

## Perceptions of Effectiveness of School Counselors with Former Graduates in a TRIO College Program

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The at-risk population has been defined as a “group of students that have experienced difficulties and/or failures as learners.”<sup>1</sup> This population is typically less engaged not only academically but also in the school community. There are many factors that can place an adolescent at risk; various cultural and social contexts may negatively influence a student’s academic performance. The current generation, the millennials, is known for being extremely diverse, with unique cultural aspects that can greatly affect their education.<sup>2</sup> Many programs and support staff are actively working to aid the millennial population; however, these support systems face many challenges as well.

Support staff, such as school counselors, can work with this population in the school setting by helping students overcome roadblocks and become engaged in learning. It is important that counselors encourage students to see achievements as a function of their own actions and not those of others.<sup>3</sup> In addition, school counselors and programs can help students become more involved in the school community and take greater responsibility for their future.

There is a need for more research on the effect of school counselors, specifically in regard to their work with at-risk students. This study was completed to further our understanding of at-risk students, specifically those in a TRIO program at their university, and students’ perceptions of the effect of their school counselor in relation to the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Model standards.

### **Programs to Increase College Access and Success**

Many programs exist to provide educational and college success services to students who are from low-income families, are the first in their family to attend college, and are traditionally underrepresented in higher education. The federal TRIO programs (TRIO), a set of federally funded programs that arose out of the War on Poverty during the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s, are one example.<sup>4</sup> These include Educational Opportunity Centers, Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement, Student Support Services, Talent Search, Training Program for Federal TRIO Staff, Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math-Science, and Veterans Upward Bound. All of the TRIO programs have the goal of supporting disadvantaged students in achieving postsecondary education success through increasing college acceptance, retention, and ultimately graduation rates.<sup>5</sup>

As a national program, TRIO has often been studied and shown to have a positive effect on college access and success for underrepresented students. Student Support Services has a significant positive effect on students' grade point averages (GPAs), number of semester credits earned, retention rates, and baccalaureate degree completion rates. College enrollment and completion rates significantly increased among students in the Upward Bound program who did not initially expect to complete a bachelor's degree before entering the program.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, a longer duration of student participation in Upward Bound was positively correlated with higher college enrollment and completion rates. Research has shown that TRIO programs and other programs like TRIO can have a positive effect on postsecondary outcomes for students.

Unfortunately, because of the limited amount of funding that is allotted to TRIO in the federal budget, TRIO programs serve only approximately 10% of the eligible population of students who qualify.<sup>7</sup> Other programs, funded through colleges or nonprofit organizations, have been established to fill this gap and aid in the effort to increase the number of students who complete a college degree. One example is the Academy of Math and Science, a student support program at a community college in a Midwestern suburban city. The Academy of Math and Science was established for students who are traditionally underrepresented in the career fields of math and science, including those who are considered low-income or first-generation students. The mission of the academy is to "encourage students to explore STEM careers ... [and] provide student support for students with an interest in STEM fields and/or with an aptitude for math and science."<sup>8</sup> This program serves as a unique model to examine the role of support in setting and achieving goals in careers in which students who are at risk are traditionally less often recruited and supported for success.

There is evidence for the success of career development and academic support programs for students like those in the Academy of Math and Science. For example, participating students have displayed increased self-efficacy<sup>9</sup> and higher GPAs at the end of their freshman year compared with nonparticipants.<sup>10</sup>

### **Ratios of Students to School Counselors**

When programs such as TRIO and the Academy of Math and Science are explored, it is important to acquire a better understanding of why high school graduates need extra support at college. Many high school students have access to college and career readiness programs during

high school, as well as to school counselors. However, school counselors find it difficult to manage their many tasks given the high ratios of students to counselors.<sup>11</sup>

The average ratio of students to school counselors in the United States is 471:1 according to data from the 2010-2011 school year, the most recent data available.<sup>12</sup> There is no federal requirement for a particular ratio of students to school counselors; states vary in their school counselor ratio requirements, with some states having no requirements at all. Minnesota is one such state. In Minnesota, school counselors are not required in schools at any K-12 level.<sup>13</sup> According to the 2010-2011 data from the U.S. Department of Education, the Minnesota ratio of students to school counselors was 782:1, higher than those of any other states except Arizona and California<sup>14</sup> and more than one and a half times the national average. The ASCA recommends a ratio of students to school counselors of 250:1 to achieve a strategic, purposeful, and effective school counseling program.<sup>15</sup> The ASCA National Model recommends that direct or indirect services to students make up at least 80% of a school counselor's time.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, increasing the number of school counselors in a school does not simply add staff; according to the National Model,<sup>15</sup> lower ratios of students to counselors translate to increased time that counselors are available to serve students.

With current ratios of students to school counselors, school counselors are unfortunately underserving many students. According to a Public Agenda report<sup>16</sup> for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that surveyed individuals 22 to 30 years old with some postsecondary education, nearly half of the respondents stated that they felt as if they were "just another face in the crowd" when they described their experience with their high school counselor (p. 6). Unfortunately, these underserved students also reported negative repercussions of their counseling experience and were less satisfied with their college choice and less likely to receive financial aid compared with students who felt that their school counselors had tried to get to know them.<sup>16</sup>

School counselors themselves consider high ratios to be an obstacle that decreases their effectiveness in meeting students' needs.<sup>17</sup> There is evidence to support this perception; lower ratios of students to school counselors have been shown to be effective in improving a number of measures of student outcomes. The number of disciplinary incidents appears to be related to ratios of students to school counselors.<sup>18-22</sup> The probability of disciplinary recurrences was greater in schools where school counselors had larger caseloads.<sup>18</sup> A smaller school counselor caseload decreases disciplinary incidents,<sup>20,21</sup> especially among low-income and

minority students.<sup>18,20,23</sup>

Evidence also indicates that low ratios of students to school counselors are associated with improved attendance and graduation rates.<sup>19,20,23</sup> Lapan et al<sup>23</sup> controlled for confounding factors while analyzing ratios of students to school counselors and found that ratios and the interaction between ratios and poverty together significantly predicted the percentage of students graduating from high school. School counselor ratios especially affect graduation rates in schools with a large percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch.<sup>23</sup> Lower ratios of students to school counselors have been associated with higher rates of vocational program completion and achievement of technical proficiency in career and vocational programs.<sup>19</sup> Increased availability of school counselors was also significantly related to decreases in students' internalizing and externalizing issues.<sup>24</sup> In sum, ratios of students to school counselors are correlated with a number of measurable student outcome variables.<sup>19,21,22</sup>

A higher ratio of school counselors to students can have a positive effect for students beyond graduation. Previous research indicates that an increase of one high school counselor is associated with an increase of 10 percentage points in 4-year college attendance rates.<sup>25</sup> It is clear that lower ratios benefit students; however, information is missing regarding the effectiveness of school counselors after students graduate from high school. School counselors may be increasing college attendance rates, but it is unclear if school counselors are giving students the support they need to continue thriving after graduation.

There is a need to understand the effectiveness of high school counselors beyond high school graduation. Research has shown that TRIO programs support postsecondary success<sup>9</sup>; however high school counselors also play a role in career development. In addition, there is a lack of research measuring the effectiveness of high school counselors for students after they graduate.

The present study seeks to understand community college TRIO students' perception of their high school counselors. Participants were asked to evaluate their school counselors based on standards of the ASCA National Model in an effort to gain information on school counselor effectiveness beyond graduation.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Sixty students attending a Midwestern community college specialty program for underrepresented students were invited to complete a survey

for this study. Twenty-six students participated in the survey. Two respondents were removed from the analysis because their ages were outliers, and three could not be included because their surveys were incomplete. This left 21 students for analysis ( $N = 21$ ). About half of the respondents were women (47.6%;  $n = 10$ ), and the rest were men (52.4%;  $n = 11$ ). Ages ranged from 18 to 22 years (median [ $M$ ] = 19.92, standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 1.29). Various races were represented in the sample, including Asian (14.3%;  $n = 3$ ), Hispanic/Latino(a) (9.5%;  $n = 2$ ), African American/black (19.0%;  $n = 4$ ), white (42.9%;  $n = 9$ ), and other (14.3%;  $n = 3$ ). The number of years that participants had lived in the United States ranged from 3 to 22 ( $M = 17.39$ ,  $SD = 5.34$ ).

Participants were asked about their mother's or guardian's highest level of education and reported 8th grade (9.5%;  $n = 2$ ), high school/GED (14.3%;  $n = 3$ ), some college/technical training (14.3%;  $n = 3$ ), two-year college (9.5%;  $n = 2$ ), college (28.6%;  $n = 6$ ), or graduate school (4.8%;  $n = 1$ ), or were not sure (19.0%;  $n = 4$ ). When asked about their father's or guardian's highest level of education, respondents reported 8th grade (4.8%;  $n = 1$ ), high school/GED (19.0%;  $n = 4$ ), some college/technical training (14.3%;  $n = 3$ ), two-year college (19.0%;  $n = 4$ ), college (14.3%;  $n = 3$ ), or graduate school (4.8%;  $n = 1$ ), or were not sure (23.8%;  $n = 5$ ).

### **Procedure**

Freshmen and sophomores in a Midwestern community college were contacted to complete a survey. The survey was completely online and sent through an e-mail from their program director. Students were offered the chance to be included in a drawing for a gift card as an incentive to complete the survey. Of the 60 students invited to participate, 26 completed the online survey. After outliers and students with incomplete surveys had been removed, 21 students made up the sample, yielding a 35% response rate.

### **Measures**

Twenty questions were asked regarding demographics and high school counselor effectiveness. The questions regarding school counselor effectiveness were based on ASCA principles, and the authors developed the questions based on the language of the standards.<sup>26</sup> For example, one standard is related to helping students understand and respect themselves and others.<sup>26</sup> A question related to this standard was, "My school counselor provided services to all students, creating a clear understanding of diversity, ethnicity, and culture." An example of a question related to another standard, which aims for students to set goals

and take necessary action to achieve their goals,<sup>26</sup> was, “My school counselor supported me in making decisions, setting goals, and taking appropriate action to achieve those goals.” Participants answered the questions on a 5-point Likert scale: 1, strongly disagree; 2, disagree; 3, don’t know; 4, agree; 5, strongly agree). Because of the small sample size, traditional internal consistency analyses were not appropriate. Inter-item correlations did not show any notable negative correlations between items. The ratings were added to calculate an overall school counselor rating, with a highest possible rating of 100. Demographic information was correlated with school counselor ratings and the answers to demographic questions.

### Results

Students in a college TRIO program were asked several questions about their high schools and school counselors. Participants reported a variety of graduating class sizes: fewer than 100 students (9.5%;  $n = 2$ ), 101 to 200 students (4.8%;  $n = 1$ ), 201 to 300 students (4.8%;  $n = 1$ ), 301 to 400 students (38.1%;  $n = 8$ ), 401 to 500 students (4.8%;  $n = 1$ ), and 500 or more students (38.1%;  $n = 8$ ). The number of school counselors in the participants’ schools ranged from 1 to 9 ( $M = 5.10$ ,  $SD = 2.47$ ). Students whose graduating class had fewer than 200 students reported having one high school counselor, students whose graduating class had between 201 and 400 students had an average of four high school counselors, and students with at least 401 students in their graduating class had an average of five high school counselors. When the largest number of students in each category and the average number of counselors per category were used, the the ratio of students to school counselors for this sample was approximately 400:1, which is 60% higher than the ASCA best practice recommendation of 250:1.<sup>15</sup>

The ratings for high school counselor effectiveness were summed to create an overall school counselor rating, with a maximum possible rating of 100. Overall ratings of high school counselors ranged from 22 to 100 ( $M = 71.76$ ,  $SD = 19.82$ ). These school counselor ratings were found to be significantly correlated with several variables. Pearson product-moment correlations are reported in Table 1. The most notable and unexpected findings are reported below.

The number of school counselors increased as the number of students in the graduating class increased:  $r(25) = 0.88$ ,  $P < .001$ . As the number of school counselors increased, the school counselor rating increased:  $r(20) = 0.45$ ,  $P = .043$ . The further along students were in their college education, the lower they rated their high school counselor:  $r(20) =$

$-0.49$ ,  $P = .025$ . The number of years of residence in the United States was also inversely correlated with school counselor rating:  $r(17) = -0.48$ ,  $P = .045$ . Students who had more contact with their high school counselor while they were in high school were more likely to work while in college:  $r(24) = 0.46$ ,  $P = .021$ . The amount of school counselor contact was negatively correlated with school counselor rating:  $r(19) = -0.49$ ,  $P = .027$ . The criteria for conducting linear regression analysis were not met.

### Discussion

The current study explored school counselor effectiveness as perceived by community college students. Study participants rated their previous school counselors, and these scores resulted in several significant correlations. An important finding is that the greater the number of high school counselors in a school, the higher the students' rating of their school counselor in that school. This lends further support to increasing the ratios of school counselors to students. It is important to note that although the number of school counselors in a school was significantly correlated with the size of a graduating class, graduating class size was not significantly correlated with school counselor rating; this finding suggests that students from schools with higher ratios of school counselors to students rated their school counselor more favorably than students from schools with higher ratios.

The ASCA recommends a ratio of students to school counselors of 250:1, but the national average in the 2010-2011 school year was 471:1.<sup>13</sup> In the state in which the survey was completed, the average ratio was 782:1.<sup>14</sup> Work remains to be done to reach the recommended ratio. This study did not specifically collect information about the respondents' knowledge of the ratio of students to school counselors at their high schools. However, the significant correlation between a greater number of school counselors and higher school counselor ratings suggests that as the ratio of students to school counselors approaches the ASCA recommendation, school counselor ratings may also improve.

The ratio of school counselors to students is not the only important factor involved in improving counselor effectiveness; the quality of school counselor–student interactions also deserves attention.<sup>19</sup> In previous studies, simply meeting with students was not enough to address students' needs; the quality of these interactions was also important.<sup>16</sup> School counselors can pay attention to the needs of individual students to serve them better and have a lasting effect for them beyond graduation. For example, in this study, students who worked while in college were found to rate their high school counselors higher. Students who work may

have special circumstances to which school counselors can be sensitive. Ohtman and Preston<sup>27</sup> found that at-risk youth who were working rated themselves higher in academic self-efficacy, which implies that the role of work is important to at-risk students. School counselors can further support students who work and help them maintain their self-efficacy after graduation.

Another notable finding from this study is that the frequency of school counselor contact was negatively correlated with school counselor rating. These lower ratings may have been a result of students having found support in other places, such as College Possible or Upward Bound programs. Students may have worked with their school counselors less often or less effectively as their needs were met through alternative programs. This inverse relationship between amount of high school counselor contact and perception of school counselor may also reflect the reason for contact with the school counselor. Although high school counselors can support students' well-being, work, and college preparation, school counselors are sometimes also the ones who meet with students when disciplinary issues arise.<sup>11</sup> If students meet with their school counselor only in disciplinary circumstances, this inverse relationship between amount of contact and perception of the school counselor is plausible. It may be that increasing the number of school counselors at a school increases the number of positive interactions between counselors and students. Future research should seek to measure disciplinary rates in relation to student perception of school counselor effectiveness and explore whether increasing the number of school counselors in a school also increases the number of positive counselor-student interactions.

Finally, fewer years of living in the United States correlated with higher school counselor ratings. Students' social and psychological needs are greater when they are new to a school system and a culture.<sup>28</sup> Previous research and discussion have shown that school counselors can meet the needs of immigrant students.<sup>29</sup> It is possible that a school counselor's ability to meet the needs of students who are relatively new to the United States affects the students' rating of the school counselor. Future research is needed to examine the relationship between immigrant students' needs and ratings of school counselors.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are limitations to this study, many of which are related to the sample. First, the response rate was small. A small response rate may indicate a response bias, which can alter conclusions based on the data.<sup>30</sup>

Another limitation is the small sample size, which makes it difficult to generalize the findings to any population. A larger sample would have also allowed appropriate internal consistency analyses to be performed, which would have ensured the appropriateness of summing the items to create an overall school counselor rating score. Additionally, the sample was from a single TRIO program whose focus was the Academy of Science and Math. Given the small number of students invited to participate in this study ( $n = 60$ ), the results should be considered as evaluative and thought-provoking findings related to the effect that high school counselors have on their students once they graduate rather than as rigorous research conclusions.

Lastly, the middle value of the Likert scale was used to indicate “don’t know.” It is possible that respondents interpreted the middle value differently. It is difficult to determine whether respondents did not know how to respond to a question or if “don’t know” was selected as the response that was most neutral. Some of the statements referenced actions a school counselor performs that are outside the scope of what a student observes, such as, “My school counselor provided systems support by effectively managing the school counseling program, as well as other school duties assigned by the administration.” The participants may not have had enough information to answer these questions or may not have remembered because they had graduated a year or two before taking this survey.

### **Future Directions**

In this study, at-risk students from schools where school counselors had smaller caseloads rated their counselors more favorably based on the ASCA National Model. The study has implications for school counselors because it emphasizes the importance of the size of school counselor caseload and perceptions of overall effectiveness. Further research is needed to explore the effectiveness of school counselors beyond high school. Based on the results of this study, future studies could explore differences between school counselor effectiveness for immigrant and nonimmigrant students.

This study noted whether students were working at the time of the survey; the fact that students who worked rated their school counselors as more effective suggests that characteristics of students who work has a positive effect on their relationship with school counselors. Further investigation can clarify the relationship between students’ work status both in high school and following secondary education and their perception of school counselor effectiveness.

Further investigation of the ratios of school counselors to students could especially clarify the correlation between school counselor effectiveness and caseload size. As stated previously, future research should seek to measure disciplinary rates in relation to student perception of school counselor effectiveness and explore whether increasing the number of school counselors in a school also increases the number of positive counselor-student interactions.

Overall, more research is needed to explore the effectiveness of school counselors for students beyond their high school education. This study was a first step in understanding school counselor effectiveness, especially for at-risk youth involved in a TRIO college program. School counselors can have a lasting effect on their students. A better understanding of the lifelong effectiveness of school counselors can inform best practices in school counseling.

**Ethical approval:** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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**Table 1.** Correlations of survey items with school counselor (SC) rating ( $n = 21$ ).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. SC rating	–													
2. Gender	–.077	–												
3. Age	–.422	–.056	–											
4. Grade	–.487*	.299	.338	–										
5. Race	–.142	–.104	–.212	.028	–									
6. Years in US	–.477*	.148	–.222	.293	.438*	–								
7. Work	–.315	.033	.478*	.362	.059	–.015	–							
8. Family member dropped out of high school	.352	–.256	–.107	–.355	.157	–.276	–.208	–						
9. Amount of contact with SC	–.494*	.204	.345	.535**	.253	.186	.458*	–.171	–					
10. Size of graduating class	.358	.439	.059	.116	–.105	–.196	–.011	.150	–.264	–				
11. Number of SCs at high school	.446*	.207	.031	.128	–.076	–.219	–.056	.206	–.216	.879***	–			
12. Pre-college program involvement	–.187	–.349	.020	–.359	.126	–.178	–.310	.055	–.019	–.315	–.215	–		
13. Father's highest education level	–.013	.213	.341	.115	.246	.274	.043	.150	–.205	.156	.094	–.264	–	
14. Mother's highest education level	.320	.280	–.205	.017	.291	–.061	–.210	.262	–.034	.293	.219	–.023	.449*	–

\* $P < .05$ .

\*\* $P < .01$ .

\*\*\* $P < .001$ .

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