

A STUDY OF THE JOB SATISFACTION OF BEGINNING SCHOOL COUNSELORS  
AND THEIR TRANSITION INTO THE FIELD

By

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ABSTRACT

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Guidance counselors are an important part of our school systems. Due to the extreme amount of information a new counselor needs to know, the transition into the field can be very difficult. It is beneficial to understand how the transition can be improved. It is known that if a person is not satisfied with their position, it is difficult to perform to potential. It is beneficial to determine whether the transition into the position as a school counselor becomes easier with each year on the job, and the specific factors, which may facilitate or hinder this transition.

This study involved an examination of the relationship between job satisfaction and the beginning years in the school counseling profession, specifically whether job satisfaction is higher among counselors who have made their transition into the field during a four-year period. Job satisfaction reports obtained through personal interviews

with beginning counselors were used to measure the counselors' job satisfaction and related factors. It was found that school counselors do not become more satisfied with their job as the number of years of experience increase; in fact, there was a slight difference in the opposite direction. The results also showed that the level of stress a counselor perceives him/herself to be experiencing does not decrease as they adjust to the new career. It may be that 1-2 year counselors felt more satisfaction with their career due to recently finding a job. Counselors in the 3-4 year group may have begun to feel less idealistic as they realized they could not remedy all of their students' problems.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Purpose of the Study.....	2
Assumptions of the Study.....	3
Definition of Terms.....	3
Limitations of the Study.....	4
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	
Roles of School Counselors.....	5
Job Satisfaction.....	6
Beginning School Counselors.....	8
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	
Participants.....	10
Instrumentation.....	10
Procedure.....	11
Data Analysis.....	12
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS	
Career Satisfaction.....	13
Stress Level.....	13
Roles of a School Counselor.....	14
Best Part of the Job.....	14
Support System.....	14
Expected Stress Level.....	15
Factors Facilitating Transition.....	15
Summary of Results.....	16
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION	
Limitations.....	18
Recommendations.....	18
Summary.....	19
REFERENCES.....	20
APPENDIX A: Interview Questions.....	22
APPENDIX B: Consent Form.....	23

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Demands from both students and faculty members exist within the field of school counseling. A counselor's role may vary depending on the district in which they are employed. Expectations and job duties may also differ with various school environments. For various reasons, school counselors are spread thin in the schools. The number of students to each counselor varies by district. However, in numerous situations, counselors are overloaded with students. Counselors must meet certain standards and follow their school curriculum, while balancing the needs of their individual students. The American School Counselors' Association has outlined specific standards, which must be maintained. Every student must experience development in three different areas, defined as academic, career, and personal/social. Individual counseling, small group and classroom interventions, as well as consultation with parents, teachers, and other staff are all vital in the healthy development of the students. Though school counselors must meet the demands of professional standards, they must also meet the expectations of the community members. According to Paisley (2001), not only are school counselors struggling to meet the demands of multiple persons, they are also trying to juggle the debate over role definition. School counselors are encouraged to be involved in both the academic and mental health aspects of the students. The list of responsibilities that is expected of the counselor may range from providing individual and small group counseling, classroom guidance, and even family interventions. Counselors are also expected to be specialists in mental health and development. They are expected to connect with the community and prevent student failures such as pregnancies, dropouts, drug use, and suicide. As previously mentioned, the student to counselor ratio

can vary dramatically depending on the school district. With these various demands, fulfilling all expectations can be extremely difficult. Not only do counselors have to meet the needs of their students, they are also accountable within the educational system. They must demonstrate that they are successful in their guidance setting. Program evaluations must occur in order to establish that the counselor is meeting the needs of the students and something is being accomplished. Administrators, professional organizations, and legislators require concrete proof that the funded program is effective. School counselors are faced with a variety of stressors in their everyday situations. The job can be very demanding. For any individual beginning a new career, new challenges are encountered. This study will involve an examination of school counselors' job satisfaction as they begin to face the many challenges that occur when beginning work in the counseling field.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

Currently, a great deal of information exists about job satisfaction. Studies have been conducted to determine the sources of satisfaction on the job. Through on site interviews of school counselors who have been in the field from 1-4 years, the researcher will conduct a study of job satisfaction of beginning school counselors as they transition into the field. Data will be collected during the spring semester of 2004, using an interview of 12 questions given to K-12 counselors in five school districts in midwestern Wisconsin.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the job satisfaction of school counselors increases after the initial adjustment phase. Due to role ambiguity and the

various demands of the school-counseling position, the researcher hypothesized that counselors would become more satisfied with their career as the number of years in service increased. It was also believed that the level of stress a counselor perceives him/herself to be experiencing would decrease as they adjusted to the new career. A new counselor may feel overwhelmed with the magnitude of their duties and deciding upon the methods by which they will be completed. This study examined whether a significant difference exists in these factors between counselors who have been in the field for 1-2 years and those who have been in the field from 3-4 years.

#### *Assumptions of the Study*

The following were assumptions of this study:

1. The interview questions were a reliable measure of job satisfaction and stress levels of the school counselor.
2. Participants replied honestly to the questions asked in the interview process.

#### *Definition of Terms*

Satisfaction- “The gratification of a desire, need, or appetite” (The American Heritage Dictionary, 1983, p.608)

Job Satisfaction- “Evaluate positively their pay, supervision, chances for promotion, work environment, and tasks they do” (Mitchell, T., Holtom, B., & Lee, T., 2001, p.97)

Transition- “An instance or process of changing from one form, state, subject, or place to another” (The American Heritage Dictionary, 1983, p.718)

School Counselor-“Professionals who assist students with developmental tasks, particularly in elementary, middle, and high schools” “These 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 , 1999, p.1)

### *Limitations of the Study*

The following were limitations of the study:

1. The lack of anonymity may have altered the results.
2. Counselors may have felt inclined to portray satisfaction with their job.
3. The sample consisted of only 10 participants.
4. The participants consisted of only counselors in the field from 1-4 years.
5. Issues of defeat may have persuaded counselors to alter their true thoughts and feelings on the subject.

In chapter two, the researcher defined the role of a school counselor at the elementary level, middle school level, and high school. Secondly, the key components to satisfaction with a chosen career were examined. Finally, aspects of beginning a new career and the transition into the field were discussed.

In the remaining chapters, the methodology for the study was discussed, followed by results and conclusions drawn, and possible recommendations for further study into the research of school counselors and job satisfaction.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Roles of School Counselors*

“The most significant challenge for school counselors rests in the ongoing debate over role definition” (Paisley, 2001, p. 3). Due to the high demands of the program and time constraints, counselors are unrealistically expected to be all things to all people within the school. Throughout the years, school counseling has expanded tremendously. With this expansion, the needs of students have grown as well. Paisley and Hayes (2003) stressed, “Accepting the challenge to raise the educational attainment of every student to enable full citizenship participation presents a significant shift for today’s school counselor. Today’s school counselor is envisioned to be a school leader who advocates for the academic, career, social, and personal success of every student.” For instance, the task of student development and guidance was once the responsibility of the classroom teacher. Today, elementary counselors are very active within the classroom. According to Schmidt (1999), the All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 and the A Nation at Risk report of 1983, resulted in the placement of a counselor in all elementary schools. In most schools a developmental program is used to assist children in learning needed social skills, building self-concept, and promoting positive interactions. Parents play a key role in the development of children, and therefore the counselor must connect and form relationships with the parents of the students with whom they may be working. According to Schmidt (1999), the counselor’s role is to assist the teacher in achieving overall success for every student. The counselor must be able to communicate with the teachers and work together to form the best plan possible for each student. At the high school level, the counselor has an impact on postsecondary options for students. Paisley

and Hayes (2003) state, “Counselors were seen as being ideally positioned in schools to serve as advocates who create opportunities for all students to define, nurture, and accomplish high academic aspirations,” (p. 200). The roles of a school counselor can fluctuate greatly depending on the different grade level and depending on district expectations. The roles previously listed are just a glimpse of the various duties school counselors possess. Everyday duties at any level will include: individual and small group counseling, classroom guidance, consultation with parents, teachers, and administrators, and school leadership. Duties may also include being the developmental specialist, the mental health specialist, assisting in the prevention of suicides, pregnancies, dropouts, and drug use, and providing interventions for students at-risk (Paisley, 2001, p.2).

According to Whiston (2002), “Most school counselors I know report that their day goes by in a whirlwind of activities, where they wonder at the end of the day what they have accomplished. One of the reasons for this is the multiple expectations that people have of school counselors and most counselors’ basic desire to help.”

### *Job Satisfaction*

As stated by Pelsma (2000), “Counselors are directly affected by the positive or negative climate of their schools. The attitudes and well-being of the teachers and staff with whom they work become important as they attempt to deliver their program and continue to define their role in the school.” Many variables can contribute to satisfaction on the job. In his book, Whiteley (2001) includes a self-test using statements to assess job satisfaction. These statements focus on criteria such as humor at work, positive outlook when things do not go as planned, passion for the chosen career, and pressure at work. Jansen (2003) uses a similar approach to determine job satisfaction. Her book

includes a self-assessment directed more towards feelings about the work environment and thoughts about the way in which the current position is going. It is important that when feelings of dissatisfaction arise, a person steps back from their thoughts and evaluates what the problem truly is. According to Tracy (2001), a person must first define the problem. It is important to determine which parts of the problem are caused by external forces and those caused by internal. Next, a vision must be formed. Once the problem is identified, it is important to plan ways that it can be fixed. Next it is important to acknowledge and accept the feelings that come with discontent. Finally, conscious choices must be made. It is important to realize that the power for change lies within the person. Pelsma, Richard, Harrington, and Burry (1989) listed ten factors that contribute to job satisfaction. These factors include relationship with administration. It is important to trust and be able to interact with the person in charge. Time is a key factor. It is important to have enough time for appropriate planning and effective teaching. The students have a key role. Their motivation, discipline, and willingness to learn can greatly affect job satisfaction. Interruptions or disruptions can be detrimental to success. The work environment should provide needed equipment and materials to aid in the teaching process. External and internal support is crucial. Relationships with parents, teachers, and other staff can determine happiness in the workplace. The job market is important. Opportunities for advancement are vital in any field. Extrinsic rewards include pay scale and benefits. Finally, evaluations as a counselor and evaluations of students are valuable in remaining satisfied (in Pelsma, 2000). As previously discussed, the workload demands on school counselors is constantly growing. According to Sears (2002), school counselors are pulled in all different directions. They feel a constant sense

of overload. This constant feeling of near failure contributes greatly to the sense of being dissatisfied at work. Pelsma (2000) states, “Stress has a major impact on the entire school and can be understood as the reason for a first-year teacher’s failure to continue in teaching or a veteran teacher who changes careers or chooses early retirement,” (p.1).

### *Beginning School Counselors*

According to Musheno and Talbert (2002), “School counselors must be equipped to become leaders in educational reform and advocates for improving students’ academic achievement,” (p.187). As counselors begin their career, it is uncertain what will be expected. As previously discussed, districts may have varying ideas of the roles of a school counselor. It is uncertain what a counselor’s exact role may be until they begin their career in a particular school. Most school counseling programs consist of similar coursework, including theory and practice, growth and development, and group work. Practicum experience or internship are required as part of the coursework (Jackson, Snow, Boes, Phillips, Standard, Painter, and Wulff, 2002, p. 2). These experiences, however, do not always prepare counselors for the exact role that they may happen to fill. According to the findings of Brott and Myers (1999),

Counselors-in-training must be prepared with a mindset that they will evolve and change in their professional role, that they will be made aware of the factors that impact their professional development, and they will ultimately determine the counseling program and services offered in the school setting (in Jackson, Snow, et al., 2002, p. 178).

According to Portman (2002), first year counselors often feel the pressure to know the history of all the students and what is happening with them. It can be overwhelming to

be the only person in the building as a school counselor. A sense of alienation may occur, and the feeling that there is no one in the school that can answer questions that may arise. It is important for beginning counselors to realize the importance of support systems. Morrissette (2000) states,

School counselors can develop social support networks consisting of colleagues, friends, and family. In maintaining a social support network, it becomes the responsibility of school counselors to inform colleagues and significant others about the inherent challenges of their work and, more importantly, their vulnerability, (p. 8).

Many variables that affect the satisfaction of beginning counselors exist. They are asked to step into a position with many varying responsibilities. It has been determined that strong relationships and support systems within the school can effectively lessen the burden.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Due to the importance of guidance counselors within our schools, it is important to take notice of their job satisfaction. This study will attempt to determine whether the job satisfaction of school counselors increases after the initial adjustment phase. This chapter will include the subject selection and description, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis, and limitations.

### *Participants*

Ten counselors were interviewed. The counselors were chosen by length of time in the field. All counselors in the five districts, who had been working in the field from 1-4 years, were asked to participate. The participants were recruited using relative location in reference to the researcher. The researcher was given names from counselors who knew of other counselors in certain districts who would meet the requirement of a 1-4 years. Within the five districts, ten counselors fit this description. Counselors were initially contacted by the researcher and asked to participate in the study. All ten of these counselors agreed to participate in the study. All counselors chosen were from five different Midwest Wisconsin public, rural school districts similar in population size. The size of districts was relatively similar, between 1,000-1,200 students.

### *Instrumentation*

Interviews were used to gather data for the study. The researcher designed the instrument, which consisted of 12 questions focusing on the counselors' perceptions of their career. The interviews were used to allow the participants to discuss their current position and their satisfaction with the position. In 2 of the questions, the participants were asked to rate their feelings of satisfaction and stress level. The other questions were

used to extract information about possible factors influencing job satisfaction. Each of these questions was open-ended and allowed the participant to form his or her own interpretation. The participants were asked the length of time at their profession, their overall rating of their satisfaction with their job at the time of the interview, and their projected satisfaction rating.

### *Procedure*

First, the potential participants were sent a copy of the interview questions along with a consent form to sign and return. They were informed that they could choose not to answer specific questions at any time throughout the interview process. The interviews were conducted at the convenience of the participants in their respective offices. Voice tapes were used during the interview to record the participants' answers for later transcription. Each counselor was asked a series of 12 questions relating to their profession. The interview took approximately 30 minutes depending on the answers given by each participant.

### *Data Analysis*

The counselors were divided into two groups. The groups consisted of counselors who have been in the field from 1-2 years and those in the field from 3-4 years. A t-test was used to analyze the relationship between the number of years the participant had been a school counselor and their ratings from 1(low)-7(high) of job satisfaction and level of stress. The transcribed answers to the interview questions were used as qualitative information to interpret the quantitative results. All results were reported as group data to protect the confidentiality of the participants. School names were also withheld.



*Limitations*

Each group consisted of only five participants. Because the researcher chose to use personal interviews to obtain information, the amount of time needed to conduct the interviews restricted the number of counselors who could participate. Also, it was more difficult than expected to locate counselors who have been in the field from only 1-4 years. Due to time constraints, the researcher was unable to interview counselors in the field for longer periods of time to determine a relationship as time went on. Because personal interviews were used, anonymity may have been an issue. The counselors may have felt inclined to answer the questions in a way that would be socially acceptable.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

An interview was administered to ten school counselors who have been in the field from 1-4 years. The interviews were used to measure the counselors' job satisfaction and related factors. The purpose of this study was to determine whether job satisfaction of school counselors increases after the initial adjustment phase. It was also believed that the level of stress a counselor perceives him/herself to be experiencing would decrease as they adjusted to the new career.

### *Career Satisfaction*

The hypothesis that counselors become more satisfied with their career as the number of years of experience increases was not supported. In fact, the results were marginally significant in the opposite direction than expected,  $t(8)=1.826$ ,  $p=.0525$ . The mean for the 1-2 year group ( $n=5$ ) was 6.0 ( $SD=1.00$ ) and for the 3-4 year group ( $n=5$ ) was 5.0 ( $SD=.71$ ). The ratings ranged from 5-7 (1 being low and 7 being high) for the 1-2 year group and 4-6 for the 3-4 year group.

### *Stress level*

The hypothesis that the level of stress a counselor perceives him/herself to be experiencing would decrease as they adjusted to the new career was also not supported. There was no difference found between the stress ratings of the two groups,  $t(8)=.258$ ,  $p=.4015$ . The mean stress rating for the 1-2 year group ( $n=5$ ) was 5.6 ( $SD=1.14$ ) and the 3-4 year group ( $n=5$ ) was 5.8 ( $SD=1.3$ ). The ratings ranged from 4-7 for the 1-2 year group and 4-7 for the 3-4 year group.

### *Roles of a school counselor*

The main roles of the school counselor varied regardless of the length of time in the field, depending on the counselor's position. Counselors in the elementary setting expressed individual, classroom, and small group guidance occupying the majority of their time. In the high school setting, roles of the counselor ranged between completing the master schedule, individual counseling, small groups, classroom guidance, and assisting with discipline.

### *Best part of the job*

It was found that the best part of the job for all counselors interviewed, was the one on one time with the students. The counselors expressed feeling effective when they were able to actually help individual students. The greatest demands of the job differed slightly between the two groups. It was expressed through all interviews with counselors in the 1-2 year group that time was the greatest demand. Throughout, a sense of never having enough hours in the day to help all of the children was expressed. The greatest demand expressed by the majority of the 3-4 year group was not being able to do more for individual students. Through all five interviews within this group, it was noted that a school counselor could only do so much. The optimism of the first two years began to wear off, as the counselors began to realize that they could not fix many of their students' problems.

### *Support System*

The support system within the schools consisted of other school counselors, teachers, administrators, and other staff. It was noted by both groups that it was

important to feel heard by their administrator and to work with the teachers to ensure the success of the individual students.

### *Expected level of stress*

The responses to the interview questions pertaining to whether the level of stress decreased, stayed the same, or increased since the participants began their job and whether the stress level was expected to change over the next 5 years were not clearly categorical due to various factors. Participants expressed many thoughts on the subject. Because the school counseling profession is a very demanding position, the level of stress fluctuates on a daily basis. The 1-2 year counselors reported feeling overwhelmed at the beginning of their first year knowing they had numerous things to learn. However, as the first year progressed they realized the number of responsibilities increased as they had been there longer, and therefore the stress once again increased. All participants suggested that the amount of stress they felt depended on the daily issues with which they were faced. Many days they were able to leave the school feeling as though something had been accomplished. Other days, they were left with an overwhelming feeling of defeat. Also, the stress level over the next five years could not be estimated by either of the two groups. The variables raised consisted of the possibility for a decrease in stress once the individual became more experienced, maintaining the same level of stress due to continual daily situations, and possible increase in stress due to the rise in societal problems.

### *Factors Facilitating Transition*

Factors that may have made an easier transition for beginning school counselors consisted of more practical experience and a more defined role and curriculum. All

involved felt they were not prepared for the job when they started. It was unanimous that classroom experience could not prepare an individual for everyday circumstances they would encounter in the field. College classes provide a broad spectrum of information and cannot include all the material needed for the multitude of possible situations. Every school district has its own expectations of a school counselor and therefore beginning a new job can be very difficult. A counselor initially feels very uncertain of what is exactly expected. When a previous curriculum guide is present, the counselors have a foundation to form their own developmental guidance curriculum. If absent, it is more difficult for a beginning counselor to know for sure what the district requires.

#### *Summary of Results*

The interview produced many interesting thoughts about the school counseling profession. In both groups of participants, the answers given were similar. The number of years on the job did not seem to affect the perceptions of the counselors. The main difference found by the researcher was the amount of time the 1-2 year counselors expressed devoting before and after school to their positions. The 3-4 year counselors seemed to begin having a foundation and therefore needed less time for prep each day. The level of stress that the counselors expressed feeling did not seem to affect their satisfaction with their career. Though the level of stress was high for both groups, they both expressed high levels of satisfaction as well.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Contrary to expectations, it was found that the 3-4 year counseling group expressed slightly less satisfaction with their current position than their 1-2 year counterparts. The two groups showed no difference in level of stress and stress was not negatively associated with level of satisfaction. Individuals in the counseling field may be more prone to thrive in stressful situations. Due to the high level of stress a counselor endures on a daily basis, the level of stress was not reported to decrease as the number of years in the field increased. The researcher found that the first year counselors discussed an increase in job satisfaction from the first half to the second half of their first year, but job satisfaction was not reported to increase from the beginning of the year to the end in the 3-4 year group. Originally, it was thought that as the counselors transitioned into the field they would become more comfortable with their position and therefore express more satisfaction. Through this study it was found that this might not necessarily be the case. The 1-2 year counselors expressed a relief at having found a position and being done with their schooling to get there. All the counselors interviewed in the 1-2 year group were in their first professional position. All five had worked part time during college, however were full time students. Their level of satisfaction may be partially due to the completion of school and beginning their lives as professionals. The 3-4 year group expressed a feeling of helplessness. They had been in the field for a few years and had begun to realize that they cannot fix all of the problems of all their students. The glory of finding a job has been replaced with the reality that the stress of the job never really decreases. Both groups expressed a high level of stress and neither group predicted that the level of stress would decrease in the next five years. However, both groups did express being

satisfied overall with their position. This finding indicates that stress level does not necessarily predict job satisfaction. People who begin in the counseling field have a realization that they will be faced with various problems and situations. Due to personality differences seen in all people, it is a possibility that persons pursuing a career in school counseling may be individuals who thrive upon or at least are amenable to high stress levels related to the everyday demands of their work.

### *Limitations*

The following were limitations of the study:

1. The lack of anonymity may have altered the responses. Counselors may have felt inclined to portray satisfaction with their job.
2. The sample consisted of only 10 participants.
3. The participants consisted of only counselors in the field from 1-4 years.

### *Recommendations*

Further study into the factors that affect job satisfaction in school counselors may include a comparison of first year counselors' initial satisfaction and that of counselors nearing the retirement age. Also, it would be interesting to interview counselors, using the same instrument, during the first month of their first year on the job and again during April or May of that same year. It appears from the current results that a school counselor progresses through transition into the field much sooner than originally predicted by the researcher.

As confirmed by this study, school counseling is a demanding profession. Various research has been conducted on counselor burnout. If time permitted, the researcher could have interviewed counselors who had been in the field for numerous

years. This comparison may have demonstrated a relationship between beginning counselors (those in the field 1-4 years) and those approaching retirement. By using the same interview questions, factors that affect counselor burnout may have been provided. This could assist in determining possible solutions to the problem. The main cause of burnout is prolonged stress. Counselors need to be aware of their feelings about their position and change the factors around them to maintain satisfaction with their chosen career. According to Igodan and Newcomb (1986), "Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do "people work" of some kind." Counselors obviously fall within this category and it is important to realize that dissatisfaction may exist before burnout occurs.

### *Summary*

School counselors are faced with a continual high level of stress. Role ambiguity, societal problems, and everyday life situations are just a few of the leading factors. Depending on individual coping mechanisms, this stress may or may not affect the satisfaction one feels with their position. This research showed that the level of stress remains constant from 1-4 years in the school counseling profession. It was also found that the level of job satisfaction decreased between the first two years and the third to fourth years.



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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are your main duties as a school counselor?
2. If you could name the best part of your job, what would it be?
3. If you could change one thing, what would it be? What are the greatest demands?
4. How effective do you feel you are in your responsibilities? Could you provide examples to clarify?
5. At work, whom does your support system consist of?
6. At the end of the day, how would you describe your usual thoughts? You usually feel how?
7. Counseling can be a very demanding profession. Have you found particular ways to relieve every day stress? What are they? How would you rate your work stress level this year on a scale of 1-7? (1 being very low, 7 being very high)
8. On a scale of 1-7, how would you rate your satisfaction with your current position? (1 being very low, 7 being very high)
9. Has your work stress level stayed the same, decreased, or increased since you began your job? What factors contributed to the change?
10. Do you plan on continuing in this profession? If yes, over the next 5 years, do you expect your work stress level to stay the same, decrease, or increase? What factors do you expect to contribute to the change?
11. What factors, if any, were absent which you believe would have made it easier for you as a beginning counselor to optimally transition into your job?
12. How many years have you been in your current position? How many former professional positions have you held, if any, and for how long?

