THE TOP TEN THINGS SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT SERVICE-LEARNING[*]

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Abstract

This module is designed to introduce professional school counselors, educational leaders, and counselor educators to current research in service-learning and its potential impact on school counseling programs and student achievement. Examples of how school counselors are using service-learning in their comprehensive guidance programs and how counselor educators are using service-learning in pre-service training are also provided. The new vision for professional school counselors broadens the traditional view to include program development, management, and evaluation. Service-learning is one type of programming that can provide hard data regarding the impact of the program on student success and that can elevate the professional school counselors to leadership positions in schools.

NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

Recent literature suggests that professional school counselors must re-define their roles as advocates for all students and as leaders in the educational reform movement (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005; Bemak, 2000; Bemak & Chung, 2005; House & Sears, 2002; Martin, 2002). In addition, school counselors must be accountable for their programs through data collection and outcome research (ASCA, 2005; Johnson & Johnson, 2003; Myrick, 2003; Stone & Dahir, 2004). Individual and group counseling (traditional responsive services) are only part of a comprehensive developmental guidance program. Greater emphasis is now placed on counselor-generated programs that promote academic success for all students,

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are data driven, and that elevate the school counselor to a new leadership role (ASCA, 2005; Bemak, 2000; Erford, House, & Martin, 2003; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006; Martin, 2002).

The "Top Ten" list cites recent research indicating that service-learning programs have the potential to be integrated into developmental guidance plans for the purpose of meeting the needs of all students, particularly minority and economically disadvantaged youth. Professional school counselors are poised to close the achievement gap between students from low income backgrounds and students from more privileged families, and service-learning may be one vehicle to impact large numbers of students in positive ways. Examples of professional school counselors who are using service-learning to assist students with academic achievement are provided.

What is Service-Learning?

According to The National and Community Service Act of 1990 (PL 101-610), the definition of service-learning is:

a method under which students or participants learn and develop through active participation in thought-fully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of a community; is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program, and with the community; and helps foster civic responsibility; and that—is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled; and provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience. (42 U.S.C. 12572 (a) (101)).

Service-learning combines the objectives of the service project with the learning objectives of the classroom in a way that both the providers of service and the recipients of the service are changed in positive ways. Participants in service-learning are provided an opportunity to reflect on their service activities by thinking, discussing, or writing about their experiences. Each referenced article below offers important information to the professional school counselor about how service-learning can be instrumental in closing the achievement gap through school wide service-learning programs. Examples of how school counselors can use this important data are included.

The "Top Ten"

1. New research indicates that involvement in service-learning programs contributes to closing the achievement gap between students from low socio-economic backgrounds and those from more advantaged backgrounds (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2005). This research can help guide school counselors in the implementation of programming that will put them in the forefront of educational reform which according to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 must focus on closing the achievement gap. School counselors have access to school data and can use that data to identify students who would benefit from service-learning programs. Some of these students might be English language learners, students with low scores on state-mandated tests, or students on free or reduced lunch. Often these are students who are not connected in positive ways to the school environment. Involving these identified students in service-learning programs has the potential to have a positive impact on student achievement.

2. In a recent nationwide study, students from low income backgrounds who participated in service did as well or better on most measures of achievement than the students from high income backgrounds who did not serve (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2005). Therefore, involving at-risk students in service projects appears to be an intervention critical to the school counselor's role of closing the achievement gap. School counselors can show accountability of their programming by collecting data from report cards and attendance reports before, during, and after identified students participate in service-learning programs. The data can then help inform stakeholders of the importance of the school counselor's role in service-learning programming and student achievement.

3. Scales and Roehlkepartain (2004) describe service-learning as a "gateway" asset for building healthy development in young people. Participating in service-learning has the potential to lead to healthy outcomes, just as "gateway drugs" may lead to unhealthy outcomes. The more "assets" students have, the more potential for success they have. It appears that school counselors can help students build healthy assets through service-learning programs. Providing students with healthy and meaningful

activities is one way to help students acquire positive assets. School counselors may be the only adult in some students' lives to provide a healthy outlet for their energy and creativity.

4. Students in Discipline Alternative Education Programs across the state of Texas who were involved in the Texas Title IV Service-Learning Grant identified positive outcomes resulting from their participation in service-learning. Some of these outcomes were: better relationships with teachers; stronger engagement in academics; leadership potential; more acceptance of diverse people and ideas (RMC Corporation, 2005). Teachers, administrators, and parents also identified positive outcomes for participants in the service projects, and school personnel reported that they had high expectations and positive feelings about the participants. Rather than "putting out individual fires," school counselors have the potential to enhance the educational experiences of behaviorally at-risk students through service-learning programs. Service-learning can move counselor interventions from problem-focused to solution-focused.

5. In a study involving middle school students, service to others indicated clear potential for building prosocial behaviors, enhancing self-esteem, and supporting school success (Scales, P., Blyth, D., Berkas, T., & Kielsmeier, J., 2000). School counselors can align guidance curriculum objectives with service-learning to create a total school program that addresses social skills, self-esteem, and academic success. Implementing a school-wide service-learning program is one way to provide a character building curriculum to all students. The school counselor can provide the lessons to teachers to present to students regularly. When these lessons are paired with service projects, the learning objectives are meaningful to students.

6. Research indicates that service-learning programs have the potential to impact large numbers of students in positive ways (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2005; Scales et. al., 2000; Skinner & Chapman, 1999). Professional school counselors who include service-learning in their developmental guidance plans have the possibility of impacting many students under the umbrella of one program. Since school counselors wear so many hats in the school setting, intervention programs like service-learning can help counselors work smarter. School counselors can act as the facilitators of the service-learning program and can ask for assistance from interested teachers, staff, and parents to implement the program. A school-wide focus on service-learning can have a powerful impact on the school environment.

7. Schools with less than 50 percent of their population on free or reduced lunch were more likely to have service-learning programs than those schools with more than 50 percent of their population on free or reduced lunch (Skinner & Chapman, 1999). It appears that service-learning is an untapped intervention for school counselors in high poverty areas. Creating service-learning programs in low socio-economic schools alerts students to community problems, engages them in the solutions, and creates opportunities for positive civic connections. Service-learning allows youth to have a "voice" in the school and community which increases the chances for them to feel connected and important to the workings of their schools, neighborhoods, and cities. Students who learn to advocate for safe schools and neighborhood are on their way to the kind of civic engagement that is meaningful and productive. In some instances, school counselors have guided students as they brought social injustices to the attention of the school board, neighborhood association, or other governing bodies. This kind of leadership training is a significant outcome of service-learning programs. In one school district, students at a DAEP created an anti-drug campaign using video technology. The students then were asked to travel to various schools in the district to show the video and talk to other students about the dangers of drug and alcohol use. The DAEP students dressed like professionals, gave a riveting performance and message to other students, and used the social skills expected of people in the business world. These leadership skills most likely would not have been learned in any other setting.

8. Service learning projects might include, but are not limited to environmental projects, tutoring programs for younger students, assistance for senior citizens, neighborhood renovations, promotion of civic responsibility, campaigns against drug and alcohol abuse, anti-poverty programs, and anti-violence programs (Texas Center for Service-Learning, 2003). School counselors can work with teachers to integrate classroom instruction, community involvement, and service-learning in ways that benefit the students as well as those being served. Students take ownership of their learning by being personally involved

with the creation and implementation of the service projects. In one DAEP, students noticed that the neighboring Boys and Girls Club had no play equipment on the playground. Young children sat around on the bare playground after school. The DAEP students decided to use grant money to design and build a playground for the children. The students spent their week-ends during the entire school year building the playground, and when it was completed, it provided much needed entertainment for the youngsters.

9. Justification for funding for service-learning may be available through The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (RMC Corporation, 2002). School counselors may be able to link service-learning to dropout prevention, enhancement of language development in students with limited proficiency in English, and promotion of safe and drug free schools in order to access funding for service-learning programs. In addition, national and local organizations provide grant money annually for the purpose of developing service-learning programs in schools. Some counselors have applied for grant money through their own professional organizations by describing the benefits of service-learning and including some of their data collection in their grant applications.

10. Billig (2004) describes four domains in which students appear to be positively impacted as a result of participating in service-learning: academic, civic, personal/social, and career exploration skills. These domains are congruent with the American School Counselor Association's (2005) National Standards which include academic, career, and personal/social development. School counselors can align service-learning programs with the National Standards of the American School Counselor Association.

Implementation Strategies and Recommendations

Between the school years 2003 and 2005, Discipline Alternative Education Placements (DAEP) in Texas were invited to write proposals to compete for funding for the Title IV Community Service Grant Program subsidized by the U.S. Department of Education under Title IV (Part A, Subpart 2, Section 4126) and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The funds were specifically for engaging DAEP students in service-learning programs. Some school counselors acted as the grant facilitators and invested a great deal of time and energy in the service-learning programs. Their efforts paid off in the form of greater student engagement in academics, better behavior, and acquisition of leadership potential for students who typically had not been successful in school (RMC Corporation, 2005). These counselors wrote the grant proposals, maintained the budgets, supervised the students as they planned and implemented their service projects, and evaluated the results of the grant funding. On the surface, it appears that the school counselors invested a great deal of time to this program, yet had they not been involved in service-learning, they most likely would have been "putting out a multitude of fires" on a daily basis. Students placed in DAEP's are at-risk and have many social, emotional, and academic needs. Service-learning programs have the potential to address these needs. Programs that impact large numbers of students make efficient use of the school counselor's time and address the needs of students who are most at-risk. School counselors are school leaders, and they can contribute to the academic achievement of all students through service-learning.

At one university in Texas, professors in the Master's Program of School Counseling require their students to plan and implement service-learning projects during the semesters they are enrolled in the two school counseling courses. The students have been very creative in their efforts, and some of them are continuing service-learning in the schools where they are currently teachers. They see the value of investing time in a program that has the potential to impact many students in positive ways. One university student started a "Service Club" at her middle school, and she can hardly keep up with the numbers of students who want to participate and the high level of enthusiasm they generate for their many service projects. Another student has involved an entire grade level in service-learning at her elementary school and is thinking of ways to expand this program so the students will continue providing service in their next grade level. All of these university students are future school counselors who have studied the research on service-learning and recognize its potential as a program that can help close the achievement gap. As these students become aware of the new vision for professional school counselors, more concerned about impacting the total school culture, and collecting data that validates the work that school counselors do, service-learning programs make sense to them. Through their graduate course assignments, they see firsthand that service-learning

makes a positive impact on student performance.

Conclusion

Implementing programs that address the needs of students who are at-risk of failing and dropping out of school can ensure school administrators and other stakeholders that the professional school counselor is meeting the needs of all students and is at the forefront of educational reform. School counselors must develop leadership skills in order to create and promote programs that prove effective in this age of accountability. Service-learning is an intervention that is research based, that provides a direct link to the standards of ASCA's National Model (2005), and that has the potential for excellent data collection. Service-learning as an intervention is a smart choice for the school counselor's guidance program. In addition, school counselors who develop advocacy skills will ensure that low income and minority students are not "left behind" in the competitive school and work environments. Service-learning is an inclusive intervention that has the potential to meet the many needs of at-risk students, to change student behaviors as well as the way at-risk students are viewed by others, and to raise the expectations of these students to a level of achievement that is competitive with their more privileged peers.

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