School Counselors and Administrators Agree: Time and Testing are Barriers

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Abstract

School leaders continuously state their concerns about rising mental health issues in schools. This study looks at the perceptions of the roles of school counselors as mental health professionals in schools from the perspectives of school counselors and principals. The purpose of this study is to explore how administrators and school counselors describe the role of school counselors, and the perceived barriers to school counselors spending the recommended 80 percent of their time in the delivery of services to students. This study uses deductive qualitative content analysis to review written responses from the 518 participants who identified as either a licensed or certified school counselor or a school administrator. The results show that school administrators and school counselors have very different perceptions of school counselors as mental health professionals; however, they agree that time and testing are barriers to providing direct services to students.

Résumé

Les dirigeants d'écoles expriment sans cesse leurs préoccupations envers l'augmen-

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IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
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tation des problèmes de santé mentale dans les écoles. Cette étude examine comment les directeurs et les conseillers en orientation perçoivent les rôles de ces derniers en tant que professionnels de santé mentale dans les écoles. Le but de cette étude est d'explorer comment les administrateurs et les conseillers en orientation décrivent le rôle de ces derniers et les obstacles qui les empêcheraient de consacrer 80 pour cent de leur temps (tel que recommandé) à servir les élèves. Cette étude utilise une analyse de contenu qualitative et déductive pour examiner les réponses écrites des 518 participants qui se sont identifiés comme étant soit un conseiller en orientation certifié, soit un administrateur scolaire. Les résultats montrent que les administrateurs et les conseillers en orientation ont des perceptions très différentes de ces derniers en tant que professionnels de santé mentale; cependant, ils conviennent tous que le manque de temps et les tests posent un défi à la capacité des conseillers à servir les élèves directement.

Introduction

Mental health issues among adolescents has lead to symptoms of suicidal thoughts, substance abuse, lower academics, and poor social relationships (Gazmararian, Weingart, Campbell, Cronin, & Ashta, 2021; Gijzen, Rasing, Creemers, Smit, Engels, & De Beurs, 2021; Saito, Kikuchi, Lefor, & Hoshina, 2022). Suicide is the second leading cause of death among students between the ages of 15 and 24 (National Alliance on Mental Illness [NAMI], 2022). Principals believed that school counselors are often the first line of defense for students suffering from mental health issues (DeMatthews & Brown, 2019). Similarly, Pincus, Hannor-Walker, Wright, and Justice (2020) note the importance of school counselors particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019a) 4th Edition National Model (ASCA-NM) discusses the roles of a school counselor and notes that they are trained to do brief counseling to address mental health needs. However, school counselors are often tasked with non-counseling duties, such as test coordination and leading specialized student service meetings, instead of directly working with students and their mental health wellness needs (Rock & Curry, 2021).

The roles of school counselors and their relationships with administrators have been extensively studied (Beck, 2017; Duslak & Geier, 2017; Ruiz, Peters, & Sawyer, 2018). Principals are the leaders in the school and set the assignments for school counselors (Duslak & Geier, 2017; Ruiz et al., 2018). Many principals prevent school counselors from performing their role as mental health professionals in schools by asking them to perform non-counseling duties (Fye, Miller, & Rainey, 2018; Pincus et al., 2020). This article provides the findings of a study conducted with principals and school counselors located in the United States and their perceptions of the roles of school counselors.

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
Bohecker

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ASCA-NM as framework for school counselor roles and responsibilities

The ASCA Standards for School Counselor Preparation (ASCA, 2019a) provides direct instruction and responsibilities for school counselor roles and the ASCA-NM (2019a) manual provides a framework with step-by-step instructions on how to implement a comprehensive school counseling program that addresses students' academic, college/career, and social/emotional needs. The ASCA-NM (2019a) requires school counselors to provide short-term counseling in small group and individual settings using evidence-based approaches and techniques (ASCA, 2019b, 2019c). However, many roles and activities for school counselors are not clearly defined. The ASCA-NM is not included in many educational leadership training programs (Fye et al., 2018). Therefore, most administrators are unfamiliar with the ASCA-NM and the roles of school counselors. As a result, school counselors often struggle to implement the ASCA-NM (2019a). Research indicates school counselors who do not receive support from administration have increased rates of burnout and an increased risk of leaving the profession (Hilts, Kratsa, Joseph, Kolbert, Crothers, & Nice, 2019; Holman, Nelson, & Watts, 2019).

Appropriate duties

The ASCA-NM (2019a) lists appropriate and inappropriate duties and recommends school counselors should be spending 80 percent of their time directly and indirectly servicing students. Even though specific activities are categorized as appropriate and inappropriate within the ASCA-NM (2019a), the activities are not defined. Many appropriate and inappropriate duties seem to overlap and may appear contradictory to those unfamiliar with the ASCA-NM (2019a). Holman et al. (2019) also notes that without specific definitions, there is ambiguity around school counseling duties. Appropriate duties are listed in the ASCA-NM (2019a) and include brief counseling and crisis-related responsive services.

School counselors providing mental health services

School counselors are expected to meet the mental health needs of all students through short-term counseling interventions and refer students needing long-term support to community resources (ASCA-NM, 2019a). The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2016) provides accreditation for school counselor training programs to ensure competency in mental health. Therefore, school counselors are ideally situated to improve child and adolescent mental health through short-term evidenced-based interventions in schools (ASCA-NM, 2019a).

Some school counselors in the United States preferred to spend more time meeting the needs of their students by providing mental health services and highlighted that there was an incongruence in what they actually did to assist their students (Neyland-Brown, Francis, & Burns, 2019). Similarly, Dahir, Cinotti, and Feirsen (2019) found significant differences between the perceptions of administrators (building and district level leaders) and school personnel (department chairs, supervisors, and school counselor leaders) about what school counselors are trained to

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
Bohecker

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do. The school personnel viewed school counselors as engaging in working with students on interpersonal skills, mental health concerns, and prevention services more frequently than administrators believed. Although the ASCA-NM (2019a) and CACREP (2016) provide training and instruction for school counselors to provide short term counseling, school administrators seem to have a different understanding of the training and roles of school counselors.

Non-counseling duties

Examples of appropriate non-counseling duties are advocacy and consultation (ASCA-NM, 2019a). There is a need for advocacy and consultation in meetings for students in the United States who have a disability and are being served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or who qualify under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504). Section 504 is a federal civil rights law that protects individuals with a disability from being excluded and receiving unequal treatment in school (Wattan, Benson, & Reyes, 2019). For students who qualify under the IDEA, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is developed. Schools are required by federal law to follow IEP and Section 504 accommodations. Advocacy at IEP and Section 504 meetings is interpreted by most school counselors as participating as consultants. These sanctioned non-counseling activities become inappropriate when a school counselor is expected to coordinate and lead the IEP and Section 504 meetings. Inappropriate duties have been defined as "time spent on clerical and office work and on testing and monitoring" (ASCA-NM, 2019a; Hilts et al., 2019, p. 5). Time spent coordinating meetings with multiple people and agencies reduces availability to students and leading meetings puts school counselors into a management role. These misinterpretations of advocacy and consultation change the roles of school counselors into clerical staff with additional administrative responsibilities (Holman et al., 2019).

Barriers for school counselors providing services

Administrators' perceptions of the role of school counselors are viewed as obstacles that may keep school counselors from addressing student mental health needs (DeKruyf, Auger, & Trice-Black, 2013). Many school and district-level leaders were unaware of school counselors' capabilities and did not view them as mental health providers (Amatea & Clark, 2005). Because of the administration's lack of knowledge regarding school counselors' roles, they often assign other duties that are important for school functioning but unrelated to the professional role of the counselor. For example, assigning activities such as building the master schedule, lunch duty, and coordinating school-wide testing consumes their time and takes away opportunities to meet with students individually or in small groups (ASCA, 2019a).

In addition to misperceptions, other factors such as lack of time and other work demands act as barriers to providing needed mental health services to their students (Carlson & Kees, 2013). Although the ASCA-NM (2019a) recommends a 250:1 student to counselor ratio in US schools, actual caseloads are double that amount. The ratio of students to school counselors is one of the key reasons counselors believe they have insufficient time to properly perform their role, and this ratio "prevent[s]

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
Bohecker

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them from meeting the mental health needs of all students" (Christian & Brown, 2018, p. 26). Therefore, the high number of students in a school counselor's caseload creates major challenges for providing short-term counseling to students.

Insufficient training is another barrier for school counselors providing mental health services. Students in school counseling programs are not required to take courses in psychopathology and are trained only in the broadest sense of knowing when to refer (Keyes, 2002, 2006). As a result, practicing school counselors may not feel competent in addressing all the mental health needs of students.

Differences in interpretation exist in the literature about the roles and responsibilities of school counselors related to the mental and social emotional health of students. Additionally, school counselors are challenged in meeting ASCA-NM (2019a) expectations related to providing delivery services, such as individual and group counseling. The purpose of this study was to explore how administrators describe the roles and responsibilities of school counselors, how school counselors describe their roles and responsibilities, and the perceived barriers to school counselors spending 80 percent of their time in the delivery of services to students.

Method

This study was part of a larger study with both quantitative and qualitative methods conducted in 2020. The Liberty University Institutional Review Board reviewed the application and granted approval to conduct the larger study, which included a survey of participant demographics and an electronic survey instrument with both quantitative and qualitative questions. This study is an analysis of the qualitative questions included in that survey. Qualitative content analysis using descriptive coding was chosen as the most appropriate study design to answer the overarching purpose statement and survey questions posed to explore the perceptions of school administrators and school counselors (Cho & Lee, 2014; Lochmiller, 2016).

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 518 participants who identified as either a licensed or certified school counselor ($n=295$) or school administrator ($n=223$) in the United States. Participants self-reported as female ($n=338$), male ($n=177$), or prefer not to state ($n=1$), with 460 (88%) of the participants identifying as White, 44 (8%) Black or African American, 24 (4%) Hispanic/Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native ($n=5$; <1%), Asian ($n=2$; <1%), and other (<1%). The majority of the participants reported working in school districts from northeast (28%), southeast (21%), and midwest (21%) regions of the United States. Years of experience as a school counselor or administrator ranged from 1 to more than 15 years of experience and one was recently retired. Related to population, 47 percent ($n=243$) of the participants were from rural communities, 37 percent ($n=191$) were from suburban communities, and 16 percent ($n=84$) were from urban communities. Nearly 52 percent of participants ($n=290$) reported working in schools where 50 percent or less of students received free or reduced-cost lunch, 20.3 percent ($n=113$) worked in schools where 51–89 percent of students received free or reduced-cost lunch, while 19.9 percent ($n=111$) had 90 percent or more of students who received free or reduced-cost lunch.

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
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Instrument

A modified version of the School Counselors and Mental Health Survey (SCMH) (Brown, Dahlbeck, & Sparkman-Barnes, 2006) was used to collect data for the larger study that included 19 of the original 25 questions. Three of the questions were short qualitative answer questions that asked the following and served as the research questions for our study: a) What do you perceive to be the roles and responsibilities of school counselors? b) What are the roles and responsibilities of school counselors in addressing the mental health and social emotional needs of students? c) What are the barriers to school counselors spending 80 pecent of their time delivering services to and for students?

Recruitment and data collection procedures

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants from the target populations of school counselors and school administrators throughout the United States. The participants were invited to participate in a research study on the perceptions of school counselors and school administrators on the role of a professional school counselor. Participants were recruited by sending an email to a purchased email national distribution list and state chapters of several school counselor organizations. The email included a recruitment letter and a link to an online Qualtrics survey to post through their listserv or website. The recruitment letter was also posted on the Facebook page for the national school counseling association. An email was also sent to a list of principals from across the nation with a link to the survey. Two reminder emails were sent to each initial email recipient. The inclusion criteria for participants were that the person was working as a school counselor at either the school or district level or working in their role at either the school or district level in positions such as superintendent, executive director, career or technical administrator, principal, vice principal, or assistant principal throughout the United States. This article provides the findings of the three open-ended questions in the survey and is part of a larger study, the results of which have not yet been published.

Data analysis

The analysis for this study was based on a naturalistic inquiry where the researchers identified categories and patterns using a directed approach to qualitative content analysis to meticulously and systematically code the data and interpret meaning (Cho & Lee, 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schreier, 2012). To respond to the roles and responsibilities of school counselors for mental and social emotional health of students, the authors incorporated the deductive qualitative content analysis methods used by Cho and Lee (2016) who also examined open-ended survey questions without direct interview contact with the participants, like that used in this study. Content analysis can be used as an unobstructive method that is flexible when using a deductive or inductive analysis approach allowing codes, categories, and themes to be derived from the data giving researchers the flexibility to make appropriate interpretations. Two different methods of coding and analysis were used in this study. A directed deductive approach was used to develop apriori codes to analyze the perspectives of administrators and school counselors related to mental health and social-emotional student needs. A conventional content analysis

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
Bohecker

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using an inductive approach to coding was used to describe the perceived barriers to school counselors delivering services to students.

Roles and responsibilities of school counselors related to mental health

A directed content analysis approach allowed for further description of the roles and responsibilities of school counselors that could potentially expand existing theory of the ASCA-NM (2019a) and allowed the researchers to classify written data into identified categories of similar meanings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researchers chose this method to explore whether the perspectives of administrators and school counselors aligned with the ASCA-NM (2019a) for roles and responsibilities of school counselors found in the literature. The authors used open coding to guide the initial analysis of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and identified categories based on the ASCA-NM (2019a) and the additional services found within the collected data. The categories identified were a) mental health, b) ASCA appropriate direct and indirect services, c) administrative, d) non-counseling, and e) school structure.

The researchers developed working definitions and activities that belonged in each of the five categories (Table 1). Mental health and direct services were grouped into one category by many participants. Within this discussion there were disagreements about whether to combine mental health with the ASCA-NM direct and indirect services or leave it as a standalone category. The final consensus was, for the purposes of this study, mental health and direct services were separated into two categories and reanalyzed for thematic match (Lowell et al, 2017). There was also disagreement about where different types of scheduling would be categorized, such as under ASCA-NM direct and indirect services or under non-counseling duties. The researchers all agreed that master scheduling was an administrative duty. After much discussion among the three research teams, they developed a definitive definition of each of the five categories with examples of services for each (Elliott, Bohecker, Elliott, Townsend, Johnson, Lopez, Horn, & Roach, 2019).

Three research teams were developed for coding. The first researcher of each team read through a section of the data and engaged in deductive open coding and analysis to identify into which of the five a priori categories participant responses would be classified. The partnering researcher engaged in coding separately to crystalize the coding done by the first researcher. The two researchers then compared the codes and discussed any discrepancies that might have existed until consensus was reached. Every datum fit into a mutually exclusive category, meaning that no datum fell between two categories or was placed into more than one category (Crowley & Delfico, 1996).

Perceived barriers to school counselors providing services to students

Conventional content analysis was used to describe the perceived barriers to school counselors spending 80 percent of their time delivering services to and for students. The researchers approached these data with a beginner's mind. Two researchers read through the data to get a sense of the whole. The next step consisted of two research-

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
Bohecker

*School Counselors
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ers individually reading the survey data and engaging in open coding to identify the analytically rich and essential themes from which to base more selective coding and units of analysis (Schreier, 2012). The units of analysis related to perceived barriers. Inductive themes were developed to compress the text into groups with similar meanings and connotations (Schreier, 2012). Next the two researchers compared codes and discussed discrepancies and negative cases until consensus was reached on the categories that best described the data and intended meaning (Cho & Lee, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). The researchers continued coding and categorizing until no new themes were identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Researcher reflexivity

All but one of the researchers identify as school counselors, former school counselors, or school counselor educators. Each researcher brought their individual experiences into this research to facilitate the rich co-creation of data as is encouraged by constructivist qualitative researchers (Saldaña, 2016). The last author did not have school counseling experience but was a counselor educator and licensed as a marriage and family therapist and did not engage in the data collection process.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the hallmark of success for any qualitative research. The authors employed triangulation techniques from Creswell (2008) and Lincoln and Guba (1985). However, the authors align with the more postmodern and multidimensional term crystallization (Richardson, 2000). Crystallization was performed with multiple people coding and linking with data. The initial coders and their crystallization partner for each of the three teams coded the comments separately first and then met in an effort to maintain the trustworthiness of the process. The researchers employed crystallization techniques of credibility as outlined in the data analysis section and through prolonged engagement with the data. Transferability was addressed through the inclusion criteria of both school counselors and school administrators for multiple perspectives also increasing dependability and conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The thematic data analysis process was enhanced through triangulations of an external researcher (last author) experienced in this methodology.

Results

One of the major structures of this study is the specific definitions of the ASCA-NM (2019a) categories. The ASCA-NM (2019a) divides services into direct and indirect and provides examples of job duties within each service. The categories developed from the data from this study were mental health, ASCA appropriate direct and indirect services, administrative, non-counseling, and school structure. However, the model does not specifically define each service, thus opening space for definitions to be created. For example, after reviewing the survey results of administrators and counselors, the authors discovered that administrators and school counselors had different understandings of the same terminology. For example, administrators understood the words "assessment" and "testing" to mean test coordination of state standardized testing, while school counselors believed it meant duties related to ap-

praisal and advisement. Therefore, the authors needed to create definitions of the ASCA-NM (2019a) services in order to conduct consistent coding of the data.

Roles and responsibilities of school counselors

The results of the qualitative analysis of the data related to the roles and responsibilities of school counselors aligned in general with the ASCA-NM (2019a) for both the administrators and school counselors, but there were interesting and nuanced differences. The definitions of the five categories and themes are presented as a component of the results. As highlighted earlier, an unintentional byproduct of this study was the development of definitions of the categories and discussions surrounding which services fit into each category. Within each category, the definition is provided then a description of the themes. Table 1 provides a summary of the definitions that were developed for this study to clarify and reduce ambiguity.

Table 1. Study definitions

Category	Definition
Mental health	A service provided on a short-term basis to address non-medical issues related to stress and mild depression and anxiety, and screenings to assist in identifying potential students at risk. Mental health services are needed when students may not present with a clear mental health issue that requires a clinical treatment but can receive immediate relief utilizing Tier 1 and 2 interventions related to the wellness model.
Appropriate direct and indirect services	Services as outlined in the ASCA-NM (2019a) that support school counselors in addressing the academic, emotional/ social, and career development needs of students. These services assist in closing the achievement and opportunity gaps in schools while also promoting mental and emotional wellness in all students. Services specific to this category included individual and group counseling, crisis interventions, consultation, making referrals, and career/college planning.
Administrative	Counselors can serve on various administrative teams as consultants. Duties that are non-counseling but are specifically related to overall management of the school such as building the master schedule, testing and Section 504 coordinator, disciplining students, and acting as assistant principal.
Non-counseling duties	Duties identified by the American School Counselor Association Model as inappropriate counseling duties. Examples include clerical work, student class scheduling, and student credit checks.
School structure	Duties historically imposed by district or school mandates that are unrelated to the school counseling training that may hinder or interfere with providing the appropriate counseling services for students. Examples include bus duties, lunch duties, and serving as a substitute teacher.

Mental health

The authors defined this category as a service provided on a short-term basis to address non-medical issues related to stress and mild depression and anxiety, and screenings to assist in identifying potential students at risk. Mental health services are needed when students may not present with a clear mental health issue that re-

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
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quires a clinical treatment but can receive immediate relief utilizing Tier 1 and 2 interventions related to the wellness model (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000). The theme that was echoed within both the administration and school counseling populations was the *short-term brief* nature of school counselors working with student mental health. However, many administrators in this category questioned whether school counselors are adequately trained to identify students in need of mental health services, or appropriately select, administer, and interpret psychological and intelligence assessments. Alternatively, school counselors felt they were adequately trained to provide mental health services and minimally identify and administer "brief screenings"; however, they did not express the same confidence in working with students with chronic mental health symptoms or administering formalized psychological testing and assessment instruments. As stated by one of the participants, "[we] help with the mental health of the students but should not be the primary source if a student has extensive mental health needs."

Appropriate direct and indirect services

The authors defined this category as services as outlined in the ASCA-NM (2019a) that support school counselors in addressing the academic, emotional/social, and career development needs of students. These services assist in closing the achievement and opportunity gaps in schools while also promoting mental and emotional wellness in all students. Services specific to this category included individual and group counseling, crisis interventions, consultation, making referrals, and career/college planning. The themes found within this category highlighted differences in the school counselors and administrators' perception of the prioritization of services provided by school counselors as outlined by the ASCA-NM (2019a). The differences in the findings indicated that while both school counselors and administrators identified similar services, they discussed them with a difference in priority. For example, school counselors described their services as focusing on the following in order of frequency: 1) students, 2) counseling, 3) support, 4) academic, and 5) career. A school counselor said the services included, "providing support and counseling, training and information to students, parents, teachers, other school personnel on social emotional topics, coordinating with community partners for Tier 3 counseling services and preventive services." In contrast, administrators described the identical services but with differing emphasis: 1) academic, 2) career, 3) students, 4) school, and 5) support. One administrator stated that school counselors should "be a conduit between teachers and students, offer referrals to outside agencies, and provide individual and group counseling."

Administrative

The authors defined this category as duties that are non-counseling but are specifically related to overall management of the school such as building the master schedule, serving as testing and Section 504 coordinator, disciplining students, and acting as assistant principal. Counselors can serve on various administrative teams as consultants. This category addressed the school counselors and administrators' perception of the school counselors' roles and responsibilities with testing and appraisal, master scheduling, and the coordination of many tasks within the school.

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
Bohecker

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The findings indicated that although both school counselors and administrators described the theme *administrative duties*, administrators appeared to have a different understanding of the importance of the administrative duties performed by school counselors than the school counselors themselves. The term "appraisal" from the school counselors' perspective means to work with students to "analyze and assess their abilities, interests, skills and achievement" to develop personal intermediate and long-range career goals; however, administrators associated the term primarily with their state's standardized testing (ASCA-NM, 2019a, p. 80). For example, administrators expressed school counselors assist with "state assessments" and often referred to school counselors as the state "assessment [test] coordinator." Similarly, administrators reported school counselors' roles as the school's "master scheduler" and coordinators for various teams such as Section 504 and IEP. The administrators describe the administrative duties performed by school counselors as an important part of their roles and responsibilities. In contrast, school counselors described administrative duties as an overwhelming barrier to performing direct services to students. This is best described by one school counselor participant who stated, "I currently coordinate all testing, run Section 504s, schedule all students, run lunches, and fill in for administrator."

Non-counseling duties

The authors defined this category as all duties identified by the American School Counselor Association Model as inappropriate counseling duties. These duties impede the school counselor's ability to spend time working on the ASCA-NM (2019a) domains. Inappropriate duties include clerical tasks, student records scheduling, credit checks, and proctoring tests. This category addressed the ways in which school counselor roles and responsibilities are misunderstood by administrators and teachers. The school counselors were aware that tasks in this category were outside of the school counselor's role, and they also noted that they are asked to take on "anything that there isn't someone else to do." One school counselor expressed spending "90 percent [of the time completing] paperwork and not building relationships with kids." Another school counseling participant stated, "I am a babysitter." This category was identified in the data collected about the roles and responsibilities of school counselors and overlaps with the data specifically related to barriers.

School structure

The authors defined this category as duties historically imposed by district or school mandates that are unrelated to the school counseling training that may hinder or interfere with providing the appropriate counseling services for students. School counselors reported challenges related to staff shortage, caseloads, district demands, and administrators not understanding their role. For example, while most school counselors understood that their duties included district or school mandates, overwhelmingly, school counselors expressed "our role is not understood nor respected" by teachers and administrators. School counselors also expressed "it is easy to overload the counselor with 'stuff' to do," and "everything thrown my way in this small school," and school counselors "wear so many hats" and "unfortunately our district

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
Bohecker

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mandates us to take on so on many roles it is difficult to be an effective counselor to students." This category also overlaps with the data specifically related to barriers.

Barriers to school counselors spending 80 percent of their time on students

The results of the qualitative analysis of the data related to the barriers to school counselors spending 80 percent of their time on students is highlighted through the themes in this section. This category addressed the barriers that interferes with school counselors' ability to meet the mental and social/emotional needs of students. Responses from the administrator described the three themes of *testing*, *other duties*, and *time* as barriers for school counselors spending 80 percent of their time on students. Alternatively, responses from the school counselor group described six themes of *scheduling*, *paperwork*, *testing*, *clerical*, *section 504 work*, and *time* as barriers to them spending 80 percent of their time on student services. Interestingly, both administrators and school counselors identified *testing* and *time* as barriers. Both school counselors and administrators spoke of high structural demands and high caseload numbers that contribute to the barrier of *time*. There were many quotes that provided rich descriptions and could have been used in this section, so the authors found it difficult to narrow down the quotes to only a few. One school counselor stated, "I am the 504 chairperson, attendance monitor and testing coordinator which takes up 90 percent of my time." Another school counselor said, "As school counselors we have a large caseload and often pulled to work on non-counseling related tasks because our role is not valued or understood by teachers or administrators." An administrator expressed that, "Unfortunately the counselor job morphed into a person who handles testing, scheduling, banquets, scholarships, a semi-administrator, a go-between teaching staff and administration, and public relations director."

Discussion and implications

The results of this study indicated that administrators and school counselors agreed with the foundational roles and responsibilities of school counselors as outlined in the ASCA-NM (2019a). However, the perceptions of administrators and school counselors differed on emphasis and competency. In the results theme of *mental health*, administrators demonstrated that they did not believe school counselors are adequately trained to provide mental health services. This belief supports the similar results of Dahir et al. (2019). Alternatively, school counselors felt competent to provide short-term counseling, with less confidence working with students who have chronic mental health concerns. This result supported the studies of role responsibilities and time commitments of school counselors by Collins (2014) and Neyland-Brown et al. (2019). The school counselors' perceptions aligned with both the training they received and the profession's professional standards (ASCA, 2019a; CACREP, 2016). The ASCA-NM's position statement on student mental health makes clear that school counselors recognize and respond to student mental health needs (ASCA, 2020). Overall, this study confirmed the polarized perceptions between administrators and school counselors about the competency of school counselors to provide short-term mental health services as a part of their roles and responsibilities. There appears to

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
Bohecker

*School Counselors
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be a disconnect with administrators understanding and valuing the knowledge and skills that school counselors have for addressing the mental health needs of students.

Within the theme of *appropriate direct and indirect services,* this study found administrators and school counselors had similar perceptions but different priorities regarding the direct and indirect services provided by school counselors. One important outcome to note is that school counselors listed counseling as a service to support student development, while that service did not appear as a priority by administrators. This finding further supports the argument that administrators are not well-informed on the services that school counselors are trained to provide (Amatea & Clark, 2005; DeKruyf et al., 2013; Ruiz et al., 2018).

While school counselors identified students, counseling, and support as the top three services they provide, administrators found academic, career, and students to be most important. This difference makes sense because school improvement and student academic achievement are high priorities from a principal's perspective; learning and instruction are an important component of their training programs (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2018). Educational leadership programs generally focus on curricula in management, legal issues, facilitating instruction, supervision, school and community relations, budgeting and accounting, and data-informed decision making. While school counselors included academic and career among the services they provide to students, they were ranked behind students, counseling, and support. This finding also makes sense since school counselor education focuses on counseling skills and supporting student success (ASCA, 2019a, 2020; CACREP, 2016).

School counselors and administrators had different views regarding administrative and non-counseling duties. Administrators considered the administrative responsibilities important for school counselors, especially regarding test coordination, creating a master schedule, or coordinating various programs. School counselors identified feeling overwhelmed by these duties, supporting previous studies that showed non-counseling and inappropriate duties contribute to burnout in school counselors (Fye, Bergen, & Baltrinic, 2020; Hilts et al., 2019). As the building manager, administrators must find someone to fulfill these responsibilities; yet, school counselors are not trained to provide these services and other licensed individuals may be more appropriate to conduct these leadership tasks. Finally, administrative and non-counseling duties take school counselors away from providing counseling and support to students. Non-counseling duties were experienced in much the same way. The school counselors in this study expressed that they are asked to take on any open responsibilities in their building even when there are better-suited individuals for that responsibility. Principals view school counselors as being able to serve in these roles and support the school program as needed. Again, this result demonstrated a disconnect between the principal's understanding of how school counselors are trained, their roles and responsibilities, and how they can best contribute to and support students.

School structure emerged as the final theme. This theme presents a disconnect between the current ASCA-NM (2019a) and a school's historical structure of roles and responsibilities with previous school counselors and other roles in the school. School counselors and administrators shared that their school structure created dis-

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
Bohecker

*School Counselors
and Administrators
Agree*

crepancies between what roles and responsibilities a school counselor ideally completes and what responsibilities are currently being assigned or completed by school counselors based on historical decisions. School counselors shared that staffing shortages, high caseloads, district demands, and a lack of understanding of their role contributed to their inability to support student mental health as recommended in the ASCA-NM (2019a). This finding supports Holman's et al. (2019) position that clerical duties are inappropriate for school counselors. Administrators did acknowledge that time and testing responsibilities interfered with school counselors spending 80 percent of their time providing direct and indirect services to students. Counselors also indicated that prior structure around scheduling, paperwork, clerical duties, and Section 504 coordination work as barriers (Carlson & Kees, 2013).

Future direction in school counseling with mental health

First and foremost, it is essential to address the disconnect in the principal's understanding of the school counselor's role and how school counselors support student development. Educational leadership programs must take the lead in this change and include how school counselors contribute to positive student outcomes. Further education and professional development are needed to help administrators consider alternative personnel who can coordinate programs like high-stakes, statewide testing, Section 504, building the master schedule and fulfilling other essential duties in running a school. Counselor education programs can facilitate this development by initiating cross-training opportunities between school counselor education and educational leader training.

In addition to educational leadership training programs providing this education and training on the school counselors' role to aspiring school leaders, it is incumbent upon school districts to provide professional development to educational leaders on positioning school counselors to have the greatest impact on students' outcomes given their knowledge, skills, and training. This professional development should be created in collaboration with educational leaders and school counseling leaders. Additionally, state standards and licensing requirements could require further competencies focused on the understanding and evaluation of school counselors in a school or district. Finally, school counselors will need to advocate for their role by engaging in dialogue and educating their administrators of their roles and ability to support student mental health. School counselors can communicate how they can improve school and student achievement, through adhering to the ASCA-NM (2019a). School counselor preparation programs should include advocacy and effective dialogue strategies as essential skills taught within school counseling programs. School counselors who work with administrators who don't understand the counseling role will need to find their voices to advocate until school leaders are provided information and training in their education programs.

Limitations and future research

The limitations in this study resulted from difficulties related to COVID-19 within our participants' school communities, the research analysis, and the language surrounding research questions, which were based on current language and best prac-

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
Bohecker

*School Counselors
and Administrators
Agree*

tices in school counseling (the ASCA-NM (2019a). The scope of questions presented one limitation regarding administrative tasks and non-counseling tasks, which were often grouped together by participants while the ASCA-NM (2019a) and the research team do not combine these categories. School counselors provide academic, social/emotional, and college/career support (ASCA, 2020); yet, this definition may differ from school counselor to school counselor and administrator to administrator, which created various perspectives in the data and the analysis.

In order to earn school counseling certification or licensure in most US states, individuals are required to complete a master's-level program.[1] If the program is accredited by CACREP, then it may include up to 60 credit hours with a focus on the ASCA-NM (2019a), while administrators are required to complete 36 credit hours at the master's level with no requirement for experience surrounding evaluation or implementation of a school counseling program (CACREP, 2020; NPBEA, 2018). Changes to administrative preparation programs and work at the school counseling level are paramount to improving the understanding and role of school counselors in schools. If the role of school counselors and their responsibilities can be researched and advocacy can inspire change, then students will have an improved school counseling program, administrators will have a better grasp on the possibilities within a comprehensive school counseling program, and school counselors will feel more supported, thus leading to less burn-out and turnover for their school communities (Fye et al., 2020).

Systemic change could improve the long-term impact on students and the longevity of school counselors within their schools (Holman et al., 2019). With a strong structure in place when they arrive at a school, they could stay longer and increase their self-efficacy about their roles. More research about a school counselors' self-efficacy in strong comprehensive school counseling programs compared with older guidance counseling structures would be beneficial to see the impact on longevity, burnout, and student support (Hilts et al., 2019). Comparing the differences in rural, suburban, and urban schools would also be an area of future research.

National and state standards could be improved for both administrators and school counselors to support the ASCA-NM (2019a). Lowery, Mayes, Quick, Boyland, Geesa, and Kim (2019) stressed the importance of aligning standards between principal and school counselor preparation programs to strength the advocacy efforts for students in every school. Administrators can work towards state and national goals that are focused on the ASCA National Standards (ASCA, 2019b) to support, advocate, and evaluate a school counseling program that will include appropriate duties, understanding of mental health for students, and strong collaboration between administrators, school counselors, and the district. A review of national and state standards compared with preparation programs could reveal discrepancies that exist between school counselors' roles, appropriate duties, and long-standing structures that further separate understanding and language at the national, state, and district level.

Conclusion

School counselors focus on three main areas of support for students in a comprehensive school counseling program including academic counseling, social-emotional learning, and college/career readiness (ASCA, 2020). Social-emotional support can

IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
Bohecker

*School Counselors
and Administrators
Agree*

and should include interventions and strategies related to a student's mental health needs. The ASCA-NM (2019a) has addressed these mental health needs within the recommended roles and responsibilities of a school counselor, which guided the categories of this study. Despite the ASCA-NM (2019a), school counselors and administrators showed confusion regarding the school counselor's role in a student's mental health experience as well as what roles and responsibilities were considered direct or indirect and appropriate for a school counselor. The results of this study indicate that updated training based on school counseling in today's school environment, including ASCA-NM (2019a) and position statements (ASCA, 2020), should be provided to educational leadership program students and current administrators to strengthen their understanding of school counseling. School counselors are advocates for their students, their schools, and their profession. This study reflects a strong need to advocate for prioritizing time spent on students' mental health and to advocate for school counselors' roles and responsibilities shifting from those of guidance counselors to school counselors with counseling training in an educational setting.

Note

A   The state certification requirements can be found at https://schoolcounselor.org/About
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Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
Money-Brady, &
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*School Counselors
and Administrators
Agree*

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IJEPL 18(2) 2022

Hannor-Walker,
Pincus, Rock,
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*School Counselors
and Administrators
Agree*

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