Preferred Qualities in High School Counselors

Kirk Zinck  
*University of Texas at Tyler*

April Hughes  
*University of Texas at Tyler*

Rachel Oney  
*University of Texas at Tyler*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jcrp](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jcrp)

*Part of the Counselor Education Commons*

**Recommended Citation**

Zinck, Kirk; Hughes, April; and Oney, Rachel (2011) "Preferred Qualities in High School Counselors," *Journal of Counseling Research and Practice: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.*  
Available at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jcrp/vol2/iss1/4](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/jcrp/vol2/iss1/4)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Counseling Research and Practice by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
Utilizing focus groups with middle, high school, and university students, this phenomenological study developed a three-faceted perspective on student preferences for the personal and professional qualities of high school counselors. Findings revealed that students value the accessibility of counselors. Informants identified elements of accessibility that include authentic concern, trustworthiness, an interactive presence, unconditional acceptance, and attuned empathy as the primary qualities they prefer in a high school counselor. The findings have implications for the professional development of high school counselors and for those who train, hire, and supervise them.

Keywords: school counselor, high school, counselor preferences, counselor-client relationship

The foundation of a school counselor’s effectiveness is the ability to form a working alliance with students. Outcome research has indicated that the quality of the counselor-client relationship is a dominant predictor of counseling outcomes (Hoqarth & Bedi, 2002; Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000; Robbins, Liddell, Turner, Dakof, Alexander, & Kogan, 2006; Teyber 2006). A working alliance is established when clients perceive a counselor as a capable, trustworthy, and empathetic and one who grasps the client’s predicament, recognizes the client’s distress, is committed to helping, and takes a collaborative approach to problem resolution (Teyber, 2006). While most studies of the working alliance have been conducted on adult clients (Ozel & Scherer, 2003), those studies that do address the counseling relationship with adolescents suggest that counselor qualities such as warmth, trustworthiness, and professional experience influence the establishment of a working alliance with this client group (Hawley & Garland, 2008; Karver, Shirk, Handelsman, Crisp, Gund mundsden, & MacMakin, 2008; Purkey & Schmitt, 1996). The overall impression of counselor qualities may have special relevance for the high school counselor. Schools present a unique environment for counselors because students encounter the school counselor frequently and in multiple roles and contexts. Due to such ongoing interaction, students are likely to be keenly aware of a school counselor’s character.

Student impressions of school counselors are developed and confirmed through an informal “student grapevine.” This systemic communication network shapes student opinion, defines much of their reality (Gergen, 2000), and informs them about the character of faculty members including school counselors. For many students, the willingness to seek assistance is grounded in these socially constructed impressions of a faculty member’s qualities (Gergen, 2000; Helms, 2003; Lindsay & Kalafat, 1998). High school counselors who want to make a difference in students’ lives must understand and develop qualities that inspire adolescents’ trust and motivate students to seek them out for assistance.

This research focused on adolescent preferences regarding the personal and professional qualities of high school counselors. The study is unique in that it expands upon prior studies that explored adolescent preferences related to seeking help from any adult (BigFoot-Sipes, Dauphinais, LAFromboise, Bennet, & Rowe, 1992; Esters, 2001; Helms, 2003; Lindsay & Kalafat, 1998; Martin, Romas, Medford, Leffert, & Hatcher, 2006) and it includes a multifaceted perspective through involving three distinct groups of informants. Informants include students anticipating the transition from middle to high school, students enrolled in high school, and recent high school graduates reflecting on their experience.

School counseling is distinctive among counseling specialties as each level (elementary, middle, and high school) involves children at different stages of development. This study is specifically about the expectations and preferences of high school students. The findings offer pertinent information to high school counselors seeking to increase their effectiveness. They also pertain to counselor educators, trainers, and supervisors who recognize professional development as an ongoing process and who are often instrumental in making opportunities for professional development accessible to school counselors.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Kirk Zinck, The University of Texas at Tyler, Department of Psychology, HPR 214, 3900 University Blvd, Tyler, TX 75799, or by email at Kirk_Zinck@uttysl.edu.
A comprehensive literature review revealed little extant literature addressing qualities and characteristics that represent adolescent preferences for high school counselors. Existing studies target distinct demographics among students and generally lack a specific focus on the relationship between school counselors and adolescents. Esters (2001) examined “at-risk” student preferences regarding school counselors as related to values, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. He determined that similarity of background between counselor and student was very important to “at-risk” students. In a study of preferences related to help seeking, Lindsey and Kalafat (1998) discovered that the perception of an adult’s trustworthiness, empathy, authenticity, and a similarity in life experiences influenced ninth grade students’ motivation to seek help from any adult. A startling outcome was that only four of fifty study participants identified any school-based adult as someone with whom they would confide, and only one mentioned a school counselor. This appears to highlight the need for a fundamental understanding of the pertinent personal and professional qualities that enhance a high school counselor’s ability to connect with students and provide effective counseling.

In studying a homogeneous group of informants, (12th grade, white, middle class), Helms (2003) affirmed Lindsey and Kalafat’s (1998) findings regarding what students prefer and what they perceive as barriers in seeking adult help. Both studies indicate that students prefer to seek peer assistance when help is needed. Further, they avoid adults who are perceived as negative, too busy to listen, or judgmental. Qualities that students identified as important in adult helpers were empathy, authenticity, accessibility, and similarity. Studies of preferred counselor qualities among students from specific ethnic groups determined that similarity is important to minority adolescents who seek counseling in school or clinical settings (BigFoot-Sipes, et al., 1992; Ponterotto, Alexander, & Hinkston, 1988).

In a search of the extant literature, Esters (2001) failed to locate studies that addressed the school counselor-student relationship. It appears that with the exception of studying a few small and specific student groups (ethnic minorities, special needs), scholars have continued to inadequately address the relationship between adolescents and their high school counselors. Research has not generated a student perspective on what personal and professional qualities of a high school counselor inspire students’ trust and promote their confidence in a counselor’s ability to provide effective assistance. School counselors (and associated professionals) appear to remain largely uninformed about needs and preferences of their primary clientele.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study included: (a) identifying adolescent preferences regarding the personal and professional characteristics of high school counselors, (b) indentifying characteristics that make a counselor approachable and promote confidence that the counselor can provide effective assistance, and (c) acquiring information for use in the training of effective school counselors. The research question guiding the study was, “What personal and professional qualities do students prefer in high school counselors?”

Significance of the Research

Research indicates that regardless of theoretical approach, the most common characteristic of effective counselors is their ability to quickly establish a working alliance (Teyber, 2006). Effective high school counselors are adept at developing a helping relationship with even the most troubled of adolescents. This is a key characteristic of school counselors who truly make a difference in students’ lives (Zinck & Littrell, 2000).

Most studies of the working alliance and client preference for counselor qualities focus upon adult populations. They commonly define qualities that contribute to successful counseling outcomes from the counselor’s perspective. In existing literature, the research team identified only four studies regarding counselor qualities that present an adolescent perspective (Bigfoot-Sipes, et al., 1992; Helms, 2003; Lindsey & Kalafat, 1998; Martin, et al. 2000). Further, Martin, et al. (2000) hypothesized that their research regarding adolescent preferences for counselors in a clinical setting would generalize to the relationship between adolescents and school counselors. Yet the relationship of a school counselor and a student counseling is multifaceted and unique. In schools, the student-school counselor relationship may include frequent interaction in varied non-counseling contexts and roles. School counselors may encounter student counselees in common areas and classrooms, in parent-student-teacher conferences, or in situations where the counselor coaches or sponsors a student activity. School counselors attend meetings and events that include students they counsel, and they provide academic and career advisement in addition to personal counseling. Issues of role distinction, confidentiality, accessibility, and frequency of interaction make the school counselor-counselor relationship very different from the counseling relationship in a clinical context.

Method

A phenomenological approach was utilized in this study. The purpose of this research method is to describe and understand the common elements of a phenomenon that is experienced by a group of people (Creswell, 2007; van Mannen, 1990). Some basic assumptions of phenomenology are as follows: (a) people know experience by attending to the perceptions and meanings that emerge from an event, (b) people describe, explicate, and interpret their experience, and (c) while an individual’s interpretation of a specific phenomenon is unique, there is essence to experience that is
shared (Patton, 2002). Phenomenology “reduces individual experiences of a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2001, p. 58). While a phenomenological study concludes with such a description, the outcome can expand understanding, inspire action, and guide change. In phenomenological research an experience is explored through gathering descriptions from informants who have direct experience with the phenomenon of interest, learning about what the experience means to informants, and developing a composite description of the experience (Creswell, 2007). The intent of this study was to describe student preferences regarding the qualities of high school counselors, and we employed a phenomenological approach.

We utilized bracketing (also called epoche) in order to avoid imposing our preconceptions or bias on the research process (Creswell, 2007, Moustakas, 1990, Patton, 2002). Bracketing involves setting aside any potential prejudices or assumptions in order to approach interviews and analyses with an unbiased and receptive presence (van Mannen, 1990). It allows researchers to approach interviews and analyses with a sense of “not knowing” (Patton, 2002) in order to elicit authentic and detailed descriptions of informant experience. Bracketing requires sustained attention, concentration, and presence (Creswell, 2007, Moustakas, 1990, Patton, 2002, van Mannen, 1990). We made bracketing an intentional and conscious act that was facilitated through self-monitoring of our statements during interviews, self-reflection, and peer consultation. In team meetings, we also listened to our recorded interviews, examined transcripts, and engaged in ongoing discussion as another form of monitoring in order to avoid introduction of preconception or bias into the process of data collection and analysis.

Employing focus groups allowed our research team to learn about student preferences regarding the personal and professional qualities of high school counselors. In the process informants described how school counselors: (a) indicate approachability, (b) instill confidence that they can help students meet challenges and change in their lives, and (c) inspire hope. Focus groups offer a method for gathering research data when the objective is to develop an understanding of perspectives and experience informed by people immersed in a specific context (Morgan, 1998). Focus group informants are asked to consider and discuss questions posed by a facilitator. Each informant is encouraged to listen fully to all views and to contribute his or her thoughts to the developing dialogue (Patton, 2002). The interactive nature of focus groups allows researchers to gather data about the meanings of an issue to a particular group and contributes to a rich and complex understanding of specific issues (Kress & Shoffner, 2007).

Numbering four to 10 informants, several focus groups are included in a study (Morgan, 1998). A few open ended questions are posed to initiate and focus discussion. Facilitators query informants about their responses, link topics and information, summarize, and promote a detailed and complex discussion among informants. This dialogic process integrates varied perspectives and provides for an interactive and robust construction of knowledge and meaning regarding a human experience (Gergen, 2000).

Members of our research team were trained in interviewing and analysis by our primary investigator (PI). Training commenced in a series of meetings prior to launching the research and continued as an ongoing process. It included assigned readings, discussion, and the compilation of a binder of pertinent articles, handouts, and other materials that served as an ongoing reference during the study. The PI modeled an initial interview for the rest of our research team. This was followed by guided practice and a team discussion of the interview process. Throughout the study, focused reading, modeling, guided practice, and team review were employed to address all aspects of the research process.

Sampling
To gain a robust perspective on student preferences regarding high school counselors, we recruited participants who were close to, or immersed in, the experience of high school. Informants included: (a) eighth grade students who would transition to high school within a year, (b) tenth and eleventh grade students providing a “here and now” perspective, and (c) university freshmen who had graduated from high school within the past year and could readily reflect upon their experiences with high school counselors. This sampling strategy met the principles of purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) by including informants that: (a) represent diverse perspectives, (b) typify people in the context of interest, and (c) have specific knowledge and experience. Stratification provided a robust and triangular perspective as viewed thorough lenses of anticipation, immediate experience, and reflection. This multifaceted perspective is unique among extant research on youth preferences regarding counselor qualities.

Thirty-seven students ages 13 to 19 participated in one of six focus groups composed of five to eight informants. Two groups were conducted at each academic level. Fourteen college freshmen (nine female), 11 high school students (six female), and 11 middle school students (eight female) participated. Informants identified themselves as European-American (27), African-American (5), Hispanic-American (5), and Native-American (1).

Data Collection
Focus group interviews occurred at a university, a high school, and a middle school in three small and proximal southwestern communities. Approval for the study was sought and received from the university institutional review board and the public school administrators prior to recruitment. Signed parental permission was obtained for middle and high school student informants.

Our research team included two graduate students enrolled in a school counseling program of study and an assistant professor of psychology and counseling. Each team member facilitated two of the six focus groups convened in this study. Five open-ended questions served to initiate fo-
Focus group discussions, and included the following:

- What makes a school counselor effective?
- How do you know you can trust a school counselor?
- What makes a school counselor seem like someone you can talk to about private matters?
- Would you describe the ideal school counselor?
- Tell me about the best school counselor you have known; what made him/her effective?

The questions were developed by our team and based upon reading from the literature review and suggestions for interview question construction offered by Kvale (1996) and Patton (2002).

In each focus group, as informants responded to questions, we summarized, linked and focused information, requested detail, encouraged commentary on expressed ideas, and guided an emergent dialogue among the informants. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following each focus group meeting, we made note of our observations, hypotheses, and impressions.

Each focus group met for an initial session and again following transcript analysis. The second meeting was a confirmatory process during which we shared impressions, observations, and themes that emerged during transcript analysis and we queried informants about findings to invite feedback and clarification.

Analysis

An approach to transcript analysis developed by Joanning & Keoughan (1997) was employed to identify emergent themes. Analysis included the following steps:

1. Sensitizing - We read the complete transcript to familiarize ourselves with content and make mental notes of data that meaningfully relate to the research questions and might suggest themes and categories.

2. Initial Coding - We returned to the transcript for a second reading noting codes in the margins of the transcript. The term “codes” refers to words, phrases, sentences, concepts, and themes. Because coding is a cyclical process, initial coding involves at least two passes through a transcript.

3. Focused Coding - Our research team met to review the coded transcripts; we discussed the codes, retained those that informed an emergent understanding of student preferences, and discarded codes that did not contribute to understanding. Codes were transferred to index cards with notation of the interview number, page, and paragraph where the code originated. Together, our group considered the code on each index card and progressively sorted the codes into categories that came to represent substantive themes within the data.

Initial coding involved two members of our team who independently coded copies of the same transcript. Following this step, the two met to compare and contrast their analysis, discuss differences, and reach agreement where differences occurred; if agreement was not reached on a code, it was discarded. Agreement between two coders was calculated at 90 percent on average.

A central question in research is, “how do we know that a . . . study is believable, accurate, and right?” (Creswell, 2007). A commonly employed approach to verification in qualitative research is one developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). It includes four criteria: (a) credibility, referring to ensuring rigor in the research process; (b) transferability, addressing the extent to which a reader can determine if knowledge gained in one context may be relevant to other contexts; (c) dependability, referring to consistency in conducting a study; and (d) confirmability, involving the provision of evidence to demonstrate that findings emerged from the inquiry process and were not products of researcher bias or preconception.

Credibility was established through triangulation, adequacy of data, and member checks. Triangulation included seeking three distinct perspectives regarding preferred counselor qualities (grade eight, high school, college freshmen). Adequacy of data was addressed by conducting two separate focus groups at each academic level to promote saturation (repetition of information, codes, and themes). Member checks followed interview analysis in follow-up sessions with each focus group when researchers shared the analysis of the group interview and sought confirmation, disconfirmation, and discussion. Transferability was established through purposive sampling used to arrive at findings representing a range of student perspectives, related to a specific context (high school) and issue (school counselor qualities). Dependability was established through generating an audit trail that documents research activities, processes, emergent themes, and influences on data collection and analysis. Confirmability was also established through the audit trail plus researcher reflexivity and frequent research team debriefing among us to insure that our findings emerged from the data and accurately represented informant perspectives.

Findings

The data indicated that qualities most preferred by students in a high school counselor include authentic concern, trustworthiness, supportiveness, interactive presence, unconditional acceptance, and attuned empathy. What follows is a discussion of these qualities. Statements from focus group interviews, that illustrate each quality, are presented in Table 1.

Authentic Concern

This highly valued quality, authentic concern, refers to the counselor’s focus upon student well-being. It includes availability and approachability. Counselors demonstrate authentic concern in many ways including affect and body language. Counselors must be aware of their posture, facial...
expressions, and gestures during interaction with students. Informants indicated that when a counselor’s actions are congruent and appear to convey acceptance and concern, students develop sufficient confidence in the counselor to open up and talk about their “real” concerns. Informants stated that a counselor’s ability to listen responsively conveys authentic concern. Such responsiveness includes what is often referred to as “listening with the third ear.” This intuitive factor sensitizes counselors to unspoken messages that may underlie what is said aloud (Teyber, 2007). Such sensitivity to underlying messages helps counselors to identify core concerns and validate counselee feelings and experience; it opens possibilities for the in-depth conversations that often lead to meaningful change.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was a universal concern among informants who indicated that school counselors are trustworthy when they demonstrate confidence in their own ability to facilitate change, are honest and genuine with students, and maintain confidentiality. The high school counselor who can positively and professionally address students’ academic, emotional, and social needs, elicits their trust. Informants indicated that a counselor’s maintenance of confidentiality, especially in talking with teachers, allows students to affirm the counseling relationship as a secure context for self-expression.

Informants described trustworthiness in terms of counselors providing broad support to all students. For example, they tended to expect that counselors would be sensitive to and capable of intervening in or addressing situations that affect the school climate. Such situations might include peer pressure, conflict, discrimination, and academic stress. Informants also expected counselors to be sensitive to and “pick up on” issues that concern students in general. They wanted counselors to actively intervene in these issues through such activities as engaging with students in classroom meetings and offering counseling groups and other forms of assistance to address such issues. One informant discussed a student suicide. She described the school counselor as “absent” (not visible) in addressing the event with the student body; instead, the coaching staff did that. The counselor was not readily available to work with bereaved students and made no effort to coordinate responsive services for individuals or small groups. According to the informant, the lack of visibility and support appeared to confirm a general lack of trust in the counselor among students.

Assistance with academic, career, and personal/social development was important to informants. They emphasized the need for high school counselors to provide information and resources in areas such as finding emotional support during difficult times, career and college planning, and transitioning from high school to young adulthood. Informants also stated that to provide students with effective support, school counselors must be organized and effective in filling the range of duties they are typically assigned.

**Interactive Presence**

Positive interaction with students in any context was described as important in building rapport and establishing relationships. Being involved and visible in school-based activities and getting out of the office to mingle with students in hallways, classrooms, and common areas allows students to get to know a counselor. A counselor who attends an occasional after school activity makes a significant impression on students, and the setting presents opportunities for informal conversation. This may allow students to develop a level of comfort and confidence that would motivate them to seek counseling assistance should the need arise.

**Unconditional Acceptance**

Informants indicated that an unbiased counselor makes counseling seem accessible to a diverse population of students. When counselors “walk their talk” and demonstrate broad acceptance, students are more likely to seek counselor assistance when they are troubled. Informants spoke about the negative impact of counselors who give preferential treatment to certain students or groups while appearing biased and unwelcoming to other students. Several informants discussed school counselors who seemed to hold preconceived (and rather public) ideas about certain students, and quickly labeled those who experienced specific problems. Informants expected a school counselor to view situations from many perspectives and to be respectful, even validating, of all students, “troubled” or not. They indicated that respect promotes contact and communication between school counselors and all students.

**Attuned Empathy**

Attuned empathy extends empathic understanding in which professional knowledge, intuition, and respect allow a counselor to enter the counselee’s world and capture core issues and meanings (Teyber, 2007). It includes understanding the developmental issues of adolescents, how adolescents experience the world, and what concerns them about life and society. Informants felt that effective school counselors do not “stand apart” from their students. One informant stated, “A school counselor must understand that [his or her] every act, that influences a student’s decision, affects their lives.” Informants perceived school counselors as having significant influence upon important decisions that high school students must make. Examples include: (a) how much to apply oneself in high school, (b) choosing a career, (c) post secondary planning, (d) relational decisions, and (e) coming to terms with one’s individual identity. Finally, in an ever-changing world, attuned empathy includes the counselor having the confidence and sensitivity to “bracket off” assumptions, ask questions, and be open to learning about how students experience life from the students themselves.
Preferred Qualities in High School Counselors

### Table 1. Preferred Qualities in High School Counselors: Statements from Focus Group Informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualities</th>
<th>Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authentic Concern</td>
<td>1. An effective counselor will reach out to students who need help; they notice distress and they respond”. University Freshman Student (U)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. A counselor who is always on hand for the students; the door is always open. High School Student (H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. I just want somebody that I can relate to, like to step in my shoes and feel what I am going through. Eighth Grade Student (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>1. They aren’t going to tell you necessarily what you want to hear, they’ll tell you what you need to hear. (U)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. She listens and understands that this has to be between me and her and not everyone else. (H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. She helped me and she knows how to help you too. (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportiveness</td>
<td>1. Students didn’t always have to seek out help; the counselor would come up and talk to us; he wouldn’t just sit back and wait for us to talk to him. (U)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Someone good at multitasking, because they have a lot of jobs. (H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. A good counselor tries to help you help yourself. (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive Presence</td>
<td>1. They[counselors] made it a point to like say hi to everybody, and they were always at the activities, like athletic events and stuff like that … they were always around,(U)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. A counselor needs to be outgoing, and serious when appropriate, but also fun when appropriate too. (H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. She greets students in the halls; seeks out students; develops relationships with students; is interested in students; likes students. (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconditional Acceptance</td>
<td>1. Counselors should have an unbiased outlook, regardless of who the student is. You want to feel that your counselor cares about you. (U)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. She’s not quick to judge; she is open to and listens to all ideas. (H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. I can talk to him about almost anything. (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attuned Empathy</td>
<td>1. A school counselor must understand that every decision you make, that influences a student’s decision, affects their lives. You don’t stand as an outsider. (U)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. You always have to be ready to put on the students’ shoes, lace them up, and go with them. (U)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. He understands and knows where I’m coming from. (H)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. They are able to relate to us, have things that happened to them and they could tell us about them. (8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(U) Undergraduate Students, (H) High School Students, (8) Eighth Grade Students

### Implications for High School Counselors

Among implications that emerged from this study, the recognition that school counselor visibility, accessibility, and willingness to interact with all individuals is of primary importance to high school students. Informants stated that school counselors can have a long-term impact as they guide students through various decisions in high school. To create positive and impactful relationships, counselors must develop a connection with students. Many informants stressed the importance of the counselor’s presence where students gather informally (commons, hallways, extracurricular activities, and other events). Informal interaction provides opportunities to “be known” and build relationships with a cross-section of students. This may place a counselor in the position of “preferred adult helper” when students seek assistance.

A second implication is that students do not seek a neutral school counselor. They prefer a counselor that will “walk with them” and become an integral member of the support system that students use at a critical junctures in their life as the students move through high school and prepare for adulthood. Students may seek a school counselor’s...
guidance in negotiating this pathway if they sense that the counselor is interested, accessible, and will help them through the developmental transitions that mark the journey from middle to late adolescence.

A third implication is that counselors must practice reflectively (Parsons, 2009). An effective counselor engages in ongoing reflection whether she or he is involved in a counseling session, a classroom presentation, or interacting with students in common areas. Reflective practice heightens counselor awareness of the effect she or he may have in the moment and develops her or his sensitivity to student needs. Ultimately, reflective practice promotes an ongoing professional evolution and increasing effectiveness.

A fourth implication regards the importance of defining one’s position as “counselor.” This is critical in the working context of schools due to the many roles a school counselor is expected to fill. Effective school counselors are assertive in defining their role within schools as “agents of change.” This is contrary to the unfortunate stereotype of school counselors as an extension of the administration (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Kaplan & Evans, 1999). School counselors must possess a rigorous commitment to being a counselor. They must know their purpose, set appropriate priorities, and provide a balanced and comprehensive service to students. Once defined as a “counselor,” the high school counselor must maintain the knowledge and assertiveness necessary to facilitate progressive growth of the counseling program while working in a collaborative manner with administrators and teachers. Counselors need “their best human relations and assertiveness skills” (Paisley & McMahon, 2001, p.111) to establish and maintain professional boundaries and limit the amount of non-counseling duties in which they engage. The effective school counselor is sensitive to and attends to multiple student needs while promoting academic and relational success among all students (Erford, 2007).

A fifth implication is that high school counselors must purposefully make time for counseling. Putting paperwork “on hold” may be necessary to allow time to counsel students. Students see counselors as potential advocates and allies; however, school counselors must be available, approachable, and attuned to student needs if they are to function as agents of change. Individual and group counseling opportunities should be readily available to students. Some non-counseling duties may need to be completed after school. The reality of school counseling is that it is not an 8:00 to 4:00 job if one truly wants to make a difference in student lives.

The final implication is for counselors to demonstrate confidence and professional competence through maintaining a current knowledge of counseling and related issues and continuing to develop their professional effectiveness. Counselors should be up-to-date on outcome-based practices in school counseling and their knowledge of theories and practices related to development, relationships, and learning. They should be informed regarding social, political, and educational issues that affect adolescents and their families and that create both stress and opportunity for youth. Such awareness is a “tool” for understanding students and supporting their learning and personal growth. It emerges in the pursuit of ongoing education, reading professional literature, attending professional events, keeping up with local and national news, and interacting with other professionals in school counseling and related areas.

Limitations

Qualitative research is utilized to increase understanding and develop perspectives on an issue of interest. While the findings of this study are transferable, the use of purposive sampling, a relatively small number of informants, and data collection in three adjacent counties precludes broad generalization of the results. Thus the findings provide a form of local knowledge (Glaser, 2001) that reflects preferences of students in a specific region.

While it is plausible to assume that the preferences described by informants in this study are comparable to those of high school students in similar contexts (small rural communities in the southwestern United States), the reader must keep in mind that any perspective is influenced by context. This study provides an increased understanding of student preferences in regard to the qualities of high school counselors. The findings may be used, with appropriate caution, by high school counselors and those who train and evaluate them to enhance student services. The article also presents a pragmatic approach to research addressing student preferences that can be duplicated or done in modified form in order to create a more specific understanding of student preferences in a given context such as a school, school district, or region.

Conclusion

In seeking student preferences regarding the personal and professional qualities of high school counselors, this study is unique in giving a voice to adolescents who utilize school counseling services. A primary concern expressed by informants was the accessibility of their school counselor upon whom they depend for personal counseling; academic assistance; career and college advisement; and modeling, guidance, and support in a variety of individual endeavors and the developmental transitions that accompany the process of maturation.

The data revealed five personal and professional qualities that students view as elements of counselor accessibility. They include authentic concern, trustworthiness, an interactive presence, unconditional acceptance, and attuned empathy. The findings may inform the training and professional development of school counselors. Duplication of the study in other contexts may support the findings and add a unique perspective on the preferences of students in specific geographical areas. Future research on this topic could also include development and distribution of a survey based on the findings of this and any similar studies that exist at the time,
employ a mixed methods approach, and study a larger and more distributed population. This could produce a composite description of preferences that represents student perspectives and generalizes to a broader population of high school students.

References


For reprints and permission please visit http://www.jcrponline.org/
Article

Secondary Student Schedule Changes: Accountability Issues in School Counseling Program Management

Tarrell Awe Agahe Portman
Susannah Wood
Anna Vivianni

The University of Iowa

Descriptive data collected on student schedule changes have been missing in the literature. School counselors agree the task of changing schedules is overwhelming, but there is no measure indicating the extent of time and attention devoted to schedule changes. The purpose of this article is to present data gathered during the crucial schedule change period just prior to the beginning of a new academic term. The findings may provide an incentive for school counselors to begin collecting data related to scheduling and establish concrete measures for providing information for dissemination to school district decision makers.

Keywords: school counseling, scheduling, accountability, program management

School counselors engage in many roles, one of which has been described as a “scheduling guru” (Burhans, 1999). School counselors devote a significant amount of time to student scheduling and report this task as a “time robber” in their day and as excessive paper work (Hutchinson, Barrick, & Grove, 1986; Partin, 1993). In addition, counselors argue scheduling takes time away from the more central counseling duties of individual and group counseling (Miller, 2002). It is not surprising school counselors have reported scheduling as their least important function (Tennyson, Miller, Skovholt, & Williams, 1989) with counseling and consulting perceived as more important to their role in helping students.

High school counselors relate spending 31% of their time on individual counseling with students, 48% of which was for educational counseling and most likely related to class scheduling (Partin, 1993). These counselors revealed approximately 17% of their day was spent on administrative and clerical activities including scheduling duties that involved activities other than directly meeting with students. In comparison, middle and elementary school counselors reported spending 12% of the day at the middle school and 7% of the day at the elementary school on student scheduling. Therefore, high school counselors reported scheduling to be significantly more of a problem than did middle school or junior high school counselors (Hardesty & Dillard, 1994). Recognizing the problem, high school counselors reported the desired amount of time they would like to spend on administrative and clerical duties including scheduling as 7% compared to the reported actual 17% (Partin, 1993).

The previous data indicates a discrepancy exists between how high school counselors perceive their roles and the professional expectations placed on them by the educational system, principals, and other administrators (Tennyson et al., 1989). School counselors report spending a tremendous amount of time on scheduling courses for students. Researchers (Borders & Drury, 1992) argue time spent on student scheduling is taking away valuable time from the developmental counseling goals of helping students formulate career plans through small group or classroom guidance activities. In 1989, Tennyson et al. put forth a call for computer programs to take over the administrative support function of scheduling so school counselors could be free to engage in other more meaningful activities.

Borders and Drury (1992), in a review of thirty years of research in school counseling, describe comprehensive school counseling programs that discuss scheduling and placement activities under coordination duties of school counselors. These authors report that while coordination activities are “paramount to effective delivery of services” (p. 489), it is very important that scheduling duties do not take too much of the time and attention of the school counselor. They further argue that when possible and “appropriate,” these coordination tasks should be given to support staff so counselors can dedicate most of their time to direct services. Coordination activities should be limited to those which increase the program’s effectiveness and accountability.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Dr. Tarrell Awe Agahe Portman, The University of Iowa, Department of Counseling and Student Development, N356 Lindquist Ctr., Iowa City, IA 52242 or at tarrell-portman@uiowa.edu
Paisley and Borders (1995) expressed school counselors have experienced a “significant amount of role confusion and unambiguous clarity of focus in schools” (p. 151), and that school counselors are spending too much time on administrative tasks such as scheduling while they should be providing direct counseling services to students. This role confusion has the potential to cause many frustrations for school counseling professionals. One potential area of frustration for secondary school counselors is the rationale for students in seeking changes in their schedules. Students provide many reasons for changing schedules, and these reasons may vary by school district and school policy. However, it is important to understand the motives for students electing to change their schedules. This knowledge may help school counselors to be proactive during the pre-enrollment process to ward off unnecessary schedule changes.

Enrollment management activities occur through a collaborative effort between administrators, teachers, students, and school counselors. These enrollment activities encompass creation of academic plans (e.g., four year plans, NCAA requirements), pre-enrollment, actual master schedule building, schedule corrections, and successful enrollment into classes. There is, however, great disparity in reporting empirical data regarding enrollment management activities. A gap exists in the school counseling literature relative to reporting descriptive data on student requests for schedule changes, counselor time expended on schedule changes, and the fiscal cost to the district. The literature, other than presenting desired percentage of time allocations for school counselors, is silent on these program management issues.

The purpose of this article is to present data on secondary student schedule changes gathered during the crucial period just prior to a new beginning of an academic term. Such descriptive data may provide an incentive for school counseling programs to begin collecting information related to scheduling procedures to be utilized in data driven decision-making. Embracing a proactive stance at the local level may clarify the school counseling time allocations related to scheduling revealed in the literature and enhance the individual planning component of school counseling programs. This outcome research can provide concrete data for dissemination to administrators and boards of education for making policy decisions.

Method

Participants

The data in this study was gathered in a field study from 1,835 high school students enrolled during the fall semester of 2002 in two Midwestern high schools in the same community school district with a combined enrollment of 3,075 students. Of the 1,835 students participating in this study, 12% (n=222) were in the 9th grade, 22% (n=404) were in the 10th grade, 27% (n=495) were in the 11th grade, and 34% (n=625) were in the 12th grade. Female students comprised 49% (n=886) of the sample and males 51% (n=929). Students who were new to the district accounted for 3% (n=64) of the students. These new students were not omitted from the sample so an accurate descriptive baseline for the number of schedule requests and time obligations of secondary school counselors could be established.

Procedures

Data was collected as part of the program evaluation for the district’s comprehensive school counseling and guidance program. The intent was to collect data to develop a basic understanding of school counselor service delivery during high periods of schedule changing at the beginning of the school year. In addition, descriptive information regarding the number of student requests and reasons given for changing schedules were identified.

Twelve secondary school counselors at the two high schools gathered descriptive data during designated times just prior to the beginning of a new fall term. Two registration days were designated prior to the beginning of classes. During these two registration days, school counselors met with 37% of the students (n=684) requesting schedule changes. One week prior to classes 111 (6%) students were seen for schedule changes. School counselors met with 40% (n=738) of the students requesting schedule changes during the first week of classes. Five percent (n=88) of the students met with school counselors during the second week of classes, and less than 1% (n=7) met with school counselors during the third week of classes. Data indicating dates of requested schedule changes were missing for 11% (n=194) of the students in this study.

Students were asked to identify the reason for their decision to request a schedule change. A tabular checklist was created to gather data. Optional reasons were listed as: (a) early graduation, (b) early release, (c) failure of a class the previous year, (d) level change based on ability, (e) mistake in schedule, (f) new student registration, (g) parent request, (h) peers, (i) post secondary education, (j) special education, (k) teacher preference (student initiated), (l) teacher initiated request, and (m) work. Students seeking assistance not related to schedules during this time period were categorized as not applicable to the topic being studied. Counselors had an optional column to add qualitative data or comments. In addition, a final column was included to identify when a counselor was unable to change the student’s schedule. The data collection sheet utilized can be found in Figure 1.

Results

The district has a total school population of 3,075 students enrolled in grades 9 through 12 with 12 secondary school counselors. The school counselor to student ratio is 1 to 256. All of the school counselors participated in the data collection. Findings from a frequency distribution of the data indicate 1,835 (60%) of the enrolled secondary students in
the district requested schedule changes over a 7-day period. Five percent (n=137) requested schedule changes the school counselors were unable to accommodate. A frequency distribution of total enrollment by grade level revealed 27% of the 827 freshmen (n=222), 52% of the 773 sophomores (n=404), 67% of the 742 juniors (n=495) and 85% of the 733 seniors (n= 625) in the school district elected to change their schedules. There was no significant difference between males (n=929, 51%) and females (n=886, 49%) related to requests for schedule changes.

Reasons for Requesting Schedule Change

The top five reasons in order of highest frequency given by students (n=1,835) for changing their schedules were students changing their minds in 38% (n=692) of cases, mistake in the schedule resulted in 12% (n=226) of changes, early release represented 9% (n=160) of the cases, teacher preference initiated by the student yielded 6% (n=114) of the time, and changes related to ability level in classes represented 4% (n=81) of changes. The categories of parent requests for changes (n=62), new student registration (n=64), and failing a class from the previous year (n=62) each yielded 3% of the reasons for student schedule changes. Two percent of the students cited early graduation (n=44) and 2% (n=44) selected special education as the reasons for making schedule changes. Less than 1% indicated their decision to make a schedule change was based on peers (n=13), post secondary education (n=25), teacher request initiated by teachers (n=24), or work (n=18). In addition, less than 1% (n =10) of the students indicated the reasons provided for changing schedules did not apply to them.

Seniors were the most likely group to request schedule changes considering 85% of all enrolled seniors requested a schedule change. Juniors, sophomores, and freshmen followed in descending order by percentages of schedule changes requested. The primary reason for schedule change requests by 11th and 12th grade students was the student changed their minds. Eliminating the student changed their mind category provides greater insight into specific reasons for students requesting schedule changes. Seniors cited early release and failure of a class the previous year as the primary motives for their requests. Juniors expressed mistakes on the schedule and early release as their primary justification for requesting schedule changes. Sophomores reported mistakes on enrollment forms and teacher preferences as their greatest reasons for changing schedules. Freshmen identified their top reason for changing their schedules was a mistake on the schedule. Reasons given for schedule changes by grade level are displayed in Table 1.
Table 1. Reasons for Schedule Change Requests by Grade Level (N=1,875)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>9th</th>
<th>10th</th>
<th>11th</th>
<th>12th</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Changed Mind</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistake</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Release</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Preference initiated by student</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure of Class in Previous Year</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abilities Level Change</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Request for Schedule Change</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Secondary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Request initiated by teacher</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Student Registration</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Graduation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Reasons</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Requests by Grade Level</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>625</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School Counselor Time Allocations

School counselor time allocations devoted to changing schedules provide additional information for consideration. In this school district the majority of schedule changes occurred over a seven day period during the two registration days prior to the first day of classes and the during the first week of classes. An estimated cost to the school counseling program and the district can be calculated as follows by using the following formula: (number of counselors) x (number of days) x (percentage of time allocated or expended) x (average daily salary including benefits) = (total financial cost to district). For example, 12 school counselors dedicated 100% of their time for a total of 84 days of contracted time. The average daily salary including benefits for school counselors in this district was $297. Therefore, a conservative estimate of cost to the district in resources devoted to secondary schedule changes is $24,948. The fiscal calculation increases to $49,896 when you consider the window for changing schedule occurs twice during a regular academic year for a total of 168 days devoted to schedule changes or 7% of the overall salary budgeted for secondary school counselors in the district. The fiscal calculations do not include the fiscal cost for other enrollment management activities or the amount of money expended on purchasing textbooks and materials based on pre-enrollment numbers that may change drastically when 60% of your student body moves from one class to another. In addition, the loss of instructional time for teaching staff during the schedule change period is not included in the fiscal calculations.

Discussion

Results from this study indicate there is a need to further examine the procedures leading to schedule changes in secondary schools. Identification of 60% of all enrolled secondary students and 85% of all seniors in this district as requesting schedule changes is a call for action. Data driven decision-making relies on using quantifiable information to re-examine current practices. Enrollment management practices in school counseling programs must be examined to increase accountability and allow reform in these procedures.

Fifty percent (n =906) of all student schedule change requests in this sample were attributed to the students changing their minds or mistakes on the schedule. Eliminating these two categories would reduce schedule changes by one-half. Concentration on eliminating or decreasing schedule change requests for students changing their mind, mistakes on schedule, early release, teacher preference, and changes related to ability level would account for 68% of the sche-
schedule changes requested or 42% of the overall student enrollment in the secondary schools in this district.

Limitations

Categorically forced choices were used in this study and need to be examined in future studies. The categorical choice of the student changing their mind is vague and in future data collection should be eliminated or qualitatively explored through conversation to gain greater clarity. Mistakes on enrollment forms might indicate a need for increased clerical inspection at the end of the pre-enrollment process. Although, all grade levels gave this rationale for schedule changes, a higher frequency was determined for the incoming freshmen than other grade levels. Careful consideration of sequencing freshman orientation to secondary curriculums and completion of pre-enrollment procedures may help to eliminate some mistakes, especially given these students were in the beginning of their second semester of eighth grade when the pre-enrollment forms were completed.

Some requests for schedule change were directly related to written school policies. A student requesting early release from the school day is related to the attendance policies for this school district. Each high school has policies in their respective student handbooks related to dropping classes. These written policies include statements such as the following: students are expected to be enrolled in a minimum of 5 major courses during each semester; schedule changes may occur during the first three weeks of each semester without grade penalty; approval for the change must come from the teacher, assistant principal, and/or guidance counselor; and parents will be notified of any dropped classes.

Teacher preference as a reason for changing a schedule may be relational or based on student word of mouth. The number of schedule changes in this study related to teacher preference by students accounted for 6% of the overall requests. Future studies are needed to examine the underlying variables involved in changing a course because of teacher preference. Whether the basis for change is a previous relationship with a teacher, a preference for varying levels of teacher academic accountability, or just social rumor passed among peers, this rationale for student choice has not been explored in the literature.

Failure in a class the previous year is a legitimate motive for requesting a schedule change; however, most class failures are known immediately after the close of an academic term. These changes could be identified and corrected with clerical oversight prior to the new academic year. This may require additional contracted days outside of the regular school year.

Implications for School Counseling

Effective school counseling program management requires facing the challenges inherent in schedule changing as a part of ongoing evaluation and program accountability. The results of this study indicate school counselors need to develop strategies to separate their role in individual planning from clerical tasks of schedule changing. The findings provide concrete data related to one school district’s schedule change requests and the impact on the secondary school counseling program. Other school counseling programs may use the information provided as a starting point for comparison. The following recommendations are offered to school counselors for addressing the issue of secondary schedule changes:

- Consider schedule changing within the context of the individual planning role of school counselors in enrollment management. Enrollment management procedures consist of determining the proper timing and personnel for pre-enrollment. Revisit enrollment before school starts, possibly in June, by distributing student schedules thus allowing time for changing schedules prior to the beginning of the academic year.
- Revisit current policies and procedures related to scheduling, schedule changes, early release, and teacher preferences. Establish and adhere to district policies that clearly articulate procedures for schedule changes.
- List the rationale and needs for conducting early pre-enrollment such as hiring teachers and staff, purchasing needed materials, accommodating student requests for advanced or ancillary classes, and determining budget.
- Identify and meet the needs relevant to each particular grade level related to schedule changes. For example, if your school district allows early release, establish guidelines and procedures for students to identify this request early.
- Concentrate on decreasing cases where students change their minds by dedicating more instructional time to students during the pre-enrollment period. This may require greater collaboration with classroom teachers, but it may equip students with more informed decision making skills.
- Redistribute tasks to paraprofessionals so school counselors can focus on academic individual planning. For example, multi-year academic plans, career portfolios, transitioning issues, collegiate regulations, admissions standards, and graduation requirements may be the focus of the school counselor. Think outside of the box; schedule changing is the clerical side of academic planning.
- Designate job responsibilities for clerical assistants which may include: (a) reviewing and comparing individual schedules to student/counselor created multi-year academic plans and career goals in order to decrease mistakes on pre-enrollment forms, (b) reviewing all failed classes after grades are reported and checking schedules for necessary changes.
- Instead of extending contracts for school counselors the first two weeks after school ends, move this contract to a summer appointment to address student academic plans.
- Explore technology as an alternative to traditional enrollment management techniques.
- Organize a focus group involving students, teachers, administrators, and parents to discuss local data collected on schedule changing.
Many questions need to be answered. The author suggests three questions for further discussion in light of the data collected in this study. First, are traditional pre-enrollment practices currently used in secondary schools successful? Second, what changes are necessary to be proactive in meeting student and school district needs when scheduling student classes? And third, what changes are necessary to decrease the intense time allocations of school counseling professionals during the crucial period of a new academic year? These questions need to be explored on the local level when evaluating district secondary school counseling programs.

References


For reprints and permission please visit http://www.jcrponline.org/