

Perceptions of the School Counselor's Role: A Challenge for the Profession

Leila Vaughn
Robin Bynum
Mary Ann Hooten
Troy University

Abstract

This study was conducted to determine school counselors' perceptions of their roles and identity and to assess how the guidelines of the American School Counseling Association National Model and the Alabama PEPE are being implemented. The results indicated significant differences on three dimensions of the School Counselor Activity Rating Scale. These findings indicate the need for counselor educators and school counseling leaders to prepare school counselors to assume the roles proposed by ASCA and the Alabama Counseling Plan.

Introduction

Discussion on accountability in school counseling programs has been a topic of concern as early as the 1930s when guidance programs were required to show results in the following areas: dropout rates, standard of scholarship, better morale in the student body, fewer disciplinary cases, fewer subject failures and withdrawals, students better informed about their futures, fewer absences, better study habits, and more intelligent selection of subjects (Gysbers, 2004). Today, the emphasis on accountability is even stronger for school counselors, who are constantly being challenged regarding their roles and identity.

The past decade has witnessed a movement toward transformation of the role and identity of school counselors. Several societal and educational concerns

have served as the impetus for reassessing the role of school counselors. Erford (2003) proposes that the "new focus on academic on academic performance in support of a school's educational mission is necessary to win the respect of school reform advocates and achievement-focused educators" (p.iii). Government agencies and the general public are requiring schools to provide better "outcome products" and all educators, teachers, administrators, and counselors must collaborate to promote student achievement. In 2001, the U.S. Department of Education introduced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in an attempt to raise standards and promote accountability. The NCLB Act aims to create equal educational opportunities and standards for all children across race, ethnicity and gender.

To become visible in this accountability/achievement movement, school counselors must "move beyond their current roles as 'helper-responders' and become proactive leaders and advocates for the success of all students (Erford, 2007, p.3). The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) through the National Standards for School Counseling Programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) has developed a comprehensive approach to deliver and manage school counseling programs. One of the key elements of the National Model is accountability with an emphasis for counselors to provide "evidence" rather than report "efforts." This new measure of accountability focuses on, "How are

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students different as a result of what we do?" Counselors can no longer only report the number of individual sessions and guidance classes they conduct; they must now show evidence of how their classroom guidance sessions, individual counseling, parent meetings, etc. make an impact on school improvement. Similar to teachers, counselor accountability has shifted from "process" to "student outcome" and counselors are now being challenged to redefine their roles and counseling programs.

Role Ambiguity.

For decades, school counselors have struggled to define their image as an integral part of the school and to prove how they contribute to the success of students. Rhyne-Winkler and Wooten (1996) reported that counselors' roles, responsibilities, and evaluation are "often subject to the whim of the building administrator." Thus there appears to be little consistency regarding the role and expectations of school counselors. Additionally, many teachers, students, and parents are unclear about the roles and responsibilities of school counselors and as a result the counselors are often viewed as ancillary workers in their schools.

For this reason, counselors are often assigned tasks by principals (Kirchner, 2005) who are either unaware of the ASCA National Standards or totally disregard the required tasks outlined for effective school counseling programs. Kirchner concluded that "it may not be principals' lack of understanding of counselor roles that leads to poor allocation of counselor' time, but the real demands of the work settings that impinge on both roles." (p.3)

Many graduates of school counseling programs indicate that there is a serious disconnect with the preparation they receive in the classroom and the actual tasks they are required to perform when they are hired. In fact, Ross and Herrington (2006) cited an example of a middle school counselor who returned to the university to enroll in educational leadership courses. When asked her reason for taking these courses, she replied "As a middle school counselor I do a lot of administrative work." (p. 2).

To counter the challenge of role ambiguity, the profession has undertaken a strong thrust to transform school counselor training programs and the identity of school counseling. The Education Trust Fund's Transforming School Counseling Initiative (1996) was one of the first efforts to address the issue of graduate-level preparation for school counselors. This Initiative recognized the impact that counselors have on students' choices and their postsecondary options. Through this program, 10 grants were awarded to school counselor programs and their K-12 district partners to identify specific content and skills that school counselor programs should include in their curriculum to effectively meet the needs of students.

Counseling Standards

In 1997, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) provided guidelines for comprehensive school counseling programs. The *National Standards for School Counseling Programs* are built on three domains: Academic Development, Career Development, and Personal/Social Development that address nine competencies/skills K-12 students should acquire. Academic Development encompasses strategies and activities to

enable the student to experience academic success; Career Development addresses strategies and activities to enable the student to develop a positive attitude toward work, and to develop the necessary skills to make a successful transition from school to the world of work; and Personal/Social Development provides strategies and activities to support and maximize each student's personal (Campbell & Dahir, 1997).

In 2003, ASCA published the *ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling* which is built on four systems: Foundation, Delivery, Management, and Accountability. This model guides counselors in implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs based on professional foundations: a mission statement, the ASCA National Standards and Competencies, and the three domains: Academic, Career, and Personal/Social. The delivery system includes the guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system support. The management system guides the implementation of the counseling program with an advisory council, use of data, action plans, use of time, and calendars. The accountability system requires counselors to analyze data standardized tests and informal data and to develop effective programs that can be audited.

ASCA has provided counselors with specific guidelines to develop, manage, deliver and evaluate their school counseling programs. Thus counselors are being challenged to recognize the crucial role school counseling programs have on student success and school achievement. They must become more involved as leaders and partners with teachers, parents, and administrators in improving academic

and behavioral issues of their students. Counseling programs must not only be developmental and comprehensive, but also be data-driven by academic assessments, needs assessments from parents, teachers and students, as well as assessment of the school environment. Strategies implemented based on data must be evaluated to determine effectiveness and areas for improvement.

As the school counseling profession works to redefine itself, there is evidence that although many counselors have embraced the new professional identity they are unable to implement these new roles as outlined by ASCA. In order to be recognized as integral players in the school improvement process, counselors must clearly articulate the ASCA National Standards for their key constituents, teachers, administrators, and parents. Until these critical groups understand the professional roles under which counselors should perform, school counseling will continue to receive limited legitimacy and counselors will continue to be used for inappropriate tasks.

Purpose

The purpose of this research study was to determine school counselors' perceptions of their roles and the activities they perform. This study was also designed to gather information on activities counselors "actually" performed, versus activities they "preferred" to do. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- (1) To examine the role and functions of school counselors.
- (2) To assess how the ASCA National Model guidelines are being implemented.
- (3) To provide information to assist counselor educators in preparing

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school counselors to assume leadership roles in the school achievement process.

(4) To determine if significant differences exist in the counselors' perceptions on five dimensions or activities: (i) Counseling (ii) Consultation (iii) Curriculum (iv) Coordination, and (v) Other, when grouped according to preferred categories

Method

Participants

All counselors (N = 52) in the 21 school districts served by the Southeast Alabama In-Service Center were invited to participate in the study. Information regarding the research study was sent to all school superintendents and principals requesting their permission for counselors' participation. Survey packets, including an informed consent form, were mailed to the counselors approved to participate in the study. Forty counselors returned the surveys of which 9 had incomplete data for both instruments; therefore, only 31 were included in the study.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to obtain data on counselor activities: *The Counselor Survey* and *The School Counseling Activity Rating Scale (SCARS)*. *The Counselor Survey* was compiled by two of the authors using seven indicators from the Alabama Professional Personnel Evaluation Program (PEPE) Self Assessment Form for Counselors (2007). The PEPE has been used since 1997 by Alabama State Department of Education to evaluate public school educators, including school

counselors. Respondents were required to respond using a 5-point Likert scale.

The School Counseling Activity Rating Scale, developed by Janna Scarborough, (2005) is designed to gather "process" data on activities of school counselors. It provides valid statistical data on how counselors actually spend their time versus how they would prefer to spend their time in job-related activities (Scarborough, 2005). The SCARS survey is composed of five scales: Counseling Activities, Consultation Activities, Curriculum Activities, Coordination Activities, and Other Activities. Results on the initial instrument indicated content validity, construct validity, and reliability coefficients for the five scales ranging from .75 to .93. Respondents were required to rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale: Actual 1 – I never do this, 2 – I rarely do this, 3 – I occasionally do this, 4 – I frequently do this, 5 – I routinely do this; and Prefer 1 – I would prefer to never do this, 2 – I would prefer to rarely do this, 3 – I would prefer to occasionally do this, 4 – I would prefer to frequently do this, 5 – I would prefer to routinely do this.

Data Analysis

The *School Counselor Survey* items were analyzed by re-coding responses into two discrete categories: (1) Never/Rarely and (2) Frequently/Routinely. A Frequency Table was created to summarize these data. The SCARS data were analyzed using the Windows version of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to compare participants' responses to each item in the "Actual" category to their responses in the "Preferred" category. A paired t-test was conducted to assess any significant differences.

Results

School Counselor Survey

Table 1 presents a summary of responses for each of the questions from the *School Counselor Survey* which was based on items from the PEPE. As previously discussed, the categories were collapsed into “Never/Rarely” and “Frequently/Routinely” to allow for a more meaningful analysis.

School Counseling Activity Rating Scale (SCARS)

To analyze the *School Counseling Activity Ratings Scale (SCARS)*, a comparison was made between each item that counselors rated as an activity they actually did versus an activity that they preferred to do. There were five different categories of activities to be analyzed: (1) Counseling (2) Consultation (3) Curriculum (4) Coordination, and (5) Other. A paired-sample t-test was done on each group to determine significant differences.

The overall results for the *SCARS Instrument* revealed that significant differences at $p < 0.5$ level were found for three categories (i) *Counseling Activities* (ii) *Curriculum Activities* and (iii) *Other Activities*. A closer observation of the findings show that the mean scores were higher for *curriculum* and *counseling activities* for tasks they preferred compared to tasks they actually performed. However, under *other activities*, the mean score was higher for the actual tasks performed compared to tasks that counselors would prefer to do. These findings suggest that significant discrepancies exist in counselors' perceptions of the activities and roles they

were actually performing compared to those they would prefer to perform.

School Counselor Survey

The results of the *School Counselor Survey* indicate that for all seven items taken from the Alabama PEPE instrument, more respondents reported that they frequently/routinely performed these activities. For item 2 “analyzes student assessment data to identify instructional needs and guidance needs” 28 of the 31 respondents stated that they were performing this activity. For item 7, 28 of the 29 respondents reported that they “participate in shared decision-making in the school.” The majority of respondents (22 of 28) also reported that they frequently/routinely “provide faculty and administrators information regarding conditions and factors that impact teaching and learning” (item 3). These responses suggest that many counselors in our sample recognize the importance of these critical functions as outlined by ASCA and PEPE.

On the other hand, although 13 respondents indicated that they frequently/routinely “provide leadership in identifying and resolving issues in education on local, state, regional, and national levels” (item 4), 12 respondents indicated they either never or rarely provided leadership. This finding is a cause for concern as leadership and advocacy are key roles for school counselors based on the ASCA National Model.

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School Counselor Activity Rating Scale (SCARS)

Responses from the SCARS instrument provided important information regarding activities participants actually performed and activities in which they would prefer to spend more time.

Counseling Activities

Based on the analyses, overall significant difference ($p < 0.00$) was found for *Counseling Activities*. Significant differences were found for 8 out of 10 variables: counsel with students regarding personal/family concerns; counsel with students regarding crisis/emergency issues; provide small group counseling regarding relationship/social skills; provide small group counseling for academic issues; conduct small group counseling regarding substance abuse; conduct small groups regarding family/personal issues; follow-up on individual and group counseling participants and counsel students regarding academic issues.

These results indicate that respondents would prefer to spend more time providing individual and small group counseling sessions on critical academic and personal issues. These results suggest that counselors believe they are not spending actual time on essential counseling activities that contribute to student development and academic success.

Consultation Activities

Although there was not an overall significance at the $p < .05$ level for *Consultation Activities*, 3 of the 7 variables in this category indicated

significant differences: consult with community and school agencies concerning students; consult with parents regarding child/adolescent issues; and coordinate referrals to community or education professionals.

These results indicate that respondents would prefer to spend more time consulting with community and school agencies and working with parents regarding developmental issues. They also suggest that counselors are not spending enough time coordinating referrals for their students. Based on these results it appears that school counselors in this study were not fulfilling their roles as advocates for students. The ASCA National Model proposes that school counselors should be advocates and collaborate with stakeholders such as community leaders, school agencies and parents to ensure that students receive essential services to promote student achievement.

Although 13 respondents indicated that they occasionally provided consultation to administrators, only 4 reported that they routinely did so. This is an area of concern as the ASCA National Model proposes that school counselors must exhibit leadership and advocacy for students as they identify barriers to learning. These results are consistent with the responses from the *School Counselor Survey* that indicated that 12 respondents never provided leadership in identifying and resolving issues facing education, on a local, state, regional and national level.

Curriculum Activities

Overall significant difference was found for *Curriculum Activities* at the $p < .05$ level. Significant differences were found

for all 8 variables in this section: conduct classroom activities to introduce yourself and explain the counseling program to all students; conduct classroom lessons addressing career development and the world of work; conduct classroom lessons on various personal and/or social traits; conduct classroom lessons on relating to others; conduct classroom lessons on personal growth and development issues; conduct classroom lessons on conflict resolution; conduct classroom lessons regarding substance abuse; and conduct classroom lessons on personal safety issues.

The results for *Curriculum Activities* indicate that respondents believe they are not spending enough time presenting guidance curriculum in classroom sessions. The ASCA Standards outlines three domains – career, academic, and personal, that should be addressed in the guidance curriculum. These responses suggest that counselors are spending limited classroom time on topics designed to develop career, and personal/social aspects of students and to encourage high academic performance.

Coordination Activities

For *Coordination Activities* significant differences at $p < .05$ level were found for 5 of the 13 variables: inform parents regarding the role, training, program, and interventions of a school counselor within the context of your school; conduct or coordinate parent education classes or workshops; inform teachers and administrators about the role, training, program, and interventions of a school counselor within the context of your school; coordinate with an advisory team to analyze and respond to school counseling program needs and formally

evaluate student progress as a result of participation in individual/group counseling from student, teacher and/or parent perspectives.

The results indicate that the majority of respondents would prefer to frequently/routinely inform parents and teachers/administrators about the role, training, program, and interventions of a school counselor within the context of their school. This suggests that counselors recognize the importance of clarifying their roles and functions to these key constituent groups. Counselors cannot expect to achieve their goals as defined by ASCA and the Alabama Department of Education if teachers, parents and administrators are unclear about the roles, training, and requirements for a comprehensive counseling program. The ASCA National Model and PEPE both propose that effective school counseling programs should be guided by a team of stakeholders who are all focused on achieving the mission of their school – student success and school improvement..

The item regarding “conduct or coordinate parent education classes or workshops” indicated that there is limited interaction with parents. Twelve respondents indicated that they never conducted parent education workshops, 14 occasionally did, and only 4 reported that they would prefer to do so. As significant stakeholders in student achievement, parents must be encouraged to participate in their children's academic and social achievement. Counselors and teachers often report how difficult it is to encourage parents to attend parent teacher meetings or to just interact regarding their children before negative issues arise. This is a challenge for school counselors to initiate

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innovative methods for increasing parental involvement in the school process.

Of similar concern is the item that addresses coordination "with an advisory team to analyze and respond to school counseling program needs." Although 12 respondents indicated they occasionally held advisory meetings, only 2 reported they routinely do so. The ASCA National Model proposes that each school should have an advisory team to assist the counselor (a) to analyze the school climate and assessment results and (b) to help develop strategies on how best to respond to identified needs. Advisory teams serve a critical role in developing strong school counseling programs.

Most respondents indicated that they would prefer to do more formal evaluation of student progress. This is a positive sign that counselors want to take more active roles in assisting students academically through individual/group counseling and through more interaction with parents and teachers

Based on the results, it appears that the majority of respondents were actually conducting needs assessments and counseling program evaluations from parents, faculty and/or students. Only 2 respondents reported they never conducted this activity. These results indicate that most school counselors are following the requirements set forth by ASCA and the Alabama State Guidance Plan for needs assessments to guide the development of the school counseling program. Needs assessments and program evaluations from key constituents – teachers, parents, and students help counselors prioritize areas to be addressed in all aspects of the counseling program, through classroom sessions, small group and/or individual

sessions, as well as through teacher and parent workshops.

The majority of respondents indicated that they coordinated the standardized testing program. This response was expected as the Alabama State Department requires that all school counselors coordinate testing within their schools.

Other Activities

For *Other Activities*, significant differences at the $p < .05$ level were found for 5 out of 10

variables: participate on committees within the school; organize outreach for low income students; perform hall, bus, and cafeteria duty; handle discipline of students; and substitute teach.

Based on these results, respondents indicated that they would prefer to spend more time on committees and to organize outreach services for low-income students. Twenty respondents indicated that they frequently/routinely scheduled students for classes with only 6 stating they never performed this activity. These results were expected especially for high school counselors for whom this activity is a major task. It is hoped that as counselors schedule

classes they will implement the underlying theme of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), that of ensuring equity for all races and gender, and promoting high standards for all students. As student advocates, they should encourage their schools and system to offer Advanced Placement courses and challenge more students to enroll in these classes so that they will be better prepared for success in life or college.

Twelve respondents indicated that they routinely perform hall, bus, and cafeteria

duty, while only 6 reported that they would prefer to do these duties. Although such tasks may appear on the surface to be non-guidance activities, the interaction that can occur at such times can be viewed in a positive way. As students file on or off the school bus, this provides counselors with an opportune time to meet and greet students, to observe individual and group behaviors and immediately collect subjective information. The same is true for hall and cafeteria duties – these all provide opportunities for assessing the school climate and for counselor visibility.

Fifteen respondents indicated that they routinely enroll and withdraw students and 19 reported that they were responsible for maintaining/completing educational records (cumulative files, test scores, attendance reports, drop-out reports). Although these are important tasks that school counselors should be involved with, there is some concern regarding the amount of time spent in these areas. Some of these tasks could be handled effectively by trained secretaries or other clerical personnel, thus releasing the counselor to utilize their time on higher-order activities, such as delivering the guidance curriculum in classrooms. Additionally, the counselor's time should be spent analyzing and disaggregating test data to determine specific areas of concern for the school and individual students.

Discussion

The results from the *School Counselor Survey* (based on Alabama PEPE Indicators) and the *School Counselor Activity Rating Scale* provide valuable insight for the school counseling profession and counselor education programs. Like other professionals, school counselors should

be required to adhere to the guidelines developed by their national organization, ASCA. The National Model should serve as the template for counseling programs and for daily implementation of school counseling programs.

There is strong evidence that the majority of the participants in this study would prefer to be involved in the activities that promote student achievement through the three domains – academic, career, and personal social activities. Yet there are glaring areas of concern – the need for more involvement with parents, for increased leadership roles in their schools, to serve as advocates for students, and for the reduction of time spent on clerical tasks.

The key elements that emerged are for school counselors to truly understand their roles as defined by ASCA and the Alabama State Department of Education and to be effective in communicating this information to principals, teachers, and parents. By doing so, school counselors will enhance their identity and gain respect as integral leaders in achieving the mission of their school - the academic improvement of all students. The school counseling profession will be transformed as counselors embrace the ASCA themes of advocacy, leadership, and collaboration. School Counseling educators play a crucial role in implementing this transformation when they focus on teaching the competencies and skills that will allow graduates to practice with confidence using the guidelines as outlined by the ASCA National Model and School Counseling Standards.

Finally, continuing research and professional development should be

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provided for principals and administrators to keep them abreast of the professional roles of school counselors. The intent should be to make them aware that when counselors are allowed to implement the ASCA roles of advocacy, leadership, and collaboration the students will benefit, and ultimately the overall school achievement will be enhanced.

Implications for Future Research

This study represents a small sample of school counselors in south Alabama. To validate these findings, further research should be conducted regarding counselors' roles and functions and to determine how closely aligned their programs are with the ASCA National Model and the Alabama PEPE. ♦

AUTHOR NOTE

Correspondence regarding this manuscript should be directed to: Dr, Leila Vaughn, 5B McCatha Hall, Troy University, Troy, Alabama 36082.
Email: lvaughn68@troy.edu

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Table 1

School Counselor Survey (based on the PEPE)

Item	Never/Rarely	%	Freq/Routinely	%	Total
1. Conducts follow-up studies of students for program and school use	10	40.0	15	36	25
2. Analyzes student assessment data to identify instructional and guidance needs	3	9.7	28	90.3	31
3. Provides faculty and administrators information regarding conditions and factors that impact teaching and learning	6	21.4	22	78.6	28
4. Provides leadership and identifying and resolving issues and problems facing education (local, state, regional, national)	12	48	13	52	25
5. Provides leadership in establishing and/or achieving school goals	4	22	14	78	18
6. Initiates activities and projects in the school and school system	5	17.9	23	82.1	28
7. Participates in shared decision-making in the school	1	3	28	97	29

* Total sample = 31. There was no response for some items.