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Secondary Student Schedule Changes: Accountability Issues in School Counseling Program Management

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Descriptive data collected on student schedule changes have been missing in the literature. School counselors agree the task of changing schedules is overwhelming, but there is no measure indicating the extent of time and attention devoted to schedule changes. The purpose of this article is to present data gathered during the crucial schedule change period just prior to the beginning of a new academic term. The findings may provide an incentive for school counselors to begin collecting data related to scheduling and establish concrete measures for providing information for dissemination to school district decision makers.

Keywords: school counseling, scheduling, accountability, program management

School counselors engage in many roles, one of which has been described as a “scheduling guru” (Burhans, 1999). School counselors devote a significant amount of time to student scheduling and report this task as a “time robber” in their day and as excessive paper work (Hutchinson, Barrick, & Grove, 1986; Partin, 1993). In addition, counselors argue scheduling takes time away from the more central counseling duties of individual and group counseling (Miller, 2002). It is not surprising school counselors have reported scheduling as their least important function (Tennyson, Miller, Skovholt, & Williams, 1989) with counseling and consulting perceived as more important to their role in helping students.

High school counselors relate spending 31% of their time on individual counseling with students, 48% of which was for educational counseling and most likely related to class scheduling (Partin, 1993). These counselors revealed approximately 17% of their day was spent on administrative and clerical activities including scheduling duties that involved activities other than directly meeting with students. In comparison, middle and elementary school counselors reported spending 12% of the day at the middle school and 7% of the day at the elementary school on student scheduling. Therefore, high school counselors reported scheduling to be significantly more of a problem than did middle school or junior high school counselors (Hardesty & Dillard, 1994). Recognizing the problem, high school counselors reported the desired amount of time they would like to spend on administrative and clerical duties including scheduling as 7% compared to the reported actual 17% (Partin, 1993).

The previous data indicates a discrepancy exists between how high school counselors perceive their roles and the pro-

fessional expectations placed on them by the educational system, principals, and other administrators (Tennyson et al., 1989). School counselors report spending a tremendous amount of time on scheduling courses for students. Researchers (Borders & Drury, 1992) argue time spent on student scheduling is taking away valuable time from the developmental counseling goals of helping students formulate career plans through small group or classroom guidance activities. In 1989, Tennyson et al. put forth a call for computer programs to take over the administrative support function of scheduling so school counselors could be free to engage in other more meaningful activities.

Borders and Drury (1992), in a review of thirty years of research in school counseling, describe comprehensive school counseling programs that discuss scheduling and placement activities under coordination duties of school counselors. These authors report that while coordination activities are “paramount to effective delivery of services” (p. 489), it is very important that scheduling duties do not take too much of the time and attention of the school counselor. They further argue that when possible and “appropriate,” these coordination tasks should be given to support staff so counselors can dedicate most of their time to direct services. Coordination activities should be limited to those which increase the program’s effectiveness and accountability.

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Paisley and Borders (1995) expressed school counselors have experienced a “significant amount of role confusion and unambiguous clarity of focus in schools” (p. 151), and that school counselors are spending too much time on administrative tasks such as scheduling while they should be providing direct counseling services to students. This role confusion has the potential to cause many frustrations for school counseling professionals. One potential area of frustration for secondary school counselors is the rationale for students in seeking changes in their schedules. Students provide many reasons for changing schedules, and these reasons may vary by school district and school policy. However, it is important to understand the motives for students electing to change their schedules. This knowledge may help school counselors to be proactive during the pre-enrollment process to ward off unnecessary schedule changes.

Enrollment management activities occur through a collaborative effort between administrators, teachers, students, and school counselors. These enrollment activities encompass creation of academic plans (e.g., four year plans, NCAA requirements), pre-enrollment, actual master schedule building, schedule corrections, and successful enrollment into classes. There is, however, great disparity in reporting empirical data regarding enrollment management activities. A gap exists in the school counseling literature relative to reporting descriptive data on student requests for schedule changes, counselor time expended on schedule changes, and the fiscal cost to the district. The literature, other than presenting desired percentage of time allocations for school counselors, is silent on these program management issues.

The purpose of this article is to present data on secondary student schedule changes gathered during the crucial period just prior to a new beginning of an academic term. Such descriptive data may provide an incentive for school counseling programs to begin collecting information related to scheduling procedures to be utilized in data driven decision-making. Embracing a proactive stance at the local level may clarify the school counseling time allocations related to scheduling revealed in the literature and enhance the individual planning component of school counseling programs. This outcome research can provide concrete data for dissemination to administrators and boards of education for making policy decisions.

Method

Participants

The data in this study was gathered in a field study from 1,835 high school students enrolled during the fall semester of 2002 in two Midwestern high schools in the same community school district with a combined enrollment of 3,075 students. Of the 1,835 students participating in this study, 12% (n= 222) were in the 9th grade, 22% (n=404) were in the 10th grade, 27% (n=495) were in the 11th grade, and 34%

(n=625) were in the 12th grade. Female students comprised 49% (n=886) of the sample and males 51% (n=929). Students who were new to the district accounted for 3% (n=64) of the students. These new students were not omitted from the sample so an accurate descriptive baseline for the number of schedule requests and time obligations of secondary school counselors could be established.

Procedures

Data was collected as part of the program evaluation for the district’s comprehensive school counseling and guidance program. The intent was to collect data to develop a basic understanding of school counselor service delivery during high periods of schedule changing at the beginning of the school year. In addition, descriptive information regarding the number of student requests and reasons given for changing schedules were identified.

Twelve secondary school counselors at the two high schools gathered descriptive data during designated times just prior to the beginning of a new fall term. Two registration days were designated prior to the beginning of classes. During these two registration days, school counselors met with 37% of the students (n=684) requesting schedule changes. One week prior to classes 11% (6%) students were seen for schedule changes. School counselors met with 40% (n=738) of the students requesting schedule changes during the first week of classes. Five percent (n=88) of the students met with school counselors during the second week of classes, and less than 1% (n=7) met with school counselors during the third week of classes. Data indicating dates of requested schedule changes were missing for 11% (n=194) of the students in this study.

Students were asked to identify the reason for their decision to request a schedule change. A tabular checklist was created to gather data. Optional reasons were listed as: (a) early graduation, (b) early release, (c) failure of a class the previous year, (d) level change based on ability, (e) mistake in schedule, (f) new student registration, (g) parent request, (h) peers, (i) post secondary education, (j) special education, (k) teacher preference (student initiated), (l) teacher initiated request, and (m) work. Students seeking assistance not related to schedules during this time period were categorized as not applicable to the topic being studied. Counselors had an optional column to add qualitative data or comments. In addition, a final column was included to identify when a counselor was unable to change the student’s schedule. The data collection sheet utilized can be found in Figure 1.

Results

The district has a total school population of 3,075 students enrolled in grades 9 through 12 with 12 secondary school counselors. The school counselor to student ratio is 1 to 256. All of the school counselors participated in the data collection. Findings from a frequency distribution of the data indicate 1,835 (60%) of the enrolled secondary students in

Figure 1. Schedule Changing Log 2002-2003

Date	Name	Grade	Not applicable – Did not access counselor	Early Graduation	Early Release	Failure previous year	Level Change	Mistake	New Student Registration	Parent Request	Peers	Post Secondary	Special Education	Student Changes Mind	Teacher Preference (Student Initiated)	Teacher Request	Work	Other Comment:	Counselor was not able to change schedule
8/18	John Micheals	9						X										Adding French	
8/18	Tara Beken	9				X													
8/18	Becki Boss	10			X													Not Eligible	X

the district requested schedule changes over a 7-day period. Five percent (n=137) requested schedule changes the school counselors were unable to accommodate. A frequency distribution of total enrollment by grade level revealed 27% of the 827 freshmen (n=222), 52% of the 773 sophomores (n=404), 67% of the 742 juniors (n=495) and 85% of the 733 seniors (n= 625) in the school district elected to change their schedules. There was no significant difference between males (n=929, 51%) and females (n=886, 49%) related to requests for schedule changes.

Reasons for Requesting Schedule Change

The top five reasons in order of highest frequency given by students (n=1,835) for changing their schedules were students changing their minds in 38% (n=692) of cases, mistake in the schedule resulted in 12% (n=226) of changes, early release represented 9% (n=160) of the cases, teacher preference initiated by the student yielded 6% (n=114) of the time, and changes related to ability level in classes represented 4% (n=81) of changes. The categories of parent requests for changes (n=62), new student registration (n=64), and failing a class from the previous year (n=62) each yielded 3% of the reasons for student schedule changes. Two percent of the students cited early graduation (n=44)

and 2% (n=44) selected special education as the reasons for making schedule changes. Less than 1% indicated their decision to make a schedule change was based on peers (n=13), post secondary education (n=25), teacher request initiated by teachers (n=24), or work (n=18). In addition, less than 1% (n =10) of the students indicated the reasons provided for changing schedules did not apply to them.

Seniors were the most likely group to request schedule changes considering 85% of all enrolled seniors requested a schedule change. Juniors, sophomores, and freshmen followed in descending order by percentages of schedule changes requested. The primary reason for schedule change requests by 11th and 12th grade students was the student changed their minds. Eliminating the student changed their mind category provides greater insight into specific reasons for students requesting schedule changes. Seniors cited early release and failure of a class the previous year as the primary motives for their requests. Juniors expressed mistakes on the schedule and early release as their primary justification for requesting schedule changes. Sophomores reported mistakes on enrollment forms and teacher preferences as their greatest reasons for changing schedules. Freshmen identified their top reason for changing their schedules was a mistake on the schedule. Reasons given for schedule changes by grade level are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Reasons for Schedule Change Requests by Grade Level (N=1,875)

Reason	Grade Levels			
	9th	10th	11th	12th
Student Changed Mind	61	148	227	245
Mistake	72	61	50	42
Early Release	0	13	47	98
Teacher Preference initiated by student	16	41	26	25
Failure of Class in Previous Year	14	20	28	62
Abilities Level Change	17	19	29	16
Parent Request for Schedule Change	16	17	12	14
Post Secondary	0	0	25	25
Special Education	7	12	10	13
Teacher Request initiated by teacher	2	5	6	5
Work	0	2	5	11
New Student Registration	4	11	5	12
Early Graduation	0	0	2	32
Peer Reasons	2	4	3	4
Not applicable	1	2	3	3
Total Requests by Grade Level	222	404	495	625

School Counselor Time Allocations

School counselor time allocations devoted to changing schedules provide additional information for consideration. In this school district the majority of schedule changes occurred over a seven day period during the two registration days prior to the first day of classes and the during the first week of classes. An estimated cost to the school counseling program and the district can be calculated as follows by using the following formula: (number of counselors) x (number of days) x (percentage of time allocated or expended) x (average daily salary including benefits) = (total financial cost to district). For example, 12 school counselors dedicated 100% of their time for a total of 84 days of contracted time. The average daily salary including benefits for school counselors in this district was \$297. Therefore, a conservative estimate of cost to the district in resources devoted to secondary schedule changes is \$24,948. The fiscal calculation increases to \$49,896 when you consider the window for changing schedule occurs twice during a regular academic year for a total of 168 days devoted to schedule changes or 7% of the overall salary budgeted for secondary school counselors in the district. The fiscal calculations do not include the fiscal cost for other enrollment management activities or the amount of money expended on purchasing text-

books and materials based on pre-enrollment numbers that may change drastically when 60% of your student body moves from one class to another. In addition, the loss of instructional time for teaching staff during the schedule change period is not included in the fiscal calculations.

Discussion

Results from this study indicate there is a need to further examine the procedures leading to schedule changes in secondary schools. Identification of 60% of all enrolled secondary students and 85% of all seniors in this district as requesting schedule changes is a call for action. Data driven decision-making relies on using quantifiable information to re-examine current practices. Enrollment management practices in school counseling programs must be examined to increase accountability and allow reform in these procedures.

Fifty percent (n =906) of all student schedule change requests in this sample were attributed to the students changing their minds or mistakes on the schedule. Eliminating these two categories would reduce schedule changes by one-half. Concentration on eliminating or decreasing schedule change requests for students changing their mind, mistakes on schedule, early release, teacher preference, and changes related to ability level would account for 68% of the sche-

dule changes requested or 42% of the overall student enrollment in the secondary schools in this district.

Limitations

Categorically forced choices were used in this study and need to be examined in future studies. The categorical choice of the student changing their mind is vague and in future data collection should be eliminated or qualitatively explored through conversation to gain greater clarity. Mistakes on enrollment forms might indicate a need for increased clerical inspection at the end of the pre-enrollment process. Although, all grade levels gave this rationale for schedule changes, a higher frequency was determined for the incoming freshmen than other grade levels. Careful consideration of sequencing freshman orientation to secondary curriculums and completion of pre-enrollment procedures may help to eliminate some mistakes, especially given these students were in the beginning of their second semester of eighth grade when the pre-enrollment forms were completed.

Some requests for schedule change were directly related to written school policies. A student requesting early release from the school day is related to the attendance policies for this school district. Each high school has policies in their respective student handbooks related to dropping classes. These written policies include statements such as the following: students are expected to be enrolled in a minimum of 5 major courses during each semester; schedule changes may occur during the first three weeks of each semester without grade penalty; approval for the change must come from the teacher, assistant principal, and/or guidance counselor; and parents will be notified of any dropped classes.

Teacher preference as a reason for changing a schedule may be relational or based on student word of mouth. The number of schedule changes in this study related to teacher preference by students accounted for 6% of the overall requests. Future studies are needed to examine the underlying variables involved in changing a course because of teacher preference. Whether the basis for change is a previous relationship with a teacher, a preference for varying levels of teacher academic accountability, or just social rumor passed among peers, this rationale for student choice has not been explored in the literature.

Failure in a class the previous year is a legitimate motive for requesting a schedule change; however, most class failures are known immediately after the close of an academic term. These changes could be identified and corrected with clerical oversight prior to the new academic year. This may require additional contracted days outside of the regular school year.

Implications for School Counseling

Effective school counseling program management requires facing the challenges inherent in schedule changing as a part of ongoing evaluation and program accountability. The results of this study indicate school counselors need to develop strategies to separate their role in individual planning from

clerical tasks of schedule changing. The findings provide concrete data related to one school district's schedule change requests and the impact on the secondary school counseling program. Other school counseling programs may use the information provided as a starting point for comparison. The following recommendations are offered to school counselors for addressing the issue of secondary schedule changes:

- Consider schedule changing within the context of the individual planning role of school counselors in enrollment management. Enrollment management procedures consist of determining the proper timing and personnel for pre-enrollment. Revisit enrollment before school starts, possibly in June, by distributing student schedules thus allowing time for changing schedules prior to the beginning of the academic year.
- Revisit current policies and procedures related to scheduling, schedule changes, early release, and teacher preferences. Establish and adhere to district policies that clearly articulate procedures for schedule changes.
- List the rationale and needs for conducting early pre-enrollment such as hiring teachers and staff, purchasing needed materials, accommodating student requests for advanced or ancillary classes, and determining budget.
- Identify and meet the needs relevant to each particular grade level related to schedule changes. For example, if your school district allows early release, establish guidelines and procedures for students to identify this request early.
- Concentrate on decreasing cases where students change their minds by dedicating more instructional time to students during the pre-enrollment period. This may require greater collaboration with classroom teachers, but it may equip students with more informed decision making skills.
- Redistribute tasks to paraprofessionals so school counselors can focus on academic individual planning. For example, multi-year academic plans, career portfolios, transitioning issues, collegiate regulations, admissions standards, and graduation requirements may be the focus of the school counselor. Think outside of the box; schedule changing is the clerical side of academic planning.
- Designate job responsibilities for clerical assistants which may include: (a) reviewing and comparing individual schedules to student/counselor created multi-year academic plans and career goals in order to decrease mistakes on pre-enrollment forms, (b) reviewing all failed classes after grades are reported and checking schedules for necessary changes.
- Instead of extending contracts for school counselors the first two weeks after school ends, move this contract to a summer appointment to address student academic plans.
- Explore technology as an alternative to traditional enrollment management techniques.
- Organize a focus group involving students, teachers, administrators, and parents to discuss local data collected on schedule changing.

Many questions need to be answered. The author suggests three questions for further discussion in light of the data collected in this study. First, are traditional pre-enrollment practices currently used in secondary schools successful? Second, what changes are necessary to be proactive in meeting student and school district needs when scheduling student classes? And third, what changes are necessary to decrease the intense time allocations of school counseling professionals during the crucial period of a new academic year? These questions need to be explored on the local level when evaluating district secondary school counseling programs.

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