

# Six Keys for Novice School Counselors

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## Abstract

What should newly graduating school counselors do? The research is clear that six key behaviors will develop and maintain who they are. The professional identity of school counselors is important because of the impact school counselors have on students and the school environment. When school counselors understand their roles, engage in continuous learning after training, gain support from administration, strengthen their advocacy, seek out mentorship and join professional organizations, current research indicates that they are better able to broaden their scope of resources to help and advocate on behalf of the students they serve. This manuscript is intended to inform novice school counselors in particular of six keys to help develop and maintain one's professional identity after graduate training.  
*Keywords:* professional identity, new school counselors, transitions

Six Keys to Strengthening the Professional Identity of a Novice School Counselor  
Upon graduating as a school counselor, the newly minted counselors have been heard to say that they have completed their train-

ing—but have they? Indications are that graduate training is an admission ticket to a life of personal and professional development that must include six elements to be effective: 1) experiential learning, 2) exposure, 3) administrative support, 4) professional development 5) mentoring and 6) advocacy (Nelson, 2018).

## History

Over the past three decades the debate within the profession of what separates counselors from other helping professionals has been ongoing (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Hanna & Bemak, 1997; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011; Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011; Nelson, 2018). The field itself has seen an identity crisis with the transition from guidance counselor to school counselor. This transition has been slow according to Lambie and Williamson (2004) due to the lack of support from school principals in understanding the role of school counselors and school counselors being better advocates for the profession.

School counseling training programs have implemented and formulated courses to teach trainees of the importance of having

a strong professional identity. Especially programs that are accredited by Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), school counselors are inundated by experiential activities and are exposed to courses that are geared to strengthen the professional identity of a trainee (i.e., particularly introduction to school counseling, comprehensive school counseling, and internship). In 2005, a committee of 30 leaders from the American Counseling Association (ACA) developed a strategic plan for the growth and sustainability of the counseling profession (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011); this committee was called the 20/20 Task Force.

The task force concluded its collaboration by developing a definition for counseling and listing as one of its principles the profession having a shared professional identity (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). Through this intuitive many school counseling programs found it necessary to prepare their trainees to not only understand the role of a school counselor but to also develop and strengthen their professional identities as school counselors.

The intent of this manuscript is to provide newly graduated school counselors with six helpful elements on how to develop and maintain a professional identity after training. The resources discussed throughout the manuscript will allow novice school counselors to understand what a professional identity is and how to gain longevity in the field by developing and maintaining a professional identity. The manuscript will also provide school counseling supervisors who work with trainees and novice school counselors' practical considerations to help develop professional identities.

## Literature Review

Moss, Gibson, and Dollarhide (2010) demonstrated within their study that a counselor's professional identity provides a framework for professional practice. The authors found it appropriate to conduct a grounded theory approach in order for counselor education programs and counselors to have something to use as a framework. The framework suggested six themes that were influential to counselors' professional development: 1) adjustment to expectations, 2) confidence and freedom, 3) separation vs integration, 4) experienced guide, 5) continuous learning and 6) work with clients. It is imperative that school counselors should also have a professional framework to help practice in the field.

According to Brott and Myers (1999), it was assumed that although there may be similar themes that arise in comparison to a counselors' professional identity, there are differences that could benefit the school counseling field. Therefore, a grounded theory method was used to demonstrate factors such as: 1) accounts, 2) advocates, 3) defines, 4) intertwines, 5) manages, 6) rates, 7) responds, and 8) sustains. It was concluded that professional identity of school counselors does contribute to the defining roles they serve. It is important to note that school counselors at times are required to take on roles that do not reflect their training due to budgeting concerns, lack of resources, and misconceptions of the roles of school counselors (Nelson, 2018). However, there are elements that help strengthen the professional identity of school counselors, and in turn school counselors strengthening the identity of the profession.

The identity of the counselor is at the core of the model to help trainees and supervi-

sors understand the development of their professional identity. Ockerman, Mason and Chen-Hayes (2013) discussed the benefits of Change Agent for Equity (CAFÉ model) in supervising school counselors and how this could help foster growth not only in school counselors but close the gap in student outcomes. The authors addressed in detail the CAFÉ model and suggest that school counselors-in-training must have trained and consistent supervisors who understand the reality of the job. The authors suggested that supervision should not only entail knowledge and skill-based training but incorporate professional identity and helping to strengthen those characteristics in trainees. It is the duty of the supervisor to help school counseling supervisees not only find resources in the field but to also determine new sources, remove barriers to sources, and address issues of equity.

### Six Keys for School Counselors

Six keys that school counselors should consider in developing and maintaining their professional identities are offered (Nelson, 2018) (refer to Figure 1). These six keys will not only build counselors professional identities after training but will foster growth in the profession and set a precedence within the school about the role and duties of a school counselor.

#### Key 1: Experiential Learning

School counselors are encouraged to continue learning by attending workshops, participating in professional developments, and attending professional conferences. Experiential learning has been identified as one of the factors that helps school counselor trainees to be successful during training programs (Nelson & Jackson, 2003; Nelson, 2018); however, school counselors can develop and maintain their professional

identity through continuous experiential learning even outside of a training program. It is during these professional events that novice school counselors can engage in experiential learning and gain exposure to new resources, and techniques to build upon their skill sets (Nelson, 2018). Auxier, Hughes and Kline (2003) stated that overtime “experiential learning” became more important than conceptual learning to counselors. This is due to the hands-on experiences counselors gain by doing activities firsthand rather than just reading about it. Experiential learning is deemed as one basis in which novice school counselors can strengthen and maintain their professional identities.

#### Key 2: Exposure

According to Burkholder (2012), counselors are able to conceptualize, contextualize, and express their professional identities through various applications, discovery, teaching, and integration. Counselors-in-training (CIT) were able to conceptualize based on their particular experiences, contextualize the meaning of what they do and express in action what they have learned. It is through exposure to various situations whether from practicum, internship, or on-the-job exposure that school counselors are able to develop their professional identities (Nelson, 2018). Therefore, it is recommended that newly employed school counselors gain exposure through being involved in various activities conducted by other school counselors on a regular basis. Such activities include but are not limited to: facilitating individual and group counseling sessions, conducting large group lessons, planning and executing individual courses of study, and scheduling. Many school counselors are instructed to do partial school counseling activities based on the need of the school

and the school counselor to student ratio; however, to develop a school counselor whose professional identity is strong and well-rounded, a novice school counselor must engage in all areas on what it means to be an exemplary school counselor (Nelson, 2018).

Exposure to the field as a new school counselor also helps put into perspective the reality of the field and how different it is from training. At times the connection between what textbooks say to the reality of the field is hard to make during practicum and internship. Once employed and with much exposure and experience over time, new school counselors begin to understand their roles and internalize what the field is more plainly than during graduate training. It is through the process of exposure that new school counselors gain experience and strengthen their professional identities.

#### Key Three: Administrative Support

Lambie and Williamson (2004) discussed the challenge the school counseling profession is having in transition from the guidance counselor perspective to the professional school counselor and the historical implications behind the transition. However, the authors spend some time discussing four steps in which school counselors can use and advance their professional identity. The first is to educate principals, because a principal’s support is essential to the school counseling profession; 2) abolish teaching requirements [for counselors]; 3) provide [professional] supervision in schools; and 4) re-assign inappropriate duties [like lunch room and bus duty]. From these steps, it is imperative that not only school counselors be engaged in relationship development with their administrators but also have meaningful conversations to cultivate their understanding in these areas (Lambie &

Williamson, 2004).

Due to novice school counselors transitioning from training to employment, they have a perspective of the field that is relevant to the changes of the field, but they lack understanding in the organization to effect large changes. School counselors are thoroughly trained in the ASCA model and are able to understand the benefits of the model in a school setting. However, school counselors would benefit from gaining experience and exposure to building relationships with administration in order to get them on on the same page (Nelson, 2018). Such a relationship would be a long-term, multi-year process that is necessary in order to help the student body but to also help strengthen the professional identity of novice school counselors.

Administration must take more initiative to understand the ASCA Model as well as the comprehensive school counseling program and its effectiveness when utilized well. It is the duty of administration to observe the roles of school counselors, foster a working relationship, and understand how school counselors can be used in the school setting to help the school culture. Moreover, school counselors can over time improve administrators’ understanding of these aspects of counselors’ role. Supervisors can start the conversation with administration to model for trainees and novice school counselor’s effective communication skills. Novice school counselors must consider ways to bring about change, and apply the lessons learned to strengthening and maintaining their professional identities in order to create a new way of looking at the school counseling profession.

Payne (2011) found that counselors exhibit higher levels of job satisfaction in

school counseling programs that “a) have administrative support, and “b) facilitate communication between faculty and staff members” (p. 91). Administrative support helps school counselors to be more satisfied with their jobs. If novice school counselors are satisfied with their jobs due to the support from administration, then this will help to strengthen and maintain their professional identities.

#### **Key 4: Professional Development**

Being engaged with other professionals in the field and developing social networks helps novice school counselors to expand their frame of thinking and gain knowledge beyond their training programs. Professional development includes being a part of professional organizations, attending or presenting at conferences, attending workshops/webinars, and participating in district wide workshops (Nelson, 2018). Brott, (2006) expressed that professional development is a necessary part of the professional identity of counselors and serves as an opportunity for new counselors to develop and evolve into effective practitioners. Previous research (Brott & Myers, 1999; Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010; Reissetter et. al., 2004; Perusee & Goodnough, 2005) defines joining and participating in professional organizations as a part of professional identity development. It is imperative for novice school counselors to be engaged in professional development in order to strengthen and maintain their professional identities (Nelson, 2018). By participating in such activities, novice school counselors will learn skills and techniques and gain resources that will build upon their training program framework. Being engaged with other professionals in the field and developing social networks help novice school counselors to expand their frame of thinking and gain knowledge

beyond their training programs. Consultation skills are broadened when novice school counselors network and meet professionals who have a wealth of information about issues that concern school counselors. It is recommended that novice school counselors take advantage of such resources and be present in these activities in order for their professional identities to be strengthened.

#### **Key 5: Mentorship**

The next key novice school counselors must be aware of is mentorship. Mentorship denotes the counselors’ awareness to either seeking out or being open to mentorship by someone that has years of experience in the field or a good understanding of the what the field entails. Murdock, Stipanovic and Lucas (2013) conducted a qualitative study to explore how counselors-in-training developed their professional identities through a co-mentoring program between master’s level and doctoral level students. The results of the study showed an increase in professional identity due to the co-mentoring relationships. The study opened the door to not only mentorship being utilized in a training program, but continuing to allow mentorship opportunities while employed to help novice school counselors strengthen their professionalism in the school setting. There are some states (South Carolina, North Carolina, Connecticut, and Indiana) that have found mentorship necessary for newly employed teachers and school counselors. Mentee’s have stated that having such a relationship not only helps their confidence on the job but also provides them with a person to consult with on difficult cases as well as strengthen their professional identities (Nelson, 2018).

Along those lines, it is also necessary for

school counselors to have mentor relationships in order to help with the transition of the field from the guidance counselor perspective to the school counselor perspective. Lambie and Williamson (2004) discussed four steps to transition from the guidance counselor perspective to the school counselor perspective. Step three is: supervision in the schools, where school counselors can continue to sharpen their skill sets. A supervisory relationship is a form of mentorship that is very familiar to novice school counselors. Continuing in this manner will help novice school counselors become comfortable in approaching a school counseling colleague with concerns, build a basis to firmly help with the transition in terminology, and expand upon counseling skill sets needed to be effective. Having such an opportunity for novice school counselors is needed for the growth and maturity of professional identity.

#### **Key 6: Advocacy**

As is clear from the earlier discussions, novice school counselors are engaged in communication about the school counseling program and about issues that impact students and the school. Novice school counselors must understand that by advocating on behalf of students, their professional identities will be strengthened. Brott and Myers (1999) suggest that much of the literature on counselors looks at the experiences or impact professional identity has on counselors while in graduate programs but not beyond that scope. The study developed a grounded theory with eight theoretical categories emerging; moreover, one of the categories that emerged was advocacy. Advocacy starts with building a relationship with administration to not only help students, but to build a more modern framework on what school counselors do and the role they play in the

school system. By building a relationship with administration, novice school counselors will be able to properly communicate duties that are not appropriate for school counselors, educate administration on the ASCA model if unknown, and foster a better relationship between administration and the school counseling department.

Nelson (2018) also found advocacy apparent in the development of professional identity in novice high school counselors. The study showed that novice high school counselors were confident in advocacy with the support of administration and found it a necessary part of their work as school counselors to advocate on behalf of their students. With experience, novice school counselors will develop the skill to advocate efficiently for their students; however, it is imperative that novice school counselors are aware of the benefits of advocacy when it comes to strengthening and maintaining their professional identities.

#### **Pairing and Networking**

Two practical processes that can accomplish much of what is suggested in these six keys are: pairing and networking. By administration building these components into the job activities of novice school counselors or with the efforts of the school counselors themselves to seek these opportunities, professional development in all six areas can occur.

Novice school counselors can be paired with a proficient colleague in the district to learn and strengthen their professional identity. Supervisors can pair novice school counselors with experienced school counselors in shadowing opportunities, observations, and project development. By being paired with an exemplary school counselor, novice school counselors may

find comfort in the relationship to ask questions, seek out resources, and learn new skills that may have not been taught during training. By pairing through supervision or with a proficient colleague, novice school counselors will have experiential learning, gain exposure, develop communication skills with administration, attend and build networking opportunities through professional development, seek mentorship and become better advocates. Through these six keys novice school counselors will see their professional identities strengthened and gain longevity in the field (Nelson, 2018).

The mentee-mentor relationship can also foster expansion of their frame of thinking and open up a perspective to the field that may not be seen in their current school settings; for example, career counseling across the grade levels or resources used to schedule students for courses. It is through the mentee-mentor relationship that novice school counselors will be able to learn innovative ways to help their students by establishing networking opportunities. Networking can take place and is encouraged at professional conferences, workshops, and trainings where novice school counselors can meet a variety of professionals. It is at these venues, many school counselors have reported learning to be better advocates for their students and the profession as a whole (Nelson, 2018). Not only are novice school counselors learning about and adapting various resources to utilize in their particular settings, but they may learn about policies and legislation that may impact their students, jobs, and the education system.

### Conclusion

When graduating from a counselor education program, the temptation is great to

feel, "I have arrived." Research suggests, "I have begun." Novice school counselors must understand the importance of having a strong professional identity in order to achieve longevity in the field. Through experiential learning, time exposed to actually doing counseling, administration support, professional development, mentoring, and advocacy, novice school counselors can strengthen and maintain a professional identity (Nelson, 2018). In the manuscript, a review of literature provided a better understanding on the importance of strengthen professional identity and detailed the significance of the six keys if applied in a school setting. The importance of a professional identity does not only benefit the school counselor but also helps to strengthen the field of school counseling and help with the transition from guidance counselor to school counselor. Understanding the role of a school counselor is dependent on school counselors also understanding their roles and developing a strong professional identity. As accrediting institutions are realizing the basis of having a strong professional identity, so should mentors, supervisors and administration in school systems when working with novice school counselors.

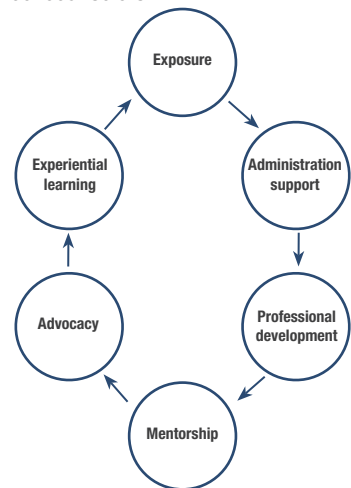


Figure 1. Shows a circular relationship of the six themes identified to help strengthen and maintain a novice school counselors' professional identity. Adapted from "Exploring the professional identity of exemplar novice high school counselors." *Nelson, 2018, Dissertation Abstracts International Section A, 79, University of South Carolina.*

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## Improving 5th Grade Attendance and Achievement through Student Success Skills Program

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### Abstract

The researcher incorporated an evidence-based Student Success Skills program, to see the impact it made on attendance and achievement rates for a 5th grade classroom, in a suburban elementary school in the Atlanta, GA area. The results show that the Student Success Skills program made no impact on the students when examining absences and standardized testing scores. A thorough discussion explains the limitations that influenced the results from the study.

*Keywords:* Student Success Skills, achievement, attendance, elementary school

Research shows that rates of student's daily attendance is highly correlated with their performance on mathematics and reading achievement tests (Steven, 2007). Fifth grade students at a suburban elementary school in the Atlanta area, had the highest amount of school absences among the whole elementary school in their 4th grade, 2016-2017 school year (School Data, 2017). Consequently, in the same year, 77 percent scored less than proficient

in English/Language Arts and 74 percent scored less than proficient in Math on their 2017 Georgia Milestones (a comprehensive summative assessment that measures the knowledge and skills that students have been taught and expected to master by the end of the school year) (School Data, 2017). Sarah Peek (2009) explains the necessity of building a solid foundation for students during their elementary years of education. She explains how if a child misses school regularly, their education foundation will likely not be stable. Peek (2009) identified a statistic that, "A correlation between test scores and attendance was taken, and findings deducted that students who attend class 95% of the time were twice as likely to pass state competency tests as students attending class only 85% of the time."

For this research study, the elementary school demographics included 93% Hispanic, 3% African-American, 1% Asian, 1% White and <1% of multi-cultured students (School Data, 2017). The Hispanic population is the fastest growing minority group