison of gender and challenges experienced.

Challenges		Males	Females
Confidentiality issues		43.6%	66.7%
Lack of privacy or anonymity		41.0%	51.9%
Limited professional resources		61.5%	50.0%
Rural culture issues		59.0%	46.3%
Stress and/or burnout		28.2%	57.4%
	N =	39	54

Age. Counselors age 20 to 29 were more likely to be single or cohabitating in a domestic relationship than older counselors (see Table 9). Also, as would be expected, the older participants had more years of experience as a school counselor than younger participants, although it did not matter in regards to counseling experience outside the school setting, as few counselors had much experience in this realm. Additionally, older counselors had been in their current positions longer than younger counselors.

Table 9: Comparison of age and partnership status.

Partnership Status	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69
Single	53.8%	12.5%	27.8%	15.4%	16.7%
Legally married	30.8%	81.3%	72.2%	80.8%	83.3%
Cohabitating in a domestic partnership	15.4%	6.3%	0.0%	3.8%	0.0%
N =	13	16	18	26	12

No clear and consistent relationships were apparent in relation to age and challenges experienced, aside from in the area of multiple roles (i.e., expected to perform a wide variety of roles – be a generalist). The highest age category (60-69) saw this as much less of a challenge (33.3%) than the younger age categories. This was marked as a challenge by 69.2% of the 20-29 year olds, 81.3% by 30-39 year olds, 72.2% by 40-49 year olds, and 74.1% by 50-59 year olds. One could speculate that either the older counselors were

used to performing multiple duties and therefore no longer saw this as a challenge, or that they were not asked to perform as many different types of roles.

Experience. Experience will be reviewed in relation to years of experience as a school counselor in rural Alaska as there were virtually no real differences regarding this and years of experience as a school counselor in general. As few counselors had experience as a counselor outside the school setting, this factor did not add any additional information.

In addition to a relationship with gender and age, participation in training also seemed to be impacted by the number of years of experience as a school counselor in rural Alaska. It appeared that those with less years of experience were more likely to have recently received Ethics training, although this relationship was not as marked for receiving Cross-cultural training. This finding may be due to the fact that recent graduates and those new to the profession most likely completed Ethics training for their degree, whereas all professionals in the state are required to receive cross-cultural training to obtain a school counseling certification. Additionally, those with more than ten years of experience were least likely to participate in either of these types of trainings within the last three years (see Table 10).

Table 10: Comparison of years of experience as a school counselor in rural Alaska and participation in training within the last three years.

Training	Under 1	1 to 2	3 to 5	5 to 10	More than 10
Ethics training	70.0%	55.6%	47.1%	40.0%	40.0%
Cross-cultural competencies	60.0%	72.2%	67.4%	55.0%	32.0%
Have not participated	30.0%	16.7%	29.4%	30.0%	48.0%
N =	10	18	17	20	25

Although almost all challenges had some variance in relation to years of experience as a school counselor in rural Alaska, no clear patterns were found (see Table 11). Of note was that 90% of the school counselors with less than 1 year of experience saw the issue of having to perform multiple roles as a challenge, whereas only 10% saw personal isolation as a challenge. Also, cultural issues appeared to be less of a challenge for those

with less than two years of experience than for those with more experience. Additionally, only 18.5% of those with more than 10 years of experience marked maintaining boundaries as a challenge, whereas those with less experience maintained this as a challenge 40-50% of the time. Finally, stress and/or burnout was marked most often by those with more than 10 years of experience as a school counselor in rural Alaska (55.6%).

Table 11: Comparison of years of experience as a school counselor in rural Alaska and challenges experienced.

Challenges	Under 1	1 to 2	3 to 5	5 to 10	More than 10
Confidentiality issues	50.0%	31.6%	82.4%	70.0%	51.9%
Crisis situations	60.0%	73.7%	82.4%	75.0%	81.5%
Cultural issues	40.0%	36.8%	58.8%	60.0%	51.9%
Lack of privacy or anonymity	30.0%	42.1%	41.2%	60.0%	51.9%
Lack of training, education, or professional development opportunities	40.0%	21.1%	23.5%	55.0%	29.6%
Lack of role clarity	60.0%	78.9%	64.7%	70.0%	55.6%
Large caseload	30.0%	26.3%	29.4%	70.0%	48.1%
Limited professional resources	30.0%	63.2%	52.9%	65.0%	51.9%
Limited community resources	70.0%	52.6%	47.1%	50.0%	66.7%
Maintaining boundaries	40.0%	42.1%	41.2%	50.0%	18.5%
Multiple roles	90.0%	73.7%	52.9%	65.0%	70.4%
Personal isolation	10.0%	36.8%	41.2%	60.0%	37.0%
Physical isolation	20.0%	36.8%	35.3%	30.0%	22.2%
Professional isolation	50.0%	36.8%	41.2%	60.0%	37.0%
Rural culture issues	50.0%	52.6%	70.6%	40.0%	48.1%
Scope of practice	30.0%	36.8%	52.9%	50.0%	40.7%
Stress and/or burnout	30.0%	42.1%	47.1%	40.0%	55.6%
N =	10	19	17	20	27

Setting. The type of setting in which a counselor grew up was viewed in terms of living in a rural versus a non-setting outside the state of Alaska versus within Alaska – rural was defined as a location with a population less than 5,000, or within the state of Alaska as anywhere aside from Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, or Wasilla. Results need to be viewed tentatively due to the few numbers of participants that actually grew up within the state of Alaska. Of those counselors completing the survey, 42 indicated

growing up in a non-rural area outside of Alaska, and 34 in a rural area outside of Alaska. Only 6 indicated growing up in a non-rural area of Alaska, and 14 grew up in a rural area of Alaska.

This variable did seem to impact the level of education as well as the time and type of position they were in currently. Of those who grew up in a rural area in the state of Alaska, 28.6% had received a bachelor's degree and 64.3% had received a Masters degree (as opposed to 9.7% and 86% of all the counselors). Furthermore, 28.6% of rural counselors that grew up within the state had only been in their current position for less than a year (versus 10.8% of all the counselors), and only 64.3% were in the position of a certified counselor (as opposed to 81.7% overall). Fourteen percent of these counselors held a joint appointment and 7.1% were provisionally certified. Perhaps due to the recent expansion of the university counseling masters program, rural residents are working towards their degree and are therefore starting to be employed in counseling positions.

Further relationships were found in regards to the types of challenges most frequently reported (see Table 12). Again, crisis situations were seen as a challenge by all school counselors, but were seen as less of a challenge to those growing up in a rural area within the state of Alaska. Perhaps those counselors growing up in the area were already accustomed to the situations and therefore saw dealing with them as less of a challenge.

Additionally, those counselors growing up in rural setting were less likely to mark lack of role clarity as a challenge than those growing up in a non-rural setting. As was mentioned previously, specialization is seen more often in non-rural settings, and therefore one's role may be more clearly defined in that setting, and thus the change to a rural setting with a less clearly defined role may be seen as a challenge by some.

Maintaining boundaries was seen as a challenge more by those who grew up within the state of Alaska than those who grew up outside the state. It can be speculated that those growing up in Alaska would have more personal connections with people within the state, which could impact their ability to establish firm counseling boundaries.

Table 12: Comparison of type of setting in which the counselor grew up and challenges experienced.

Challenges	Non-rural setting outside the state	Rural setting outside the state	Non-rural setting within the state	Rural setting within the state
Crisis situations	76.2%	79.4%	100.0%	57.1%
Lack of role clarity	71.4%	58.8%	100.0%	50.0%
Maintaining boundaries	40.5%	20.6%	83.3%	50.0%
Personal isolation	31.0%	17.6%	66.7%	7.1%
Physical isolation	33.3%	23.5%	66.7%	14.3%
Professional isolation	47.6%	47.1%	83.3%	21.4%
Scope of practice	50.0%	41.2%	66.7%	28.6%
Stress and/or burnout	59.5%	38.2%	50.0%	21.4%
N =	42	34	6	14

Relationships between the type of setting and the challenge of isolation were also found. Counselor who grew up in a rural setting in Alaska were least likely to mark personal isolation as a challenge (only 7.1% saw this as a challenge). Additionally, counselors who grew up in a rural setting marked this as a challenge less frequently than those who grew up in a rural setting. Similar results were found in terms of physical isolation. As discussed previously, possibly those growing up in a rural setting in Alaska may already have personal supports in place there, and those growing up in a rural setting in general may be accustomed to the types of activities and supports available in these types of communities.

In regards to professional isolation, again those who grew up in a rural setting in Alaska were least likely to mark this as a challenge (21.4%), but those growing up in a non-rural setting in Alaska were most likely to mark this is a challenge (83.3%). This same result was found in relation to the challenge regarding scope of practice (i.e., expected to attend to matters outside your competency or training) – although it must be stated again that there were few counselor within this category, so results can only be seen as tentative. Perhaps those growing up in a non-rural area of Alaska have not had enough exposure to rural areas within the state and therefore may have believed it would not have been as different as the settings in which they grew up.

Finally, those growing up in a rural setting marked stress and/or burnout to a less degree than those who grew up in a non-rural setting. This was particularly true for those who grew up in rural Alaska, as only 21.4% of these individuals marked this as a challenge as compared to 45.2% overall. Furthermore, those individuals that grew up in a non-rural area outside the state marked this challenge most frequently (59.5%). Again, possibly those who grew up in a rural setting are more familiar with the issues inherent in these communities and therefore do not see them as a challenge, or are more adept at being able to handle their stress in these types of settings.

Partnership status. In addition to the relationship between age and partnership status discussed above, there were some notable differences regarding challenges experienced by single versus legally married counselors (as the variable of cohabitating in a domestic partnership only had 6 participants, and no one marked having a same-sex life partner, those variables were not included in this section). The main relationships with partnership status involved challenges in relation to isolation, resources, maintaining boundaries, rural culture issues, and crisis situations (see Table 13). Challenges in all of these categories were marked as experienced at least 10% more by single counselors than married ones.

Table 13: Comparison of partnership status and challenges experienced.

Challenges	Single	Legally Married
Crisis situations	86.4%	71.4%
Limited professional resources	63.6%	49.2%
Limited community resources	72.7%	50.8%
Maintaining boundaries	45.5%	33.3%
Personal isolation	45.5%	15.9%
Physical isolation	54.5%	19.0%
Professional isolation	63.6%	39.7%
Rural culture issues	68.2%	46.0%
N =	22	63

The most striking differences were seen in the isolation variables. Physical isolation showed a 35% difference, personal isolation a 29.6% difference, and professional isolation a 23.9% difference. It appears that having a marriage partner alleviated the

isolation challenges. Furthermore, although married counselors did report the issue of limited professional resources and limited community resources as challenges (49.2% and 50.8% respectively), they did not see them as being as much of a challenge as single counselors (63.6% and 72.7%). This was particularly true in regards to community resources as there was a 21.9% difference in this category. Perhaps having a partner would open more avenues to find and/or create resources within the community.

In addition to the relationship to isolation and limited resources, 68.2% of the single counselors found the issue of rural culture (i.e., poverty, lack of trust, value conflicts, stigma of counseling, unstable work force) to be more of a challenge than married counselors (46.0%). One could speculate that the values of a rural culture may be more conducive to those with marriage partners than those who are single. Furthermore, 45.5% of the single counselors noted that maintaining boundaries was a challenge, whereas only 33.3% of the married counselors marked this as a challenge. Again, having a partner might allow the counselor to create more established boundaries, as others may feel a single person has more time to devote to other activities which could open the doors for dual or multiple relationships to occur.

Finally, all counselors noted that crisis situations were very challenging, but single counselors reported this more often than married counselors (86.4% vs. 71.4%). Perhaps the fact that married couples have a built-in support network at home may help alleviate the stressors and challenges of dealing with crisis situations. Or possibly, those married counselors may live in communities that experienced less crisis situations.

Summary of relationships among survey variables. Several survey variables were found to have relationships. Females were generally younger and had less experience. Additionally, they marked stress and/or burnout as a higher challenge, as well as the issue of confidentiality. Younger counselors were more likely to be single and have less years of experience, but were also more likely to have participated in Ethics training. Additionally, the oldest counselors were least likely to find performing multiple roles as a challenge, but also least likely to have participated in either Ethics or Cross-cultural competencies training within the last three years. No clear patterns were found in

relation to years of experience and challenges experienced, but 90% of the school counselors with less than 1 year of experience saw the issue of having to perform multiple roles as a challenge, whereas those with more than 10 years of experience were most likely to mark stress and/or burnout as a challenge.

The type of setting a person grew up in was related to level of education in that those who grew up in a rural area in the state of Alaska had lower educational levels, less years of experience in their current position, and were less likely to be employed as a certified school counselor. But these counselors were least likely to mark personal or professional isolation as a challenge, and those who grew up in a rural setting in general were less likely to see either personal or physical isolation as a challenge. Isolation variables were also clearly related to partnership status with single counselors marking personal, physical, and professional isolation challenges more often than married couples. School counselors should be aware of these relationships in order to better prepare themselves for working in a rural area.

Chapter Five: Interview Results

As described in the methodology section, 24 rural Alaska school counselors were interviewed. Participants represented 15 different districts. At least three counselors, but up to five, were from each of the six regions of rural Alaska. General demographic information found that 13 participants (54.2%) were females, their age ranged from 23 to 65 with an average of 47, and the majority of interview participants were Caucasian (87.5%). This section will first review the results of the demographic and school setting information of the interview participants. Next it will discuss the responses to each of the eight question topic areas. As there were only 24 interview participants, most variables did not have enough data in each cell to adequately show relationships, but a brief discussion of relationships among variables is included. Finally, the relationship between survey and interview results is examined.

Interview Results – Closed Questions

As described in the methodology section, each individual interviewed completed the demographic and school setting information found in section two of the surveys (questions 2 to 19). The initial questions included gender, age, and ethnicity, while the remainder looked at other demographics of the counselor and the schools in which they worked as described above in the initial survey results.

Of the interview participants, half indicated they grew up in a non-rural setting (11 outside the state of Alaska, and 2 inside the state of Alaska), and half in a rural setting (8 outside Alaska and 5 in Alaska). The majority (19) of participants were legally married. Fifteen had no children living with them in their rural setting, although four reported having 1 child, three reported 2 children, and two reported 3 children lived with them.

In regards to education, 22 participants held a Masters degree, 1 held a bachelors degree, and 1 marked other, which included a Masters and an Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) degree. Thirteen participants stated that they held additional certifications or licenses: 3 mentioned National Board Certified Counselor (NBCC), 2 held a Licensed Professional Counselor certification, 2 stated Licensed Master Social Worker, 2 held teaching credentials, 2 mentioned counselor certifications in other levels than their

current work site, 2 claimed counselor credentials in other states, 1 held a nursing degree, 1 was an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), 1 held an Educational Leadership credential, and 1 person held certifications in drug and alcohol counseling. Three participants listed more than one certification area.

Participants had a range of experience levels (see Table 14). Few held much experience outside the school setting: 15 reported having less than a year of experience (as mentioned previously, 0 years was not an option). In contrast, half of the participants (12) reported having more than ten years of experience as a school counselor, whereas only six reported having less than 2 years experience as a school counselor. There was a bit more spread when looking at years of experience as a school counselor in rural Alaska. One participant indicated having less than a year of experience, five reported having 1 to 2 years, four people stated 3 to 5 years, six people had 5 to 10 years, and eight people reported having more than ten years of experience working as a school counselor in rural Alaska.

Table 14: Interview participant's years of experience as a counselor.

Years of Experience	As a Counselor Outside the School Setting	As a School Counselor	As a School Counselor in Rural Alaska
Under 1	15	0	1
1 to 2	5	5	5
3 to 5	2	3	4
5 to 10	2	4	6
More than 10	0	12	8

The majority of participants (19) held the position of certified school counselor, although one was provisionally certified, two held joint appointments, and two were in an administrative role at the time of the interview, although had previously been the school counselor. Seven participants had been in their role more than 10 years, three for 5 to 10 years, five for 3 to 5 years, eight for 1 to 2 years, and one person for under a year.

In regards to the school level, most of the interview participants (11) reported working in K-12 settings, although nine reported working in a high school environment, one

worked in a K-8 setting, three worked in a middle school, and three worked in an elementary school. Three participants marked two categories – middle school and high school, as this was not a separate category option. Seventy percent of the participants interviewed (17) reported working in only one school site, four people worked in two schools, one worked in three schools, one stated they worked in six schools, and one person worked in eight different schools. Additionally, 20 participants stated they were the only counselor in their school, two people reported having two counselors in the school, two more stated there were three counselors, and one person marked that although he was the only school counselor, there were three mental health clinicians that also worked with the school.

Finally, although eight participants had not had training in Ethics or Cross-cultural competencies in the past three years, 16 counselors interviewed had participated in at least one of these trainings. Ten participants reported that they had received training in Ethics in the past three years and fifteen marked that they had obtained training in Cross-cultural competencies. Nine participants reported they had received training in both categories.

Summary of interview participant demographic information. In summary, the 24 interview participants represented 15 different districts across the six regions of rural Alaska. Thirteen participants were females, the majority were Caucasian (87.5%), and they had an average age of 47. Half of the participants grew up in a rural setting, although only 5 grew up in a rural setting in the state of Alaska. The majority (79%) were legally married and most had no children living with them. Most held a masters degree with some additional certification or license. Although few had experience as a counselor outside the school setting, half had over 10 years of experience as a school counselor. Interview participants varied in the time spent in their current position with seven being there only 1 to 2 years, and eight having been in their position over ten years. The majority of participants worked in K-12 schools, in one school site, and were the only counselor in their setting. Finally, over half had recently participated in recent training regarding Ethics or Cross-cultural competencies.

Interview Results – Open-ended Questions

Interview analysis was organized according to the interview question topics. The first question focused on describing the characteristics of the rural area in which the participant worked as a school counselor. Question two asked them to describe the main challenges they experience working in their current setting, but also when thinking of working in a rural setting in general. The third question asked counselors to discuss specifically how their work is affected by the rural setting, whereas question four focused on the particular skills and/or understandings they felt were needed to be effective in a rural setting. The next question asked participants to discuss the resources they currently use to help meet the challenges, and question seven requested information regarding those resources they thought could help them deal with the challenges even more. Question seven allowed the participant to share anything they felt would be useful for other counselors to hear in regards to working as a school counselor in rural Alaska, and the final question allowed the opportunity to share any additional comments. The results of each of these questions will be described in this section.

Characteristics of the rural area. Interview participants described their communities in a variety of ways, but the main themes fell in to four major areas: size, geography and climate, economy, and culture. As this was an open-ended question, not all participants commented on each area. Therefore, the descriptions provided are just a small look in to the variety of communities in which these rural school counselors work.

Size. Locations varied greatly in size in regards to both the number of people in the community, as well as the number of school-age children. The smallest community had approximately 60 people in it, whereas only one other person reported working in a community with less than 100 people. Seven participants noted working in communities with 100 to 500 people, three stated 1000 to 2000, three mentioned between 2000 to 5000, and another three mentioned working in a location with more than 5000 people, but less than 8000 (there were three different communities that had two participants each).

Although the populations reported ranged from 100 to 8000 people living in the communities, only 35 to 400 students attended the counselor's school sites. Additionally,

five participants discussed the fact that there was a decrease in their population. The speculation was that tourism or the economy was down, and people were moving to urban locations because the rural areas were too expensive. Therefore, the community as a whole was getting smaller and thus the student population.

Geography and climate. As expected, the geographical differences were also striking. Seven participants worked on islands, although the geography of those islands were described quite differently. On the whole, four participants described working in coastal regions, four others reported working in river based communities, and another described working in a bay area. Four discussed working in a forest area with many trees, although only one mentioned the mountains; whereas three participants worked in areas with tundra.

Transportation to the community was also discussed in terms of the geography. Six participants mentioned working on the road system, but the time to get to a city (i.e., Fairbanks, Anchorage) varied from less than two hours and up to three and a half hours (although again, not all participants commented on this aspect). Three participants described that although there were roads to drive on once you arrived to the location, that you could not drive to the location itself. Driving often was discussed in relation to the season. For example, four participants mentioned that travel could be easier in the winter due to the ice roads and the use of snow machines or dog sleds to go between villages, but three others stated that travel in spring and summer was easier due to the option of traveling by boat. The most common response was that the main way to get there was to fly in – whether by large, small, or float plane.

Participants described climates that ranged from very cold, brutal winters, "typically 50 below," to nice summers averaging 70 or 80 degrees. Then there were participants who described temperate climates that were seldom below 30 degrees, but also seldom above the 70s. Again, this varied based on their location. Those living near the ocean, mainly on islands, described more moderate temperatures, but with a lot of wind and rain with storms in winter. Participants in the northern regions discussed the cold weather as "a given," but that the temperatures could be extreme. Few participants mentioned the

darkness in winter, but this could be because it was never specifically addressed in any question. One participant did state, "It is dark – you can come to work in the dark and leave in the dark. I think that is definitely something that affects people's lifestyles here too, so they would definitely be inside more in the winter."

Economy. Participants focused on the type of employment option available in their communities, although a few touched on more general socio economic status (SES) variables. For example, four participants stated that the SES was diverse with many students receiving free or reduced lunch meals but also having many students that were very affluent. Another stated their community was mainly of middle class SES, whereas another described it as a "blue collar community." Two participants described their location as having a depressed economy with few people working. Similarly, others mentioned the fact that the community utilized government aide to get by.

In regards to how people made their living, fishing or working in the fish canneries was most commonly reported (12 participants). Working in the schools was mentioned by eight participants, as was working in a government or city job. For example, one counselor stated, "most of the jobs that are available are working for the city, either as a police officer or working with the heavy equipment." Working in the local community store was mentioned by seven people, whereas the healthcare field was discussed by six participants. The military, and specifically working in the coast guard, was described as a large part of the economy by six counselors. Logging, or working for the forestry or park service was also discussed by four participants. Other options included working for the tribal council, mining, the oil industry, or in tourism or seasonal employment options. Finally, hunting was mentioned by four participants.

In relation to accessing food to provide for their families, hunting, fishing, or having a subsistence lifestyle was discussed by six interview participants. One member stated, "There is a tradition of subsistence here that is followed by a lot of people, Native and non-Native people." Another participant described it as follows: "A lot of people make their living on fishing, or people fish and hunt and pick berries and that is how they

provide for their families – the main way they provide for their families." A third participant described the economy as being,

in the midst of a switch between subsistence and a cash economy. They are still doing the subsistence to some extent, but over the period of about 40 years they have gone from about 80% subsistence and 20% of what people call store food, to probably the opposite now – it depends on the village and the family. A lot of people still hunt and fish a lot, but there is a lot of food that is brought in as well.

In a similar vein, one participant mentioned that the subsistence economy "is vanishing some, but it is still feasible because we cannot just go to the grocery store and buy a cup of coffee." Others discussed that the prices in the stores are so expensive that it is almost necessary to subsidize in whatever way is possible. Type of subsistence activities mentioned were fishing, hunting (mainly deer, moose, caribou, water fowl), and collecting berries.

Culture. There was similar diversity in regards to the cultural aspects. Most of the participants (17) mentioned that they worked with a specific Alaska Native population including: Aleut, Athabascan, Eskimo, Haida, Inupiat, Tlinget, and Yupik. Others discussed the approximate percentage of their population that was Native versus non-Native. The percentages ranged from the entire community being Native (aside from maybe a few people), to two-thirds Native, 50% Native, 40% Native, 35% Native, one-third Native, 30% Native, 18% Native, to the population being mainly Caucasian. For example, one participant mentioned two Alaska Native cultures were represented in the community, and that they each held cultural "activities and gatherings." Another mentioned that although the geographic area separates many of the villages, that "the same language and lots of cultural and family ties" keep them united across villages.

Several participants mentioned diversity in regards to other racial backgrounds including a large Puerta Rican population, a large percentage of Slovak people, a high percentage of Filipino people, and a large Hispanic population. Other groups mentioned included Vietnamese, Samoan, Korean, Asian, and African American people. One

participant mentioned that the diversity in their community allowed cultural festivals to occur regularly.

Religion was also mentioned in relation to cultural variables, although only a few participants specifically mentioned religion. The religions that were mentioned included: Baptist, Catholic, Russian Orthodox, and a Universal religion. One participant discussed the importance of belonging to a church. For example, "It was a strong religious community, and if you didn't belong to their church then you were one of the bad guys so to speak…. It was extremely socially important to belong to a church." Additionally, some participants discussed the general culture of rural community. One discussed the fact that the community was tight and had several specific groups or cliques – this included those from different religious groups. Another mentioned the social hierarchy that was apparent.

Summary of interview participant's communities. It was clear that the school counselors interviewed worked in diverse community settings. Populations reported ranged from 100 to 8000 people, with 35 to 400 students attending the counselor's school sites. Geography included islands, coastal and river communities, to those living mainly in locations of forest trees or tundra. Climates went from extreme cold temperatures, to moderate climates, and warm summer temperatures. The communities ranged from having a depressed economy to having many affluent individuals. People worked in a variety of occupations, but mainly were involved in fishing, the schools, government or city jobs, the military, and health care, although it was reported many people utilized government subsidies, and/or participated in a subsistence lifestyle as their main economy. Finally, most communities included a high percentage of Alaska Native cultures, although a few communities were comprised of mainly Caucasian people.

Challenges. Interview question number 2 asked participants to discuss the main challenges they experienced working as a school counselor in their current setting, but also in relation to working in a rural school setting in general as many participants had worked in several rural sites (see Table 15).

Table 15: Challenges of working as a school counselor in a rural setting.

Challenges	Response Percent	Response Count
Ethical issues	16.7%	4
Crisis/counseling issues	54.2%	13
Cultural issues	54.2%	13
Lack of privacy or anonymity	20.8%	5
Lack of role clarity	33.3%	8
Multiple roles	50.0%	12
Combine lack of role clarity & multiple roles	62.5%	15
Large caseload	12.5%	3
Limited professional resources	45.8%	11
Limited community resources	54.2%	13
Personal isolation	33.3%	8
Physical isolation	54.2%	13
Professional isolation	62.5%	15
Rural culture issues	66.7%	16
High turnover	37.5%	9
Administration issues	12.5%	3
Time demands	12.5%	3
N =		24

Responses were categorized in to similar categories as those listed in the survey that corresponded to previous research. The challenge that was most commonly reported was rural culture issues, followed by professional isolation, crisis/counseling issues, cultural issues, limited community resources, physical isolation, multiple roles, limited professional resources, lack of role clarity, personal isolation, lack of privacy or anonymity, ethical issues, large caseload, administration issues, and time demands. Each of these categories will be discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Rural culture issues. Sixteen interview participants discussed rural culture issues as being a challenge. These issues varied around topics such as poverty, low adult educational levels, values associated with education, attendance issues, conservative values, not acknowledging problem areas (i.e., bullying or sexual activity), a transient population associated with high turnover and/or lack of employment, lack of trust in regards to outsiders, and the general political or social structure of the community. The most commonly discussed challenge in regards to the rural culture was the issue of high

turnover – nine participants discussed this as an issue. This was not only in regards to school personnel (i.e., administrators, teachers), but also in relation to the trouble of finding qualified personnel to fill counseling related position in the community. For example, one counselor stated,

> People don't stay very long and then the positions are hard to fill again… It takes a while to get parents to agree to go that route and then there is not the consistency of seeing somebody…. Then when they do get somebody new again then they have to start all over.

The next most common issue discussed in regard to the rural culture was the issue of educational values. Five participants mentioned that the adults in the community had lower educational levels and therefore did not see education as a priority for their children. This then impacted attendance – five participants discussed attendance issues as being a challenge, but the adult values on education also influenced the attitudes of the children and their motivation for school (two participants saw this as a challenge).

Professional isolation. Fifteen participants discussed issues of professional isolation as being challenging. Issues of professional isolation included limited contact with colleagues, lack of access to mentors or supervision, lack of follow-up from other professionals, and keeping current with knowledge in regards to resources or trainings. Not having any counselor colleagues was the most commonly cited challenge in this category. One counselor stated, "The most difficult thing is not having anybody else to talk to about what I am doing in the school." Another stated, it "was hard because there was no one here to ask – how do you do this, or how do I handle that – because I was it." Although several counselors acknowledged that they could call or email others, they mentioned that it was not the same and therefore this was still a challenge. To illustrate, one counselor stated, "I'm sure you can make phone calls, but it is not quite the same as talking one-on-one and them seeing your concern or frustration."

Other counselors focused on the issue of follow-through from other counselors or agencies. Many sites did not have a local Office of Children's Services (OCS) or a local treatment facility and therefore it took time for professional services and follow-up to

occur. For example, one counselor stated, "if we can get outside help it may take a day, a week, or something like that." In relation to sending kids out for treatment, one counselor stated, "it is hard first of all for families to be able to send their kids to treatment, and then it is hard for them to come back…. It is not like there are lots of other kids…. We say go make new friends and there are only 10." Another stated, "they are brought back to the village and I hear complaints that there wasn't any follow-up. So they are just back in the village and it is not long before they start going own the dark side again." So, professional isolation was seen as a challenge in regards to having other counseling professionals to help deal with these issues.

Crisis/counseling issues. Thirteen participants discussed crisis situations and specific counseling issues as being challenging. These topics included alcoholism, suicide, drug use, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), child abuse, child neglect, domestic violence, and depression. Nine participants particularly mentioned alcoholism as being a challenge and seven discussed suicides as a challenge in the rural areas. Drug use was indicated to be a challenge by three participants, as was child abuse and/or neglect, but fetal alcohol syndrome was only mentioned by two counselors, and only one participant mentioned either domestic violence or depression as being a challenge in the rural areas.

Many of these issues overlapped – for example, one counselor stated, "Suicide is one of the problems. I haven't had a suicide in my village yet that wasn't associated with drinking". Another stated, "The village has some wonderful people in it, but there is a lot of dysfunction as well. There is a huge amount of alcoholism in the village… Our kids suffer a lot of neglect and along with that neglect comes abuse."

Cultural issues. Challenges related to cultural issues included aspects such as difficulty in connecting or fitting in, communication issues due to misunderstandings or language barriers, different values or ideas in regards to education, and differences in foods. Eight counselors discussed the challenge of making a cross-cultural connection or having trouble fitting in to the community. For example, one counselors stated, "I think it takes time to understand and accept the lifestyle of the Native people and understand what it is that would be comfortable with them and how they related to a counselor. That

is definitely a learning experience." Another stated, "Being an outsider, a non-native, sometimes trust is hard." Others mentioned the general difficulty of fitting in if you were not originally from the community.

In regards to the cultural challenges related to the educational system, one counselor stated, "One of the things that was a challenge was finally recognizing that the goals of our educational system sometimes contradicted the goals of the community and the culture". Another discussed the challenge of communicating graduation requirements to students coming from other cultures. The counselor state, "There are some real differences in education and understanding the whole idea of credits and things like that. It is a real challenge in that regard." Some of these issues were similar to those discussed in regard to the rural culture placing less value on education, which was discussed in a previous section.

Furthermore, three counselors specifically mentioned the concern regarding being misunderstood or having their conversation misconstrued. One counselor stated, "I am very conscious of all races, ethnic, sex, gender, whatever your orientation is.... That is at the top of my head all the time – you don't want to offend anybody." In a similar vein another counselor stated, "you have to choose your words carefully with everyone because things can get misconstrued." The potential difference in communication styles due to cultural variables was acknowledged by several counselors.

Finally, cultural differences in regards to foods was mentioned by a few counselors as being a challenge. One counselor stated, "The further north you get the more unique the Native foods become and this is a real challenge you have to deal with." Although others saw the differences in food as a positive – for example, one counselor stated, "We have cultural festivals here pretty regularly with the dances and ethnic foods and things. So that is one of the real pluses of living here."

Limited community resources. The lack of community resources was discussed by 13 counselors. Community resources focused on issues such as housing, food supplies, general expenses, phone and/or internet services, medical or dental care, funding, youth services, and the ability to expose kids to colleges and/or careers. The

challenges regarding housing and basic supplies was specifically mentioned by six counselors. For example, one counselor stated, "Housing is a problem. There's not enough and there's not enough quality housing – not enough space for children and parents." Another mentioned that teacher housing was always a problem. One counselor stated that many things will depend on your living quarters. The counselor stated that depending on your housing, you might be focused on,

> basic survival. How do you keep your water running, your toilet going, your heat coming in the cold setting? The whole idea of just getting your food supplies in and out, because that is a challenge. You can't just go to the local store and get everything you need. Those are things you need to be prepared about and it is not something that teacher education programs provide – especially for people going in to the rural areas.

Services such as cell phone service can also be an issue. One counselor discussed the fact that cell phone service had recently come to the community, but as it was not the phone plan of the counselor, then it was not accessible. Another stated the challenge of "a lack of resources, like the fax machine goes out, the phones go out, and you are kind of stuck. Sometimes the electricity goes our or the water goes out and that happens for days." Others mentioned the limited Internet service for homes versus in the school as being a challenge.

Additionally, three counselors focused on the general aspect of expense. For example, one stated,

> The cost of living is expensive... If you want to buy gas for your car it is $5.60 a gallon... Groceries are very expensive. If you want to buy milk at the store it can be up to $12 dollars... Also, the Laundromat is very expensive. The dryers cost about $2 dollars for 5 minutes.

Other counselors talked about the lack of funding in the community. Two counselors discussed the need for utilizing grants, but unfortunately once the grants were over then the services provided by the grants were gone. Another mentioned, "a lack of finances to buy things that we might need for the kids."

Additionally, four counselors mentioned the lack of community resources for medical and/or dental care. For example, one counselor stated, "our second biggest challenge is auxiliary services, and what I mean by that is dental care, medical care that is thorough and up-to-date." Another discussed the concern that "some of the social behavior and problem behavior in the school was due to medical issues" not being addressed.

As stated previously, there were several topics covered in relation to the lack of community resources. Taken together, the lack of community services and the cost of those services were seen as a challenge for several of the counselors.

Physical isolation. Aspects of physical isolation included geographic conditions such as distance, terrain, and weather. Thirteen counselors discussed challenges in these areas. One counselor stated professionals may feel the stress of "being cut of from the world" when you live in a rural area. Another stated, "There are challenges of geography. We are very far away from additional services…Remoteness, isolation, things that we can't control are certainly big factors."

The most commonly cited physical isolation variable mentioned was the cost and time to travel in and out of the village, and to go between sites if you were the counselor for more than one location. To illustrate, one counselor stated that, "travel associated with other duties, assessment for example, takes a lot of time." Others discussed that the costs associated with traveling to visit relatives and/or friends in the lower 48 states contributed to the physical isolation.

Transportation within the area was also seen as a challenge. One counselor stated, "that transportation issue is a big one in our district… a vehicle is important in our area because we are spread out." One counselor discussed the fact that it is difficult to be off the road system as you cannot just drive to reach what you want. The counselor stated, "There we have to depend on everything to be on the Internet or to be on television. To see and hear is not the same as to smell and touch, so the kids still miss a great deal." Therefore, the physical isolation impacted accessibility to services in regards to time, cost, and the general ability to get to places.

Limited professional resources. Professional resources included referral options, specialists, other helping professionals, community agencies, materials, and work space. Eleven counselors discussed the challenges associated with limited professional resources. Of those eleven, six participants mentioned the problem of having few referral options. In discussing the limited counseling options available outside the school setting, one counselor stated that even when you do make a referral "it is hard to get the kids in because they are over booked... They have such big caseloads so all the kids are not getting the services they need." It was further discussed that agencies have difficulties finding qualified people to fill their positions, which further compounds the issue of having a lack of referral options. A different counselor agreed with this challenge by stating, "I'm really uncomfortable referring kids off to somebody where the counselor has been there 3 or 4 months and may not be there 3 months from now."

Other counselors focused on the lack of other types of helping professionals such as troopers, social service workers, or mental health professionals. One counselor mentioned the lack of a women's shelter or any resources for on-going crisis counseling. To illustrate, one counselor simply stated, "I think we need more social services here; that would be really helpful."

Several other aspects regarding limited professional resources were mentioned by only one or two counselors. For example, two counselors discussed the lack of counseling space in their sites, which did concern them in regards to privacy issues. One counselor discussed the difficulty in finding appropriate resources for kids with special interests or special needs. Another discussed the challenge of bringing in qualified speakers for training aspects, and another discussed the lack of general counseling materials in the schools. Overall, limited professional resources was seen as a challenge mainly in regards to other professionals, but also in regards to space and materials.

Multiple roles. Twelve counselors discussed the challenge of fulfilling multiple roles. Duties were varied and included test coordinator, registrar, and teaching duties. The counselors discussed how these other roles significantly impacted the amount of time

they were able to devote to counseling and prevention types of activities. One counselor clearly stated this issue:

> You wear a lot of hats and the expectations are that you are an expert in so many different fields. When I was a kid I always thought that I would much rather be a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none, but I am expected to be a jack-of-all trades and a master of all.

Many of the counselors that discussed the challenge of multiple roles related that to the fact that few people really understood the role of the school counselor and therefore assigned them many duties that may not necessarily fall under the counseling role. This is discussed further in the next section – lack of role clarity.

Lack of role clarity. Eight counselors discussed the challenge of role ambiguity. Participants stated that counselor duties were unclear to the principal, the teachers, the superintendent, and the community. It was difficult for counselors to discern their own role and meet the expectations of the various players. This lack of role clarity fed in to the assignment of multiple roles that may be outside the scope of the counselor's duties and therefore erode time devoted to actual counseling. For example, one counselor stated, "One of the biggest challenges is the fact that the school counselor is viewed by administrators as having lots of time. So over the years, my counseling time has eroded significantly." Another counselor concurred by stating, "Sometimes the counselor is seen as the catch-all because they are not assigned to a specific classroom of kids…The perception of the counselor by others is unclear – they do not know your role and figure you have more time." When taken together, 15 counselors (62.5%) discussed the challenge of multiple roles and lack of role clarity.

Personal isolation. The challenge of personal isolation was discussed by eight counselors. One counselor discussed that it was probably easier if you had a family. The counselor stated, "I think if you were coming here, 22 years old, straight out of college and you're single, it could be a pretty lonely place, kind of isolated… There isn't a lot of social activity in this area and I think that could be a challenge." Another counselor concurred by stating, "Just having the family unit there really helped us. If you are a

single person going in there you really don't have that. You can maintain electronically today, but it is not the same. You are still isolated."

A single counselor discussed the difficulties by stating, "Just finding the kind of social life that might be supportive is hard if you are alone in the community. You might not fit in to any social groups and I think that is always hard." Additionally, with the transient nature of the rural community, one counselor discussed that the personal isolation can be compounded by the fact that once you do meet friends, you may continuously see them move away.

Lack of privacy or anonymity. Five counselors discussed the issue of the lack of privacy and/or the lack of anonymity in a rural community. For example, one counselor stated, "If you go to the grocery store everyone knows you. All the parents know you. So, I've very aware of my behavior in a town like this as being a role model for students." The counselor later continued on this topic by stating, "In a small town your actions are known no matter what you do, so you don't do anything that you shouldn't be doing." Other counselor comments were similar in nature, although some focused more on the fact that there was little privacy in regards to counseling space (although this was touched on in relation to limited professional resources as well).

Ethical issues. Ethical issues focused on confidentiality and boundaries. The issue of confidentiality was mentioned by three participants. For example, one counselor stated, "The confidentiality part is pretty major in a rural area, maybe more so than in an urban area. You need to know when to talk about things and when not to… You need to know where you're at. You need to know whose ears might be listening." Another counselor discussed the challenge regarding confidentiality when sending records electronically. Only one counselor mentioned boundary issues, simply stating, "As a counselor you need to understand where your ethical boundaries are – that is another challenge working in a rural setting."

Large caseload. None of the three counselors discussed the large caseload as being in relation to the number of students, but rather in regards to the number of sites they needed to visit, or the distance between sites. For example, one counselor discussed

the challenge of "not having enough time with the students." The counselor was stretched between three different locations and commitments and felt he was unable to provide a good quality of services to any of them due to the lack of time at any one. Another discussed the concern regarding working with several sites and the challenge of "having enough time to get everything done everywhere." Therefore, large caseloads did not mean a large number of students, but rather the challenge of having several sites and meeting the needs at each one.

Administration issues. Three counselors discussed the challenge of having inadequate administration. Although some of these mentioned the high turnover as being a problem, and the lack of understanding of the role of the counselor, these counselors specifically discussed the lack of administration as being a challenge. For example, one counselor stated, "The administration sets the tone... Things can easily snowball if there is a lack of administration." Another counselor stated the challenge of misguided administration, whereas the third counselor discussed the difficulty of having an administrator that does not take in to account the "fit of the school with his leadership style." Therefore, although administrative issues regarding turnover and role clarity were mentioned in other categories, it still came up as a distinct challenge area.

Time demands. Three counselors specifically mentioned the challenges in regards to the counselor's own time. They all discussed the long hours that were expected of a school counselor. For example, one counselor stated, "One thing that is challenging about the rural area, but also very good, is that you do work very hard. You probably work more hours in a work week than you would in a normal school job." Therefore, demands on their personal time were seen as a challenge.

Summary of challenges. School counselors discussed a variety of challenges regarding working in a rural setting. Challenges surrounded rural culture issues, particularly in regards to the high turnover, was the most commonly cited challenge. This was followed closely by professional isolation, and the problem regarding the lack of role clarity leading to the assignment of multiple duties. Crisis situations, cultural issues, limited community resources, and physical isolation were all seen as equally

challenging for the interview participants. In summary, there are many challenges experienced by rural counselors. The next section will discuss how the counseling role is specifically affected by working in a rural setting.

How the Counselor Role is Affected by the Rural Setting

Interview question number 8 asked participants how their work as a school counselor is specifically affected by the rural setting. Counselors discussed many similar issues as discussed in regards to the challenges inherent in working in a rural setting. Responses fell in to six main categories: lack of resources, role ambiguity, rural culture issues, transient population, visibility, travel, and general positive aspects (see Table 16). This section will discuss each of these categories.

Table 16: How one's work as a school counselor is specifically affected by the rural setting.

How Counselor's Work is Affected by the Rural Setting	Response Percent	Response Count
Lack of resources	54.2%	13
Positive aspects	29.2%	7
Role ambiguity	54.2%	13
Rural culture issues	45.8%	11
Travel issues	12.5%	3
Transient population	37.5%	9
Visibility	25%	6
N =		24

Lack of resources. Similar to the discussion regarding challenges experienced, 13 counselors stated that the lack of resources specifically affected their role as a school counselor. Due to the lack of resources, school counselors had to actively network to utilize every possible service available. One counselor stated, "I don't know that I'd work so hard at the networking in a bigger area because you refer people out and you assume people will make those networks on their own." One counselor also discussed the issue in regards to being the lone counselor – students do not have the option of going to another counselor, which limits them as well.

Lack of resources was additionally discussed in relation to finding career options, specialists, and colleagues with whom to consult. For example, one counselor stated, "their opportunities to go to a community college to see what that is like or different kinds of jobs they might want to see – they are more limited." Another counselor discussed the lack of specialists and qualified professionals: "If there was a student that had a problem that needed to see a psychiatrist, there is only one and it take months to get in. There is just a general lack of resources and a lack of educational choices." Additionally, counselors discussed that they needed to facilitate out-of-town treatment for students, and to help with follow-up services upon their return, as there were not options for treatment within the local community.

Role ambiguity. As discussed previously, counselors had a difficult time establishing their role as a school counselor. Counselors discussed the necessity of having to spend time educating others about their role. Furthermore, counselors discussed the challenge of working under several different principals if they covered different schools. One counselor mentioned the stress of having to satisfy 4 different people who all had different ideas of what the counselor was to do.

Additionally, the counselors discussed the fact that they were doing more community counseling duties such as dealing with crisis counseling such as suicides, and providing on-going individual counseling. One counselor stated, "I know schools say you are not supposed to do therapy... counseling is not therapy, but they don't understand the bush." Another stated, "In smaller places like this you might be the school counselor and deal with things like a suicide attempt, but at the same time you might also have to deal with keeping some records in the computer that you probably shouldn't have to spend your time doing." Again, their duties were fairly nebulous.

Rural culture issues. Rural culture issues that affected the school counselors included aspects such as the lack of trust if one is not from the community, different values that impacted what might be taught as counseling curriculum, and the various problems inherent in the communities that impacted the students and thus the counselor. For example, one counselor stated that there had only been two weddings in the village

he worked in, but approximately 150 children born. The values of the community in regards to having children out-of-wedlock specifically affected the role of the counselor since they were working with the teen parents, and eventually their children.

Other issues affecting the counselor included the need to be seen in the community. A few counselors talked about the fact that rural school counselors are more apt to spend time out of the school building. For example, counselors discussed doing home visits, and one even mentioned visiting a parent's work place due to the parent's lack of transportation. Counselors stated they needed to be visible both as a school member and a community member, and thus needed participate in community activities to show they were committed to the residents.

Transient population. Nine counselors discussed the impact of having a transient community – both in terms of a high turnover of staff, but also in relation to the transient community population. The high turnover of administration specifically seemed to affect the school counselor as six participants mentioned this issue. One counselor summed up the matter regarding the impact of district turnover by stating, "every year we kind of reinvent the wheel on lots of things." The turnover also impacted student continuity, which further affected the counselor role. In addition to the turnover of personnel, the transient nature of the population itself impacts the school counselor. Two counselors discussed this issue and the fact that kids will transfer in and out of the school on a regular basis. This impacted registration and scheduling, but also the types of services the counselor might provide to these students and families.

Visibility. Six counselors discussed the issue of visibility in the community and school affecting the school counselor. Some discussed this is relation to the fact that they could never escape the role of the counselor. For example, one counselor stated, "We all go to the same grocery store. It doesn't really bother me at all, and it is not really a challenge, but it is something to keep in mind. You are always on." Others discussed this as positive aspect for the counselor when stating, "You have the advantage of being recognizable and really a part of the school structure."

Travel. The amount of time traveling specifically impacted the school counselor. One counselor stated, "Last year there were 120 calendar days and I was in at least one airplane 80 of those days." Although only three counselors mentioned travel as specifically affecting their role, they discussed it as a challenge due to the time it took to complete the travel, but more importantly the lack of time they were able to spend with students due to the number of sites they visited.

Positive aspects. Seven counselors discussed how the rural community can affect the school counselor in positive ways. The main focus tended to be regarding the ability to know all the students due to the low counselor-student ratios, which also allowed counselors to get to know the families as well. For example, one counselor stated, "I think you grow closer to people in a rural setting… Because people know me, I think I can go quicker with people and get to the heart of the matter faster." Finally, other counselors mentioned the ability to be creative, that change can potentially happen faster, and that technology is growing rapidly and therefore schools and students are having more access.

Summary. In summary, the counselor's role is specifically affected by the rural setting in several ways. Lack of resources and role ambiguity were seen as the most salient features affecting the rural counselor. Effects of the rural culture, including the transient nature of the community, also specifically affected what the counselor was able to do from year to year. Finally, several positive things were discussed including the ability to really get to know the students and families.

Skills and/or Understandings Needed to be Effective

When responding to question four regarding skills, understandings or characteristics that school counselors working in rural settings need to be effective, seven main categories emerged: personal characteristics, interpersonal relations skills, cultural competency, a general knowledge base, specific counseling skills, the ability to engage in the community, and a final category representing all other type of responses (see Table 17). Each of these will be discussed further in this section.

Table 17: Skills and/or understandings that school counselors working in rural settings need to be effective.

Skills/Understandings	Response Percent	Response Count
Personal characteristics	66.7%	16
Interpersonal relations skills	54.2%	13
Cultural competencies	54.2%	13
General knowledge base	54.2%	13
Counseling skills	45.8%	11
Ability to engage in the community	25%	6
Other skills or understandings	25%	6
N =		24

Personal characteristics. Over half of the counselors interviewed (67%) believed that specific personal characteristics were necessary to work effectively in a rural setting. The most commonly cited characteristic was flexibility, followed by creativity and patience. For example, one counselor stated, "I think the most important thing is just to be open-minded and to be patient – which isn't always easy. It isn't patience with the kids; it is patience with the system and the lack of resources."

Other characteristics recommended by more than one counselor included the ability to be tough and not take things too personally, to have good judgment, be versatile, caring, open-minded, and to have a positive attitude. One counselor stated, "You have to be friendly. Regardless of what happens, you have to bear up, smile and go on and keep encouraging yourself as well as them." Another stated, "You need to be versatile because you are going to be asked to do other things rather than just counseling duties."

Additional characteristics included the ability to be humble, friendly, honest, understanding, stable, willing to make sacrifices, and to have a competitive drive to enable you to better yourself and your counseling program. One counselor stated,

> You have to have a good understanding of sociology, multicultural dynamics, being flexible, being open to new things. You have to accept the things you can change and there are some things you can't change. Don't become hung up on the things you can't.

Interpersonal relations skills. Thirteen participants mentioned the need to have good interpersonal relations skills. These included skills such as the ability to network with others (i.e., colleagues, agencies, community members), the ability to build relationships, the ability to educate others about the counselor role, and the ability to be respectful and tactful with others. For example, in regards to educating about one's role, one participant felt rural counselors need to, "tactfully be able to educate the administrator in such a way that they are not offended." Other counselors mentioned the ability to not give up on people, the ability to see other perspectives, and the willingness to work with all people.

For example, one counselor stated, "flexibility is important. A willingness to work with the whole gamut of people in life…. People on each end of the spectrum and everything in between." Another participant elaborated on the ability to see other perspectives, and be understanding and knowledgeable of what it would be like to live in a rural community. The participant stated, "someone that grew up in a very affluent neighborhood, went to an affluent school, and wears affluent clothing; stepping in to the rural community I live in…. and serving through their own perspective might have a lot of challenges to overcome."

Cultural competency. A facet of having interpersonal relation skills is being culturally competent. Again, over half of the participants mentioned the need to be culturally aware or to be sensitive to the community. One counselor stated that the skill most necessary to be effective is "knowing the community and the people in the community and how to work with them." Another summed it up by stating, "You just need to be cognitively sensitive to their culture, their lifestyle, the way they do things."

General knowledge base. Having a general knowledge base was mentioned by 13 of those interviewed. The type of knowledge was broad based, including technology skills, knowledge of the school setting, knowledge of the resources available, and the ability to teach oneself. For example, one participant stated counselors need to "at least know the education system. You understand the teacher role. You understand the parent role. You understand the principal role. Because as a counselor, you have to get along

with all aspects." Another counselor focused on the need to have technology skills. She discussed the example of having a college admissions counselor call in to virtually talk to a group of students. The counselor would need to know how to set it up and how to deal with any mishaps that occur during the discussion. She concluded by stating, "Being self-sufficient and creative when it comes to technology would be a great asset for a rural counselor to have."

Other areas included having writing skills, telephone skills, organizational skills, and having the ability to prioritize. Another mentioned the need to be knowledgeable regarding the comprehensive school counselor program. And the final category focused on knowledge of the geography and seasonal changes, including general outdoor skills.

Specific counseling skills. Although general counseling skills were mentioned, several counselors discussed the need for additional skills in specific counseling related areas, and the need to attend professional development to enhance counseling skills. The topics ranges from: assessing the situation, crisis counseling, individual counseling, group counseling, having therapy skills, drug and alcohol counseling skills, de-escalation techniques, and the ethical skills of establishing boundaries and remaining confidential. For example, one counselor stated,

> I had no idea when I was going in to school counseling that an understanding or some experience or insight in to the effects of drugs and alcohol on people and society and families was going to be such a big piece of working with kids.

Another counselor discussed the need for therapy skills to help deal with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and grief. She stated, "If I had to come to this school with the amount of classes I had in actual one-on-one counseling and even group counseling, I probably wouldn't have stayed."

In relation to having skills to assess the counseling situation, one counselor used the analogy of the television show Mash: "When the helicopter first brings in the wounded, the doctor goes out right away to make a quick assessment to see if this is something I can handle or is it something I need to send off to Tokyo." As the school counselor, he stated he did the same thing. When "a student comes in and they have a problem – is this

something I can handle or is it something I need to refer out. We have to make those calls pretty fast sometimes."

The ability to engage in the community. Five participants focused on the need to be able to engage in the community – to specifically become a part of the community and be there for them. For example, one counselor stated, "You need to integrate in to the community… Realistically, just being able to go out and relate to people and do things they do – whether that is fishing or hunting or those kinds of things. Those are important here." Another person stated, "If we are going to build a foundation and be effective, I can't work in my office. I don't work Monday through Friday, from 8 to 5. It is 24 seven."

Other skills. Several participants mentioned skills or understandings that were not mentioned by any other participants. These included: the need to have a crisis plan and keep it current, the necessity of being accountable (i.e., taking notes and keeping records), the ability to celebrate all victories no matter how small, to have reasonable expectations, to have hobbies and engage in self-care, to be willing to travel, and to have a long term outlook. For example, one counselor stated, "I think a long term outlook is a good skill to have, which I would have never thought about before I came here. Because once you get engaged in people's lives you want to see the results and that takes time."

Summary of necessary skills and/or understandings. Although a variety of skills and characteristics were described as essential for school counselors working in rural settings, the main response category focused on the basic personal characteristics of the individual such as being patient, flexible, and creative. The next three categories were addressed equally by over half of the participants – these included the need for interpersonal relations skills, having cultural competency, and having a good general knowledge base. Having good counseling skills, as well as the ability to engage in the community were also seen as essential for being effective in a rural setting.

Resources currently utilized. Question five asked interview participants to discuss any resources they use now to help them manage the challenges they experience in their roles as schools counselors. The categories were: community resources, school

resources, state or national resources, technology resources, cultural resources, professional organizations and trainings, and personal support (see Table 18). Each of these categories will be now discussed in more detail.

Table 18: Resources currently utilized by school counselors in rural Alaska.

Resources Currently Utilized	Response Percent	Response Count
Community resources	91.7%	22
School resources	86.4%	19
State/national resources	54.2%	13
Technology resources	50.0%	12
Cultural resources	45.8%	11
Professional organizations & trainings	33.3%	8
Personal resources	12.5%	3
N =		24

Community resources. Almost all the counselors interviewed discussed their use of community resources. All of the 22 counselors spoke of the specific community agencies and community helping professionals, but additionally mentioned community businesses, community members, specific organizations, pastors or religious leaders in the community, and the military or coast guard base resources. Community businesses were discussed in terms of relationships to assist with mentoring, internships, and funding. The most commonly cited organizations utilized included the Office of Children's Services (OCS), the troopers or volunteer police officers (VPOs), and the public health or general clinic. Only two people mentioned working with the religious leaders, and only one discussed specifically working with the resources from the military or coast guard base.

School resources. Resources found within the school were the next most commonly sited category. First and foremost was the utilization of colleagues; 17 participants mentioned using other colleagues as a resource. Although most of the counselors discussed utilizing other counselors, other personnel included teachers, administrators, and people working in the district office. Students were described as a

resource by two counselors – they were discussed in terms of establishing youth leaders. Additionally, parents and/or the Parent Teacher Association was also mentioned as a school resource by three participants.

Curriculum found in the school was a resource mentioned by seven counselors. This included various counseling programs and materials such as books or journals. Finally, school screening forms and assessment materials were mentioned by two participants as resources they utilized.

State and national resources. Resources found around the state or on the national level were discussed by thirteen participants. These resources varied and included boarding schools, vocational education programs, treatment facilities, colleges and universities, and grants. The majority of these counselors focused on the educational options such as the alternative education programs, but four counselors discussed utilizing the state treatment facilities for students, and four discussed accessing state and national grant funding as a resource. Several others described maintaining contact with their university or college professors and/or accessing programs at the university level including the admissions offices and the rural student services programs.

Technology resources. Utilizing technology was discussed as a resource by half of the interview participants. Technology was discussed on a variety of levels. Some discussed utilizing the Internet to search for information, to read blogs, and to access programs such as the Alaska Career Information System (AkCIS). Others used technology for communication purposes – rural counselors specifically mentioned utilizing Skype for videoconferencing. One counselor also mentioned using the on-line public records system to help students determine whether or not they still had juvenile charges on their records.

Cultural resources. Eleven of the counselors mentioned using the native tribal associations and the elders of the community as resources. One counselor stated, "Our knowledge is through the elders and the kids too." Other counselors discussed working with the native association's mental health and clinic personnel to coordinate services and serve as cultural liaisons.

Professional organizations and trainings. Eight counselors discussed utilizing professional organizations like the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) or the Alaska School Counseling Association (AkSCA) for resources and training options. Some counselors discussed using the websites of these organizations, such as the ASCA Scene, for help with general questions, but others discussed the resources such as professional journals and ethics codes. Five participants specifically discussed the trainings and workshops offered by professional organizations as being useful resources.

Personal resources. Finally, only three counselors discussed utilizing their own personal supports such as family, friends, prayer, or personal fitness. For example, one counselor sited their children as a resource. The counselor stated, "I bounce things around with my own kids. How does this feel when somebody does this, or how does that feel. I'd say my own kids are a pretty good resource for me." Another stated, "My family has been a huge resource. After a really tough day it is important to have a support network at home as well."

Summary of resources utilized. In summary, counselors discussed a variety of resources to help them manage the challenges associated with working in a rural environment. Community resources, including other helping professionals and organizations, was the most commonly cited resource. School resources, and specifically other school counselors, were also discussed by the majority of interview participants. State and national resources, technology, and the native tribal associations and/or elders were all also discussed as primary resources.

Additional resources desired. Interview question 6 asked participants to discuss any resources that they thought might help them deal with the challenges more if they were available to them. Response categories were the same as those discussed previously in relation to those resources they currently utilized, but were addressed in a different order. These are the resources most commonly cited as being desired: school resources, community resources, state resources, training options, cultural resources and technology resources (see Table 19). Each of these categories will now be described further.

Table 19: Resources that would help counselors deal with challenges even more.

Resources Wanted	Response Percent	Response Count
School resources	66.7%	16
Community resources	58.3%	14
State resources	41.7%	10
Training options	16.7%	4
Cultural resources	4.2%	1
N =		24

School resources. Although sixteen counselors discussed the desire to have more school resources, these resources encompassed a variety of realms. More personnel was the most commonly requested resource – this included more counselors, specialists such as special educators, a school counseling director, better administrators, and general personnel that can take on some of the extra duties of the school counselor. Three counselors discussed the desire for more time, but this was seen in relation to having the ability to focus on counseling issues instead of other duties assigned. Seven counselors discussed the desire for more funding. Funding could be used to purchase counseling programs and materials, but also to allow counselors to attend trainings. Two counselors mentioned the desire for more space, one wanted more vocational programs, and one desired a well-defined school counseling program.

Community resources. Fourteen counselors discussed the desire for more community resources. Ten of these counselors specifically mentioned the need for more mental health counselors and more qualified specialists. Other counselors focused on other support service personnel such as judges, police, and medical and/or dental care providers. Five counselors specifically mentioned the need for better response in regards to the Office of Children's Services – the need for 24-hour help in relation to these issues. A few counselors mentioned resources such as a shelter or a local residential treatment program (or at least more options of treatment programs). Finally, two counselors discussed the need for more adult counseling or parenting group options, and one counselor desired more in-home family support.

State resources. Ten counselors discussed the desire to have more state support for school counselors. For example, six counselors discussed the desire to have more state and/or regional networking opportunities. These could be facilitated by conference calls or videoconference options. Additionally, five counselors mentioned the desire for counseling mentors. One counselor stated, "It would be great to have a counselor mentorship program. It would be good to sit down to talk with someone, or at least get teamed up with another counselor in a similar situation."

One counselor mentioned the desire to have a district-wide comprehensive counseling program that was supported at the state level, and in a similar vein one counselor discussed the need for making other professionals more aware of the national school-counseling model. Finally, one counselor discussed the desire for a more in-depth counseling handbook that included specific resources for new counselors to utilize.

Training options. Four counselors mentioned the desire to have training options that were specifically targeted to the needs in rural Alaska. Counselors mentioned training related to self-abuse, prescription drug use, crisis counseling, and ethical issues in rural areas.

Cultural resources. Only one counselor mentioned the desire for more native tribal support. The counselor specifically stated, "It would be really nice if the local tribe here would provide more supportive services for the Native families in town." The counselor further discussed the educational needs of the Native children, and that although Title VII money is utilized for tutors, additional support to aid in addressing the educational and social needs of these students and families would be helpful.

Summary of resources desired. In summary, school counselors desired a variety of resources to help them deal with the challenges of working in their rural setting. More school and community counselors and helping professionals was the most desired resource. Additionally, more state support such as having state mentors or more state and/or regional networking opportunities, was also seen as being potentially beneficial. Finally, counselors desired having accessible training opportunities that focused on areas relevant to rural Alaska.

Useful information and further comments. Interview question number 7 asked participants to share anything they thought would be useful for other counselors to hear in regards to working as a school counselor in rural Alaska, whereas question number 8 invited participants to share any additional comments. In analyzing the information for these two questions, it was found that the information significantly overlapped and therefore the data was compiled to reduce redundancy and add cohesion. Responses fell in to 12 main categories: connect with the community, connect with the school, stay connected to professionals, know the counselor roles, keep personal care, have positive personal characteristics, gain cultural knowledge, know your resources, receive training and education, be aware of ethical issues, be prepared – know what you are getting in to, and be aware of the positive aspects (see Table 20). Each of these areas will be discussed further in this section.

Table 20: Useful information for school counselors working in rural Alaska.

Useful Information	Response Percent	Response Count
Connect with the community	58.3%	14
Connect with the school	29.2%	7
Stay connected to professionals	58.3%	14
Know the counselor roles	58.3%	14
Keep personal care	58.3%	14
Have positive personal characteristics	50.0%	12
Gain cultural knowledge	33.3%	8
Know your resources	29.2%	7
Receive training and education	29.2%	7
Be aware of ethical issues	25.0%	6
Be prepared – know what you are getting in to	58.3%	14
Be aware of the positive aspects	41.7%	10
N =		24

Connect with the community. Fourteen counselors stated that school counselors need to connect with the community in a variety of ways. Participants suggested that counselors should reach out to others and get to know the parents and the community members. They can draw on other individuals who have been there a long time and learn

about the community – the values, the culture, and the history. Counselors need to get involved in the community and participate in their activities.

Connect with the school. Seven counselors specifically discussed the need to connect with the school. New counselors need to find out the expectations and needs of the school by talking to school personnel, secretaries, principals, parents, and students. They should get to know the school board and understand their contracts and unions. Others suggested that counselors truly get to know the school setting – be in the building and keep your office door open to help build rapport.

Stay connected to professionals. Although it was emphasized to connect with the community and the school, fourteen counselors also suggested that school counselors stay connected with other counseling professionals by any means possible (phone, email, videoconference). Counselors suggested attending regional counselor meetings and utilizing the state professional organizations (i.e., AkSCA) to help remain in contact with other school counselors. Make it a point to check in with your colleagues – other counselors, mentors, and other helping professionals.

Know the counselor roles. Fourteen counselors discussed the variety of roles one may assume when working in a rural area. They cautioned that school counselors may be asked to do many duties, such as monitoring the halls, and to know that if you have a teaching certificate that you will more than likely be asked to teach classes. One counselor stated, "your job is to help everyone – students, parents, administrators, and teachers." Other participants discussed that school counselors deal with many different types of complaints, but be sure to take all problems seriously. One counselor stated, "I have to be able to diffuse any type of problems here. In a small community, eventually you have to work it out anyway because you are stuck with them." Other participants stated that counselors need to keep in mind that they cannot do everything, and therefore they need to prioritize and focus on the needs of the school and community.

Several counselors stressed the importance of knowing your role, setting goals, and making sure to communicate them to others – particularly to the administration. Additionally, it was suggested that counselors have a school counseling program and to

stay focused on it. Having a program may assist the school counselor when there is rapid turnover of administration. Additionally, counselors stressed the need to make their role indispensible, as there are often cuts to positions. One suggested way to accomplish this in the high school setting is to find scholarships for students to attend post-secondary options. Finally, counselors cautioned to make sure to follow through on commitments and that providing feedback is an essential component.

Keep personal care. Fourteen counselors discussed the need to keep up one's personal care. One counselor stated, "Stress is normal, but distress; when you get distressed you will have to have outlets. What do you do to get yourself to stay healthy?" This could be accomplished in many ways. Counselors suggested exercise, going outside, being adventurous, and having hobbies such as hiking, skiing, kayaking, playing an instrument, baking, or quilting. In general, counselors suggested that the school counselors needed to have fun and enjoy what they do. They need to find ways to manage their stress and deal with the isolation. Along with personal fitness, counselors suggested to stay connected to one's support network – family and friends.

Have positive personal characteristics. Half of the interview participants discussed the need to have positive personal characteristics. The most commonly cited characteristic was to be open-minded and take the time to see other perspectives. Other characteristics included a positive attitude, creativity, flexibility, patience, understanding, confidence, competence, tact, helpfulness, and respect. In general, treat others the way you want to be treated. In addition to being open-minded, a few counselors discussed the willingness to get to know oneself and be open to growing as a person and a professional. Finally, one counselor mentioned the need to be able to be alone, as you will often have times by yourself.

Gain cultural knowledge. Eight participants discussed the need for counselors to become culturally aware – in regards to values, behaviors, and foods. School counselors should get to know the tribal council in their community, but also know that each village is going to be different so they must learn in regards to each specific community.

Additionally, know that curriculum programs may not be culturally appropriate, and therefore the counselor may need to adjust their programs to fit the community.

Know your resources. Seven counselors discussed the need to know your resources. Counselors cautioned that there may be few resources available, but to learn all that is out there. Additionally, it was recommended to build one's own resources and keep files of resource information. Finally, one counselor mentioned the need to utilize the teachers and try to incorporate counseling aspects in to their curriculum – for example, infuse career aspects in to other subject areas.

Receive training and education. Seven counselors touched on the topic of training and education. Three mentioned the need to gain knowledge in regards to technology – for example, how to utilize distance education methods and social support networking tools. Others suggested counselors attend trainings and workshops on issues related to rural Alaska, such as crisis intervention topics. Two counselors mentioned the benefit of receiving an education in Alaska to help them prepare to work in the rural areas, whereas another discussed the need to adequately prepare new counselors and educators to work in rural environments.

Be aware of ethical issues. Six counselors discussed the need to have appropriate boundaries. For example, one counselor stated, you need to keep,

> really good, strong clinical boundaries. Especially when you get in to rural
> settings there may be more opportunities for there to be a lapse of boundaries or
> there to be multiple roles, and so keeping your different roles that you play in a
> student's life or their families to a minimum.

In general, counselors suggested one should be knowledgeable of ethics, keep some professional distance, and be aware of dual relationship issues.

Be prepared – know what you are getting in to. Fourteen counselors discussed the need for new counselors to be prepared and knowledgeable about what they are getting in to when they become a school counselor in a rural community. First of all, counselors mentioned the fact that school counselors work hard. It can be a challenging job as there are a lot of problems, such as suicide, alcohol, drugs, politics, and attendance

issues. The hours are long and definitely beyond the regular school day, and they do not end when you leave the school – you are always visible as a school counselor in the community. Additionally, it may be difficult to connect with other adults as there can be cliques in small communities. Furthermore, people tend not to open up until one shows they intend to stay, therefore do not expect a lot the first year and know that it will get better with time. Finally, be aware of the longevity of the counseling position. School counseling jobs tend to be cut, so be prepared for that possibility.

Other counselors discussed the need to be prepared for basic survival issues. Know that things are going to be expensive in rural areas – some areas more so than others. Learn how to get your food supplies in and out of the village – what can be purchased on site, what can be mailed, and what needs to come by plane. Overall, participants suggested that new counselors know where they are going, and if possible visit ahead of time to help be prepared.

Be aware of the positive aspects. Although many of the comments and useful information focused on how to deal with the challenges of working in a rural location, ten counselors discussed the many positive aspects and opportunities available. Several counselors discussed how much they enjoyed their jobs and mentioned how rewarding a career as a rural school counselor is. Others discussed the positive characteristics of the people, such as being strong, intelligent, big-hearted, and caring. Other advantages included the opportunity to be creative, to help lead programs in a strong direction, and the opportunity to grow as a person. One counselor discussed the opportunity to do things you might not necessarily do in the city. Another counselor summed it up by saying, "It is a really, really good job. It is rewarding."

Summary of useful suggestions and comments. In sum, counselors had many suggestions for counselors that intend to work in a rural setting. Some of the main topics included the necessity to be connected – to the community, to the school, and to other professionals. Additionally, be knowledgeable of the counselor roles, the resources available, ethical issues, and gain cultural competency and education. Finally, maintain

positive personal characteristics, be prepared for what you are getting in to, take care of yourself, and take advantage of the positive opportunities.

Interview Results – Relationships Among Variables

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format that utilized open-ended questions, and therefore the only discrete variables were the demographic and school information from the initial survey responses. Again, each interview participant again filled out this information when they completed their interview. Although data was cross-tabulated to determine if any relationships or patterns occurred, there was not enough data in any given cell to add noteworthy information regarding any of the discrete variables among interview participants.

Relationship Between Survey and Interview Data

All of the school counselors, survey respondents and interviewees, first provided demographic characteristic information, and then had the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions in regards to their experiences working as school counselors in a rural environment. Analysis was completed on each set of data separately, but this section will compare those results to determine if there were any significant differences.

Comparison of closed-ended questions. As discussed previously, both sets of participants completed the initial questions or the survey regarding demographic, school setting and education variables – questions 2 to 21. It appeared that the interview participants were highly representative of the survey participants with few differences in any categories, which will be demonstrated here.

Interview participants represented the survey participants almost exactly in regards to the demographic variables of gender, age, ethnicity, and setting in which the counselor grew up (see Table 21). Ethnic variables were not broken down further in the interview sample to help retain issues of confidentiality for the participants.

Table 21: Comparison of demographic variables between survey and interview participants.

Demographic Variables	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
Gender		
Males	41.9%	45.8%
Females	58.1%	54.2%
Age		
Range	23-65	23-65
Average	46	47
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	93.5%	87.5%
Other	7.6%	12.5%
Type of setting counselor grew up in		
Non-rural Setting	51.7%	54.2%
Outside Alaska	45.2%	45.8%
Within Alaska	6.5%	8.3%
Rural Setting	51.7%	54.2%
Outside Alaska	36.6%	33.3%
Within Alaska	15.1%	20.8%
N =	93	24

The relationship variables were also very similar. The interview participants had a slightly larger percentage of married individuals, and had no cohabitating individuals, but the differences were not large (see Table 22). The number of children the counselors had with them in their settings showed no difference.

Table 22: Comparison of relationship variables between survey and interview participants.

Relationship Variables	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
Partnership Status		
Married	69.2%	79.2%
Single	24.2%	20.8%
Cohabitating	6.6%	0.0%
N =	93	24

A few differences did show up in relation to education and experience level. No differences were seen among educational level attained or training obtained in the last

three years, but a few minor differences were found in the experience variables (see Table 23).

Table 23: Comparison of education and experience variables between survey and interview participants.

Education and Experience	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
Years of Experience as a School Counselor		
Under 1	9.9%	0.0%
1 - 2	13.2%	20.8%
3 - 5	17.6%	12.5%
5 - 10	19.8%	16.7%
More than 10	39.6%	50.0%
Years in Current Position		
Under 1	19.4%	4.2%
1 - 2	31.2%	33.3%
3 - 5	16.1%	20.8%
5 - 10	18.3%	12.5%
More than 10	15.1%	29.2%
N =	93	24

First, although most participants had little experience as a counselor outside the school setting, survey participants had more experience in the highest category (more than 10 years of experience) than interview participants (10.9% vs. 0.0% respectively). Although there were no differences found between the years of experience as a school counselor in rural Alaska, it appeared that interview participants had a bit more experience as a school counselor overall. Furthermore, although there were no differences regarding the type of position the counselors held (most held a certified school counselor position), interview participants had been in their current position for a longer amount of time.

School characteristics were fairly similar as well, but a few differences were found. For example, the survey participants reported working in a middle/junior high school setting more often than the interview participants (25.8% vs. 12.5% of the counselors). Additionally, the interview participants reported working with only 1 school more often

than the survey participants (70.8% vs. 57.0%). Finally, the interview participants reported working with fewer counselors (see Table 24).

Table 24: Comparison of number of counselors working in the school between survey and interview participants.

Number of Counselors Working in the School	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
1	69.6%	83.3%
2	18.5%	8.3%
3	6.5%	8.3%
4	2.2%	0.0%
Other	13.0%	4.2%
N =	93	24

In summary, the interview participants appear to be a representative sample of the survey population, but there are a few differences to keep in mind when interpreting the data further. First there were slightly more married interview participants than survey participants. Additionally, interview participants had more years of school counseling experience and had spent more years in their current position. Finally, there was a higher percentage of interview participants that reported working in only one school, but they also reported working with fewer other school counselors.

Comparison of open-ended questions. Only four questions allowed for open-ended responses in the survey. These same questions were posed to the interview participants, and therefore the responses to these four questions can be compared. Each question will be discussed further in this section.

Challenges. Even though interview participants tended to focus on the same categories of challenges as marked by survey participants there were some differences. One relevant issue to keep in mind when interpreting the data is that survey participants were given a list of choices and asked to mark whether or not they experienced the issue as a challenge, whereas the question was posed as a total open-ended question to interview participants. Although almost all challenges were mentioned by the interview participants, and few additional categories were added, interview participants discussed fewer challenges overall. Each interview participant generally focused on their main

challenges, whereas some survey participants marked all categories as a challenge they experienced. Additionally, interview participants did not focus on specific ethical issues (i.e., confidentiality or maintaining boundaries), but rather focused on ethical issues in general. For the purposes of comparison, they were put across from confidentiality. The entire set of information was compared in regards to the ranking of the challenges (i.e., which challenges were reported most frequently by the participants), but also in relation to any noticeable differences in regards to how often the challenge was touched upon.

First of all, challenges were not ranked in the same order by the survey and interview participants (see Table 25). The most commonly cited challenge marked by the survey participants was crisis situations – 76.3% of the counselors marked this as a challenge (as opposed to 54.2% of the interview participants). The most commonly cited challenge by interview participants was rural culture issues (66.7% vs. 51.6%). This was also one of the highest things survey participants elaborated on in their open-ended response option.

Table 25: Comparison of challenges experienced by survey and interview participants.

Challenges	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
Crisis situations	76.3%	54.2%
Multiple roles	68.8%	50.0%
Lack of role clarity	65.6%	33.3%
Confidentiality issues	57.0%	16.7%
Limited community resources	57.0%	54.2%
Limited professional resources	54.8%	45.8%
Rural culture issues	51.6%	66.7%
Cultural issues	50.5%	54.2%
Lack of privacy or anonymity	47.3%	20.8%
Stress and/or burnout	45.2%	0.0%
Professional isolation	44.1%	62.5%
Large caseload	43.0%	12.5%
Scope of practice	43.0%	0.0%
Maintaining boundaries	36.6%	
Lack of training, education, or professional development opportunities	33.3%	0.0%
Physical isolation	29.0%	54.2%
Personal isolation	24.7%	33.3%
Administration issues		12.5%
Time demands		12.5%
N =	93	24

Of particular notice are the challenges the interview participants chose to discuss the most in comparison to the survey participants. Interview participants discussed rural culture issues and all three isolation variables to a higher degree than the survey participants marked them as a challenge. All other variables were discussed less by the interview participants. It is unclear as to why this occurred – particularly as all of these variables were seen as less of an issue by married survey participants, and there was a higher percentage of married interview participants.

Resources currently utilized. Survey and interview participants discussed the same types of resources that they were currently using to help them manage the challenges they experience as a school counselor in a rural location. Each interview participants talked about more resources overall thoroughly reviewing their options, whereas most survey participants only wrote down a few resources they utilized. Again, although the resources were the same, they were ranked in a different order by survey and interview participants (see Table 26).

Table 26: Comparison of resources currently used by survey and interview participants.

Resources Currently Utilized	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
School resources	58.2%	86.4%
Personal resources	32.9%	12.5%
Community resources	30.3%	91.7%
Technology resources	25.3%	50.0%
Professional organizations & trainings	17.7%	33.3%
Cultural resources	12.6%	45.8%
State/national resources	7.5%	54.2%
N =	79	24

Interview participants mentioned community resources most often, whereas survey participants discussed school resources the most (although this was the second highest category for the interview participants). Another interesting difference was the percentage of interview participants that discussed state and/or national resources as well

as cultural resources in compared to survey participants (54.2% vs. 7.5%; and 45.8% vs. 12.6% respectively). Interview participants clearly discussed using these resources more than survey participants. In contrast, survey participants discussed their own personal resources more often than interview participants (32.9% vs. 12.5%). This was the only resource discussed by a higher percentage of survey participants. It was possibly easier to discuss one's own strengths and resources on paper versus in person.

Resources wanted. Again survey and interview participants discussed the same types of resources in regards to what they felt would help them deal with their challenges even more. In this case, all participants discussed most often the desire for more school resources, particularly more school counselors (see Table 27). As interview participants had discussed utilizing community resources more often than survey participants discussed this, it is not surprising that they also focused more on the fact that more resources in this category would be beneficial. The participants did not contradict each other, but rather focused on specific resources to a different degree.

Table 27: Comparison of resources wanted to help deal with the challenges in the rural environment by survey and interview participants.

Resources Wanted	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
School resources	34.5%	66.7%
Professional organizations & trainings	34.5%	4.2%
Community resources	31%	58.3%
State/national resources	20.1%	41.7%
Cultural resources	3.4%	4.2%
N =	58	24

Useful information. Finally, survey and interview participants both shared things they felt would be useful for counselors to hear in regards to working as a school counselor in rural Alaska. Interview participants discussed a wider range of topics and discussed more information overall than survey participants (see Table 28).

Table 28: Comparison of useful information by survey and interview participants.

Useful Information	Survey Participants	Interview Participants
Be prepared – know what you are getting in to	35.0%	58.3%
Have positive personal characteristics	33.3%	50.0%
Connect with others	30.0%	
Connect with the community		58.3%
Connect with the school		29.2%
Stay connected to professionals		58.3%
Know the counselor roles	16.7%	58.3%
Receive training and education	11.7%	29.2%
Gain cultural knowledge	8.3%	33.3%
Keep personal care		58.3%
Know your resources		29.2%
Be aware of ethical issues		25.0%
Be aware of the positive aspects		41.7%
N =	60	24

Both sets of counselors most often discussed the need to be prepared for what you are getting in to prior to becoming a rural school counselor. Additionally, both sets agreed it is necessary to have positive personal characteristics and to connect with others. Interview participants discussed this issue so often that the category was divided in to the need to connect with the community, connect with the school, and to stay connected to other professionals. This is not surprising as they focused highly on isolation variables and this information would be helpful to combat isolation variables. Furthermore, although interview participants did not mention their personal resources as a resource they currently utilized, they did feel it was important to convey the need to keep personal care – this was also one of the most frequently discussed topics.

Summary of survey and interview data comparison. Overall, interview participants were highly representative of the survey population. In regards to the results, participants discussed similar information, but to a different degree. Interview participants talked about each topic to a greater degree than survey participants – they were able to discuss each issue in more depth, and therefore a higher percentage of

counselors tended to respond to each category. Interview participants tended to focus on the challenges of isolation and rural culture to a higher degree than survey participants, and discussed utilizing community resources more often. Both sets of participants discussed the desire for more school counselors, and really felt new counselors should be adequately prepared for working in a rural setting prior to agreeing to be a rural school counselor.

Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusions

Prior research has explored the experiences of rural helping professional, but sparse recent research has been done that specifically addresses the experience of the rural school counselor. This research intended to expand the knowledge base by allowing rural school counselors to voice their perspectives regarding the specific challenges they face, how their work is affected by the rural setting, the skills necessary to work in a rural environment, and the resources they use to help overcome the challenges inherent in these areas. Additionally, they were asked to discuss resources they would like to have to allow them to better meet these challenges, and then to provide any suggestions for future counselors intending to work in rural environments.

In an effort to gain this knowledge, 125 rural school counselors in the state of Alaska were surveyed. Ninety-three counselors responded to the surveys, and from these counselors, 24 were interviewed to discuss the issues further. Results did not differ significantly from past research, but several recommendations can be draw from the information. This section will first explore how the results from this study related to previous research. It will then discuss specific recommendations based on those results. Next it will consider the limitations of the current research, and will then suggest avenues for future research.

Relation to Prior Research

In general, the research results were similar to those found in other studies looking at the experiences of rural helping professionals. The main difference being that participants in this study highlighted the challenges and resources that are specific to the school setting, as that was their main work setting and the research base was taken from several different types of helping professionals. The main areas of overlap were in relation to challenges experienced, necessary skills and understandings for counselors to be effective in rural settings, and useful information or recommendations to counselors intending to work in rural environments.

Challenges. The challenges experienced by the school counselors in the current research did not differ from those cited in the literature. For example, similar to other

research (Baldo et al., 1998; Barbopoulos & Clark, 2003; Berntson et al., 2005; Brewster & Railsback, 2001; Bushy, & Carty, 1994; Collins, 1999; Drew, 2004; Drew & Breen, 2004; Morrisette, 2000; Pearson & Sutton, 1999; Schank, 1994; Sutton & Southworth, 1990), school counselors felt that isolation was a significant challenge. Even though only 25-44% of the survey participants marked personal, physical, or professional isolation to be a challenge, 33-62% of interview participants focused on these challenges.

When given the opportunity to discuss the challenges experienced, school counselors were most likely to discuss problems of isolation along with rural culture issues. This is important to note, as those counselors who were raised in a rural setting in Alaska were least likely to identify personal or physical isolation as a challenge variable. Therefore, the current research substantiated the view that counselors with rural backgrounds may be better predisposed to working in a rural environment (Collins, 1999; Howley & Pendarvis, 2002; Kilpatrick et al., 2009; Monk, 2007; Ricketts, 2005). Furthermore, counselors with rural backgrounds were also less likely to indicate stress and/or burnout to be a challenge.

Lack of role clarity or role ambiguity was also found to be one of the main challenges for rural school counselors. Other research that focused specifically on rural school counselors also noted this to be a main challenge (Baldo et al., 1998; Monteiro-Leitner et al., 2006; Morrissette, 1997; Sutton & Southworth, 1990; Webber, 2004).

One noteworthy difference was in regards to the challenge of dealing with crisis situations. Seventy-one percent of the school counselors in this research discussed the challenge of dealing with suicides or child abuse and neglect issues, whereas few of the other research studies mentioned this to be a big challenge area (Baldo et al., 1998; Hines, 2002; Ritchie & Partin, 1994; Roberts et al., 1999). Perhaps these issues are more salient in Alaska due to the vast difference in geographic conditions, along with the unique population base.

Necessary skills and understandings. Similar to the findings in Drew's study (2004), the school counselors felt there were specific skills and understandings needed to be effective in a rural context. These skills included having: positive personal

characteristics, good interpersonal relations skills, cultural competency, a good general knowledge base, good counseling skills, and an ability to engage in the community. Drew's research (2004) highlighted these same issues, but also emphasized the need for an understanding and appreciation for rural life, knowledge of oneself, ethical decision-making skills, and the need for a good support system. These aspects were all discussed by the current research participants when they considered information that would be useful in regards to working in rural Alaska.

Resources currently utilized. The counselors in this study utilized many resources. Previous research recommended counselors build networks in a variety of realms (Beeson, 1999; Brems et al., 2006b; Bushy & Carty, 1994; Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Drew & Breen, 2004; Hovestadt et al., 2002; Jensen & Royeen, 2002; Lund, 1990; McIntire et al., 1990; Merrell et al., 1994; Monteiro-Leitner et al., 2006; Morrissette, 2000; Sutton, 1988). The current counselors focused on building networks in the school, in the community, across the state, and in professional organizations. Like Weigel (2002), the current counselors also specifically mentioned utilizing the cultural resources in the community. Additionally, similar to Helbok's (2003) research, the counselors recommended utilizing one's own personal resources such as friends and family.

Furthermore, the current counselors discussed using a variety of technology resources such as the Internet, videoconferencing resources, career information websites, and counseling related blogs. Using technology was also discussed in the previous literature in regards to enhancing communication, maintaining or expanding professional contacts, or accessing education or professional development (Brems et al., 2006b; Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Drew & Breen, 2004; Gibb et al., 2003; Morrissette, 2000).

Useful information and recommendations. Again, similar results were found in regards to specific recommendations for rural counselors. The school counselors in this research highlighted 12 main tips: connect with the community, connect with the school, stay connected to professionals, know the counselor roles, keep personal care, have positive personal characteristics, gain cultural knowledge, know your resources, receive training and education, be aware of ethical issues, be prepared and know what you are

getting in to, and be aware of the positive aspects of working in a rural setting. These were all similar to those recommendations made by other researchers. For example, Monteiro-Leitner et al. (2006), Lund (1990), and Baldo et al. (1998) all discuss the need to define the role of the counselor. Breen and Drew (2005), Harowski et al. (2006), Helbok (2003), Hines (2002), Hovstadt et al. (2002), McIntire et al. (1990), Morris (2006), and Smith (2003) all recommend counselors understand and appreciate the rural culture. Although different wording may have been provided, essential the suggestions were similar in this research as those found across other helping professionals that work in rural areas.

Recommendations

Although the information regarding the challenges experienced, necessary skills, utilization of resources, and recommendations of working in a rural environment did not differ significantly from previous research, there are some specific implications that need to be addressed. The rural school counselors specifically noted the resources they would like to have that would enable them to deal with the challenges in their sites even more. These resources fell in to the categories of school resources, community resources, professional organizations and trainings, state and/or national resources, and cultural resources. Each of these areas might be addressed at a local school or district level, at the state level, or by educational institutions that train counselors. Additionally, there are specific implications directly for counselors that intend to work in the rural setting. These will each be addressed further in this section.

Implications at the local school or district level. The research clearly shows that there is a problem with retention in rural areas (Esposito et al., 2003; Hill & Hirshberg, 2008; Hines, 2002; Kilpatrick et al., 2009; Ricketts, 2005; Roellke, 2003). That is also apparent in the current research, as 31.2% of the counselors had only been in their position for one to two years. Additionally, 51.6% of the survey participants marked rural cultural issues, which included the issue of an unstable workforce, to be a challenge. On top of that, 37.5% of those counselors that were interviewed specifically mentioned the high turnover rate to be challenging.

The high turnover issue was also discussed in the suggestions for future counselors. Participants suggested rural counselors assess the longevity of their position prior to accepting a contract. Furthermore, one counselor specifically noted the need for districts to hire counselors earlier. Sometimes counselors get cut in the spring, but then may get rehired in August after the school has their teaching positions filled and determine whether they can keep a school counselor. The counselor discussed the frustration of sending all their belongings away from the village only to have to resend them back in the fall, which was a great expense. After several years of doing that, the counselor decided they would no longer come back. If districts were to complete their counselor hiring practices earlier, it may impact the turnover rates.

Several counselors recommended that district recruiters give new counselors a realistic picture of what is to be found in their community. Discuss with prospective counselors the type of housing that is available and whether or not it will be provided by the district or if the counselor will be responsible for finding and paying for their accommodations. Furthermore, it was suggested that districts prepare counselors in how to deal with basic necessities such as how to get food supplies in and out of the village, how to access the phone or internet service, and how to work with basic utilities such as heat or electricity.

One counselor that was interviewed discussed that their district meets with new school personnel in Anchorage prior to locating them to the village. During that time they would take the new counselors and teachers shopping – they would show them what type of bins to buy for shipping food, help them determine what is best bought prior to reaching the village, and then take them to either a mailing or flying service and teach them how to ship their items. Another counselor mentioned that their district helped school staff purchase food items once they were in the village so that purchases could be make in bulk to enable lower costs. These counselors stated that they appreciated the district making these preparations and that it helped them to come to the setting more prepared and thus less likely to experience shock upon arrival. Other districts may want to adopt similar practices.

Another recommendation from counselors is that districts need to implement a counseling mentor program. One counselor mentioned that in one of their rural Alaskan placements that the school put her in contact with another counselor in a different location. Although there was only one counselor in each community covering several locations, she stated that is was helpful to know that you had someone you could contact. She stated, "I didn't have a mentor, but there was someone I could call up." As 44.1% of the survey participants and 62.5% of the counselors interviewed indicated professional isolation was a challenge, and 69.6% of the counselors indicated they were the only counselor that worked in their school, it would behoove districts to facilitate connections between the counselors. If there is only one counselor per district, they could facilitate networks with neighboring districts, as other research suggests (Drew & Breen, 2004).

Furthermore, schools and/or districts could help counselors clearly define their role. Lack of role clarity was found to be a big challenge for school counselors – 65.6% of the counselors specifically marked this as a challenge, and 68.8% marked the need to perform multiple roles to be a challenge. In recent research of Alaska elementary school counselors, McMorrow (2010) found that only 45 percent of her respondents stated they had a "somewhat clear written job description, while 12 percent indicated having an unclear description and 13 percent reported having no written job description" (p. 104). If districts could provide counselors with a more defined role, and ensure that all school personnel understand that role, it would help counselors to focus on the task of providing academic, career, and social emotional counseling to the student population.

Finally, school districts should help provide funding and release time for counselors to attend trainings. Professional development is necessary to keep abreast of new developments in the field, but it also provides an opportunity to network. But, counselors did caution districts in over scheduling the professional development time. Several counselors discussed the desire to network with other counselors while at these trainings or district in-service meetings, but their time was so regimented that there was not time to just get to know the other counselors and build connections. As these connections are

vital to offsetting the professional isolation, districts should allow for this type of networking to take place whenever possible.

Along those same lines, districts could provide new counselors with information regarding local, state, and national organizations that could provide useful connections to professional development, as well as provide a professional support system. New counselors could receive information regarding the Alaska School Counseling Association, as well as the American School Counseling Association.

Implications at the state level. The main recommendation on the state level is also in relation to providing counseling mentors. Several counselors referred to the teacher mentor program in the state of Alaska and wondered why school counselors were not included in this project. Again, professional isolation was seen as a big challenge. If new counselors were provided a mentor, it would help them deal with the professional isolation and give counselors the opportunity for supervision and consultation.

In addition to allowing counselors to become a part of the statewide mentor program, it was also suggested that the state have a school counseling specialist that could help advocate for counselors. This individual could also help facilitate a statewide counseling network to assist in building counselor connections, combating professional isolation, and broadening the limited resources in the rural communities. Furthermore, the statewide school counseling specialist could help to define the role of the school counselor at the state level, and help spread the word to other necessary constituents.

As of the fall of 2010, the state of Alaska Department of Education and Early Development did re-establish a full time State School Counseling position. School counselors within the state do need to be aware of this position (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2010). Counselors within the state need to be made fully aware of this position and how they can utilize this as a resource. Counselors outside of Alaska could benefit from advocating for a similar position in their home states as well.

State professional organizations should also be made aware of the needs and desires of rural school counselors. One of the main things counselors discussed was the desire to

attend the Alaska School Counseling Association (AkSCA) conference in the fall. Many counselors recommended that new counselors become involved in this organization, but also thought it was beneficial for all rural counselors. In addition, counselors felt that the AkSCA should actively advertise their role to school districts and specifically spread the word of their organization to new counselors. Several counselors stated that they wished they had been made aware of this organization when they began their career. One counselor stated, "I had been here two years before I went to it, before it caught my radar." This counselor further discussed the benefits of becoming which included the opportunity to connect with other rural counselors and find out about their resources.

In addition to providing an opportunity to get school counselors in the state together to network, the professional organizations can provide useful training opportunities. The AkSCA does provide continuing education credits, which can be used for the renewal of a current school counseling certification. For example, in the state of Alaska,

> Six semester or nine quarter hours of credit earned from a regionally accredited university are required for renewal or reinstatement of a Regular five-year certificate. Credits earned after the effective date of the certificate being renewed count toward recency credit(s). Three semester hours of credit may be continuing education units (CEUs) and/or with prior EED approval, non-academic credit.

(State of Alaska, Department of Education and Early Development, 2011, ¶ 1) These training opportunities can focus on topics for both urban and rural school counselors in topics specifically relevant for working with Alaskan communities.

Implications for training institutes. Several recommendations were made that were specifically targeted towards educational institutions that prepare new school counselors and/or offer continuing education or professional development. For example, 34.5% of the counselors indicated they wanted more professional development options, and they specifically wanted trainings to be on topics relevant to rural Alaska. As 76.3% of the counselors stated that dealing with crisis situations was a challenge, it is no surprise that the counselors recommended relevant training in how to manage crisis situations. Suggested topics included culturally relevant suicide training, training

regarding self-abuse, and training regarding drug and alcohol use. Furthermore, it was recommended that issues specific to rural areas be infused in to the curriculum. For example, one counselor recommended utilizing ethical scenarios that could realistically be found in the rural settings.

Many respondents recommended that counselors be adequately trained in cultural awareness. Research does suggest that culturally responsive schooling should be provided for Indigenous youth (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Although the majority of the research reviewed discusses this in relation to teachers, it is also important for counselors to adapt curriculum to meet the needs of the Alaska Native populations. More specifically, Castagno and Brayboy (2008) recommend using the student's culture to teach them. The benefits mentioned include enhanced self-esteem, the development of healthy identity formation, and being more self-directed. All of these are undertakings can be regarded as working towards the social and emotional development of the students, which is a counselor's task.

Along these same lines, participants recommended that new counselors be better prepared to work in a rural environment, and if possible should visit the rural setting prior to making a commitment. Weigel (2002) agrees that training programs need to better prepare counselors for work in rural settings. Jensen and Royeen (2002) recommend that training programs help to facilitate internships that would allow students to spend time in a cross-cultural setting. These opportunities might provide insight in to the nature of a rural community, but it may also provide the student necessary insight in to themselves.

Finally, the counselors discussed several specific skills that they deemed necessary to work effectively in a rural context. Having positive personal characteristics was mentioned most often as being a necessary characteristic. Although counselor training programs cannot specifically instill positive characteristics, they can certainly inform counselors of the skills most desired, and also assess counselors in their personal characteristics and provide feedback in relation to those areas they need to work on further.

Similarly, counselor educators can assess the student's interpersonal relations skills. They can provide feedback in relation to how they interact with others, whether or not they appear respectful to others, and provide them opportunities to network with a variety of professionals. Additionally, the ability to see other perspectives was seen as a necessary skill. Counselor educators could help facilitate this type of awareness by providing opportunities for students to respond to similar situations and share their viewpoints. Continuously allowing the student's access to different points of view will stretch the counselor's comfort zone and help build awareness of others in prospective counselors.

Finally, counselor educators can prepare counselors in regards to how their role might be affected just by being located in a rural setting. For example, counselors can be taught the necessity of knowing all available local resources. Educators can specifically provide examples of resources found in various villages to help illustrate the possible local resource options. Additionally, state and national level resources can be explored to help establish a breadth of resources that can be utilized wherever the counselor may find employment. This will help prospective counselors to understand that they may be faced with limited resources, but also will provide them a knowledge base in regards to how they might access all possible resources available.

The preparation for working in rural areas and accessing all available resources can extend to include the necessary training to utilize technology. As 50% of the school counselors mentioned utilizing technology as a resource, counselor preparation should include the opportunity to utilize these tools in coursework prior to completing their training.

The rural counselor role will not only be affected by the lack of resources, but additionally the necessity for travel, and the rural culture issues such as poverty, lack of trust, value conflicts, and high turnover. Depending on their location, they may have a transient population, and may have very limited privacy. Discussions could ensue in regards to the ethical issues of keeping confidentiality in a small setting, and maintaining role boundaries while negotiating multiple relationships. By discussing the various ways

in which a school counselor's role might be affected by being in a rural setting, the prospective counselor will be more prepared for working in that type of environment.

Implications for school counselors. Finally, there are specific implications for potential rural school counselors. Counselors intending to work in rural settings need to be proactive and learn all they can about the community in which they intend to work. It was recommended that they learn about the history, culture, and values of the community. One counselor recommended they thoroughly get to know the district website to determine the school's mission, as well as become familiar with the school board and the district level personnel.

The main suggestion for school counselors was to learn how to connect with all possible resources – that included school personal, community members and agencies, outside professionals, cultural resources such as elders and tribal organizations, as well as parents and students. Additionally, they need to have a firm grasp on the role of the counselor and be willing and able to discuss that role with others in a respectful and tactful manner. Furthermore, they need to be willing to gain cultural knowledge, as well as participate in continuing education and professional development.

Being able to connect with others is not only an issue for the local area, but rural counselors need to make an effort to learn about their professional organizations and become active participants to expand their connections with other professionals. Research in the field specifically states that rural counselors need to be involved in their state, regional, and national organizations to stay connected with other professionals, further their knowledge base, and help avoid professional isolation and burnout (Drew & Breen, 2004; Lund, 1990; McConnell, 1994; Monteiro-Leitner et al., 2006; Morrissette, 2000; Sutton, 1988; Worzbyt & Zook, 1992).

Finally, the respondents in this study highly recommended that counselors keep up personal care. This could be done in many ways, but counselors needed to be able to recognize when they were stressed and be able to do something about it. One way to help maintain personal care was to remain aware of the positives of living and working in a rural environment and to take advantage of those positive aspects. Self-care was a key to

avoiding burnout, staying positive, and being able to attend to the needs of the school community.

Counselors intending to work in a rural area need to be aware of specific variables that may increase the challenges of working in a rural area. For example, the current research found that being single and/or growing up in an urban setting increased the chance for counselors to find isolation to be a challenge when working in a rural environment. Therefore, single counselors should specifically look in to opportunities to establish ties to the local community, but also how to maintain ties with their support network that may be outside their community. The counselors in this study highly recommended counselors learn to communicate via videoconference to help maintain a healthy connection to their personal support network. In contrast, this research found that those counselors that grew up in a rural area of Alaska found maintaining boundaries to be more of a challenge. Therefore, counselors need to be aware of their own demographics and how they may impact them when working in a rural setting.

Summary of recommendations. As stated previously, there were few differences in regards to the challenges experienced by rural school counselors in Alaska and those discussed in the literature regarding other helping professional in other states. Additionally, the current research highlighted specific skills and understandings that would be useful for school counselors in rural settings, and this too complemented previous recommendations. This was also true when looking at the resources counselors currently utilize, and general tips for counselors intending to work in rural areas.

Although this data broadened the knowledge regarding the experiences of the rural school counselor, it also called attention to specific issues that could be addressed on the local school or district level, the state level, or through educational institutions that prepare new counselors or provide continuing educational opportunities for counseling professionals.

At the local level, it was recommended that schools better prepare prospective counselors for their environment by realistically discussing both the challenges and benefits inherent in their communities. Additionally, they could encourage new

counselors to join professional organizations and be supportive of training opportunities to enhance counselor's skills and help build professional networks. Finally, it was recommend they hire counselors prior to August, the month in which school starts, in hopes of retaining counselors before they find work elsewhere. Furthermore, upon hiring school districts need to provide counselors with a clearly defined job definition.

At the state level, it was recommended that counselors be included in a state mentorship program to help with supervision and issues of professional isolation. Additionally, professional organizations should provide outreach to new counselors to ensure they are aware of the organization and invite them to become members. Finally, it was recommended that states have a state school counseling position to help advocate for counselors and assist in addressing their needs.

Educational institutions preparing new counselors can infuse rural curriculum in to the coursework throughout the program, and provide professional development opportunities that focus on topics relevant to the rural culture. They could provide the opportunity for rural internships, and expand on the cultural knowledge base by promoting culturally responsive practices. Furthermore, they could provide a realistic picture of how the role of the school counselor might be affected by the rural setting, and provide opportunities for students to become familiar with resources and techniques that are currently being utilized in those settings. Finally, they can assess student's personal characteristics and interpersonal relation skills and provide appropriate feedback to allow the counselor to determine whether they might fit in to a rural environment.

Finally, counselors themselves need to be proactive in their response to working in a rural environment. They need to learn about their communities, gain cultural knowledge, and be willing to be an active participant in the community. School counselors need to have a firm grasp of the counselor role, actively build and maintain connections, join professional organizations, and keep abreast of current knowledge in the field. Finally, they need to be self-aware and able to maintain their own personal well-being.

Limitations

There are several possible limitations that need to be kept in mind in regards to this research study and the findings. The limitations fall under several categories including the survey itself, interview limitations, experience level issues, response bias, and the generalizability of results. Each of these issues will be discussed in this section.

Survey limitations. First of all, the survey itself had some limitations. The survey was developed by the researcher versus using a well-established survey, as there was not one developed specifically in this area. Although the information included in the survey was selected based on previous research, as well as reviewing surveys that were utilized in other research studies, there were some general flaws. For example, the questions in regards to years of experience had the following categories: under 1, 1–2, 3–5, 5–10, and more than 10. Two of the categories overlap: 3–5, and 5–10, therefore this could possibly have inflated the experience levels as people with only three to five years of experience may have marked the five to ten years category.

Additionally, the question regarding level of school(s) assigned also had a design flaw. The categories included: elementary, middle/junior high, high school, K–8, K–12, and other. Upon analysis it was found that several counselors marked more than one category. This was generally in response to the fact that there was not an option for working in an 8–12 environment (a combination of middle and high school). Again, this could have had an impact on the number of counselors actually working in the different levels of schools and therefore may not have painted an accurate picture of that variable.

Finally, three of the demographic questions called for write-in responses. The question regarding age asked participants to write-in their response versus mark a category. Thus, seven people skipped this question. Additionally, although it allowed for a specific average to be computed, it did not allow cross-tabulation with other variables. Therefore, this question was turned in to a categorical response question after all surveys were collected. The categories developed were: 23–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, and 60–69. The researcher categorized all participants with responses in to one of these five categories, which did allow for further analysis of data.

Another demographic variable that called for a write-in response was in relation to the district in which the counselor was employed. Only two people skipped this question, therefore adequate information was gained. The responses allowed for a tally of how many districts were represented, as well as how many counselors were from each district, but it did not allow for further analysis based on their location in rural Alaska. On retrospect, it would have been beneficial to provide participants with categorical responses regarding which region they were from based on the AkSCA information. This would have allowed further analysis in relation to the geographic area in which the school counselor worked.

Finally, question number nine asked participants to list any additional certifications or licenses they hold and provided a few samples in parenthesis (i.e., NBCC, LPC, LCSW). I believe it would have been beneficial to specifically ask whether or not the counselor had a teaching and/or a principal certification. The issue of role ambiguity came up often in regards to other school personnel understanding the role of the school counselor. It would have been interesting to note whether or not those with teaching or principal certifications also saw this as a problem, and whether this had an impact on other variables such as challenges reported.

Interview limitations. Although all interviews utilized the same script, they were conducted via different methods and at different time frames. As discussed previously, 17 participants interviewed during the month of June. This is directly after the school year has ended and participants were already on summer break. Six participants were interviewed in August after they had just returned back to the school setting, and one was interviewed in November when school was in full session. Participants may have had different attitudes and viewpoints at these different time frames. For example, those interviewed in June could have potentially been more relaxed if they were not currently working, and therefore been less likely to voice negative opinions. Or, on the other hand, they could have had the school year fresh in their minds and therefore may have been more able to voice accurate responses. In contrast, those returning in the fall could have stress regarding leaving family members if they were returning to their locations from

being away for a while, which was true of many of those counselors in the rural north or southwest regions, many of whom were interviewed in August.

Additionally, the methods of conducting the interviews was slightly different. Most of the interviews were conducted in person in the counselor's community, but several were conducted in a location outside their own community (i.e., Anchorage). Furthermore, two were over the phone, and one used videoconference. Although it does not appear that these differences altered the results in any fashion, the differences in methodology do need to be noted as participants may have varied their responses in reaction to where the interview took place.

Experience variables. In addition to the experience levels overlapping in the survey document, as discussed above, there is another issue in regards to participant's years of experience in their site. Many of the counselors interviewed had worked at several different locations in rural Alaska, as well as rural areas outside the state. As this was not a specific question on the survey, this did not become as apparent until the interviews were conducted. The interview participants continually talked about their experiences at different sites. Therefore, although they may have marked they only had 1-2 years of experience in their local setting, they may have been talking about their experiences in another setting where they had more years of experience. This helped to broaden the information base, but could have confounded the results as it was unclear whether the person was talking about the challenges they experiences particularly in rural Alaska, or in a rural setting in general.

Response bias. As discussed previously, no one place has a current list of rural school counselors in the state of Alaska. The researcher had to contact each school district and request a list of current counselors in hopes of compiling an adequate sample. Although 125 counselors were found, it is possible that some counselors were not located and therefore did not have the chance to express their views. Additionally, it is possible that some of the counselors were not truly in school counseling positions, but were just the individual in the school that was closest to being in that role. These populations

could have differed from the school counseling that did respond to the survey, and although unlikely, results could be skewed.

In addition, all of the participants in this study volunteered their time to complete the survey, even though a five dollar incentive was given to the survey participants, and a 25 dollar gift card to amazon.com was given to all the interview participants to thank them for their time. As participation was voluntary, school counselors who chose to participate may comprise a different view than those who did not. As discussed by Salkind (2006), "Nonresponders might constitute a qualitatively distinct group from responders. Therefore, findings based on nonresponders will be different than if the entire group had been considered" (p. 191). Additionally, as recommended by Dillman et al. (2009) incentives were included to help with survey response rates. But, as discussed by Erford (2008), it is possible that people may have responded just for the incentive and those people may differ from those who do not respond. Follow-up surveys were mailed after initial responses were received to help overcome the issue of nonresponders, but this issue always needs to be considered. Additionally, interview participants did not learn of the gift card until they had already agreed to participate, but before the actual interview. Therefore, this may not have affected who chose to be interviewed, but may have affected the actual responses.

An additional consideration is interviewer bias. All the interviews were conducted and analyzed by the same researcher. It is possible that the interviewer could have subtly focused on specific follow-up questions and therefore biased participants to respond in a certain manner (Salkind, 2006). Additionally, those interviewed may also respond in a biased fashion by only giving socially desirable responses. It was clear that the research was focused on the challenges and ways to overcome the challenges, therefore interviewees may not have considered positive aspects of their environment to be something that was sought by the researcher and thus may have not included this information unless it was specifically requested.

Generalizability of results. As stated earlier, all participants worked as school counselors in rural Alaska during the spring of 2010. Therefore, the research findings

may not be applicable to counselors working in other states. As mentioned previously, the state of Alaska has some unique geographic conditions, which may have impacted the results. Additionally, results may be more specific to one region of Alaska versus others. Seventeen participants came from one school district in the southern region of Alaska, so the possibility exists that these responses may have skewed results in one direction or another. Even so, due to the large number of respondents (93), and the fact that 76 of the participants noted that they grew up outside of the state of Alaska, it can be argued that the results can be extrapolated to a wider general population of school counselors.

Furthermore, the participants were all identified by their school as working in the position of a school counselor. Although, upon analysis of results it was found that fifteen participants marked the category of other instead of marking their current position as certified or provisionally certified school counselor, or holding a joint appointment. Participants without full school counselor training may have responded differently to survey questions than those in other positions (all interview participants marked that they were at least partially in school counseling positions during the time of the survey, although two were in principal positions by the time the interviews were conducted). Additionally, the information may not be able to be generalized to other helping professionals.

Suggestions for Further Research

There are few studies specifically looking at school counseling in a rural setting. This research can add to that knowledge base, but further research is also needed. Several findings suggest specific avenues of research that might be beneficial to explore further. First of all, future research could focus specifically on the challenges mentioned most often – crisis situations, isolation variables, and lack of role clarity. These challenges can be explored more fully to help determine how to address these issues more fully. Furthermore, the current research did not conduct statistical analysis on the data, but considering the high response rate further analysis can be computed to determine if any statistically significant differences are found between variables.

Additionally, this research is specific to rural Alaska. Including a broader spectrum of states would help to determine whether or not the results can be generalized to other areas. Additionally, the inclusion of other helping professionals that work in the school setting (i.e., mental health works, social workers, school psychologists, school nurses), may be able to further determine if suggestions and recommendations will apply to other helping professionals. This research could be extended to community counselors as well, but at minimum, a comparison to other school helping professionals could enrich the knowledge base even further.

Furthermore, several suggestions were made in regards to including rural components in counselor training programs, as well as focusing on rural issues in professional development. Although no specific differences were found in this research in regards to counselors who had participated in ethics or cross-cultural competency training within the last three years and the challenges they specified, it would be beneficial to determine whether or not including training specific to the rural context would change their views in regards to the challenges they face. Additionally, future research could look in to whether or not participating in professional organizations and trainings impacts the views of the rural counselor, their ability to deal with the challenges, and ultimately their retention in a rural work environment.

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Appendix A:

University of Alaska Fairbanks IRB Approval Letter

UAF
UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA
FAIRBANKS

(907) 474 7800
(907) 474 5444 fax
fyirb@uaf edu
www uaf edu/irb

Institutional Review Board

909 N Koyukuk Dr Suite 212 P O Box 757270 Fairbanks Alaska 99775 7270

April 2, 2010

To   Ray Barnhardt, PhD
      Principal Investigator

From   Bridget Watson
       Research Integrity Administrator
       Office of Research Integrity
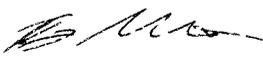
Re   IRB Protocol Application

Thank you for submitting the IRB protocol application identified below   This protocol has been
administratively reviewed and determined to meet the requirements specified in the federal
regulations regarding human subjects' protections for exempt research under 45 CFR 46 101(b)(2)
for research involving the use of educational test, survey procedures, interview procedures or
observation of public behavior, unless (i) information is recorded in such a manner that human
subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and (ii) any
disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside of the research could reasonably place the
subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing
employability, or reputation

Protocol #   10-09

Title   *Voices from Rural Alaskan School Counselors Exploring the Challenges and
                 How You Can Overcome Them*

Level   Exempt

Received   March 10, 2010 (original)
                 March 30, 2010 (revisions)

Exemption Date   April 2, 2010

*If there are major changes to the scope of research or personnel involved on the project, please
contact the Office of Research Integrity Email us at fyirb@uaf edu of call 474-7800 Contact the
Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding IRB policies or procedures*

UNIVERSITY   OF   ALASKA   FAIRBANKS

Appendix B:

Survey – Perceptions of School Counselors in Rural Alaska

Perceptions of School Counselors in Rural Alaska

1. Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. It should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete and consists of demographic questions, school setting questions, questions regarding the challenges you face as a rural school counselor in the state of Alaska, and finally the strategies you utilize to help deal with or overcome those challenges. Remember that you are under no obligation to complete this survey and may withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Your consent to participate is implied once you complete the survey
Thank you again for your participation, it is greatly appreciated.

* 1. Include the coded number indicated on the hard-copy of your survey or in the email you were sent.

[   ]

2. Demographic/School Setting Information

Please complete the following demographic section. The information will help to understand whether or not there are differences in challenges and/or strategies based on different characteristics of the school counselor or their school setting. To help ensure confidentiality, all information will be aggregated and no individual participant or school data will be discussed.

2. What is your gender?

| Male

| Female

3. What is your age?

[   ]

4. What is your ethnic background (mark all that apply)?

ε Caucasian, non-Hispanic   ε Pacific Islander

ε Hispanic/Latino(a)   ε Native American

ε African American   ε Alaska Native

ε Asian/Asian American

ε Other (please specify)

[   ]

Perceptions of School Counselors in Rural Alaska

5. What type of setting did you grow up in?
For the purposes of this question, a rural setting outside of Alaska is a location with a population less than 5,000; a rural setting in the state of Alaska is anywhere aside from Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, or Wasilla.

- ε Non-rural setting outside the state of Alaska
- ε Rural setting outside the state of Alaska
- ε Non-rural setting in the state of Alaska
- ε Rural setting in the state of Alaska

6. What is your current partnership status?

- ε Single
- ε Legally married
- ε Cohabitating in domestic partnership
- ε Same-sex life partner

7. How many children do you have living with you in your rural setting?

- | None
- | 1
- | 2
- | 3
- | 4 or more

8. What is your highest level of academic training?

- ε Bachelors Degree
- ε Masters Degree
- ε Doctorate Degree
- ε Other, please specify _____

9. List any additional certifications or licenses you hold (i.e., NBCC, LPC, LCSW).

| |

Perceptions of School Counselors in Rural Alaska

10. How many years have you been a school counselor in rural Alaska?

| Under 1

| 1 - 2

| 3 - 5

| 5 - 10

| More than 10

11. How many years experience do you have as a school counselor?

| Under 1

| 1 - 2

| 3 - 5

, 5 - 10

| More than 10

12. How many years experience do you have as a counselor outside the school setting?

| Under 1

| 1 - 2

| 3 - 5

| 5 - 10

| More than 10

13. In what district are you employed?

[   ]

14. What is your current position in your school?

ε Certified School Counselor

ϱ Provisionally Certified School Counselor

ε Joint Appointment

ϱ Other (please specify)

[   ]

Perceptions of School Counselors in Rural Alaska

15. How many years have you been employed in your current position?

| Under 1

| 1 - 2

| 3 - 5

| 5 - 10

| More than 10

16. What level of school(s) are you assigned?

ε Elementary

ε Middle/Junior High

ε High School

ε K - 8

ε K - 12

ε Other (please specify)

[   ]

17. How many different schools do you work with?

ε 1

ε 2

ε 3

ε 4

ε Other (please specify)

[   ]

18. How many counselors work in your school (including yourself)?

ε 1

ε 2

ε 3

ε 4

ε Other (please specify)

[   ]

Perceptions of School Counselors in Rural Alaska

19. Have you obtained training in any of the following in the past 3 years:

- Ethics training

- Cross-cultural competencies

- Have not participated in these trainings

3. School Counselor Perceptions

20. Do you experience any of the following as a challenge to working as a school counselor in rural Alaska? Examples are included to help clarify, but these specific situations do not all have to be experienced to mark this is a challenge.

- Confidentiality issues

- Crisis situations (i.e., suicide or child abuse and neglect)

- Cultural issues (i.e , related to racial or cultural differences)

- Lack of privacy or anonymity

- Lack of training, education, or professional development opportunities

- Lack of role clarity (i.e , role of school counselor is misunderstood)

- Large caseload

- Limited professional resources (i.e., assessment materials, colleagues, referrals, specialists, translators, work space)

- Limited community resources (i e., funding, housing, job or career development opportunities, transportation)

- Maintaining boundaries (i.e , dual or multiple relationships)

- Multiple roles (i e., expected to perform a wide variety of roles - be a generalist)

- Personal isolation (i e., lack of social activity, lack of personal support system)

- Physical isolation (i e , geographic conditions such as distance, terrain, or weather)

- Professional isolation (i.e., limited contact with colleagues; lack of consultation, supervision, or professional development opportunities)

- Rural culture issues (i e , poverty, lack of trust, value conflicts, stigma of counseling, unstable work force)

- Scope of practice (i.e , expected to attend to matters outside your competency or training)

- Stress and/or burnout

Please expand on any of the above challenges, or include any other challenges that were not stated above.

Perceptions of School Counselors in Rural Alaska

21. Describe any resources or techniques you use now to help you manage the challenges you experience.

22. Please describe any resources, if available, that you think might help you deal with these challenges even more.

23. Please include any other things you wish to share that you think would be useful for other counselors to hear in regards to working as a school counselor in rural Alaska.

4. Great! You're Done!

I appreciate your feedback. Your responses will provide valuable information that will hopefully benefit rural school counselors in the state of Alaska, and ultimately the children and families living in the communities we serve.

I will be conducting follow-up interviews with participants over the next month to gain more in-depth information to provide a clearer picture of what it is like to be a school counselor in rural Alaska and the specific challenges you face in that role. I hope to be able to provide information and resources to other rural school counselors in Alaska to help them cope with and overcome these challenges

If you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview, or you can recommend a rural school counselor that you feel has particular expertise in this area, then please provide contact information below. If completing in hard-copy, return it in the designated envelope.

If you have any questions concerning this survey or this research in general, please contact me I can be reached by email at crcook@alaska.edu or call my office at 907-474-5743. Thank you once again for your time and participation. - Christine R. Cook

Perceptions of School Counselors in Rural Alaska

24. I am willing to participate in a follow-up interview. My contact information is:

Name
School site
Email
Telephone
Preferred mode of
contact

25. I would not like to be interviewed, but do recommend the following school counselor:

Name
School site
Email (if known)
Telephone (if known)

Appendix C:

Initial Survey Letter

April 2010

Dear School Counseling Professional,

I am asking school counselors working in the rural areas of Alaska to participate in a doctoral dissertation entitled *Voices from Rural Alaskan School Counselors Exploring the Challenges and How You Can Overcome Them* The purpose of this research is to explore the challenges of being a school counselor in rural Alaska but more importantly to provide resources to help cope with and overcome these challenges The findings of this study will provide school counselors, both new and experienced with useful information to assist them in working in their rural environment This research is only possible with the assistance from school counselors such as yourself who are actively working in the rural settings of Alaska

Before proceeding I need to explain your rights as a participant in this research First, participation is entirely voluntary You are under no obligation to complete the survey and may withdraw from participation at any time without penalty Second although the survey is coded it has been designed to protect your confidentiality No identifying information is to be collected on the survey itself and only myself as the primary investigator and Dr Ray Barnhardt my doctoral committee chair will have access to the completed survey Third this study is not expected to involve any risks of harm greater than those encountered in daily life Potential loss of confidentiality is always a slight risk but given the non invasive nature of the data the harm associated with the risk is deemed negligible to non existent Fourth all results of the survey will be reported based on group data only Results will be available to participants upon request after all the data has been collected and analyzed The University of Alaska Fairbanks Institutional Review Board has approved this project for data collection with human subjects Your consent to participate is implied once you complete and return the survey

I am asking that you please help contribute to the knowledge base in the counseling field and take the time to fill out the enclosed survey which should only take approximately 15 minutes to complete The survey consists mainly of demographic questions, along with questions regarding the specific challenges you have faced being a school counselor in rural Alaska and what you have done to help overcome these challenges You have the option of completing the enclosed hard-copy of the survey instrument and returning it in the self addressed postage paid envelope or you can complete the survey on-line by sending me an email to crcook@alaska edu and I will send you the appropriate link If you decide to complete the survey on-line, you must enter the code located in the first question of your survey to ensure only one response is collected from each participant

Your timely response to this survey is greatly appreciated To thank you in advance, five dollars has been enclosed as appreciation for your participation, but is yours to keep even if you are unable to participate Although this is only a minor compensation, know that your responses will provide valuable information that will not only benefit rural school counselors in the state of Alaska but other helping professionals both in and out of the state counselor educators, and ultimately the children and families living in the communities we serve If you have any questions concerning this survey or this research in general please contact me by email at crcook@alaska edu or call my office at 907-474-5743 Thank you once again for your time and participation

Sincerely

Christine R Cook M S UAF Doctoral Candidate
Assistant Professor UAF Counseling Department

Appendix D:

Follow-Up Survey Letter

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May 2010

Dear School Counseling Professional

This letter is written as a follow-up to the survey I recently sent to you as part of my doctoral research. To remind you, the research is entitled *Voices from Rural Alaskan School Counselors Exploring the Challenges and How You Can Overcome Them.* I realize how busy and hectic things can get in this profession, and I wanted to thank you if you have already completed and returned the survey. Obtaining as many responses as possible will help ensure voices of school counselors across our rural Alaskan sites will be heard. Again, this research is only possible with the assistance from school counselors such as yourself, who are actively working in the rural settings of Alaska. Though as stated in the initial letter, your participation is entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to complete the survey.

If you have not yet returned your survey, please take the time to complete it and return it as soon as possible. If by chance you did not receive it or have misplaced it, I have enclosed an additional survey for your convenience. Again, you have the option of completing the enclosed hard-copy of the survey instrument and returning it in the self-addressed postage-paid envelope, or you can complete the survey on-line by sending me an email to crcook@alaska.edu and I will send you the appropriate link. If you decide to complete the survey on-line you must enter the code located in the first question of your survey to ensure only one response is collected from each participant.

Thank you for your time and for helping me complete my doctoral research. Remember if you have any questions concerning the survey or this research in general please contact me by email at crcook@alaska.edu or call my office at 907-474-5743. I thank you once again for your time and participation.

Sincerely

Christine R. Cook M.S. UAF Doctoral Candidate
Assistant Professor UAF Counseling Department

Appendix E:

Introductory Interview Script and Questions

Introductory Script for the Follow-up Interview

Thank you for participating in the initial survey and agreeing to participate in a follow-up interview. It is my hope that through these interviews I will be able to gain a clearer picture of what it is like to be a school counselor in rural Alaska and the specific challenges that you face in that role. But, the focus will be on what you have done, or are now doing, to help you overcome these challenges. I hope to be able to provide information and resources to other rural school counselor in Alaska to help them cope with and overcome the challenges they face.

Before proceeding, I want to remind you that your participation is entirely voluntary. You are under no obligation to complete the interview and may withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Also, I am asking permission to record the interview so that I can better attend to your conversation without the necessity of taking notes. If you are uncomfortable with me recording our interview, please let me know now and the interview will not be recorded. Additionally, although I will state your name at the start of the interview, which will allow me to contact you for clarification purposes in the future, I will not attach any identifying information in the final data collection and analysis. All results of the surveys and interviews will be reported based on group data only. Therefore, consenting to be interviewed is not expected to involve any risks of harm.

To thank you in advance, I am offering you a twenty-five dollar gift certificate to amazon.com to show appreciation for your participation, but is yours to keep even if you are unable to complete the interview process. Although I am ready to begin, I am asking that you please take a minute to complete the demographic part of the survey once again to help determine if any specific demographic characteristics are important when interpreting the interview data.

Now if you are ready, let's get started.

Open-Ended Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about the rural area in which you work as a school counselor (i.e., geographic, cultural, economic, historical aspects).

2. What are the main challenges working as a rural school counselor in your current setting? Are there others when you think of working in a rural school setting in general?

3. How is your work as a school counselor specifically affected by the rural setting?

4. Are there particular skills and/or understandings that school counselors working in rural settings need to be effective?

5. What resources do you use now to help you manage the type of challenges you described?

6. What resources, if available, do you think might help you deal with these challenges even more?

7. Are there other things you want to share that you think would be useful for other counselors to hear in regards to working as a school counselor in rural Alaska?

8. Any other comments you would like to share?

Questions 1 to 4 adapted from Drew (2004, p. 75-76); Questions 5 and 6 adapted from Womontree (2004).

Appendix F:

University of Alaska Fairbanks

School of Education Research Fund Approval Letter

June 15 2009

RE   UAF School of Education Faculty Research Fund
      Notification of Award

Dear Colleague

We are pleased to inform you that with approval from the Dean you have been awarded the UAF School of Education Faculty Research Fund. Your research proposal *Voices from Rural Alaskan School Counselors Exploring the Challenges and How You Can Overcome Them* will be funded in the amount of $12 000 Assuming that your IRB approval is in place, if applicable and satisfactory progress is shown at your interim report your funding is available from July 1, 2009 through June 30 2010. In accepting this award you (the PI) agree to the following terms and outcomes

Due Date	PI Obligation[1]	Notes
Prior to research	- Address any deficiencies noted in the proposal - Contact Sasha Wood to discuss funding & budget - Obtain IRB approval if necessary	
During research	PI is required to maintain a record of funds encumbered/spent	
February 15 2010	Interim Report[2]	Note progress achieved anticipated and encountered problems, budget spent and encumbered, and any changes in plans Failure to meet this specification could result in the termination of funding
February 15 2010	Deadline to request a research extension	

November 1 2010	Final Report[2]	This report must be suitable for public dissemination It should include
		    Abstract
		    Summary of findings
		- Plans for wider dissemination
		- Status of acquiring external funding

[1] IRB documents, letters of support and reports should be available to the Research Fund Committee if requested

[2] In any publication or document referring to this research the PI will indicate on the document or manuscript that This project was carried out with funds provided by the UAF School of Education Faculty Research Fund However, the findings are those of the investigators and are not necessarily those of the School of Education

Congratulations again on your successful proposal   We look forward to hearing the results of this research   We wish you the best of luck on this and future work

Sincerely
UAF SOF Faculty Research Fund Committee

Appendix G:

Initial Email to Possible Interview Participants

Hello –

I wanted to thank you for completing my survey regarding the perceptions of school counselors in rural Alaska. Also, I wanted to follow-up regarding your ability and willingness to participate in a follow-up interview that would enable me to gain further information on the topics in the survey. After all have been returned, I will review the list of possible interviewees and select a representative sample of rural school counselors to interview. I am hoping to conduct in-person interviews with participants (although I know this may not always be possible) between June 10th and June 30th. I will be coordinating my travel plans the first week of June. If you are still willing to be a participant, and that time frame works for you, please reply to this email (crcook@alaska.edu) or call 907-474-5743. Again, I truly appreciate your response to the survey.

Best wishes and have a great day!

- Christine R. Cook

Christine R. Cook, Asst. Professor

UAF School of Education

Counseling Department

crcook@alaska.edu

Phone: 907-474-5743

Fax: 907-474-5451