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Activities and Role of School-Based Counselors in the US: A National Survey of American Counseling Association Members

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Abstract

This study was conducted to determine: how a US sample of American Counseling Association (ACA) affiliated school-based counselors viewed their role; the extent to which various activities were practiced; and, how demographic variables (e.g., work setting and professional identity) were related to both perceptions of role and practice. Participants (N = 249) completed the International Survey of School Counselors Activities-US (ISSA-US) online, which measured both perceptions of the appropriateness of 42 activities and whether these activities are reported to be enacted. US counselors had a broad definition of their role and showed a high degree of consensus regarding the appropriateness of activities. Grade level proved to be an important determinate of the level of enactment of both group counseling and college and career counseling. The implications for of these findings for redefining the role of school counselors in the US and for international comparative research are discussed.

Key Words: school-based counselor, role, activities, professional issues

Introduction

Lambie and Williamson (2004) noted that in the US, "School counseling roles have been vast and ever-changing, making it understandable that many school-based counselors struggle with role ambiguity and incongruence while feeling overwhelmed" (p. 127). Despite the fact that counselors have been working in US schools for over 100 years, the ideal role and role-related activities of school-based counselors are still a matter of controversy (Cinotti, 2014). School-based counselors deliver various direct and indirect services in a wide range of formats including one-on-one counseling, group counseling, primary prevention programs, and parent and teacher consultation; in addition, US school-based counselors advocate for students and engage in planning, management, and evaluation of the school-based counseling program (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2012). School-based counselor activities have been focused on promoting students' academic development, social-emotional development, career development, vocational choice, college transitions, and mental health (ASCA, 2012; Astramovich, Hoskins, & Bartlett, 2010; College Board, 2010; Herr, 2013; Lockhart & Keys, 1998). It has been suggested that the role of US school-based counselors is so broad that it is impossible to enact all of the profession's recommended components with high quality (Carey & Martin, 2017; College Board, 2011). To remedy this putative and undesirable state of affairs, some have suggested eliminating activities consider to be extraneous (like mental-health counseling) by aligning university training with school-based counseling practice (College Board, 2011), using paraprofessionals to perform activities that do not require advanced counselor training (Astramovich et al., 2010), and developing school-based counseling specializations to enable schools to create teams of counselors with needed expertise (Carey & Martin, 2017). It should be noted that these suggestions for altering the role of school-based counselors in the US have been elaborated without a precise understanding of how school-based counselors view the importance of different activities and what they actually do on the job.

Enabling International Comparative Research

The comparative study of school-based counseling models and practices across the world can usefully shed light on the essential activities of school-based counseling and inform public policy by identifying which modes of practice are most effective in which contexts. Such research also offers the promise of contributing fresh perspectives to understanding best practices within national contexts (Aluede, Carey, Harris, & Lee, 2017). To enable cross-national investigations, objective

comparisons of school-based counseling systems and practices will be necessary, coupled with a study of policy and context. As a foundation for such work, it is important to be able to compare what school-based counselors do and how they conceptualize and prioritize their work across contexts.

According to a recent scoping report by Harris (2013), school-based counseling is practiced in over 90 different countries and great variability exists in modes of practice that is related to the specific historical and contextual factors that have affected the development and practice of the work. Harris noted, "Counsellors' knowledge and expertise in education may be understood within a historical context, whereby the emergence of counselling can be traced back to changing educational landscapes and new imperatives or concerns in education" (p. 1). In a similar vein, Martin, Lauterbach, and Carey's (2015) international grounded theory study of school-based counseling found that the practice of school-based counseling within a given country was strongly shaped by specific contextual factors including: culture; national needs; models of school-based counseling; laws and educational policies; characteristics of the educational system; activities of the counseling profession; research and evaluation; larger societal movements; the actions of related professions; the influences of community and nongovernmental organizations; and, the perceptions of school-based counseling by local stakeholders.

Investigating the similarities and differences in roles and activities amongst school-based counseling practitioners around the world and the relationships between these modes of practice and public policy can uncover important findings and implications that can lead to the development of more effective policy and the improvement of practice. Before roles and activities can be compared between contexts, completing a one-country 'baseline' is a commonly recommended practice (Tymms, Merrell, & Jones, 2004). The present study represents such a baseline description of US roles and activities that can be used in future international school-based counseling research. The present study is, therefore, an effort to initiate this comparative work by providing a quantitative description of the role and activities of school-based counselors in the US and by the elucidation of how contextual, demographic factors in the US shape school-based counselors' views on the appropriateness of different activates and influence their enactment of different activities.

The Present Study

Clearly, there is a need for research that maps the role and activities of US school-based counselors with greater precision than past research has done. Such a quantitative mapping of role and activities would enable sound policy decisions related to role redefinition and credentialing and appropriate curricular decisions related to school counselor education reform in the US. It would also enable fertile cross-national comparative research.

This present study was therefore conducted with a dual purpose:

1. To achieve a more precise understanding of the current role and activities of school-based counselors in the US as a foundation for US-based policy studies.
2. To lay the groundwork for international comparative policy research on the work of school-based counselors.

The specific goals of this research project were: to identify how a United States (US) national sample of American Counseling Association (ACA) affiliated school-based counselors viewed the importance of different activities related to their role; to determine the extent to which they reported practicing these activities; and, to determine how demographic variables (e.g., personal characteristics, work setting, professional identity) were related to views of role centrality and the enactment of role-related professional activities.

In the present research, we used the newly developed International Survey of School Counselors' Activities-US (ISSCA-US; Fan et al., in press) to measure respondents' views of the level of importance of 42 different activities to the role of the school-based counselor in the US and to determine whether or not respondents reported enacting these activities in their work. It is important to note that the ISSCA items were drawn from a wide range of US and international sources related to the role and activities of school-based counselors so that it would be appropriate for a wide range of national contexts. We also collected demographic information from the participants that would be expected to be related to their views of the importance and their level of enactment of different activities. We sought to determine if counselors' gender was related to their views about the importance and their level of enactment of different school-based counseling activities. We reasoned that counselors with different levels of experience might have different perspectives on the school-based counselor role either because of cohort effects related to changes in pre-service education practices or shifts in dominant school-counseling models. We expected that counselors working at different levels might report differing levels of activity enactment since throughout its history the school-based counseling field has given different categories of activities (i.e., individual planning, guidance curriculum, and responsive services) varying prominence across levels (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012) and because some activities (e.g., group counseling) are more difficult to implement at certain levels. Given research findings that some school-based counseling activities are enacted more or less frequently in urban vs. rural settings (Neale-McFall & Owens, 2016), we sought to determine whether

counselors' work setting influenced their perspective on role and their professional activities. Because of the American School Counselors' Association's focus on establishing the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012) as the standard for school-based counseling practice, we sought to determine if affiliation with ASCA influenced counselors' conceptualization of their role and their professional activities. Finally, given the recent emphasis on the importance of professional identity in guiding professional practice (Kaplan Gladding, 2011), we sought to determine whether there were differences in role conceptualization and professional activity between respondents who held a counselor vs. an educator primary professional identity.

Methods

Participants and Sampling

The American Counseling Association (ACA) provided emails for members who had indicated that they were employed as school-based counselors and who had granted permission to be contacted for research purposes (N = 2,137). It would have been desirable to also collect data from a national sample of American School Counselor Association (ASCA) members. ASCA was contacted repeatedly and the researchers also offered to purchase an e-mail list. However, ASCA did not follow up on our requests.

To increase the number of respondents, the tailored design method for electronic surveying methods was used in regard to email communications and the timing of delivery (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). Out of a possible 2,147 participants invited to complete the research instruments, 403 people returned surveys, 249 of whom completed the entire 42-item ISSCA-US, representing an approximately 12% return rate. This rate, while low, is on par with prior survey research involving school-based counselor populations (see Limberg, Lambie, & Robinson, 2016; Mullen, Lambie, Griffith, & Sherrell, 2015). Online survey response rates among large, external populations typically fall between 10-15% (Fan & Yan, 2010).

Measures

International Survey of School Counselors' Activities—United States. The ISSCA-US was used in this study to measure school-based counselors' ratings of the appropriateness of various activities for the school-based counselor role and whether school-based counselors engaged in these activities. Fan et al. (in press) described the development, factor structure, and subscale composition of the instrument.

ISSCA-US items were drawn from a wide range of US and international sources related to the role and activities of school-based counselors. Sources included: the ASCA (1999) role statement; the current ASCA statements on appropriate and inappropriate school-based counselor duties (ASCA, n.d.a), school-based counselor competencies (ASCA, n.d.b), and the role of the school-based counselor (ASCA, n.d.c); the ASCA National Model (2012); the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2016) Standards; the School Counselor Activity Rating Scale (Scarborough, 2005); recent US-based research that used researcher-developed surveys or lists of school-based counselor activities (Agresta, 2004; Bardhoshi & Duncan, 2009; Dodson, 2009; Fitch & Marshall, 2004; Fitch, Newby, Ballestero, & Marshall, 2001; Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; National Office for School Counselor Advocacy, 2011; Nelson, Robles-Pina, & Nichter, 2008; Reiner, Colbert, & Perusse, 2009); and 26 articles reflecting international research and scholarship on the role and activities of school-based counselors (see Fan et al., in press).

A total of 42 items resulted. Two response formats were selected for the ISSCA-US. School-based counselors were asked to "Respond to each item based on your opinion on the appropriateness of each activity for the role of a school-based counselor in (your country)" using a 4-point Likert scale of: "*Very Inappropriate*", "*Inappropriate*", "*Appropriate*", and "*Very Appropriate*" as response categories. Participants were also asked to respond to the question, "Do you do this activity in your present position?" for each item using dichotomous (i.e."*Yes*" or "*No*") response categories.

Fan et al. (in press) reported that exploratory factor analyses (EFA) of the ISSCA-US items using the Likert and dichotomous (yes/no) formats differed slightly. The Likert response format's EFA yielded six factors corresponding to different domains of practice: Leadership, Program Management, and Evaluation (LPME; 13 items); Indirect Services with Parents and Teachers (ISPT; 8 items); Individual and Group Counseling with Students (IGCS; 10 items); Prevention Work (PW; 5 items); College and Career Counseling with Students (CCCS; 4 items); and Administrator Role (AR; 2 items). The following Cronbach alpha reliability estimates for the resulting 6 subscales were found: LPME (α = .91), ISPT (α = .79), IGCS (α = .92), PW (α = .87), CCCS (α= .79), and AR (α = .62). Small to moderate scale inter-correlations were found, ranging between -.01 (ICGS and AR) and .65 (ICGS and LMPE).

Fan et al. (in press) reported that the dichotomous response format EFA also yielded six factors. Four of the six dichotomous EFA factors corresponded almost exactly with the Likert EFA factors: LPME, ISPT, PW, and CCCS. However, instead of a single factor corresponding to individual and group counseling with students (as was found in the Likert EFA), the dichotomous EFA yielded two distinct factors corresponding to Individual Work with Students (IWS)

and Group Work with Students (GWS). A factor related to administrator's role was not found in the dichotomous EFA. The subscales were formed on the basis of this EFA. Subscale scores were determined by summing the scores of the items belonging to each subscale. The subscales showed adequate reliability with Cronbach alpha estimates ranging between .65 (ISPT) and .79 (CCCS). Small to moderate scale inter-correlations were found ranging between -.07 (CCCS and GWS) and .43 (IWS and LMPE).

Demographic Items. Demographic data were collected through six survey items. Participants were asked to identify their gender (female or male), experience (i.e., years employed as a school-based counselor), work setting (rural, suburban, urban, or inner city), the level(s) at which they were working (elementary, middle and/or high school), ASCA affiliation (member of ACA only vs. member of both ASCA and ACA), and professional identity (i.e., whether they considered themselves primarily as a counselor working in a school or an educator who does counseling). In deference to the opinion of the IRB regarding the collection of non-essential, potentially sensitive information, demographic data on participants' racial/ethnic group membership, sexual orientation, and age were not collected as was originally anticipated.

Procedures

The ISSCA-US and all research materials and procedures were reviewed and approved by the University of Massachusetts Human Subjects Institutional Review Board prior to study implementation. A survey was built in Survey Monkey that included an informed consent page, demographic items, and the 42-item ISSCA-US. In January 2017, the first author sent an email to ACA members employed as school-based counselors who had granted permission to be contacted for research purposes. In addition to a link to the online survey, this email included information on the purposes of the research, the nature of the ISSCA-US, the potential impact their participation could have on policy research, and the confidentiality of their responses.

The survey link led participants to an informed consent page. If recipients agreed to participate in the study, they were directed to the demographic items and ISSCA-US. After the initial request, the first author sent two reminders emailed at one-week intervals to people who had not yet responded.

Analyses

Subscale scores for both Likert and dichotomous item response formats were calculated for each participant according to the item assignments to subscales suggested by Fan et al. (in press). We examined the histogram plots of all subscales and determined that the distributions approximated normality. The absence of statistically significant ($p < .05$) differences between group differences using Leverne's test indicated that the homogeneity of variance assumption of parametric analyses was not violated. One-way ANOVAs were then conducted with the demographic items as the independent variables and subscale scores (reflecting the sums of item scores) as the dependent variables. Rather than controlling for experiment-wise alpha inflation by setting a more conservative alpha level, we chose to report the exact probabilities for all statistical findings with an alpha less than .05. We reasoned that, at this exploratory stage of the investigations of the relationships among demographic characteristics, role and practice, it was appropriate to minimize the probably of a beta error—failing to identify a real difference.

Three demographic variables had only two levels (gender, ASCA affiliation, and professional identity). The results of the one-way ANOVA were sufficient to describe the differences between the groups. The remaining three demographic variables, however, had more than three levels. For the experience category, we grouped respondents into five groups with roughly equal numbers: fewer than four years; 4-8 Years; 9 to 14 Years; 15-19 years; and over 20 years. For work setting, respondents indicated that they were working in one of 4 groups (rural, suburban, urban, or inner city). Because some counselors indicated that they worked at more than one level, respondents were grouped into six categories corresponding to elementary, elementary and middle school, middle school, middle and high school, high school, and all levels). The numbers of participants in each of the subgroups for experience work setting and level are presented below in the Participant Characteristics section.

Subsequent to performing the one-way ANOVAs, we computed Eta^2 for each statistically significant result in order to determine its practical significance. We used Cohen's (1988) criteria to determine small ($Eta^2 = .02$), medium ($Eta^2 = .13$) and large ($Eta^2 = .26$) effect sizes.

We next conducted post hoc analyses for all results found to have a medium or large effect size, to determine which subgroups differed significantly from each other using Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) procedures to control for experiment-wise alpha inflation (i.e., the procedure reduces the Type I error rate).

Finally, we performed descriptive statistical analyses to understand counselors' responses to all items in the survey. These analyses were performed for two reasons: to potential identify issues for subsequent research and to facilitate subsequent international comparisons. We examined the percentage of demographic variables to reflect the characteristics of the participants. We then analyzed the mean (*M*) and

standard deviation (*SD*) of 42 Likert items and the percentages of 42 dichotomous items to describe counselors' views of each item. We identified discrepancies between Likert ratings of the centrality of activities to the role of the school-based counselor and dichotomous ratings of whether the activities were actually performed by counselors by comparing the relative rank order position of the items in the terms of centrality vs. performance.

Results

Participant Characteristics

Among the 249 participants who completed the entire survey, 79% were female (n = 197) and 21% were male (n = 52). In terms of school setting, 23.5% of the participants reported working in rural areas (n = 59), 44.6% in suburban areas (n = 111), 24.5% in urban locations (n = 61), and 6.8% reported working in the inner city (n = 18). Regarding grade levels, 19.7% reported working in an elementary school (n = 49), 17.7% in a middle school (n = 44), and 38.6% in a high school (n = 96), while 6.4% worked in both elementary and middle school (n = 16), 9.2% worked in middle and high schools (n = 23), and 7.2% worked among the three levels of elementary, middle, and high school (n = 21). Regarding participants' number of years of experience as a school-based counselor, 17.8% reported working fewer than four years (n = 44), 19.5% said they had worked between 4-8 years (n = 49), 20.7% had worked 9-14 years (n = 52), 21.6% 15-19 years (n = 54), and 20.3% had worked in the field for more than 20 years (n = 50). With respect to professional identity, 77.5% of participants identify more as a counselor who works in an educational setting (n = 193) while 22.5% see themselves more as an educator who specializes in counseling (n = 56).

Likert Item Subscales and Demographics

Table 1 contains a summary of the Eta^2 effect size estimates for all the significant one-way ANOVA (p < .05) findings for demographic item-related differences on the ISSCA-US Likert response format subscales. While statistically significant differences were noted for Gender and the Prevention Work subscale (F = 3.948, df = 1/246, p < .048) and for ASCA affiliation and the College and Career Counseling with Students subscale (F = 3.894, df = 1/246; p < .050) the Eta^2 effect size estimates failed to reach the criterion for even a small effect size. These results most likely do not have any real practical significance .

A significant difference for role centrality ratings on the Prevention Work subscale was noted for ASCA affiliation (F = 8.426, df = 1/246; p < .004) but this result only reflected a small effect size (Eta^2 = .033) and hence has little practical significance. Similarly, significant differences for role centrality ratings on the Administrator Role subscale were noted for both grade level (F = 3.116, df = 5/241, p <.010) and affiliation with ASCA (F = 17.737, df = 1/246; p < .0001). However, both differences reflected only small effect sizes (Eta^2 = .061 for Grade Level; Eta^2 = .067 for ASCA Affiliation) and suggest little practical significance.

Dichotomous Item Subscales and Demographics

Table 1 contains a summary of the Eta^2 effect size estimates for all the significant one-way ANOVA (p < .05) findings for demographic item-related differences on the ISSCA-US dichotomous response format subscales that reflect the summation of dichotomous (yes-no) response format items consistent with Fan et al. (in press).

Ten statistically significant findings were determined to reflect only small effect sizes. Significant differences related to whether counselors reported enacting activities related to *Individual Work with Students* were noted for experience (F = 2.598, df = 4/242, p < .037), work setting (F = 3.401, df = 3/243; p < .018), ASCA affiliation (F = 7.511, df = 1/246; p < .007), and professional identity (F = 9.305; df = 1/246; p < .003). Significant differences related to whether counselors reported enacting activities related to College and Career Counseling with Students were noted for gender (F = 4.996; df = 1/246; p < .006) and setting (F = 3.090; df = 3/243; p < .028). Significant differences related to whether counselors enacted activities related to Prevention Work were noted for grade level (F = 3.956; df = 5/241; p < .002) and ASCA affiliation (F = 8.731; df = 1/246, p < .003). A significant difference related to counselors' engagement in activities associated with Indirect Services with Parents and Teachers was noted for gender (F = 5.286, df = 1/246; p < .022). Finally, a significant difference related to whether counselors actually enacted activities related to Leadership Program Management and Evaluation was noted for ASCA affiliation (F = 8.488, df = 1/246; p < .004). While statically significant, based on effect size estimates all these finding have little practical significance.

Only one statistically significant finding was determined to have a medium effect size. A significant difference related to whether counselors actually enacted activities related to Group Work with Students was noted for grade level (F = 8.499; df = 5/241; p < .0001). Tukey's HSD posthoc analyses indicated that both elementary (M = 1.90) and middle school counselors (M = 1.73) reported conducting significantly more group work than did high school counselors (M = 1.50).

Only one statistically significant finding was determined to have a large effect size. A significant difference related to whether counselors reported enacting activities related to College and Career Counseling with Students was noted for grade level (F = 25.310; df = 5/241; p < .0001). Tukey's HSD posthoc

analyses indicated that (a) elementary counselors (*M* =1.20) reported performing significantly fewer college and career counseling activities than counselors who worked at the middle school (*M* =1.50), middle and high school (*M* = 1.66), high school (*M* = 1.73), and all levels (*M* = 1.68); (b) counselors who worked at both the elementary and middle school levels (*M* = 1.35) reported doing significantly fewer college and career counseling activities than did counselors who worked at the high school (*M* = 1.73) and all levels (*M* = 1.68); (c) counselors working in middle schools (*M* = 1.50) reported doing significantly less college and career counseling activities than counselors who worked in high schools (*M* = 1.73).

Likert Descriptive Item Analyses

ISCCA-US items, grouped by their average Likert rating of appropriateness (1 = *Very Inappropriate*; 2 = *Inappropriate*; 3 = *Appropriate*; 4 = *Very Appropriate*) for the role of a school-based counselor are presented in Table 2. The highest group (i.e., items with an average rating of 3.5-4.0) contained 66.7% (28 out of 42) of the ISSCA-US items. This group also contained nine of the ten items from the IGCS subscale; three of the five items from the CCCS subscale items; four out of the five items of the PW subscale; and 12 of the 13 items of the LPME subscale. No item from either the ISPT or AR appeared in this group. Respondents indicated that most of the activities included in the ISSCA-US were very appropriate for the school-based counselor role. The activities considered most appropriate for this role were spread across several dimensions including individual and group counseling with students, college and career counseling with students, primary prevention-oriented activities and leadership, program management, and evaluation-related activities.

The second highest group (i.e., items with an average rating of 3.0-3.49) contained 16.7% (7 out of 42) of the ISSCA-US items. Items included: seven of ten items of the ISPT subscale; the one remaining item from the CCCS subscale; four of the five items from the IGCS subscale; the one remaining item from the PW subscale; the one remaining item from the CCCS subscale; and the one remaining item of the LPME subscale. Respondents generally considered indirect service activities with parents and teachers to be appropriate for the school-based counselor role but somewhat less so than direct services to students. Furthermore, respondents generally considered providing group mental health counseling, engaging in parent education, providing professional development for teachers, helping students with college choice, and investigating possible instances of child abuse and neglect as role-appropriate but somewhat less so than other activities.

The third highest group (i.e., items with an average rating of 2.50-2.99) contained 9.5% (four out of 42) of the ISSCA-US items. All four items belonged to the ISTP subscale. Respondents in general considered providing counseling services to teachers and school staff; performing psychological assessments; helping parents determine how to pay for college expenses; and leading school data teams to determine directions for school improvement initiatives to be somewhat inappropriate for the school-based counselor role.

Only three of the 42 items (7.1%) were contained in the bottom two groups (i.e., items with an average rating of 0.0-2.49). One of these items was from the ISPT subscale and two items were from the AR subscale. Respondents generally rated providing family therapy, determining student disciplinary sanctions, and assuming a school administrators' role in their absence as very inappropriate.

Dichotomous Descriptive Item Analyses

ISCCA-US items, grouped by their average percentage of "Yes" responses regarding the activity described in each item, are presented in Table 3. The group of items with the highest percentage of "Yes" responses (90-100%) included 23.8% (10 out of 42) of the items. Eight of the ten items were from the IWS subscale and reflected individual counseling with students. Two of the ten items were from the LPME subscale and reflected making referrals to outside mental health providers and improving practice through personal reflection, consultation, and supervision (see Table 3 for yes-no item ratings).

The group of items with the second highest percentage of "Yes" responses (80-89%) included 14.3 % (six out of 42) of the items. One item belonged to the IWS subscale and reflected individual mental health counseling with students. Three belonged to the LPME subscale and reflected consulting with school administrators to help create a positive school climate; documenting the impact of school-based counseling work; and monitoring the effectiveness to improve practice. One item belonged to the ISPT subscale and reflected consulting with teachers to help them be more effective. One item in the group did not belong to an ISSCA-US subscale. This item reflected advocating for appropriate services for special needs students.

The group of items with the third highest percentage of "Yes" responses (70-79%) included 21.4% (9 out of 42) of the items. Three items came from the PW subscale and reflected engagement in classroom guidance related to mental health, career development, and personal/social development. Two items came from the LMPE subscale and related to advocacy for appropriate school policies and procedures, and consultation to the school administration regarding the design and implementation of the school counseling program. One item came from the CCCS subscale and reflected one-on-one career counseling with students. One item came from the GWS

subscale and reflected group counseling focused on students' academic development. One item came from the ISPT and focused on providing consultation for parents. One item in the group did not belong to any ISSCA-US subscale: this item reflected investigating possible instances of child abuse and neglect.

The group of items with the fourth highest percentage of "Yes" responses (60-69%) included 14.3 % (six out of 42) of the items. In this group, three items came from the GWS subscale and reflected leading counseling groups focused on mental health, personal development, and social development. One item came from each of three subscales: CCCS (focusing on choosing an appropriate course of study and courses); PW (focusing on delivering classroom guidance to promote students' academic development), and LMPE (focusing on evaluating the impact of school activities and interventions and reporting results to stakeholders).

Of the 42 items, only one (2.3%) was contained in the next group (50-59% "Yes"). This item belonged to the CCCS subscale and reflected leading counseling groups to promote students' career development.

Three of the 42 items (7.1%) were found to be in the 40-49% "Yes" response group. Two of these items were from the ISPT subscale and reflected providing counseling services and professional development training for teachers. One item was from the CCCS subscale and reflected helping students select an appropriate college.

Four of the 42 items (9.5%) were found to be in the 30-39% "Yes" group. The ISTP and CCCS subscales each contributed one item to this group that reflected delivering parent education and helping parents determine how to pay for students' college expenses. Two items in this group did not belong to any ISSCA-US subscale. These items reflected performing psychological assessments and leading school data teams.

The last group of items (0-29% "Yes") included three of the 42 items (7.1%). Two items came from the ISPT subscale and reflected providing family therapy and determining disciplinary sanctions for misbehaving students. One item did not belong to any ISSCA-US subscale and reflected assuming an administrator role in the absence of the principal.

Discrepancies Between Likert ratings & Dichotomous ratings

Comparing the Likert ratings of the centrality of activities to the role of the school-based counselor (see Table 2) with the dichotomous ratings of whether or not the activities are actually done by counselors (see Table 3) reveals an interesting pattern of results. Three items (items 20, 21, and 42) that were rated in the "Appropriate" (3.0-3.49) range were actually enacted by fewer than 50% of counselors. These items reflected: the delivery of parent education programs (item 20; 35.7% "Yes"); the delivery of professional development programs for teachers (item 21; 42.2% "Yes"); and helping students choose a college that fits their interests and abilities (item 42; 49.5% "Yes"). It is also important to note that the items relating to group counseling (items 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12) and primary prevention (items 16, 17, 18, and 19) tend to be enacted at levels that would be somewhat less than expected based on the ratings of role appropriateness.

Given the importance accorded to engaging in program evaluation and accountability in school-based counseling and the fact that counselors rated item 34, so highly (M = 3.53) regarding the role centrality of evaluation activities, it is surprising that only 62.2% of the counselors reported that they actually engaged in these activities. Finally, we found it surprising that even though item 6, "The school counselor provides counseling services to teachers and school staff to help them deal effectively with personal issues and to concentrate on their work educating students" was rated low in terms of appropriateness (M = 2.55), 48.8% of the counselors reported that they provided counseling for teachers or staff.

Discussion

This study investigated the role and activities of US school-based counselors. It described how a national sample of school-based counselors who are ACA members rated a wide range of types of activities in terms of appropriateness for the school-based counselor role. It also identified the extent to which these school-based counselors actually enacted these activities. In addition, it described how demographic differences influenced counselor ratings of activity appropriateness and enactment.

Findings and Conclusions

The results indicate that US school-based counselors do indeed have a very broad definition of their role. This finding is consistent with previous literature (Carey & Martin, 2017; College Board, 2011). Thirty-five of the 42 ISSCA-US items had an average rating of "Appropriate" or "Very Appropriate." These 35 items came from five of the six domains of practice measured by the ISSCA-US subscales. Based on average ratings of appropriateness, individual and group counseling items had the highest ratings followed by college and career counseling, prevention activities, counseling program-related leadership and evaluation activities, and indirect services for parents and teachers. Items related to assuming the administrator role were rated as "Very Inappropriate."

The present study also suggests that there is generally a good deal of consensus within this sample of school-based counselors regarding the appropriateness of

various activities. Very few differences related to demographic factors were found. While statistically significant differences were noted related to gender, grade level and professional association affiliation, none of these differences proved to of great practical significance.

Somewhat more demographic-related variability was noted in the ratings of whether participants reported actually enacting the 42 activities contained in the ISSCA-US. Statistically significant differences were noted related to gender, experience, setting, grade level, professional association affiliation, and professional identity. However, the majority of these findings also proved of little practical significance.

Only two findings proved to be of practical significance. Grade level was associated with the extent to which counselors reported engaging in activities related to group counseling and in activities related to college and career counseling. Elementary school counselors reported engaging in higher levels of group counseling than counselors at other levels. High school counselors reported the highest levels of engagement in college and career counseling, followed by middle school counselors and then elementary school counselors. These differences in practice across grade levels make sense given the different demands placed upon counselors, the developmental needs of students, the practical limitations placed upon counseling practice, and the traditional models of counseling that suggest different patterns of activity for different levels (see Gysbers & Henderson, 2012).

Given the salience accorded to professional identity in the literature on the role of school counselors in the US (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011), it is surprising that in the present study professional identity was not found to have a strong influence on participants' ratings of the importance of activities or participants' reports of levels of activity enactment. Professional identity was significantly associated statistically only with differences in the performance of individual counseling and even then it was found to have little practical significance.

Analyses of the items related to different domains of practices indicated that individual counseling with students was the most universally enacted activity. This finding is consistent with previous research (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Group counseling and preventative guidance activities were reported to be enacted at much lower rates than individual counseling. This result could reflect either that these activities are more appropriate at different levels or that they are more difficult to enact at some levels.

Leadership and program development activities were generally reported to be enacted at relatively high levels. With the exception of teacher consultation, low levels of enactment were reported generally for indirect services for parents and teachers.

It is not surprising that relatively few counselors reported engaging in counseling students about college choice even though this activity was recognized as appropriate for the role. College choice-related counseling activities are more appropriate to implement at the secondary level and in fact, typically occur toward the end of high school.

It is somewhat surprising that given the importance accorded in the professional literature (ASCA, 2012; Dimmitt, Carey, & Hatch, 2007; Loesch, & Ritchie, 2005; Sink, 2009), engagement in formal program evaluation was reported at relatively low levels. This finding is however consistent with the literature that has consistently documented low levels of involvement by school-based counselors in formal program evaluation (Astramovich, Coker, & Hoskins, 2005; Fairchild, 1993; Lombana, 1985; Sink, 2009).

It is also surprising, given the scant attention in both the professional practice and counselor education literatures, that a relatively high percentage of counselors reported engaging in counseling of teachers and/or school staff. Evidently school-based counselors spending time counseling teachers is a more widespread practice than evidenced by the existing professional practice literature.

Limitations and Recommendations

The primary limitations of this study are related to sampling. While the return rate is consistent with similar investigations, it is low and the representativeness of the sample cannot be assured. Relatedly, the participants come from a self-selected sample of ACA members who may have viewpoints and professional orientations that are different from the general population of US school-based counselors. In addition, the utility of the results was limited by the dichotomous response format of the ISSCA-US related to activity enactment. We recommend that the ISSCA-US be revised so that participants are asked to provide frequency ratings related to the performance of each activity (e.g., *Never, Infrequently, Frequently, Always*) rather than a simple dichotomous response indicating that they did or did not perform an activity. Finally, it should be noted that the ISSCA-US-based reports of enactment are a self-report measure of a school-based counselor activity and need to be validated by behavioral measures of that activity.

Implications

The results of the present study provide a useful quantitative description of the role of US school-based counselors based on both their views of the appropriateness and their reports of enacting a wide range of activities. This study suggests that many activities considered as central to role are enacted relatively infrequently. Group counseling, preventative classroom guidance, many types of parent- and teacher-focused

indirect services (with the exception teacher consultation), and program evaluation are all enacted less frequently than would be expected given the importance accorded to them by the school counseling profession. A gap currently exists between the ideal conceptualization of role and current practice. This gap could be closed through efforts of state departments of education and professional associations to expand the scope of practice in schools or by efforts of professional associations and school-based counseling accrediting bodies to narrow the definition of role by pruning off "extraneous" components of the school-based counselor's role. To date, most efforts at reducing "role ambiguity" (e.g., differences in role expectations between counselors and school administrators) in the US have focused on changing the perceptions of educational administrators and convincing them of the necessity of supporting the adoption of comprehensive models of practice that require a broad counselor role (ASCA, 2012). More recently, there have been suggestions that adopting new models that prune back the school-based counselor role may be a more effective and appropriate way to reduce the gap between the ideal role and actual practice (Astramovich et al., 2010; College Board; 2011). Given the finding that activities that are considered central to role are practiced relatively infrequently, the evaluation of alternative models of school-based counseling in the US is warranted.

In addition, the present study found that nearly 50% of the participants reported engaging in counseling teachers and/or school staff. This finding warrants attention from the professional community in terms of the development of ethical guidelines and safeguards to ensure that the quality of services to students are not compromised when counselors are also in a counseling relationship with teachers with whom they work.

Similarly, much can be learned about the effectiveness of different models of practice and related school-based counselor roles by studying the natural variability in school-based counseling practice that has developed around the world. The present study provides quantitative data on US counselors' perceptions of role and practice that can serve as a valuable comparison for studies on other countries. We are currently collaborating with colleagues using the ISSCA to compare the role and activities of school-based counselors in 16 different countries with the expectation that these comparative studies will lead to the elucidation of the strengths and limitations inherent in the different models of practice and enable the comparative investigation of the relationships between policy and practice.

Suggestions for Future Research

In addition to replicating the present study with other additional samples of counselors in the US and continuing the ongoing cross-national study of role and activities, a more extensive study examining the practice of school-based counselors counseling teachers and school staff is warranted given the lack of information of this practice in the professional literature. Research is needed to identify the type of issues typically addressed, the mode of counseling employed, and the safeguards used to prevent potential role conflicts that could limit their effectiveness in working with students. Finally, given the present study's general lack of findings of relationships between school-based counselors' professional identity and their views of the appropriateness of activities or the levels of enactment of activities, additional research on the relationships between school-based counselors' professional identity and their professional practices are warranted. Give that much of the work to promote the development of the counseling profession by counseling associations in the US is predicated on the assumption that professional identity is a very salient factor affecting practice, such follow up research is very important.

Finally, the present research represents a potential valuable baseline for international comparative research. It is important to determine cross-national similarities and differences in school-based counselors' perceptions of the centrality of different activities and enactment of these activities. It would be very valuable to compare and contrast these data across countries that differ in terms of the contextual variables identified by Martin et al. (2015) as affecting school-based counseling programs. It would be especially important identify how differences in role and activities related to differences in: national needs; models of school-based counseling; laws and educational policies; characteristics of the educational system; and activities of the counseling profession.

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Table 1

Size of Effect and Eta² for significant statistically One-Way Analyses of Variance (p < .05) results: Demographic Variables and ISSCA-US subscales

ISSCA-US Likert item subscales					
Independent Variable	Dependent Measure	SS Between	SS Total	Eta²	Size of Effect*
Gender	PW	0.949	60.097	.016	------
Grade Level	AR	5.989	98.232	.061	small
ASCA	AR	6.686	99.795	.067	small
ASCA	CCCS	0.936	60.321	.018	------
ASCA	PW	2.009	60.903	.033	small

ISSCA-US Dichotomous item subscales					
Independent Variable	Dependent Measure	SS Between	SS Total	Eta²	Size of Effect*
Gender	ISPT	0.300	14.274	.021	small
Gender	CCCS	0.602	30.264	.020	small
Experience	IWS	0.245	5.818	.042	small
Setting	CCCS	1.122	30.541	.037	small
Setting	IWS	0.238	5.911	.040	small
Grade Level	GWS	5.503	36.583	.150	medium
Grade Level	PW	2.251	29.566	.076	small
Grade Level	CCCS	10.508	30.435	.345	large
ASCA	PW	1.018	29.818	.034	small
ASCA	IWS	0.175	5.919	.030	small
ASCA	LPME	0.433	13.040	.033	small
PI	IWS	0.215	5.919	.036	small

Note. Eta² size of effect criteria from Cohen (1988): .02 = small; .13 = medium; .26 = large.

Table 2

Summary of Likert Items' Average Ratings for all ISSCA-US Items

Group	Item #	Item Content	*M*	*SD*	ISSCA-US subscale
3.5-4.0	1	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in one-on-one counseling in order to support their mental health (e.g., dealing with anxiety, depression, suicidal ideations, and/or addiction)	3.54	.720	*IGCS*
	2	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in one-on-one counseling in order to facilitate their academic development (e.g., developing self-motivation; engagement with school)	3.78	.536	*IGCS*
	3	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in one-on-one counseling in order to facilitate their career development (e.g., dealing with career indecision)	3.62	.613	*CCCS*
	4	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in one-on-one counseling in order to deal with personal issues (e.g., self-esteem, identity crisis)	3.69	.587	*IGCS*
	5	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in one-on-one counseling in order to support their social development (e.g., developing good relationships with peers)	3.74	.525	*IGCS*
	7	The School Counselor engages in effective crisis counseling with students who need immediate attention due to traumatizing events	3.73	.555	*IGCS*
	9	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in group counseling in order to facilitate their academic development	3.58	.593	*IGCS*
	10	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in group counseling in order to facilitate their career development	3.52	.623	*CCCS*

11	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in group counseling in order to support their personal development	3.58	.592	*IGCS*
12	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in group counseling in order to support their social development	3.64	.587	*IGCS*
13	The School Counselor helps students develop a course of study and choose appropriate courses that further their academic and career goals.	3.59	.656	*CCCS*
14	The School Counselor helps students resolve their interpersonal conflicts with peers.	3.68	.539	*IGCS*
16	The School Counselor plans and delivers effective primary classroom-based preventions programs for children and adolescents to support their mental health (e.g., stress management)	3.58	.577	*PW*
17	The School Counselor plans and delivers effective classroom-based primary preventions programs for children and adolescents to facilitate academic development (e.g., time management, study skills)	3.52	.610	*PW*
18	The School Counselor plans and delivers effective classroom-based primary preventions programs for children and adolescents to promote career development (career interest identification; college choice)	3.54	.603	*PW*
19	The School Counselor plans and delivers effective classroom-based primary preventions programs for children and adolescents to support personal/social development (e.g., social skills, life skills, leadership)	3.59	.618	*PW*
23	The School Counselor coordinates with parents to support students', mental health, academic development, career development and personal/social development, in ways that respect students' confidentially and parents' rights to make decisions about their children's education.	3.63	.555	*LPME*
27	The School Counselor consults with school administrators to help ensure that school policies and procedures create a climate that is conducive to the education and wellbeing of all students	3.54	.575	*LPME*
28	The School Counselor advocates for all students so that they will have access to needed supports and programs.	3.75	.533	*LPME*
29	The School Counselor advocates for children with special needs and ensure they receive the accommodations that are necessary for them to be successful in school.	3.57	.606	*LPME*
31	The School Counselor advocates for vulnerable children in order to safeguard their rights and protect them from abuse, bullying and/or exploitation.	3.71	.527	*LPME*
32	The School Counselor advocates for improvements in school policies and procedures so that the school is an equitable institution that is able to effectively educate all its students	3.55	.575	*LPME*
33	The School Counselor provides consultation to the school administration on how an effective school counseling program should be designed and implemented	3.70	.549	*LPME*
34	The School Counselors conducts evaluations of the impact of school counseling activities and interventions and reports the results to administrators, teachers, and parents	3.53	.568	*LPME*
36	The School Counselor makes appropriate referrals to outside mental health providers and coordinate with the outside providers to maximize students' experience of success and wellbeing in school	3.70	.548	*LPME*
38	The School Counselor documents their work and the impact it has on students, families and the school community	3.53	.546	*LPME*
39	The School Counselor monitors the efficacy of their work and uses this information to improve practice	3.60	.538	*LPME*

	40	The School Counselor continuously improves their practice through personal reflection, seeking consultation and developmental supervision	3.74	.467	*LPME*
3.0-3.49	8	The School Counselor children and adolescents in group counseling in order to support their mental health	3.49	.643	*IGCS*
	20	The School Counselor plans and delivers effective parent education programs for parents/guardians to help them develop more effective parenting skills and more productive relationships with their children	3.24	.660	*PW*
	21	The School Counselor plans and delivers effective professional development programs for teachers to help them develop more productive relationships with students and manage a broad range of discipline and classroom management issues.	3.12	.744	*ISPT*
	24	The School Counselor consults with parents regarding problems they are experiencing to enable them to have more constructive relationship with their children and be more effective in parenting them.	3.21	.700	*ISPT*
	25	The School Counselor consults with teachers regarding problems they are experiencing to enable them to have more constructive relationships with their students and be more effective in teaching them.	3.33	.703	*ISPT*
	30	The School Counselor investigates possible instances of child abuse and neglect and determines whether the authorities should be notified.	3.22	.993	*LPME*
	42	The School Counselors helps students choose a college that fits their interests and abilities.	3.41	.624	*CCCS*
2.5-2.99	6	The School Counselor provides counseling services teachers and school staff to help them deal effectively with personal issues and concentrate on their work educating students	2.55	.972	*ISPT*
	35	The School Counselor uses psychological assessments effectively to facilitate progress in counseling and to promote students' mental health, academic development, career development and personal/social development	2.88	.802	*ISPT*
	37	The School Counselor leads a data team to analyze school data and determine directions for school improvement initiatives	2.93	.786	*ISPT*
	41	The School Counselor helps parents determine how to pay for the costs of their children's college.	2.91	.763	*ISPT*
2.0-2.49	22	The School Counselor provides family therapy services to help trouble families develop effective communication patters and boundaries.	2.28	.812	*ISPT*
O.0-1.99	15	The School Counselor determines the appropriate disciplinary sanctions for students who have misbehaved.	1.61	.734	*AR*
	26	The School Counselor assumes the administrative role of the principal in their absence	1.68	.736	*AR*

Note. AR = Administrator Role; CCCS= College and Career Counseling with Students; IGCS= Individual and Group Counseling with Students; ISPT = Indirect Services with Parents and Teachers; LPME= Leadership, Program Management, and Evaluation; PW = Prevention Work; 1= "Very Inappropriate", 2 = "Inappropriate", 3 = "Appropriate", and 4 = "Very Appropriate"

Table 3

Summary of Yes No Items' Ratings for all ISSCA-US Items

Group	Item #	Item Content	% Yes	% No	*ISSCA-US* subscale
90-100% Yes	2	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in one-on-one counseling in order to facilitate their academic development (e.g., developing self-motivation; engagement with school)	95.1%	4.9%	*IWS*
	4	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in one-on-one counseling in order to deal with personal issues (e.g., self-esteem, identity crisis)	94.0%	6.0%	*IWS*
	5	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in one-on-one counseling in order to support their social development (e.g., developing good relationships with peers)	95.2%	4.8%	*IWS*
	7	The School Counselor engages in effective crisis counseling with students who need immediate attention due to traumatizing events	93.2%	6.8%	*IWS*
	14	The School Counselor helps students resolve their interpersonal conflicts with peers.	96.0%	4.0%	*IWS*
	23	The School Counselor coordinates with parents to support students', mental health, academic development, career development and personal/social development, in ways that respect students' confidentially and parents' rights to make decisions about their children's education.	93.1%	6.9%	*IWS*
	28	The School Counselor advocates for all students so that they will have access to needed supports and programs.	95.2%	4.8%	*IWS*
	31	The School Counselor advocates for vulnerable children in order to safeguard their rights and protect them from abuse, bullying and/or exploitation.	94.4%	5.6%	*IWS*
	36	The School Counselor makes appropriate referrals to outside mental health providers and coordinate with the outside providers to maximize students' experience of success and wellbeing in school	92.2%	7.8%	*LPME*
	40	The School Counselor continuously improves their practice through personal reflection, seeking consultation and developmental supervision	93.9%	6.1%	*LPME*
80-89.9% Yes	1	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in one-on-one counseling in order to support their mental health (e.g., dealing with anxiety, depression, suicidal ideations, and/or addiction)	87.4%	12.6%	*IWS*
	25	The School Counselor consults with teachers regarding problems they are experiencing to enable them to have more constructive relationships with their students and be more effective in teaching them.	81.2%	18.8%	*ISPT*
	27	The School Counselor consults with school administrators to help ensure that school policies and procedures create a climate that is conducive to the education and wellbeing of all students	83.3%	16.7%	*LPME*
	29	The School Counselor advocates for children with special needs and ensure they receive the accommodations that are necessary for them to be successful in school.	88.7%	11.3%	*None*
	38	The School Counselor documents their work and the impact it has on students, families and the school community	82.0%	18.0%	*LPME*

	39	The School Counselor monitors the efficacy of their work and uses this information to improve practice	88.3%	11.7%	*LPME*
70-79.9% Yes	3	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in one-on-one counseling in order to facilitate their career development (e.g., dealing with career indecision)	73.9%	26.1%	*CCCS*
	9	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in group counseling in order to facilitate their academic development	71.7%	28.3%	*GWS*
	16	The School Counselor plans and delivers effective primary classroom-based preventions programs for children and adolescents to support their mental health (e.g., stress management)	72.5%	27.5%	*PW*
	18	The School Counselor plans and delivers effective classroom-based primary preventions programs for children and adolescents to promote career development (career interest identification; college choice)	70.0%	30.0%	*PW*
	19	The School Counselor plans and delivers effective classroom-based primary preventions programs for children and adolescents to support personal/social development (e.g., social skills, life skills, leadership)	74.6%	25.4%	*PW*
	24	The School Counselor consults with parents regarding problems they are experiencing to enable them to have more constructive relationship with their children and be more effective in parenting them.	76.6%	23.4%	*ISPT*
	30	The School Counselor investigates possible instances of child abuse and neglect and determines whether the authorities should be notified.	76.9%	23.1%	*None*
	32	The School Counselor advocates for improvements in school policies and procedures so that the school is an equitable institution that is able to effectively educate all its students	77.0%	23.0%	*LPME*
	33	The School Counselor provides consultation to the school administration on how an effective school counseling program should be designed and implemented	79.1%	20.9%	*LPME*
60-69.9% Yes	8	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in group counseling in order to support their mental health	60.7%	39.3%	*GWS*
	11	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in group counseling in order to support their personal development	67.7%	32.3%	*GWS*
	12	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in group counseling in order to support their social development	68.1%	31.9%	*GWS*
	13	The School Counselor helps students develop a course of study and choose appropriate courses that further their academic and career goals.	66.7%	33.3%	*CCCS*
	17	The School Counselor plans and delivers effective classroom-based primary preventions programs for children and adolescents to facilitate academic development (e.g., time management, study skills)	67.3%	32.7%	*PW*
	34	The School Counselors conducts evaluations of the impact of school counseling activities and interventions and reports the results to administrators, teachers, and parents	62.2%	37.8%	*LPME*
50-59.9% Yes	10	The School Counselor engages children and adolescents in group counseling in order to facilitate their career development	54.4%	45.6%	*CCCS*

40-49.9% Yes	6	The School Counselor provides counseling services teachers and school staff to help them deal effectively with personal issues and concentrate on their work educating students	48.8%	51.2%	*ISPT*
	21	The School Counselor plans and delivers effective professional development programs for teachers to help them develop more productive relationships with students and manage a broad range of discipline and classroom management issues.	42.2%	57.8%	*ISPT*
	42	The School Counselors helps students choose a college that fits their interests and abilities.	49.6%	50.4%	*CCCS*
30-39.9% Yes	20	The School Counselor plans and delivers effective parent education programs for parents/guardians to help them develop more effective parenting skills and more productive relationships with their children	35.7%	64.3%	*ISPT*
	35	The School Counselor uses psychological assessments effectively to facilitate progress in counseling and to promote students' mental health, academic development, career development and personal/social development	31.6%	68.4%	*None*
	37	The School Counselor leads a data team to analyze school data and determine directions for school improvement initiatives	32.1%	67.9%	*None*
	41	The School Counselor helps parents determine how to pay for the costs of their children's college.	30.1%	69.9%	*CCCS*
0-29.9% Yes	15	The School Counselor determines the appropriate disciplinary sanctions for students who have misbehaved.	14.5%	85.5%	*ISPT*
	22	The School Counselor provides family therapy services to help trouble families develop effective communication patters and boundaries.	20.2%	79.8%	*ISPT*
	26	The School Counselor assumes the administrative role of the principal in their absence	24.0%	76.0%	*None*

Note. CCCS= College and Career Counseling with Students; GWS =Group Work with Students; ISPT = Indirect Services with Parents and Teachers; IWS = Individual Work with Students; LPME= Leadership, Program Management, and Evaluation; PW = Prevention Work