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Professional School Counseling in the Rocky Mountain Region:
Graduation rates of CACREP vs. non-CACREP Accredited Programs

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Abstract

School Counseling in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States was explored with a focus on the production of professional school counselors in the Rocky Mountain region of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (RMACES). Comparisons of program graduates are made by state and program as well as by accreditation status. State mandates related to professional school counseling are also noted.

Professional School Counseling in the Rocky Mountain Region:
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Schools across the nation continually strive to meet the myriad of needs presented by the many and diverse students who enter their doors every day. In this rapidly changing world the role of the professional school counselor (PSC) is even more crucial than ever before. The current demographics of the United States are very different from those of the past. Nationally, 24.5% of the population is under the age of 18 years old and the states in the Rocky Mountain Region of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (RMACES) reflect this trend with percentages ranging from 22.9% in Montana to 30.9% in Utah. An increase in school-aged children needing services coupled with increases in racial and ethnic diversity presents huge challenges for PSCs who already deal with excessive case loads within the schools (Clark & Breman, 2009).

Education in the 21st Century places high priority on academic success. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) legislation mandates accountability in education resulting in the expectation that students meet high standards and that all students graduate from high school. High levels of academic achievement are becoming a prerequisite for full participation in this new and evolving global society. Professional school counselors (PSCs) must be prepared to work with teachers and other educators to accomplish these academic goals in addition to maintaining their longstanding commitment to promoting student development in the personal/social and career domains as well.

Charged with accountability, PSCs must also be able to collect and use data to document that school counseling practice is consistent with the NCLB standards for evidence-based practice (Carey, Carey, Hatch, Lapan, & Whiston, 2008). PSCs are expected to develop, implement, and evaluate comprehensive programs that meet the needs of individual schools and

they are held accountable for doing so (Carey et. al., 2008). PSCs must be prepared to meet contemporary students' needs while demonstrating their own effectiveness amidst the demands of a multitude of stakeholders.

Schools are working organizations and as such involve many systems, all of which impact students and their abilities to achieve. PSCs must work effectively within these existing systems which include parents and caregivers, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders (Curry & Lambie, 2007). A comprehensive and integrated approach to school counseling positions PSCs as key players in the building of alliances and better relationships between and among all stakeholders which is foundational in creating an environment conducive to learning and personal growth (Lapan, 2001).

The varied and numerous tasks of PSCs become increasingly difficult as the student to counselor ratio increases across the nation. Research has shown that counselors positively impact the students with whom they work but that effect is tempered, often even reduced as the student to counselor ratio rises (Carrell, & Carrell, 2006; Sink & Stroh, 2003). While the need for more PSCs is recognized across the nation it is essential that counselor education programs (CEPs) do not replace quality with simple quantity. PSCs must be well trained if they are to provide the comprehensive services being asked of them to meet the needs of all students.

School Counselor Preparation

Considering the National Standards for School Counseling Programs, the ASCA National Model, The Transforming School Counseling Initiative, and credentialing through the National Board for Counselor Certification (NBCC) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) it might appear that all school counselor training includes the same core of knowledge, skills, and strategies but this is not necessarily the case. Counselor education

programs prepare PSCs according to different mandates and guidelines, including state, national and standards set by the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Programs (CACREP), if accreditation is sought. Non-CACREP accredited programs establish their own guidelines and curriculum criteria and these are generally guided by state requirements, the past experiences of school counseling faculty members, and professional preferences. Since all counselor education programs do not include the same core curriculum, external evaluation of quality can be difficult (Boes, Snow, & Chibbaro, in press). Common core curricular experiences and the ability of school counseling students to demonstrate knowledge and skills of professional school counseling including leadership, collaboration/consultation, academic development, research, assessment and advocacy, program development, implementation, and evaluation as well as counseling are CACREP requirements (CACREP, 2009) and thus make comparisons across accredited programs more meaningful.

Accreditation

Since the early 1980s the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs has outlined training standards within the counseling profession. CACREP is a voluntary accreditation body and it plays a significant role in standardizing the counselor's scope of practice, and serves to elevate the profession as a whole (Paisley & Borders, 1995; Smaby & D'Andrea, 1995). Application for accreditation is also voluntary (in most states) and is viewed by some as indicative of a strong commitment to program excellence (CACREP, 2006). CACREP provides guidelines that reflect the profession's expectations, promote professional quality, and strengthen the profession's credibility (Bobby & Kandor, 1992).

There is little literature available and no investigations located that specifically relate to the number of school counseling graduates from CACREP versus non- CACREP accredited

programs (Boes, Snow, Chibbaro, & Sebera, 2008). CACREP accreditation does require conforming to standards but this does not mean school counseling programs that have not acquired CACREP status are not viable programs. In fact, many programs have adopted concepts based on CACREP standards but for various reasons are unable to undertake the process of full accreditation which requires faculty commitment as well as administrative and financial support from their home institutions. While reform initiatives (i.e., ASCA standards, ASCA National Model, and Transforming School Counseling Initiative) laid a good foundation for improving school counseling, there is no one body to oversee if these guidelines are actually being followed in Counselor education programs across the country. Because CACREP accreditation incorporates concepts from these initiatives it appears to be a reasonable means for comparison of numbers of school counseling graduates from accredited programs and those programs that are not accredited. The purpose of this manuscript is to present data on reported numbers of graduates of school counseling programs throughout the RMACES region for the years reported in the AACTE directories from 1995-2002 for both CACREP accredited and non-CACREP programs with state by state comparisons.

Rocky Mountain ACES

State Mandates Related to School Counseling and Counselors

Among the six Rocky Mountain ACES states Idaho, Montana, and Utah report state funded mandates specific to the provision of counseling services and the grade level for which these services apply. Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, and Utah require comprehensive school counseling programs in their states (www.schoolcounselor.org). However, it should be noted that Utah requires counseling for students in grades 9-12 only. Wyoming, through legislative action, mandates access to guidance services but school counselors are not specifically addressed

leaving open the possibility that services are provided by less qualified personnel. Colorado reports no mandates for any grade level but in 2008 Colorado Governor Ritter signed Colorado House Bill 08-1370 (Counselor Corps Grant Program and Appropriations, 2008) establishing the *School Counselor Corps Grant Program*. The program focuses on increasing the level of services provided by school counselors in public secondary schools with the intent being to boost the number of students going on to college (Poppen, 2009). In New Mexico school counseling is one of the support service programs that is mandated through Administrative Code. However, this mandate does not contain "counseling language" and the statute is unfunded (ASCA, n.d.). This is another situation in which qualifications of the specific school personnel providing services are not clearly defined.

Though not a mandate, in January 2008 the legislature of New Mexico introduced House Joint Memorial Bill 3 (HJM3) charging the public education department and the office of education accountability to undertake a study of issues related to predicted shortages in school staff. The bill proposed the examination of issues related to predicted shortages of school counselors, nurses and other professional instructional support personnel in public school districts and charter schools. The legislation emphasized the importance of qualified professional instructional support personnel including school counselors in the state of New Mexico to help meet the demands of NCLB (2001).

Student to Counselor Ratios

Based on data from the U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education statistics (USDOE, 2009) the K-12 student to counselor ratios for the six states in the Rocky Mountain region of ACES range from 188:1 in Wyoming (one of the lowest state ratios nationwide) to 720:1 in Utah (one of the highest state ratios in the country). Wyoming has a

student population of 85,193 and reports 453 PSCs yielding the low ratio of one counselor for every 188 students. Montana's 144,481 students have 449 counselors for a student to counselor ratio of 322:1 and Colorado's student population of 794,026 is served by 1,934 counselors, a ratio of 411:1. Idaho with 267,380 students and 593 counselors (451:1), and New Mexico with 328,220 students and 720 counselors (456:1) report ratios that approach twice the ACA recommendation of a maximum 250 students to one counselor (2007). Utah is 46th out of 50 states in student to counselor ratio (720:1). The 523,586 students in Utah are served by only 727 counselors which is nearly the same number of PSCs as in New Mexico but Utah has almost 200,000 more students. Montana is the only RMACES state that mandates student to counselor ratios but the requirement of 400:1 is still far too high for optimal results (ASCA, 2005). Nationally the current average (2006-2007 data year) student to counselor ratio in the United States is 475:1, well above that recommended by ACA to demonstrate that students receive adequate access to counseling services.

Method

Archival data collection, based on a review and analysis of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) member directories published from 1995 through 2002, comprised the numbers of PSC graduates produced by member institutions. These member universities and colleges submit an annual report through the AACTE/NCATE Professional Education Data System and information is presented for teachers, administrators, and school counselors. Each directory contains an analysis of the productivity of member institutions. The data is approximately 2 years old when published in each directory so information found in the 2002 directory is actually reporting data from 2000, the 2001 directory from data for 1999 and so on. After the 2002 directory, however, information for counseling is not identified specifically

but is grouped under “advanced” programs. Consequently, information about school counseling graduates (or *completers*, as termed by AACTE) was available only through the 2002 directory.

The data collected by AACTE is considerable and is specified for each member institution. AACTE (2002) describes itself as follows:

AACTE and its predecessors reflect educator preparation’s evolution from normal schools to colleges to comprehensive universities. The Association’s approximately 760 member institutions include private, state, and, municipal colleges and universities – large and small- located in every state, the District of Columbia, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and Guam. Together, they graduate more than 90% of new school personnel entering the profession each year in the United States. In addition, AACTE has a growing number of affiliate members, including state departments of education, community colleges, educational laboratories and centers, and foreign institutions and organizations (p. 1).

The authors are unaware of any other databases that even approximate the information about school counselors as that collected by AACTE. Clawson, Henderson, Schweiger and Collins (2004) along with predecessors, Hollis and Dodson (2000), Hollis (1997), and Hollis and Wantz (1990, 1994) have gathered considerable information about counselor education programs in the United States. While these authors have delineated helpful information including some data relative to admission and graduation rates, most of the numbers seem to be estimates and these works have not been published yearly with specific data for each year.

From the AACTE database, the authors identified colleges or universities located in the Rocky Mountain ACES region of the United States reporting school counseling graduates (i.e., completers). The authors then identified CACREP status of each reporting institution. Accredited

programs were identified with the year accreditation was granted (CACREP, 2001). In the data analysis, only graduates who completed the school counseling program during or after the year the program was accredited were considered CACREP graduates. Thus, an institution may have both graduates from a CACREP program and graduates from a non-CACREP program.

Results

The Rocky Mountain region of ACES includes six states and within those states there are 23 universities having school counseling programs that reported data published by AACTE during the years from 1995 to 2002. As of the 2002 directory (reporting data for 2000), 13 universities had CACREP accreditation; however some may have been in the application process when this information was reported or acquired CACREP status since then. The number of school counseling graduates from each of the 23 universities is depicted in Table 1.

Rocky Mountain ACES School Counseling Programs

Among the counseling programs in the Rocky Mountain region, Idaho State was the first to receive CACREP accreditation in 1980 followed closely by the University of New Mexico, the University of Wyoming, and the University of Northern Colorado in 1982. Shortly thereafter the University of Idaho was accredited in 1984. Seven years elapsed before the University of Colorado in Denver received CACREP accreditation in 1991 and three more universities received their CACREP accreditation during the next several years; Montana State University in Bozeman in 1993, Adams State in 1995, and Colorado State in 1997. In 2000 Boise State was awarded CACREP status followed in 2001 by Northwest Nazarene University, Brigham Young University, and the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs. The total number of graduates of CACREP accredited school counseling programs in the Rocky Mountain ACES region was approximately 1336 for the published years 1995-2002 (AACTE, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999,

2000, 2001, 2002). During these years the numbers of graduates from CACREP accredited programs ranged from a low of 15 at Boise State University to a high of 259 graduates at the University of New Mexico. Across the same years graduates from non-CACREP programs ranged from one at Great Falls to 276 at Montana State, Northern. In total the region produced 2557 school counseling graduates during this time period (see Table 2 for production by state).

It is notable that oftentimes the number of graduates from a given program may actually decrease after the institution acquires CACREP accreditation but this is likely due to the more stringent CACREP requirements and standards (i.e., student to faculty ratio, advisor/advisee ratio, number of full time faculty, and the 700 hours of work in school counseling programs under direct supervision). Review of the current CACREP directory (2009) indicates that the University of Idaho and Brigham Young University no longer hold CACREP accreditation and in 2005 the University of Montana was accredited by CACREP.

[Place Table 1 and 2 about here]

Rocky Mountain ACES Region Top Ten Graduating Programs

Of the universities in the RMACES region the top 10 universities producing school counseling graduates from both CACREP and non-CACREP accredited programs from 1995-2002 (AACTE published years) include: Montana State, Northern (non-CACREP), Utah State (non-CACREP), University of New Mexico (CACREP), University of Idaho (CACREP), New Mexico State (non-CACREP), University of Colorado, Denver (CACREP), Western New Mexico (non-CACREP), Northwest Nazarene (CACREP), University of Wyoming (CACREP), and Brigham Young (CACREP). Six of the 10 top universities have CACREP accredited programs while the other four did not when this data was gathered. Thirty percent of the school counseling graduates from this top producing group were from the state of New Mexico which has three programs in

the top 10 in this region, only one of which holds CACREP accreditation (University of New Mexico). Idaho and Utah produced a combined 40% and Colorado, Montana and Wyoming each produced 10% of the school counseling graduates in the region (see table 3). A point worth noting is that each of the six states in the Rocky Mountain region is represented by at least one university program in the top 10 graduating programs. In addition, the University of Wyoming and Utah State were among the top 20 universities in the nation for production of PSCs in 2002 (see table 4).

[Place Table 3 and 4 about here]

For the AACTE published years 1995-2002, states included in the RMACES region reported the following total number of graduates of school counseling programs: Colorado, 395; Idaho, 305; Montana, 507; New Mexico, 707; Utah, 437; and Wyoming, 116 (AACTE, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002). Colorado, Montana, and New Mexico all reported five universities offering school counseling programs and Idaho four. Interestingly, Colorado and Idaho with nine CACREP accredited programs between them graduated 700 school counselors while New Mexico alone produced 707 from its five programs (only one held CACREP status). Utah reported only three school counseling programs but graduated 437 counselors, more than Colorado or Idaho each of whom had more universities with counseling programs during the same years (AACTE, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2001, 2002).

The total number of school counseling graduates in the RMACES region from 13 CACREP accredited programs for the 1995-2002 periods was reported to be 1336; the 10 non-accredited programs reported 1221. Unlike some other regions of the country, school counseling graduates in the Rocky Mountain region from CACREP accredited institutions exceeded the number of students graduating from non-accredited programs (AACTE, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998,

1999, 2002, 2001, 2002). In the RMACES region 57% of the universities were CACREP accredited during the 1995-2002 period of data collection and these programs produced 52% of the graduating school counselors. Forty-three percent of the universities in the region had non-CACREP accredited programs during the same timeframe and produced 48% of school counseling graduates. National and regional comparisons of CACREP accredited programs and graduation rates indicate that RMACES has the largest percentage of CACREP programs and also provides the greatest percentage of graduates. In fact, nationwide, only 33% of university counselor education programs were CACREP accredited and these reportedly produced just 39% of professional school counseling graduates across the country.

Discussion

States and university programs in the Rocky Mountain ACES region appear to be maintaining a balance between meeting the more rigorous standards of CACREP and producing adequate numbers of PSCs for their schools. Each of the six states had at least one counselor education program in the top 10 of the RMACES region. Over half of the school counseling programs in the region hold CACREP status and these universities also produce more than 50% of the school counselor graduates. This level of production of school counseling graduates from CACREP accredited programs in the Rocky Mountain ACES region is quite interesting because typically CACREP accredited programs produce fewer graduates as a result of accreditation requirements.

As evidenced by state mandates the RMACES states are aware of the increased need for counseling services within their schools. The fact that four states (Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, and Utah) require comprehensive counseling programs suggests that there is a conscious effort in these states to make school counseling an integral part of the mission of the schools. However, in

New Mexico where concerns were reported about possible shortages of school counselors, the comprehensive school counseling initiative was unfunded leaving open the question of commitment to the actual provision of needed school counseling services. In addition, Utah only mandates school counseling for secondary schools.

No state mandates prevail in Colorado as public education is under local control placing decisions about such issues as curriculum, personnel, graduation requirements, and many other issues in the hands of 176 school district administrators (ASCA, n.d.). In other words there can be up to 176 different ways of dealing with the provision of counseling services (if at all) in Colorado schools making it extremely difficult for school counselors around the state to develop and implement similar comprehensive counseling programs.

Accreditation was not a primary focus of this study but it is apparent that CACREP standards provide guidelines for the development of similar curricular experiences among school counseling students. PSCs who graduate from accredited programs have been taught the skills to develop comprehensive programs that ultimately help K-12 students academically, with career preparedness, and in their social/emotional development.

Limitations and Recommendations

The primary limitation of this study is the fact that AACTE is no longer reporting school counselor program graduates as an individual data category. As with many educational specialties school counseling graduates are now subsumed under “advanced programs” so more current data were not available.

Some research has explored the relationship between CACREP accredited and non-CACREP accredited program graduates' National Counselor Examination (NCE) scores (Adams, 2006). Milsom and Akos (2007) investigated the relationship between national certification and

counselor preparation programs in CACREP accredited vs. non-CACREP accredited programs. Needed though is research focusing on the differences between CACREP program graduates versus non CACREP graduates. Few studies have been conducted that investigate the overall impact of CACREP accredited programs on the actual practices and effectiveness of PSCs once they have entered the workforce. Comparative data on program experiences, knowledge, attitudes, skills, and in service practice between CACREP accredited and non-CACREP accredited programs would be enlightening and important for future counselor education program development. Considering the financial and time investments of CACREP accreditation, it would be in the best interest of counselor education programs to know that the outcome warranted the costs of pursuing accreditation.

Conclusions

As in most of the nation, the Rocky Mountain region is experiencing increased numbers of school-aged children. While most of the RMACES states appear to be producing PSCs in sufficient numbers, Utah's percent population growth is nearly triple that of the country as a whole putting great demands on school counseling personnel there. If all of the states in the Rocky Mountain ACES region required and funded the services of school counselors throughout elementary and secondary school it is questionable whether the current level of production of school counseling graduates would provide the needed personnel.

The age of accountability has brought with it a vast array of outcome measures and performance based evaluations all of which are found in today's school classroom. National professional organizations like ASCA and ACA are urging schools to reduce the student to counselor ratio (250:1) so that PSCs can effectively render the needed services. The demands for school counseling services are great and will likely increase in the years to come. Quality

counselor education programs that consistently produce knowledgeable and effective PSCs are essential not only in the Rocky Mountain region but in every region of the United States.

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Table 1
 School Counselor Graduates in Rocky Mountain ACES Region (AACTE, 1995-2002)^a

University	2002	2001	2000	1999	1998	1997	1996	1995	Total
MT St.-Northern	8	25	40	36	43	59	-	65	276
Utah State	62	28	31	72	30	11	19	10	263
New Mexico (1982)	36	20	17	39	37	31	38	41	259
Idaho (1984)	16	30	34	53	33	35	-	-	201
New Mexico St.	12	21	21	30	24	18	23	14	163
Colorado-Denver (1991)	-	16	-	81	16	12	20	-	145
Western New Mexico	20	-	-	25	22	23	27	28	145
NW Nazarene (2001)	25	38	11	13	26	14	-	-	127
Wyoming (1982)	87	-	14	-	11	4	-	-	116
Brigham Young (2001)	11	1	5	4	9	3	39	30	102
Adams State (1995)	5	15	-	6	11	15	24	23	99
Montana	12	1	21	16	5	7	13	13	88
New Mexico Highlands	27	-	4	22	4	-	20	10	87
Colorado State (1997)	7	12	16	7	9	10	13	-	74
MT St.-Billings	9	13	10	19	11	9	-	2	73
Utah	13	11	10	7	8	4	7	12	72
MT St.-Bozeman (1993)	6	10	3	5	10	12	10	13	69
Eastern. New Mexico	3	-	-	25	20	5	-	-	53
Idaho State (1980)	4	5	7	6	-	13	10	7	52
N. Colorado (1982)	-	12	6	4	3	4	3	9	41
Colorado-CS (2001)	10	8	-	11	7	-	-	-	36
Boise State (2000)	15	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15
Great Falls	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Total Graduates (yr)	389	179	173	353	251	210	166	188	2557

^aAACTE Directory of Members; if CACREP accredited, date of accreditation in parentheses.

Table 2

School Counseling Graduates in Rocky Mountain region of ACES Ranked by State

State	# of Graduates	^a 2000 Population
New Mexico	707	1,819,046
Montana	507	902,195
Utah	437	2,333,169
Colorado	395	4,301,261
Idaho	395	1,293,953
Wyoming	116	493,782

Note. Number of graduates based on AACTE directories, 1995-2002.

^aRand McNally 2004 Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide.

Table 3

RMACES Top Producing School Counseling Programs

Top Ten Universities (AACTE, 1995-2002)

	CACREP	<i>N</i>	\bar{X}
Montana State University - Northern	N/A	276	35
Utah State University	N/A	263	33
University of New Mexico	1982	259	32
University of Idaho	1984	201	25
New Mexico State University	N/A	163	20
University of Colorado - Denver	1991	145	18
Western New Mexico University	N/A	145	18
Northwest Nazarene University	2001	127	16
University of Wyoming	1982	116	15
Brigham Young University	2001	102	13

Note. These numbers represent the totals as reported to AACTE in a given year. They may not reflect actual numbers for each year as a university may collapse data and report numbers at different time frames. AACTE directory published dates of 1995-2002 reflect actual graduation years of 1993-2000 respectively.

Table 4

Top 20 Schools in the Nation for School Counseling Graduates in 2002 (AACTE)

1. National University	(209)
2. University of Phoenix	(190)
3. Western Kentucky University	(131)
4. Indiana Univ. of Pennsylvania	(115)
5. Mississippi State University	(114)
6. Fordham University	(99)
7. University of Wyoming ^a	(87)
8. Canisius College	(79)
9. Indiana University	(75)
10. East Central University	(74)
11. Georgia State University	(72)
12. Western Michigan University	(68)
13. University of Dayton	(64)
14. University of Georgia	(64)
15. New York University	(63)
16. Morehead State University	(62)
17. Utah State ^a	(62)
18. Eastern Kentucky University	(61)
19. University of South Carolina	(60)
20. Prairie View A&M University	(57)

Note. AACTE directory published date of 2002 reflects actual graduation year 2000.

^aRocky Mountain ACES universities