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SLO's and School Counseling: A Perfect Fit

by Dr. Brandie Oliver & Dr. Nick Abel, Butler School Counseling Program

Like all educators, school counselors must be held accountable for their work with students. To that end, high quality counselors are constantly asking themselves questions such as, “How am I spending my time?”, “How is my counseling program making a difference in the lives of students?”, and “What areas of need are revealed by our school’s data?” While these concepts seem novel to some, they come as no surprise to counselors whose work is guided by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2012) “National Model” and the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) “Gold Star” program. These two models provide a roadmap for school counselors to design comprehensive school counseling programs that impact the academic, college/career, and personal/social development of all students in a school -- not just those who actively seek help. Both ASCA and Gold Star emphasize a process that starts with collecting and analyzing data from stakeholders and school records, and then creating program goals that drive the design of specific counseling interventions. Following each intervention, data is examined to determine its efficacy, and the process begins again. In a perfect world, every school counseling program would operate in this manner. And while we encourage all principals and counselors to explore how they can best align their school’s counseling program with ASCA’s National Model and IDOE’s Gold Star models, we recognize that this task can seem daunting at first. As such, we offer up the suggestion to start small by setting a program goal in the form of a Student Learning Outcome (SLO).

While most teachers are intimately familiar with the term SLO, many school counselors are not. The school counselor’s learning outcomes are generally constructed around the three major school counseling domain areas: academic, personal/social, and college/career development. The learning outcomes should clearly state what knowledge the students are learning, what skills students are gaining, and/or what behaviors are being impacted by the work of the school counselor. For example, consider a school counselor who teaches a 4-week classroom guidance unit on academic success skills (i.e., organization, growth mindset, test-taking strategies). A “knowledge” SLO might ask the school counselor to measure the percentage of students who demonstrate increased knowledge on the key skills needed for academic success according to a pre-test/post-test taken before and after the unit. A behavior outcome for the same unit might measure the percentage of students with passing grades before and after the lessons.

One last point on school counseling SLO’s is the importance of connecting them to the school’s overall mission. While grounding the counseling program’s goals in data and stakeholder input is a good start, another step is developing outcomes that address the school’s annual improvement plan. In doing so, the school counselor and administration team work together to ensure the counseling program becomes (or remains) a critical part of the school’s response to the core needs of students, rather than an “extra” or ancillary service. In this way, school counselors are held accountable for the work they do, and administrators are held accountable for giving school counselors the time and freedom necessary to implement services and interventions that are meaningful and impactful. Even if you start small with one school counseling SLO, you are taking an important step to move the school counseling program forward, and ultimately, to do what’s best for kids.

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