

Professional Development and School Counselors: A Study of Utah School  
Counselor Preferences and Practices

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### Abstract

This study investigated the professional development needs, preferences, and practices of secondary school counselors in Utah. Participants included 226 secondary school counselors who responded to a 20-question survey instrument. The respondents revealed that most of them exceed minimum licensure requirements for professional development but also spend significant amounts of personal time and expense to do so. The counselors also identified obstacles with, and preferences toward, professional development that they experience in the increasingly complex and sophisticated school environment. Findings will inform professional development policy and practice in the state and also provide a basis for future research.

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School counselors are often considered the bastion of all knowledge by students and parents alike. Whether the question is about a student's class schedule, the latest school or district policy, or an appropriate intervention strategy for any of a number of behavioral or emotional problems, the school counselor is expected to know the answer. The depth and breadth of tasks assigned to school counselors make it particularly important for members of the profession to engage in professional development in order to keep themselves apprised of current standards and practices in their field. This need is augmented by a trend in the profession toward educational accountability for services and contributions, as well as the demand for evidence that school counseling services meet standards for professional practice.

School counselors are expected to skillfully respond to a variety of tasks and fill a number of roles. For example, they are expected to be advocates for students and for their institution as they engage in individual and small-group counseling, large-group guidance, consultation with staff and agencies, and coordination of services within and outside the school setting. These varied roles and responsibilities can make it difficult for counselors to identify all their clients, let alone define their clients' needs. One of the coauthors of this article describes a typical morning she experienced as a junior high school counselor:

My morning consisted of counseling a young woman who struggles with an eating disorder, and her family's decision to place her in a local residential treatment center; a young man who came in with concerns that his girlfriend is

pregnant (they are both 15); a young woman whose mother is moving to another state to live with her boyfriend whom she met online, leaving the girl to decide if she wants to go with her mom or move in with her dad whom she hasn't seen for ten years; two young women who wanted to know about job shadowing experiences that are coming up; a young woman who wanted help reviewing for her science test; several students wondering about what classes to take next year; the librarian asking me to review a book and decide whether it was appropriate for the library; questions about the Utah School Counselor Association (USCA); and the principal asking about our Pyramid of Interventions (committee assignment).

Not only are school counselors at the gate of knowledge within the school system they are also working in a day and time when knowledge is expanding exponentially. Scholars now estimate that knowledge has been doubling every five years and that by 2020 it will double on a 73-day cycle (Breivik, 1998, p. 1). Furthermore, other experts predict that technological capacities will double every nine months (Daggett, 2003, 5).

Carey and Dimmitt (2005) comment on the implications of rapidly obsolescing skill sets and rapidly changing requirements for school counselors in a recent issue of *Computers in the Schools*. They have written that "the role of school counselors and the nature of school counseling programs are changing in ways that require school counselors to develop different skill sets in order to be effective" (p. 70). Technology and computer skills have now become essential for school counselors in ways that were not needed in the past. The complexity of the school counselors' job requires the ability to access and process information almost immediately upon request by administrators,

parents, and teachers. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and other school reforms now require school counselors to document a multitude of learning and behavioral outcomes for students. Many of these numerous and complex job expectations—and many more—did not even exist 10 to 15 years ago; today, they are a necessity. Carey and Dimmitt recommend that school counselors will need extensive professional development to work effectively.

The school counseling profession has recently emphasized the importance of its counselors taking time and making effort to improve their skill sets through professional development. These recommendations come not only because of technological advances and knowledge proliferation but also because school counseling programs themselves are evolving at national, state, and district levels. At the national level, a new model for school counseling programs has recently emerged. In Utah, baseline outcomes for four program domains were just established: Academic/Learning, Life/Career Development, Multicultural/Global Citizen Development, and Personal/Social Development. There seems to be no question, professional development is more needed for school counselors today than at any time in their existence.

This purpose of this study was to better understand professional development practices and preferences of school counselors, and, more specifically, those of Utah school counselors. This study was also supported by the Utah School Counselor Association (USCA) and its governing board with an interest in strategically advancing professional development among its school counselors. This is a study by school counselors for school counselors: “National data suggest that when teachers [school

counselors too] think they have influence in determining the content of in-service professional development, they are more likely than those who think they have no influence to participate in such learning opportunities” (Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education, 2006). While this study may be generalized to the school counseling profession nationally, it is specific to Utah school counselors who are regulated by the requirements of its state’s licensing board.

### Literature Review

At the inception of the school counseling profession, the role of counselor was conceptualized as that of a teacher with additional duties to perform. As the job description became more specialized the counselor position was placed within the pupil personnel services category since they provide a set of ancillary services. Eventually, counselors were recognized as providers of developmental services based on a comprehensive guidance program within the school setting (Gysbers, 2001; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000, 2001). At least five professional development themes can be identified in the professional development literature: (a) a broad category that includes the continued updating of overall skills within one’s area of learned expertise (Carone, Hall, & Grubb, 1998; Sears, 1993); (b) encompassing, but not limited to, supervision of counseling skills alone; (c) envelops both counseling and guidance components within the work contexts (ASCA, 1999, 2002 – 2003b, 2003; ASCA Delegate Assembly, 2004; Kaplan, L.S., Goeffroy, K. E., Pare, P., & Wolf, L., 1992); (d) considers both the individual counselor’s and the school constituents’ needs (Kaplan et al., 1992; Stickel, 1999); and (e) a planned system of continual feedback, growth-engendering evaluations, and mechanisms for change (Kaplan et al., 1992; Rhyne-Winkler &

Wooten, 1996; Splete & Grisdale, 1992; Stickel & Trimmer, 1994; Waidley & Pappas, 1992).

When compared to counseling practitioners in other settings, the role of school counselors is more complex and multifaceted (Boyd & Walters, 1975; Kahn, 1999). Frequently school counselors are assigned tasks that are important but not necessarily related to the overall education programs they serve. Further, these duties and services are largely based on the arbitrary desires of the local building administrator.

Traditionally, the building administrator or principal holds the final determination over how counselors' duties are defined. However, these traditional models have given way to a more purposeful, ideological contemporary model. In the newer comprehensive guidance models, the position or work of the school counselor is framed within a kindergarten through twelfth-grade (K-12) developmental program, based on preventive and proactive services which anticipate and meet the academic, personal, social, and career needs of students (ASCA, 2002-2003a, 2002-2003b, 2003; Gysbers & Henderson, 2000, 2001; Gysbers, Lapan, & Jones, 2000; Starr, 1997).

### *Reasons for Professional Development*

Researchers have commented on the need for school counselors to have systematic opportunities available for ongoing professional development. Rhyne-Winkler and Wooten (1996) stated that practicing school counselors are subject to current trends in educational reform and face the same levels of accountability as other K-12 educators. Although many school counselors are not required to have a teaching certificate, they are expected to be aware of and responsive to educational reforms.

However, this expectation is secondary to their primary responsibility of staying current with emerging counseling models and improved interventions within the profession.

Research has also recognized school counselors' need for professional development to renew or attain skills needed to serve student populations with severe emotional difficulties (Sears, 1993), as well as to protect themselves from charges of malpractice (Rhyne-Winkler & Wooten, 1996). Sears noted increasing levels of emotional and personal problems in student populations, which places a greater demand on counselors to be skilled in the most current preventive techniques and remedial services for students with such issues and few external support systems.

The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Comprehensive School Guidance Model also calls for post-degree development of skills as necessary for proper program implementation and improvement. Therefore, all school counselors, especially the novice and less effective, need to update their skills in order to perform better in their professional role and combat the diminution of some skills (Peace, 1995; Spooner & Stone, 1977) and the outdating of others (Splete & Grisdale, 1992).

### *Barriers to Professional Development*

In their literature review, Splete and Grisdale (1992) noted that professional development activities are often directed at teachers and administrators—school counselors are rarely the primary audience. Furthermore, much of the professional development provided to school counselors is taught by administrators or teachers on subjects that may not be relevant to a counselor's primary responsibility. Sutton and Page (1994) found that school counselors must also contend with financial and temporal barriers. Although some professional development opportunities are provided



through conferences, seminars, and learning institutes, counselors usually attend at their own expense and on their own personal time. Educational institutions rarely and unevenly provide the financial and clinical supervision that many school counselors need.

Empirical research and academic literature also identify the systemic lack of professional development to update school counselor skills and training through post-degree professional development. In their seminal work, Boyd and Walters (1975) recognized the necessity of post-degree professional nurturing and theorize that without it, the school counselor will likely become a “stunted specimen” (p. 103). This stance was echoed by the American Association for Counseling and Development (AACD) Task Force (1989), as it concluded that the lack of ongoing professional development for school counselors would be the most pervasive threat to the future of the profession.

### Method

This quasi-experimental research was dependent on its respondents reporting their own experiences and perceptions as school counselors. The purpose of this research was to assist the Utah school counseling community in better understanding its professional development needs, practices, and preferences.

### *Participants*

In December 2005, USCA and BYU's Division of Continuing Education surveyed counselors (grades 7-12) in the state of Utah about their professional development needs and practices. The Utah State Office of Education authorized and facilitated the use of their official secondary school counselor listserv for this study. They reported to the researchers that they forwarded the explanatory message and survey hyperlink to

810 educators included on the listserv. A total of 206 educators—all with at least a master's degree—responded to the Web-based survey for a 25 percent response rate: 190 from the public schools and 16 from the private and alternative schools. The sample population included 101 middle school counselors, 79 high school counselors, and 14 other counselors in intermediate and K-12 schools and district offices.

### *Instrumentation*

The survey instrument (see Appendix A) contained two parts and was comprised of 20 questions: seven demographic questions under the heading “background information”; and thirteen professional development-related questions under the heading “survey.” The instrument was developed and refined after reviewing the literature and interviewing school counselors about professional development needs and practices. Next, a sampling of school counselors who attended the annual USCA conference meetings on November 17, 2005, in St. George, Utah piloted the instrument and provided helpful feedback from which further clarifications and refinements were made.

### *Data Analysis*

The statistical analysis of the counselor survey was completed using the statistical software program SAS; all original plots were created by exporting the SAS data to Microsoft® Excel spreadsheet software. The analysis consisted of testing the demographic information obtained with responses to the main section of the survey. It also involved organization of summary statistics into tables and graphs. In this section the assumptions made and the methods used will be explained. The demographic variables used in analysis for this article included:

1. School Levels: Junior High or Middle School, and High School,
2. Highest Level of Education Completed: Master's and Other,
3. School-Related Employment Before Becoming a School Counselor: School Teacher and None,
4. Number of Years as a School Counselor: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 5+ years and then categorically, 5 years or fewer and 5 years or more.

These demographics were compared to question responses. For each comparison tested a chi-square test was conducted to determine statistical relationship between the demographics measured and the responses collected. The chi-square statistic is a measure of how far the observed counts in a contingency table are from the expected counts. The expected count for any cell in the table is the ratio of the row count total times the column count total and the total table count. There are two important conditions that are necessary for the chi-square test to be valid: there must be no more than 20% of the expected counts fewer than 5; and all individual expected counts must be greater than 1: 160 tables met these conditions.

The original data tables contained the observed counts, the expected counts, the chi-square p-value for that cell, and the percent of the total responses for that table. The overall chi-square statistic is the sum of each of the cell chi-square values. For each statistic, the probability of obtaining that statistic is obtained using a chi-square distribution with degrees of freedom equal to the number of rows in the table minus one, times the number of columns minus one. The resulting probability, or p-value, is then compared to an alpha level to determine whether a statistically significant relationship is present. The alpha level can be thought of as the probability of saying there is a

statistical significance if the study were replicated many times. Traditionally the critical alpha level is 0.05 but that number was adjusted for this study because of the number of tests performed. One possible adjustment to the alpha level is suggested by the Bonferroni correction, which takes the alpha level and divides by the number of tests conducted. The researchers adopted a very conservative alpha level of 0.01 which, while statistically appropriate for the 160 tests conducted, was also so conservative that none of the tests were statistically significant. However, the researchers examined more closely some of the almost-significant results since more focused research by future researchers would support less conservative alpha levels, e.g., 0.05.

### Results

Of the 810 e-mails sent to Utah secondary school counselors, it is known that 7 were rejected and determined to be undeliverable. Two-hundred-twenty-six members (28 %) of the listserv responded to at least one question. For most questions, the number of respondents ranged between 190 and 200.

Question 1 asked respondents which counselor category or categories best described them (i.e., school counselor, school psychologist, special education, or other). Out of 197 unique respondents to this question, 98% (193) said that "school counselor" best described them. Other responses included school psychologist, social worker, career center counselor, principal, etc.

Question 2 asked in what kind of school the counselors worked: public, private, or alternative. Ninety-eight percent (190 of 194) of the respondents indicated that they were associated with a public school. Question 3 inquired about the level of their school (i.e., elementary, junior high or middle school, high school, and other) of which 51.5 %

(101 of 196) were at the junior high or middle school level, 40.3 % (79 of 196) the high school, and the rest elementary or other (e.g., K-12).

In Question 4, the school counselors reported what kind of educator license they presently held with 57.9 % (114 of 197) reporting a standard (level 3) license, 27.4 % a basic (level 2) license, 13.2 % a provisional (level 1) license, and the three others as either “not sure” or “other.” Since the naming conventions for school counselor licenses in Utah has recently changed to “Levels,” the former names, e.g., provisional, were parenthetically associated with the levels. Question 5 asked about the respondents’ “highest level of education” with 99.0 % reporting a master’s degree (194 of 196)—all school counselors in Utah are required to hold at least a master’s degree—the other two held a doctoral degree.

Question 6 inquired about the previous employment of Utah school counselors. The two categories receiving the greatest response were “school teacher” with 50.8 % (101 of 199) and “none,” with 26.1 % (52 of 199) coming directly to the profession from graduate school. Only two came from the school administrator ranks, with 43 others reporting some other kind of previous employment. The responses to the “other” category were quite eclectic. Some of the previous employments listed included: army, fitness instructor, Scout executive, office clerk, registered nurse, real estate appraiser, social worker, and travel agent. Question 7 asked about “number of years as a school counselor” with 63.1% of respondents (125 of 198) indicating they had worked as a school counselor for more than five years. The remaining 36.9% stated that their tenure had been fewer than five years.

The results from these seven background questions were tested against variables from the survey questions. One of the important purposes of this study was to determine the reasons school counselors have for participating in professional development or continuing education. Earlier interviews and pilot studies captured most of the reasons that school counselors participate in professional development such that only 5 respondents selected the “other” category. Each counselor on average selected approximately three-and-a-half (3.66) reasons for participation. The one reason selected by almost all of the respondents (178) was to “improve knowledge and skills.” Other variables selected, in decreasing order of frequency, were “recertification” (153 respondents), “personal enrichment” (149), “lane change” (113), “required for comprehensive guidance review” (69), “secure additional credits” (17), and “required to supervise” (12).

Two almost-significant tests (chi-squares p-values 0.0227 and 0.0190 respectively) occurred when the reason for participating (i.e., “improving knowledge and skills” and “personal enrichment”) was analyzed for those school counselors who work at the high school and middle school levels. About 83.5 % (66 of 79) of the high school counselors selected “improving knowledge and skills” as their reason for participating, contrasted to 94 % (95 of 101) of the middle school counselors. In the second almost-significant test, 65.8 % (52 of 79) of the high school counselors contrasted to 81.2 % (82 of 101) of the middle school counselors selected “personal enrichment” as the reason for participating.

Survey Question 2 asked how much of their professional development the counselors actually claimed credit for by completing paperwork and placing it on file.

Responses from 197 counselors were distributed across four categories, 22.3% selected “all” (44 of 197), 40.1% selected “most” (79 of 197), 31% selected “some” (61 of 197), and 6.6% selected “none” (13 of 197).

Survey Question 3 asked, “By how much do you generally exceed the 100 licensure points required for recertification?” The options were “minimum,” selected by only 1.6% of respondents (3 of 190); “a few,” selected by 16.3% (31 of 190); “quite a few,” selected by 38.9% (74 of 190); “double,” selected by 33.2% (63 of 190); and “not applicable,” selected by 10% of respondents (19 of 190).

In Table 1, responses are summarized for Question 4, “Your choices of continuing education opportunities so far.” Respondents were instructed to “report approximate percentage of use for selections only—ignore all others.” There was acceptable data for 181 respondents. The adjusted percentage for this question was calculated by taking the average percentage and weighting it in such a way that the percentages for each choice, when aggregated, would equal approximately 100 %. For example, 163 respondents selected “district-sponsored” and their average percentage was 28.3; the adjusted percentage is 25.51 % ( $163/181 \times .2833 = .2551$ ).

**Table 1*****School counselors report their choices of continuing education opportunities.***

<i>Source of Continuing Education</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Average Percentage</i>	<i>Adjusted Percentage</i>
District-sponsored	163	28.33%	25.51%
State conferences	160	30.71%	27.14%
Other institution-sponsored	115	21.39%	13.59%
School-sponsored	102	18.79%	10.59%
University-offered courses	86	34.77%	16.52%
Self-help materials	58	13.24%	4.24%
Reading ASCA journal	32	5.53%	0.98%
Supervision meetings	19	8.05%	0.85%
Other	19	7.89%	0.83%
Reading other journals	9	5.56%	0.28%

In Questions 5 and 6, school counselors reported what instructional format they have previously used for their continuing education, and what format they would *most prefer*. There were 201 respondents to these questions with only one selecting the “other” option and writing in “reading.” The majority of respondents (183) stated that they used traditional face-to-face courses, while 14 used online or 1- or 2-way audio/video courses, and 28 used “blended” sources, i.e., some of both traditional and non-traditional formats. When asked what format or formats were most preferred, 173 respondents selected “traditional” formats, 18 selected non-traditional (e.g. online, etc.) formats, and 48 selected “blended” formats.



Question 7 asked the counselors about the greatest challenge(s) they faced in completing their professional development requirements. One-hundred-ninety-eight respondents selected, on average, 3.1 of the following options—number of responses to each is parenthetically listed: balancing continuing education with family and other personal responsibilities (128); finding money to cover associated expenses (108); arranging time off from work (92); identifying courses relevant to counseling (88); not enough variety in course offerings (69); finding available classes or workshops (65); availability of online programs/courses (20); availability of independent study or correspondence programs (online or paper-based (19); and no “greatest challenge” so far (18). Six of the respondents said that their greatest challenge was something other than the options provided.

An almost-significant test (chi-square p-value = 0.0107) occurred when the demographic “years as counselor” was analyzed against the variable, “identifying courses relevant to counseling.” Among the counselors with more than five years of experience, 51.2 % (65 of 127) selected this option, while an almost equal percentage (48.8 %, or 62 of 127) did not select this option. However, of the counselors with five years’ experience or less, only 32.4 % (23 of 71) selected this variable as a “greatest challenge.”

Another almost-significant test (chi-square p-value = 0.0133) occurred when school counselors who had been previously employed as school teachers and those who had not been teachers were examined against the variable, “no greatest challenge so far.” In this instance, only 6.1 % (6 of 98) of former school teachers declared that there had not been a “greatest challenge so far” in their professional development

efforts, whereas 19.2 % (10 of 52) of those who were not former teachers reported “no greatest challenge so far.”

Survey Question 8 asked respondents how much of their professional development they paid for personally. Out of 202 respondents, 28.2% (57 respondents) said they paid for “all” their expenses, 17.3% (35) said they paid for “a large amount,” 17.8% (36) said they paid “about half,” 30.7% (62) said they paid for “a small amount,” and 6% (12) said they personally paid “none” of their professional development expenses. Question 9 asked what portion of their professional development time was outside of regular work hours. Of 206 respondents, 5.8% (12) selected “all,” 35.5% (73) selected “a large amount,” 25.7% (53) selected “about half,” 30.1% (62) selected “a small amount,” and 2.9% (6) selected “none.”

Question 10 asked how the counselors generally found out about the continuing education programs/courses in which they had participated. The respondents selected, on average, 3.54 choices from among the following options with number of responses to each parenthetically listed: “workshop flyers” (151 respondents); “district” (142); “other school counselors” (134); “mailings from USCA” (118); “state office” (81); “school and/or principal” (77); “internet searches” (13); “mailings from alma mater” (12); and “other” (5). In the “other” category, five of the respondents stated that they found out about continuing education opportunities through sources other than those specified.

The first of two almost-significant tests (chi-square p-value = 0.0505) occurred for Question 10 when respondents who were formerly employed as school teachers were asked how they found out about continuing education programs and courses in which they participate. Of respondents who had previously been school teachers, 59 % (59 of

100) said they found out about continuing education programs/courses from “other school counselors,” compared to 75 % (39 out of 52) who had not been school teachers prior to becoming counselors. The second almost-significant test (chi-square p-value = 0.0207) for this question also related to the “previous occupation” demographic. Of respondents who listed no other occupation before becoming a school counselor, 76.9 % (40 of 52) said they found out about continuing education opportunities from “other school counselors,” contrasted to 58 % (58 of 100) who did list another previous occupation.

Question 11 asked what most influenced the respondents’ choice of programs/courses. The respondents selected on average 3.81 choices from among the following options with the number of responses to each parenthetically listed: “location” (169 respondents); “course topic” (153); “cost” (151); “time availability of courses, e.g., early afternoons, evenings, etc.” (143); “quality of program” (72); “length of course” (55); “faculty/instructor” (32); “weekend program” (11); and “other” (2). The two respondents who selected the “other” option indicated that they were concerned with the relevance of courses offered.

The first of two almost-significant tests (chi-square p-value = 0.0481) occurred for Question 11 when high school and middle school counselors were analyzed against “cost” as the most influential factor in their choice of professional development options. 65.8 % (52 of 79) of high school counselors, as contrasted to 79 % (79 of 100) of middle school counselors, chose “cost” as a factor that most influences their choices. The second almost-significant test (chi-square = 0.0134) occurred when “time availability of courses . . .” was tested against “previous occupation.” Of respondents who were

previously employed as school teachers, 77 % (77 of 100) said “time availability of courses . . .” most influenced their choice of continuing education. Of the respondents who were not previously employed as teachers, 57.7 % (30 of 52) said “time availability of courses . . .” influenced them most. In the third almost-significant test (chi-square p-value = 0.0134), 57.7 % of respondents (30 of 52) who listed “no previous occupation” said “time availability of courses” influenced their choice of continuing education, as contrasted to 77 % (77 out of 100) of respondents who did list another occupation prior to their employment as a school counselor.

Question 12 asked respondents to list universities and institutions/associations from which they had received continuing education credit. They were asked to report approximate percentage of overall use for each; the results are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2**

***School Counselors Identify Primary Sources of Continuing Education Credit.***

<i>Primary Sources</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Average Percentage</i>	<i>Adjusted Percentage</i>
District	148	30.86%	24.96%
Utah State Office of Education	147	27.93%	22.43%
Utah School Counseling Association	123	24.11%	16.20%
Other	97	32.22%	17.08%
School	83	22.31%	10.12%
Alma Mater	57	29.56%	9.21%

At the end of the survey, participants were given opportunity to make open-ended recommendations or comments. A total of 95 respondents took advantage of this opportunity to express their own thoughts about professional development. Comments and concerns from the 95 respondents were clustered into 15 broad categories: relevance of offered courses to work the counselors are doing (23 comments); cost/funding issues (22); desire for more variety/availability in courses offered (13); concerns or comments which did not apply to any of the other broad categories (11); concerns with lack of time for professional development (10); desire for dual university or higher education credit (8); need for better advertising/communication about available courses (8); desire for more convenient location of available courses (8); concerns with when courses were available (7); need for more information or help understanding requirements (5); concerns with bureaucracy or “politics” (5); desire to network with other counselors (3); request that courses be offered in other formats (3); concerns about being stretched too thin and/or assigned to non-counseling tasks (2); and desire for better quality of continuing education courses (2).

The concerns mentioned most frequently in the text responses related to the relevance of available courses and cost. Those who were concerned with the relevance of courses available sometimes mentioned specific needs, notably a desire for more courses on mental health issues such as suicide, eating disorders, and anxiety. Seven comments mentioned a concern with the time availability of courses offered, i.e., a desire for more courses offered at a particular time. Some mentioned particular months that would be preferable for them to complete their continuing education, while others merely indicated a general time frame such as “evenings.” Of the respondents who

indicated a concern with “location,” at least two mentioned that they lived in rural areas. Five respondents had concerns with bureaucratic or “political” issues, including the perception that some of their continuing education time was used to satisfy administrative requirements which had little or no relevance to the work they do on a daily basis. Of the three respondents who wanted courses offered in other formats, two requested online course availability. In the “Other” category, two respondents expressed interest in courses that offered more depth and progression and not necessarily so much variety. Two more requested logistical improvements in record keeping and communication strategy. One respondent requested that school counselors have more of a voice in developing professional development activities

### Discussion

As mentioned previously in this article, the state of Utah requires school counselors to accrue at least 100 professional development points every five years to recertify. It was not surprising that a large number of respondents (153) chose “recertification” as a reason for participating in professional development activities. However, nearly as many (149) chose “personal enrichment” as a reason for participation, and an even higher number (178) stated that they participate in continuing education and professional development to “improve knowledge and skills.” This reflects a remarkable intrinsic commitment by school counselors to provide excellent service for students and to improve themselves through increased learning and training.

Several other numbers from the survey support the idea that school counselors are dedicated to their profession and deeply motivated to provide high-quality services. For example, 62 % of the counselors reported that they were paying half or more of

their continuing education costs out of personal funds, and 67 % were doing at least half of their professional development outside of work hours. Not only are these counselors not being compensated for the personal time they are spending to improve their knowledge and skills, they are also paying for the time they are spending.

As further evidence that counselors are motivated to pursue continuing education by factors beyond state requirements, 90 % of respondents reported that they exceeded the number of licensure points required, and as many as 33 % reported that they had double the licensure points they needed.

#### *Resources for Continuing Education*

Although the largest percentage of respondents identified their local school district as the most common source of professional development (see Table 2), an almost equal percentage also reported the Utah State Office of Education as their primary source of professional development. Workshop flyers from district offices, and mailings from the State office, appear to be effective in advertising possible sources of continuing education to school counselors. Another information source used by a high frequency of respondents was word of mouth from other counselors. While these results show that the local districts and the State are using effective methods to publicize available opportunities for professional development, several respondents' text comments also indicated a need for more advertising of the professional development options available.

Responses to Questions 5 and 6 clearly demonstrate that the traditional face-to-face format continues to be the dominant, and most preferred, medium for continuing education and professional development. Of the three respondents who mentioned

course formats in the final open-ended “comments” section of the survey, however, two specifically indicated a desire for more online course availability. Additionally, 20 of the respondents chose “online availability” as a challenge to completing their professional development requirements (Question 7).

### *Challenges in Continuing Education*

Survey respondents reported that the greatest challenges to completing their professional development requirements are trying to balance the requirements with their personal life, finding money to cover costs, and arranging time off from work (Table 7). The Utah State Office of Education requires continuing education for school counselors, yet there is no requirement to compensate them for time they spend outside of their workday. It may be worth reiterating that 62 % of the counselors reported that they were paying half or more of their continuing education costs out of personal funds, and 67 % were doing at least half of their professional development during personal time. The amount of personal subsidy by school counselors is alarming; especially in a state that has allocated funds for its comprehensive guidance programs. Future researchers may want to examine adequacy of funding levels and efficiency of administration practices in distributing monies from the state, to the districts, and then to the individual schools.

Concerns about the personal and financial costs of professional development may also explain why so many respondents stated that “location” most influenced their choice of continuing education programs and courses; factors such as cost, course topics, and even course quality were further down the list of influences. Courses which are available locally require less travel time and expense. Concerns with location may also lead school counselors to sacrifice more relevant professional development for



more convenient, but less specific-to-their-work training. This issue also merits additional research.

This survey does show that school counselors are very concerned about the content of courses available to them. Although other concerns may overshadow this issue, the majority of respondents indicated that course topics have a strong influence on their continuing education choices. As discussed in the results section, many respondents expressed concerns about identifying which courses would be relevant to their profession—for example, finding course topics that are school counselor-oriented as opposed to teacher-oriented. Furthermore, several of the respondents remarked in the “comments” section that the continuing education options available to them were not relevant to the work that they were doing on a daily basis. One counselor noted that she doesn’t report some of the training she receives at her school because it is not related to counseling. Some respondents specifically mentioned a desire for more instruction on mental health issues, such as anxiety, suicide, and eating disorders.

#### Limitations and Suggestions for Further Study

Although demographic information was collected from study participants, it was limited to information related to their school counseling experience, e.g., how many years they had been practicing. The study did not gather demographic information such as age, race, gender, etc., for a number of reasons including the exploratory and more informal nature of the study, use of results, length of survey instrument, smaller size of population, and first-time use of the state's school counselor listserv for survey and research purposes, etc. However, any future research would benefit from gathering and analyzing responses against additional demographic data.

The statistical analysis of the survey responses was conducted without anticipating particular results or having specific hypotheses. Instead of testing only certain demographic information against certain survey questions, as discussed in the method section, every demographic variable was tested against every survey variable. The large number of tests necessitated a very conservative p-value of .001. For this reason, statistical analysis yielded no statistically significant results, although it yielded several results which would have been significant had there been fewer tests conducted and a higher p-value (.05) been used. The almost-significant results discussed in this article might be used as a basis for future studies.

The survey was delivered to the respondents via an electronic mailing list which is owned and maintained by the Utah State Office of Education. At this early stage of investigation, no effort was made to use alternative forms of delivery, such as a paper-based survey instrument. However, there is no reason to assume that alternative formats would have increased the response rate among counselors or the validity of the study itself. Olsen, Wygant, and Brown found that “as long as an electronic survey is conducted carefully, with a representative sample, there is no prima facie reason to assume that its data are less valid than data collected via paper” (2004, p. 14).

As an exploratory study, the authors found areas for further research and investigation. One of the most obvious relates to funding—or at least school counselors’ perception of financial distribution. The study found that 62% of the survey population spent personal money on professional development. With professional development being required by the state and provided for in the comprehensive guidance time management structure (system support), this use of personal funds for professional

development needs to be discussed and investigated. Another area for future research is the relevancy of current professional development offerings for school counselors. Many school counselors mentioned expressed difficulty in identifying development topics that were more relevant to their work. This was especially noted among counselors who had been in the field for over five years. In addition, another area of focus could be on comparing state professional development needs to national professional development offerings. The surveyed population consisted of over 800 members; the American School Counselor Association has over 19,000 members. When placing this local study and discussion in a national context what differences and similarities would arise? What professional development practices and preferences would transcend those indigenous to Utah?

#### Conclusion

Upon sharing some of the results of this study with the Utah State Office of Education Comprehensive Guidance specialist, he commented, “that doesn’t surprise me” (personal communication with T. Sachse on May 12, 2006). While some of the results of this study may not be surprising, its most important contribution may be that of documenting for the first time the professional development needs, practices, and preferences of Utah school counselors. School counselors are a dedicated group of educators who draw on their personal time and funds for professional development and many exceed the state’s minimum 100 points standard for professional development. The counselors in this study have also indicated a need for more professional development opportunities suited to their role as school counselors. Hopefully, this study will establish an informed dialogue between school counselors, providers of

professional development, and state licensers in their efforts to improve professional development opportunities.

If any role in education requires professional development in order to maintain effectiveness, it is that of a school counselor. One counselor writing for the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) magazine may have said it best: “those who don’t change, don’t grow, and school counselors are no exception. In today’s era of educational reform and shifting roles for school counselors, it’s vital to hone your skills via professional development” (ASCA School Counselor, September/October 2001, p. 8). Utah school counselors are no different. This research has helped document the professional development needs, practices, and preferences of school counselors in Utah—all to the end of helping students succeed.

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### Biographical Statements

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Kathryn S. Bitner is a professional school counselor in Lindon, Utah. She has experience counseling diverse students populations in elementary, middle school, and higher education settings. In addition to school counseling, Dr. Bitner also works at the Center for Change, a residential eating disorder treatment center. She received her doctoral degree in counseling psychology at Brigham Young University.

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Dennis L. Eggett is an associate research professor and the Director of the Center for Statistical Consultation and Collaborative Research in the Department of Statistics at Brigham Young University. Before coming to BYU he worked for ten years as a research scientist at Battelle–Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, primarily on national security projects. Dr. Eggett received his master's and doctoral degrees in statistical science. His primary responsibility is as a statistical consultant to on-campus researchers.

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Octavia Sawyer is a master's candidate in the English literature program at Brigham Young University.

Russell Bryant is the assistant director of marketing for the Department of Independent Study. Mr. Bryant is responsible for marketing independent study high school courses to

over 6,000 high schools; his staff visits and consults with some 5,000 counselors each school year. Mr. Bryant's previous marketing experience was in the telecommunications industry for 19 years while providing high speed digital communication solutions to educational, medical, financial and other industries.

## Appendix A

## Background Information

1. Counselor Type (check all that apply.)
  - School Counselor
  - School Psychologist
  - Special Education
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
2. School Type (present or most recent employment)
  - Public
  - Private
  - Alternative
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
3. School Level (present or most recent employment)
  - Elementary School
  - Middle School or Junior High
  - High School
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
4. Certificate Type (presently held)
  - Provisional (Level 1)
  - Basic (Level 2)
  - Standard (Level 3)
  - Not sure
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
5. Highest Level of Education Completed
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Master's degree
  - Doctoral degree
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_

6. School-related, Full-time Employment before Becoming a School Counselor, if any  
(Check all that apply.)

- School Teacher
- School Administrator
- None
- Other\_\_\_\_\_

7. Number of Years as a School Counselor

- [Pull-down menu with 1 to 40 years]

## Survey

Continuing education is defined for purposes of this survey as professional development for school counselors on the job and beyond university-required, graduate courses.

1. Reason(s) for participation in continuing education activities or programs (Check all that apply.)
  - Recertification
  - Lane change
  - Improve school counseling knowledge and skills
  - Personal interest and enrichment
  - Required to supervise other counselors
  - Secure additional credentials, e.g., dual school counselor and rehabilitation counselor
  - Required for Comprehensive Guidance Review
  - Other\_\_\_\_\_
2. How much of your continuing education do you actually claim credit for by completing paperwork and placing in file?
  - All
  - Most
  - Some
  - None
3. By how much do you generally exceed the 100 licensure points required for recertification?
  - Don't exceed—just do the minimum 100 points
  - Exceed by a few
  - Exceed by quite a few
  - Exceed by double (or more)
  - Not applicable right now
  - Not sure what 100 licensure points means

4. Your choices of continuing education opportunities so far. Report approximate percentage of use for selections only—ignore all others. (For example, if you have participated only in district-sponsored workshops and training then report 100 % next to it and ignore all others.)

- University-offered courses, including online & independent study courses \_\_\_%
  - State counselor conferences (e.g., USCA) \_\_\_%
  - District-sponsored counselor workshops and training \_\_\_%
  - School-sponsored counselor workshops and training \_\_\_%
  - Other institution-sponsored school counselor conferences, workshops, and training \_\_\_%
  - Supervision meetings \_\_\_%
  - Reading ASCA journal \_\_\_%
  - Reading other counseling journals (name of journal) \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_%
  - Self-help, e.g., reading books, etc. \_\_\_%
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_%
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_%
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_%
- \_\_\_\_\_ 100%

5. What instructional format(s) do you most use for continuing education? (Check all that apply.)

- Traditional, face-to-face, instructor-led courses and workshops
- Online, Internet-based, 1- or 2-way audio video, or other technology-based courses and workshops
- Courses that incorporate both face-to-face and online elements
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

6. What instructional format(s) do you most prefer for professional development?  
(Check all that apply.)
- Traditional, face-to-face, instructor-led courses and workshops
  - Online, Internet-based, 1- or 2-way audio video, or other technology-based courses and workshops
  - Courses that incorporate both face-to-face and online elements
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
7. What are the greatest challenges you experience in completing continuing education? (Check all that apply.)
- Generally, just finding available classes or workshops
  - Availability of online programs/courses
  - Availability of independent study or correspondence programs (online or paper-based)
  - Identifying courses relevant to counseling, e.g., counselor-focused and not teacher-focused
  - Not enough variety in course offerings, e.g., same ones seem to be offered each year
  - Arranging time off from work
  - Balancing continuing education with family and other personal responsibilities
  - Finding money to cover associated expenses
  - No “greatest challenge” so far.
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
8. What portion of total continuing education expenses, including travel and lodging, do you personally pay for whenever not covered by the school, district, or state?
- None
  - Small percentage
  - About half
  - Large percentage



- All
9. What portion of your continuing education time is outside of regular work hours?
- None
  - Small percentage
  - About half
  - Large percentage
  - All
10. How do you generally find out about continuing education programs/courses in which you have participated? (Check all that apply.)
- Other school counselors
  - Internet searches
  - Workshop flyers
  - Mailings from USCA
  - Mailings from alma mater, e.g., alumni newsletters, etc.
  - School and principal help
  - District help
  - State suggestions
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
11. What most influences your choice of programs/courses? (Check all that apply.)
- Location
  - Cost
  - Time availability of courses, e.g., early afternoons, evenings, etc.
  - Weekend program
  - Length of courses
  - Faculty/Instructor
  - Course topics
  - Quality of programs/courses
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_

- Other \_\_\_\_\_

12. List the names of universities and institutions/associations from which you have received continuing education credit so far. Report approximate percentage of overall use for each.

- Utah School Counseling Association \_\_\_\_\_%
  - Utah State Office of Education \_\_\_\_\_%
  - District \_\_\_\_\_%
  - School \_\_\_\_\_%
  - Alma mater \_\_\_\_\_%
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_%
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_%
- \_\_\_\_\_
- 100%

13. What recommendations or comments can you make for improving the continuing education process and experience for school counselors in the state of Utah?