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## Transforming High School Counseling: Counselors' Roles, Practices, and Expectations for Students' Success

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### Abstract

*This study examined the current roles and practices of American high school counselors in relation to the ASCA National Model. Expectations for student success by high school counselors were also examined and compared to those of teachers' and school administrators'. A nationally representative sample of 852 lead counselors from 944 high schools was surveyed as part of the High School Longitudinal Study: 2009-2012. Findings are examined in the light of the National Model and advocated practices.*

**Key words:** high school counseling, counselor role, ASCA National Model, learning expectations, student success

School counselors are highly valuable professionals in the education system, but they are also least understood and have been largely left out of the education reform movement (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011). Since *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983), school counseling has shifted its focus from a traditional service to one that is transformed and focuses on student success based on academic, career, and personal social development. New standards in K-12 education and new comprehensive school counseling programs established at national and state levels to a large extent promote and enhance student achievement and success. Despite the increased focus on academic improvement, the school counseling profession is omitted from most of the educational reforms (Dahir & Stone, 2012).

Research has indicated that students in high schools with fully developed, comprehensive, and outcome-based counseling programs are more likely to obtain high grades and to be prepared for success in college and careers (Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001; Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997). In

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particular, those students from schools with better counseling services are also more likely to perceive that their school has a positive climate (attendance, student behavior, perceived school identity, and school safety) than those from schools providing limited counseling services (Dahir & Stone, 2012). Moreover, past studies have shown that high school counselors can effectively use their services and strategies to successfully serve their students, schools, and communities (Brown & Trusty, 2005; Butler, 2003; Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001; McWhirter, Crothers, & Rasheed, 2000; Miano, Forrest, & Gumaer, 1997; Nelson, Gardner, & Fox, 1998; Sink & MacDonald, 1998; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). However, little is known to what extent American high school counselors have actually practiced in the current educational system. Therefore, this study attempted to answer several critical questions regarding school counselor practices and attitudes toward student success.

### **Goals of School Counseling**

The history of school counseling in the U.S can be traced back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, yet a national, comprehensive, and standardized model for school counseling program authored by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) did not emerge until 2002. The ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012) helped school counselors meet the ASCA National Standards for Students (ASCA, 2004) and developed a structured and outcome-based school counseling program to help school counselors achieve maximum effectiveness in their services. The ASCA National Model consists of four components: (a) foundation, (b) delivery, (c) management, and (d) accountability. The first foundation component demonstrates mission statements, goals, student standards, and professional competencies that guide and support both students and school counselors in academic, career, and personal-social domains. The delivery component focuses on methods that deliver an effective school counseling program: individual student planning, responsive services, school counseling curriculum, and system support. The third component, management, includes school counselor competency, school counseling program assessments, use-of-time assessment, annual agreements, advisory councils, use of data, action plans, and calendars. The last component, accountability, addresses how effectiveness of a school counseling program is measured and how a school counseling program has impact on student achievement and behavior.

### **Counselor Roles and Practices**

Counselors play a vital role in delivering the effective counseling services that are based on this new, transformed model. The role of the counselors is broad, and to a large extent depends on the student groups they serve. According to the ASCA (2015), professional school counseling services model makes them “uniquely qualified to address all students’ academic, career and personal/social development needs by designing, implementing, evaluating, and enhancing a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes and enhances student success” (p. 1).

Although research (Fitch & Marshall, 2004; Whiston, 2007) has indicated that school counselors have a positive impacts on students when their practices conform with the ASCA National Model, many researchers have asserted that there are discrepancies between the actual practices of school counselors and what has been prescribed as the best model and practice (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011;

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Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). For example, in a recent study, Bridgeland and Bruce (2011) pointed out that the majority of counselors expressed a concern that the current school system (or a “broken system”) is not aligned with their expectations for their students and they called for a “reform” for empowerment for leadership, reduced administrative tasks, smaller caseloads, and accountability. Further, the survey reported a 50 percentage-point gap between the ideal and the reality of helping students develop by means of the school counseling program.

In addition, previous research has shown that counselors have unwittingly engaged in school tasks unrelated to professional school counseling (Foster, Young, & Hermann, 2005; Martin, 2002). This may occur because of an outdated view of the mission of school counselors from the principal or district leadership, a lack of commitment to or a lack of understanding of standards on the part of the counselor, a lack of additional personnel to do support or clerical tasks, or some combination of these constraints. For example, counselors may be involved in inappropriate activities such as keeping and maintaining records, computing grade-point average (GPA), supervising classrooms, teaching classes when teachers are absent, and serving as a data entry clerk described by the American School Counselor Association (2012). These activities often prevent school counselors from implementing the goals and objectives of counseling programs and direct services. Given the potential impact of high school counselors and counseling services on students, how counselors spend their time and conduct counseling services becomes an accountability issue that deserves more research attention.

### **Counselor Expectations for Student Success**

The effect of teacher expectations on student performance has been well documented (Feldman, 1983, Jussim, 1991; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Smith, 1991). Research has revealed that teachers' expectations are associated with student achievement. In a review of empirical research on teacher expectations spanning 35 years, Jussim and Harber (2005) demonstrated that teacher expectations more accurately predict student outcomes than a self-fulfilling prophecy. Similarly, counselors and principals' expectations and attitudes toward students could play a significant role in students' personal, social, and academic development. In a recent national survey of 5,300 middle school and high school counselors, Bridgeland and Bruce (2011) reported that most counselors showed high expectations for themselves, their students, their schools, and the education system, while half of them expected significant changes in their schools and educational system. Professional school counselors collaborate and consult with teachers and administrators to effect changes in student outcomes. Significant changes will not happen if the key school personnel do not hold high expectations for student success.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study examined high school counselors' current practices and reported how these practices were in alignment with the ASCA National Model and best practices as described by the American School Counselor Association (2012). The ASCA National Model provides a framework for the program components, the school counselor's role in implementation, and the underlying philosophies of leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and system change. This study offered valuable information to K-12

counselors, counseling supervisors, and counselor educators. Specifically, the researchers addressed the following questions:

1. What are the goals of high school counseling programs?
2. What different kinds of services do high school counselors provide, and how do counselors spend their time as they engage in these activities?
3. How do counselors' expectations for student performance compare to those of teachers' and administrators'?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The data utilized in the study are from the High School Longitudinal Study of 2009-13 (HSL: 09-13) provided by the Institutional Educational Sciences, U.S. Department of Education (2016). The HSL: 09-13 study is the fifth in a series of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) longitudinal studies. All of the studies monitor a national sample of young people in transition from their high school tenure throughout their postsecondary years, including further education, participation in the work force, and establishing other adult roles.

The data base year took place in the 2009–10 school year, with a randomly selected sample of fall-term 9<sup>th</sup> graders in more than 900 public and private high schools. The first follow-up study was conducted in 2012. For the HSL, students took a mathematics assessment and an online survey. The students' parents, principals, and mathematics and science teachers, along with the lead school counselor, completed surveys on the phone or on the Web.

Overall, 852 lead counselors participated in this survey. Of the 852 school counselor responses, a total of 782 surveys were completed online (92%), and an additional 70 surveys were completed by telephone (8%). The total unweighted response rate for the school counselor survey was 90.3%. One percent or 10 counselors chose not complete the survey. The remaining 82 school counselors (8.7%) never responded to the request to complete the survey.

### **Instruments**

The counselor questionnaire sought information about school programs and practices as they relate to activities that assist with the transition of students from middle school to high school, student programs and course assignments, and the help provided by counseling services. Questionnaire responses were reported by the lead counselor or the counselor most knowledgeable about counseling practices at each school sampled. The survey questions included in this study address counseling program goals, time school counseling staff spent on delivering services, and perception of counselors', teachers', and administrators' expectations for student performance.

**Counseling program goals.** The survey question, “Which one of the following goals does your school's counseling program emphasize the most? Would you say...” has four response options: (a) helping students plan and prepare for their work roles after high school, (b) helping students with personal growth and development, (c) helping students plan and prepare for postsecondary schooling, and (d) helping students improve their achievement in high school.

**Time counselors spent delivering counseling service.** The survey question asks “Last school year, what percentage of work hours did your school's counseling staff spend delivering the following services to high school students?” The question offered nine different service activities in which a counselor spent his or her time (see Table 1). The distribution of time spent was categorized (a) 5% or less, (b) 6%-10%, (c) 11%-20%, (d) 21%-50%, and (e) More than 50%.

**Counselors’ expectations of students’ success and perceptions of teachers’ and principals’ expectations.** Counselors’ perceptions were measured by a 6-item questionnaire asking, “To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the counselors in your school?” The response format involved a 4-point Likert scale with 1-strongly agree to 4-strongly disagree. The reliability coefficients of the three generated psychological scales were counselor perceptions of teacher expectations (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .85$ ); counselor perceptions of counselor expectations (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .78$ ); and counselor perceptions of principal expectations (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .85$ ).

## Data Analysis

Mean scores and standard deviations were calculated for all items on the survey questions. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to compare differences in expectations of students among counselors, teachers, and administrators. Subsequent univariate analyses were conducted on separate items followed by Scheffe’s post hoc tests. The analyses were based on weighted samples created to adjust for the over-sampling bias, and the observations were redistributed to represent the distribution in the population. This was done by *Normalized weight = [sample weight] \* [sample n / population N (sum of weights)]*. Design effects were also used to adjust standard error for hypothesis testing.

## Results

### Counseling Program Goals and Mission

The lead high school counselors (52.7%) reported that helping students prepare for post secondary schooling was the most important goal of their counseling program. Their second most important goal was helping students to improve their achievement level in high school (42.0%). Helping students with personal growth and development was the third most important goal, and helping students prepare for work roles after high school was the least important of the four goals.

## The Practices of High School Counselors

High school counselors indicated that they spend their time in a manner that is consistent with the importance of their counseling goals. Consequently, more of their time was spent helping students choose courses, arranging their schedules, and helping students' prepare, select and apply to different colleges. More of their time was spent on these activities than any other activity (see Table 1). Counselors spent a significant amount of time helping students with personal, academic and career development issues. They spent some time with students on school and personal problems and helping students make occupational choices so that they can plan for their future career. Overall, high school counselors spent the rest of their time on other unspecified counseling activities and non-counseling activities.

Table 1  
*Percent of Time Counselors Spent Delivering Counseling Service*

Percent of Work Hours Counseling Staff Spent in a Year	<5%	6-10%	11-20%	21-50%	>50%
High school course choice/scheduling	5.6	14.1	29.6	41.2	9.4
College readiness/selection/apply	2.3	16.0	34.2	37.3	10.2
Personal/academic/career development	7.0	23.9	36.3	24.9	7.9
School/personal problems	20.4	27.3	29.3	19.2	3.8
Occupational choice/career planning	20.5	35.7	31.1	11.4	1.4
Academic testing	30.6	28.2	24.8	13.2	3.2
Job placement/job skill development	66.0	22.9	9.4	1.7	0
Other counseling activities	32.7	32.7	23.4	9.8	1.4
Non-counseling activities	77.8	13.9	6.2	2.1	0

## Expectations of Students

Results of MANOVA analysis showed a significant overall effect on all items [ $F(12, 113462) = 1094.85, p < .001$ ]. Subsequent analyses showed significant differences among group on all items. Means, standard deviations, and F tests are presented in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, counselors perceived themselves as setting high standards for student learning ( $M = 1.43$ ), believing that all students can do well ( $M = 1.50$ ), and working hard to make sure that all students can learn ( $M = 1.51$ ). Counselors disagreed with the perceptions that counselors have given up on some students, that they expect very little from students ( $M = 3.63$ ), and that they only care about smart students ( $M = 3.67$ ).

Counselors perceived that teachers in their school set high standards for teaching ( $M = 1.54$ ), that teachers in their school believe that all students can do well ( $M = 1.96$ ), and that teachers work hard to make sure all students learn ( $M = 1.73$ ). Counselors disagreed with the perception that the teachers

have given up on some students ( $M = 2.61$ ), that teachers expect very little from students ( $M = 3.42$ ), and that teachers only care about smart students ( $M = 3.34$ ).

Counselors' perceptions of their principals' expectations for students were as follows: counselors perceive that principals set high standards for teaching ( $M = 1.36$ ), that principals believe that all students can do well ( $M = 1.52$ ), and that principals work hard to make sure all students learn ( $M = 1.46$ ). Counselors disagreed with the perceptions that principals have given up on some students ( $M = 3.25$ ), that principals expect very little from students ( $M = 3.61$ ), and that principals only care about smart students ( $M = 3.58$ ).

One-way analysis of variance was used to test for statistically significant differences between the groups. Differences were statically significant for all variables. Scheffe's post hoc test was used to determine the differences of means of the different combinations of subgroups (counselor-teachers, counselors-principals, and teachers-principals). This analysis revealed that all of the differences between the means of the counselor-teacher, counselors-principal, and teacher-principal subgroups are statistically significant for these variables at the .000 level or better. Since statistical significance is very sensitive to large sample size, effect sizes are examined using Cohen's  $d$  following the convention that a  $d$  of 0.2 to 0.3 is "small," around 0.5 is "medium," and around 0.8 or greater is "large effect."

Counselors saw themselves as setting high standards for teaching: slightly less than principals (.07) and slightly more than teachers. Counselors perceived principals as setting high standards for teachers, but slightly more than teachers do themselves. Note that a positive difference suggests less agreement on that statement.

Counselors saw themselves as believing that all students can do well, but slightly more than principals ( $d = -0.3$ ). They perceived themselves as more positive about this than teachers ( $d = -.74$ ), and principals as more positive than teachers ( $d = -.71$ ).

Counselors perceived that they work hard to make sure all students learn, slightly less than principles ( $d = .08$ ) and more than teachers ( $d = -.36$ ). They perceived principals as working hard to make sure all students can learn and more than teachers ( $d = -.43$ ).

Counselors did not believe that they have given up on some students, and they differ very little from principals in this regard ( $d = .04$ ). Counselors perceived teachers less positively on this item than they did themselves ( $d = .91$ ). They perceived that teachers are more likely to "have given up on some students" than principals ( $d = .84$ ).



Table 2  
*Counselors' Perceptions of Their Teachers and Principals and Their Own Expectations of Students' Learning*

Perception	Teacher		Counselor		Principal		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>
Set high standards for students	1.54	.59	1.43	.52	1.36	.53	574.6**
Believe all students can do well	1.96	.67	1.50	.55	1.52	.56	3489.7**
Work hard to make sure all students learn	1.73	.64	1.51	.57	1.46	.59	1074.6**
Have given up on some students	2.61	.77	3.28	.70	3.25	.75	4954.4**
Expect very little from students	3.42	.65	3.63	.52	3.61	.53	762.0**
Care only about smart students	3.34	.59	3.67	.51	3.58	.56	1738.1**

*Note:* The values in the table are based on a 4-point Likert scale with 1-strongly agree to 4-strongly disagree; \*\*  $p < .001$ ; Weighted  $N = 18044$

## Discussion

In this study, we examined the aims and practices of current American high school counselors. We sought insight into how they view their roles and missions and spend their days, as we believe they might be more strategically deployed to better serve students. Information on counseling roles and discrepancies in role implementation based on cited models is presented. Insight can be gained by carefully analyzing the consistently reported discrepancies.

### Counseling Goals

ASCA views the primary goal of school counseling programs to be the enhancement of student achievement and accomplishment (ASCA, 2015). The present study showed that the goals of high school counseling programs are fairly in alignment with the foundation of the ASCA National Model, especially for establishing program focus and guiding the program to meet national standards for students. High school counselors reported that the top three goals of counseling programs are (a) to help students prepare for post-secondary schooling, (b) to help students improve achievement in high school, and (c) to help students with personal growth/development. These three goals are closely aligned to three domains of ASCA national standards for students and clearly reflect school counselors' vision of program mission.

In addition, we found that high school counselors spend their time in a manner that is consistent with the importance of their counseling goals after examining their actual practices. Interestingly, we found that less than 10% of counselors reported that they spent more than 10% of their time on inappropriate

school counseling program activities. In similarity with Foster et al.'s (2005) study on work activities of school counselors, our finding indicated that school counselors are engaging in more counseling-related activities and less non-counseling activities. Meanwhile, it was also shown that the role of the professional school counselor and school counseling program has been gradually redefined, from being not valued (Hart & Jacobi, 1992), as well as being involved in inappropriate responsibilities (Gysbers, 2001), to being transformed and viewed as a leader by school administrators, parents, teachers, educational organizations, and state departments of education.

### **Counselors' Roles and Practices**

The results of the descriptive analysis showed that more than half of lead high school counselors investigated in the current national survey place their working priority on preparing students for postsecondary education, while 40.2% of them consider academic achievement as the most important goal. First, this finding was consistent with the previous literature about the increasing need for college and career readiness (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011; Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001; Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997), in which high school counselors are in a unique position to support post-secondary planning. Moreover, it was also aligned with the ASCA standards (ASCA National Standards for Students, 2004; ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success, 2014) for the school counseling programs that maximize student success in college and career readiness. Second, the finding provided an interesting perspective for understanding ASCA standards for student success in their academic, career, and personal/social development. In particular, high school counselors saw supporting college achievement and career success as slightly more important than academic achievement and personal growth and development. This could suggest that school counselors ideally have a holistic view of their profession and the education system because of educational standards and efforts (ASCA National Model; ASCA National Standards for Students). Despite double caseload (NOSCA, 2012; Woods & Domina, 2014), high school counselors still put an effort into balancing their focus and time for student graduation.

### **Attitudes and Expectations toward students**

School counselors believe every student can learn, and every student can succeed (ASCA, School Counselor Competencies, I-C-1). The current survey showed that American high school counselors hold high expectations and have positive attitudes toward their students. This high standard and positive attitude toward students is what ASCA describes as one of the key competencies that a school counselor should display. Counselors' perceptions about teachers and principals' attitudes and expectations of students showed similar results. When the researchers compared counselors, teachers, and principals, counselors and principals tended to hold higher expectations and positive attitudes toward students than teachers.

### **Implications**

In conclusion, the present study showed that the current practices of high school counselors are fairly well aligned with the national models and best practices (ASCA, 2012). Helping students prepare for

post-secondary school is the most emphasized goal in counseling programs today. Counselors spend most of their time helping students with course choice/scheduling and college application/selection.

We believe the efforts to promote a transformed school counseling program have begun to take effect. Especially, when the economy is in a down-turn, counselors will be more likely to feel pressured to utilize activities from the national model (e.g., career development). School counselors are a source of data for school improvement in terms of college and career readiness. As data is collected and reported, goals for improvement and strategies to increase student performance and increase student success in post-secondary education are in the skillset of the school counselor. It is important that efforts to educate the public (administrators, teachers, students, and parents) about school counselor's appropriate roles continue and that counselors and principals collaborate to both educate state officials about the school counselor's role and influence state-level change in counseling standards and regulations.

In spite of the results, many counselors may still feel that principals and teachers do not understand the role of the counselor. Because of this variance and possible misunderstanding in each individual setting, it would be a valuable starting point at the beginning of each year to center goal-setting discussions around the role of the counselor and where he or she may be valuable to the goals of the school. In this way, the counselor can take the opportunity to be certain of the principal's perceptions, advocate for the appropriate utilization of counselor training, and demonstrate how the specialized skills of a counselor can impact the trajectory of the school climate, academic progress, and preparation of students for the future. With this as the starting point, each year, the counselor can be instrumental in meeting school goals, decrease the use of counselors in non-counseling activities, educate leadership on the impact of a comprehensive counseling program, and create an annual review of counseling needs and evaluation of counseling interventions. In the event the counselors work in a setting in which there is no question as to their value, the annual review and goal setting adds to the accountability of the counseling program and positive communication with school principals.

Counselor educators could benefit from information about obstacles that exist in real-world settings and help to reduce the gap between theory and practice. It is important that school counselors are familiar with the national standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) and the national model (ASCA, 2012) for school counseling in 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is also important that they have the skills to implement the ASCA national standards and model.

Similar to other self-reported surveys, this study may have issues related to distortion, bias, and recall. The responses from the leader counselors may reflect his/her own perceptions and may not be shared by other counseling staffs. Counselors may have reported in generalities, which do not capture the delivery of services to students. For example, large group, small group, and individual counseling activities when reported independently, may demonstrate even closer adherence to or departure from the standards of the ASCA National Model. Readers should keep these possible limitations in mind when interpreting findings. However, the relatively large sample and high response rate of counselors represented in this study may compensate for some of these limitations. Further studies could link the

type of counseling services to student performance and could also investigate how counselors' expectations affect students' personal, social, and academic development.

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