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A Study of the Overlap of School Counselor Identity and Duties

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Professional school counselors (N=92) across grade levels completed the Professional Identity of School Counselors survey (PISC) online to provide their views of professional identity and the concepts of leadership, collaboration, advocacy, multiculturalism, and the general delivery (e.g., counseling, consulting, individual planning, and guidance curriculum), management (i.e., how school counselors organize their time in meeting student needs), and accountability (e.g., collecting, using, and reporting the results of data) tasks of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model. Participants identified advocacy, delivery services, and collaboration as most important to the professional identity of school counselors. None of the top activities were leadership or data collection tasks. Implications and practical suggestions for counselor educators and professional school counselors are provided.

Keywords: ASCA, PISC, school counselor, counselor competencies, counselor identity, student advocacy

Solidifying an agreed upon professional school counselor identity has been an ongoing task by the school counseling profession since its inception. Lambie and Williamson (2004) described the challenges for school counselors as their identity changed from guidance personnel to comprehensive and proactive professional school counselors. As the roles of professional school counselors expanded with additional services and activities beyond those of traditional guidance counseling, a lack of consensus exists on the proper roles and functions of professional school counselors which seem to affect how school counselors identify themselves.

To assist in creating an agreed upon identity among professional school counselors, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) took steps to define the role of the professional school counselor and unify the vision of the profession around making school counselors an integral part of student achievement. A unified identity among professional school counselors not only benefits the profession but also the students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and the school systems and surrounding communities in which school counselors serve. This article describes the results of a survey examining professional school counselor identity related to the duties set forth by ASCA's School Counselor Competencies (2008).

School Counselor Competencies

As the school counseling profession transformed, ASCA

created a description of professional school counselors in an attempt to define the identity and role of professional school counselors. Professional school counselors were defined as certified or licensed professionals who "deliver a comprehensive school counseling program encouraging all students' academic, career, and personal/social development and help all students in maximizing student achievement" (ASCA, 2004, p.2). The ASCA National Model (2005) further clarified the identity of professional school counselors and their role within school systems. The National Model described the duties and responsibilities of professional school counselors as appropriate or inappropriate counseling and/or non-counseling activities for school counselors. Recently, ASCA proposed competencies for school counselors that cut across the four main components of the ASCA National Model and infused the qualities of leadership, advocacy, and collaboration and teaming to produce systemic change (ASCA, 2008). These new competencies provide, for the first time, a comprehensive list of the essential functions of school counselors. What remains less clear is how well these tasks relate to professional school counselor identity.

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Professional School Counselor Identity

Articulating a professional school counselor identity and the roles associated with it can be challenging because of the complexity of how the roles are defined. Borders (2002) suggested the difficulty related to the dilemma of whether the role of the professional school counselor was defined as an educator or a mental health professional. The various functions that professional school counselors from across the nation perform contribute to the difficulty of defining the role and ultimately the identity of school counselors.

School counselor identity develops from a myriad of contributors. Brott and Myers (1999) described the process of professional identity development for school counselors as the result of influences of graduate training, interactions with other counselors and school personnel, self-perceptions, and the interactions between these contributors and others. Lambie and Williamson (2004) added that the beliefs of school principals are vital in defining the roles and duties of school counselors. This may not directly predict school counselor identity, but the act of completing the tasks asked by superiors may have a meaningful influence on professional school counselor identity development as well. The expectation is that the identity of professional school counselors would then inform the duties, role, and functions of the school counseling program.

Professional identity development is a primary goal of school counselor training programs. Part of the training includes practicum and internship experiences where counselors-in-training are placed in the schools and supervised by working school counselors. However, the National Model (ASCA, 2005) is relatively new, and many professional school counselors may not be performing the functions or activities that the model espouses, let alone see these duties and responsibilities as being significant to professional identity development. Studer and Oberman (2006) found practicing professional school counselors who supervised school counseling internship students were teaching their interns to accomplish the activities of the ASCA National Model, regardless of whether the practicing school counselors were trained in the ASCA Model themselves. Dahir, Burnham, and Stone (2009), however, noted significant differences by grade level in the overall implementation of the National Model with counselors focusing their work on different developmental needs depending on the ages of their clients. Little information exists on how practicing school counselors rate these activities related to their professional identity. Examining the current activities of practicing school counselors may provide insight into the relationship between their work activities and those proposed by the ASCA National Model. In their study of school counselor work activities, Foster, Young, and Hermann (2005) identified 14 work activities related to academic development, 20 identified as promoting career development, and 25 related to promoting personal/social development. Although these activities relate to the national standards proposed for increasing student achievement, they were not directly associated with the work

competencies promoted by the ASCA National Model (2005). Walsh, Barrett, and DePaul (2007) surveyed elementary school counselors involved in a community-school partnership and found their duties aligned somewhat with the ASCA National Model's (2005) suggested time commitments with participants devoting slightly more time to planning and system support than the model recommends. Conversely, Dahir et al. (2009) found that counselors in a state that embraced the National Model differed greatly in their attitudes and beliefs about school counseling. Results indicated that middle school counselors most aligned with the National Model and that high school counselors lacked emphasis on personal/social issues. Clearly, differences exist in studies measuring school counselor activities compared to the National Model.

Research on the National Model lacks information about how current school counselors view the roles and activities proposed in the ASCA School Counselor Competencies (2008). The purpose of this study is to determine if there is an overlap between the activities that the ASC National Model advocates and the activities practicing school counselors believe to be important to professional identity development. Specifically, we want to know what functions practicing school counselors deem important in defining a professional school counselor identity.

Method

Participants

School counselors from seven school districts in two Southeastern U.S. states were asked to complete the survey. The districts represent a convenience sample of those near each author's institution. The districts include a combination of rural, urban, and suburban schools. A total of 248 school counselors, representing all of the school counselors from the seven districts, received the email request to complete the online survey. Ninety-two participants completed the survey for a 37% response rate. Most were female (82.4%), and nearly all were Caucasian (91.2%). The remaining counselors identified themselves as African American. The participants were split among work sites with 39% working in an elementary school, 26% in a middle school, and the remaining 35% in a high school. Years of experience varied as well with 20.9% reporting having less than 2 years experience as a school counselor, 30.8% having 3-7 years, 20.9% having 9-12 years, and the remaining 28.6% having at least 13 years experience. Half indicated they were or had been a site supervisor for practicum and internship students, and 80% answered they had graduated from a CACREP-accredited master's program.

Instrumentation

Participants completed the Professional Identity of School Counselors survey (PISC) created for the purposes of this study. The PISC was modeled after the ASCA School

Counselor Competencies (2008) and the ASCA Statement on the Role of Professional School Counselors (2004) which were based on the ASCA National Model (2005). The School Counselor Competencies are a complete list of the skills, information, and attitudes needed to create a comprehensive school counseling program. ASCA views these as necessary components for school counselors to have in order to be effective in their service provision. The Roles statement identifies the areas of leadership, collaboration, and advocacy for all members of the school community. Therefore, it made sense to use these documents as a platform for identifying aspects of school counselor professional identity.

Based on ASCA's stated foci in the School Counselor Competencies (2008), we used the concepts of leadership, collaboration, advocacy, and multiculturalism as the platform for item creation. Then, we individually went through the School Counselor Competencies and identified the items associated with these areas. Next, we separately created prompts for each item, and the lists of prompts were compared for any overlap. Items also were created to cover the direct services or tasks not covered by the four concepts listed above: (a) Delivery System, including counseling, consulting, individual planning, and guidance curriculum; (b) Management, including how school counselors organize their time in meeting student needs; and (c) Accountability, including collecting, using, and reporting the results of data (ASCA, 2005). These additional items were based on tasks considered important within the ASCA National Model. All included items paralleled a skill deemed essential or nonessential by the ASCA School Counselor Competencies resulting in a total of 54 items.

The 54 items represented various tasks and attitudes related to school counseling. All items used responses with a four-point Likert-type scale (1 = not important, 4 = very important) with the prompt for the responder to rate how important he or she felt the task or item was related to the identity of a professional school counselor. Four items asked about leadership (e.g., Being a leader in your school), six items focused on advocacy (e.g., Advocating for the school district), five items explored collaboration (e.g., Collaborating with parents), eight items asked about multicultural issues (e.g., Promoting awareness of discrimination and prejudices), twelve items examined delivery methods including counseling and consultation (e.g., Providing career counseling for students), six items focused on data collection (e.g., Using and Interpreting data), and thirteen items asked about other possible counseling duties (e.g., Coordinating peer helper programs). Ultimately, the PISC measured beliefs about counselor identity related to various aspects of school counseling tasks.

Also included were nine demographic questions and six open-response questions, four of which were only for site supervisors. Due to the low number of site supervisor respondents, the questions specified for site supervisors are not discussed. The coefficient alpha for the Likert-type items was .95, suggesting a high level of internal consistency.

Procedures

Directors of counseling services for seven different school districts in two Southeastern U.S. states were contacted regarding participation in the survey. All agreed to forward an email asking for study participation to all school counselors in their districts. A projected total of 248 school counselors received the email asking them to participate in our online study of professional identity development. A second email reminder was sent to each district 10 to 15 days after the first request. Interested participants went to the online website and gave consent by completing the survey. No incentives were used to recruit participants, and no consequences existed for those choosing not to participate. The district coordinators received a summary of the results for their assistance.

Results

Frequency data and descriptive statistics were compiled from the results of the survey. Due to the moderate response size, no comparison tests were conducted. Means and standard deviations for the most and least important tasks related to school counselor identity along with the theme they represent are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Mean scores closer to four indicate more perceived importance of that item related to professional identity. Several items in each group had the same mean scores which are noted in the tables. Overall, mean scores ranged from 1.16 to 3.91 on the 1 - 4 scale with those items with higher scores indicating the participants believed those items were more important to professional identity than the others.

For the most important tasks (Table 1), advocating for students was the highest rated item related to school counselor professional identity. Of the remaining top five items, three were delivery service tasks including providing individual counseling, crisis intervention, and consulting with school administrators. Collaborating with school administration also was deemed very important. In all, 18 items had mean scores of 3.5 or higher indicating these were the most important areas related to school counselor professional identity. Of these 18, three represented advocacy tasks, four focused on collaboration, four were multicultural items, and seven were direct or delivery services. None of the top items came from the leadership, data collection, or other counseling duties categories.

For the least important tasks (Table 2), 9 of the 10 represented items from the category of other duties of school counselor, and many were tasks that are required of school counselors but not listed by ASCA as an appropriate task for school counselors. The tenth item was related to advocacy. Participants also were asked to list, choosing from the items in the survey, their five current primary activities or duties as a school counselor. In this open response question, participants listed a variety of tasks and responsibilities. These

Table 1. Most Important Tasks of School Counselor Identity

Item	Mean	SD	Theme
Advocating for students	3.91	.27	Advocacy
Providing individual counseling	3.82	.39	Direct Services
Providing crisis intervention	3.78 (tie)	.44	Direct Services
Consulting with school administrators	3.78 (tie)	.42	Direct Services
Collaborating with school administration	3.78 (tie)	.42	Collaboration
Providing personal/social counseling	3.75 (tie)	.44	Direct Services
Consulting with teachers	3.75 (tie)	.44	Direct Services
Promoting acceptance of others	3.74	.51	Multicultural
Promoting equality for all	3.73 (tie)	.49	Multicultural
Collaborating with teachers	3.73 (tie)	.45	Collaboration
Collaborating with school counselors	3.66 (tie)	.58	Collaboration
Consulting with parents	3.66 (tie)	.54	Direct Services
Advocating for counseling profession	3.65	.55	Advocacy
Collaborating with parents	3.62	.59	Collaboration
Promoting awareness of discrimination	3.58	.62	Multicultural
Identifying own values, biases, stereotypes	3.56	.62	Multicultural
Advocating for other school counselors	3.54	.64	Advocacy
Providing academic counseling	3.50	.66	Direct Services

were grouped together by similar items and tallied. For example, providing classroom guidance and guidance lessons were grouped together as classroom guidance. Because the participants were able to name up to five primary duties, the

total number of activities exceeds the total number of respondents.

Individual counseling was the most noted primary duty with 87 responses. Coordination and working with data

Table 2. Ten Least Important Tasks of School Counselor Identity

Item	Mean	SD	Theme
Covering classes when teacher absent	1.16	.36	Other Services
Helping with lunch and bus duty	1.47	.68	Other Services
Disciplining students	1.54	.76	Other Services
Organizing master schedule	1.99	.89	Other Services
Developing behavioral modification systems for teachers	2.29	.76	Other Services
Preparing for end-of-year tests	2.31	.88	Other Services
Being a part of IEP teams	2.54	.76	Other Services
Helping students complete college apps.	2.62	1.08	Other Services
Coordinating peer helper programs	2.68 (tie)	.80	Other Services
Changing policy at district/state level	2.68 (tie)	.80	Advocacy

was second with 52 responses followed by collaboration activities ($n = 52$), consultation ($n = 47$), and classroom guidance ($n = 42$). Other common duties included group counseling ($n = 37$), scheduling ($n = 33$), and non-counseling duties such as bus/hall/lunch duty, attendance, discipline, and crossing guard ($n = 30$). To a lesser degree, the participants also spent their time testing, being a part of Individual Educational Plan (IEP) and student intervention teams, providing academic counseling, working with parents, assisting with graduation preparation, helping with student programs such as peer helpers and assemblies, advocating with their stakeholders, and offering career counseling.

Although these findings are noteworthy, it is important to mention some limitations. One limitation was the size of the sample. Although representative of counselors from two states and comprised of 37% of the total sample population, it is a small representation, so caution must be taken when generalizing the results. Also, the survey itself was developed specifically for this study, therefore its reliability and validity must be further studied. The survey is based on the ASCA literature on school counseling but has not been used and validated in previous studies. The self-report nature of the study can also be seen as a limitation, although we were interested in self-perceptions about counselor identity, and we believed that practicing school counseling professionals would be the best source for that information. Nevertheless, this study does provide important insight and information on counselor identity development and the ASCA-specified counseling duties.

Discussion

The purpose of this project was to explore the activities stated as important by the ASCA National Model (2005) as related to professional identity in school counselors. The PISC survey was created based on the ASCA School Counselor Competencies (2008) and included items on leadership, collaboration, advocacy, multiculturalism, direct services, and other school counseling duties. A discussion of the results is included below.

Results Supporting the Competencies

Of the 18 items rated most important for professional identity, several trends emerged. Overall, 3 of the 18 focused on advocacy-related tasks, including advocating for other school counselors and the school counseling profession. Advocating for students, which is seen as the core of the profession, was rated as the single most important task related to professional identity. Recently, authors (Field & Baker, 2004; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007) identified the need for advocacy behaviors toward both students and the school counseling profession. Indications that advocacy was an important part of school counselor identity among the school counselors in this study, then, is encouraging.

Four of the 18 top tasks related to collaboration. In-

cluded in these are collaboration with teachers, school administration, parents, and other school counselors. ASCA (2004) deemed collaboration and teaming as a primary way to effectively enhance student achievement and the best way to address student needs. The importance of collaboration to the school counselors we surveyed highlights that this belief goes beyond ASCA and has effectively filtered to working school counselors.

Four other top tasks were related to multiculturalism. Since ASCA's position statement on cultural diversity (2009) states that school counselors should advocate for all students no matter their race, ethnicity, or cultural background, these results are once again heartening. Counselors appear to feel empowered to address both their own beliefs and the beliefs of others related to culture.

Additionally, seven top tasks focused on direct services to students. Clearly, being in direct contact with and working to help individual students is vital to school counselor identity. The ASCA National Model (2005) states that counselors should spend 80% of their time in direct services, and these results seem to suggest that working school counselors agree with this allotment.

Finally, most of the lower rated tasks are considered by ASCA to be duties not related to school counseling. Although counselors often engage in activities unrelated to their training, they do not seem to judge these activities as being integral to their school counselor identity. Activities such as covering classes, lunch and bus duty, discipline, scheduling, and testing may be necessary tasks, but school counselors seem not to identify themselves by these tasks. As a result, they may be more likely to stress to counselors-in-training and to administration that these duties fall outside the realm of school counselor identity.

Results of Concern

Based on the results reported here, several concerns arise. First, none of the top items came from the leadership or data collection categories. The four leadership items ranged from school-based to community and beyond and had scores ranging from 2.76 to 3.41, indicating these are somewhat to modestly important to the identity of the school counselors in the study. Being a leader in the school was the most highly ranked of the four suggesting that leadership within their own site may be more salient for school counselors than leadership in the community or profession. These results present an interesting dichotomy when one considers the advocacy ratings. Advocating for the school counseling profession was highly rated, yet leadership in the community and profession were not. Perhaps working counselors focus their efforts on change within their own schools rather than expanding to their school districts, region, or state.

The lack of data collection items in the highly rated group is also a concern. Six items focused on the task of data collection with the items specific to collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data rating lower than 3.0 which indicates minimal importance to school counselor identity. Accountability is one of the four primary functions of school coun-

selors (ASCA, 2005). Perhaps the lower ratings on these items are due to a lack of understanding about data collection and analysis. Or it may be that counselors see the need for accountability but do not identify the tasks involved in this process as integral to their overall school counselor identity. In either case, the lack of representation of this category in the top ratings is worth noting.

A third concern relates to some of the lower rated items. Coordinating peer helper programs, being a part of IEP teams, and developing behavioral modification programs were all among the lowest rated tasks. Coordinating peer helper programs is listed in the ASCA School Counselor Competencies (2008) as a skill needed in effective school counseling, yet the participants in our study do not see this task as integral to school counselor identity. We are uncertain why this is, although it is possible that counselors question whether this time consuming task is truly helpful or worthwhile. The other two lower rated items listed above involve activities where school counselors work with other school personnel. IEP teams and teacher consultation regarding behavioral modification both require counselors to meet regularly with teachers and other school staff to create programs or generate ideas to help students. It is curious, therefore, that counselors who rated collaboration and student advocacy as very important would then rate these tasks as not very important. Possibly, the participants may feel they lack training in how best to collaborate with teachers on addressing student behavior issues. Future research is needed to further clarify these issues.

Implications and Conclusion

The results indicate several important implications for practicing school counselors. For the most part, the school counselors in this study consider the activities promoted by the ASCA National Model (2005) as important to the professional identity of school counselors. Yet, they did not find tasks such as being involved in leadership in their local community and the school counseling profession; collecting, analyzing, and reporting data; working on IEP teams; and developing behavioral modification program as integral parts of their identity of professional school counselors. All of these tasks and activities are important aspects of the role of a professional school counselor according to the National Model. The following practical suggestions may help school counselors highlight the importance of various school counseling tasks in relation to school counselor identity development to their counseling peers, school counseling students, and school administrators. Researchers can emphasize the relationship between these activities and the role of professional school counselors as well.

Peers

School counselors might utilize the results of this study to reevaluate their perceived importance of some counseling tasks. For example, in this study, many practicing school counselors did not identify being a part of IEP teams as im-

portant to their professional identities. School counselors, however, can advocate for students who need IEP's and help those on IEP teams take a strengths-based approach in meeting student needs (Geltner & Leibforth, 2008). If school counselors have not had a course or training in providing services to students who have IEP's, they can seek these opportunities. In doing so, school counselors will be working towards promoting interdisciplinary teams to meet student needs and help students reach educational goals.

School counselors in this study also rated helping teachers develop behavioral modification plans as only somewhat important to the professional identity of school counselors. School counselors serve in a key role on school campuses by helping teachers understand the behavioral management process, develop and implement modification plans that remediate poor behavior in the classroom, and prevent behavior that might interrupt learning (MacGregor, Nelson, & Wesch, 1997).

Practicing school counselors also can team with counselor educators to collect data for research projects targeted to enhance school counseling programs. Kaffenberger and Davis (2009) recently highlighted the lack of practitioner-driven research and the need for more articles focusing on evidence-based programs implemented in today's schools. Conducting research or reporting positive results of innovative programming can increase both comfort with data collection as well as address the need for leadership in the community and beyond.

In addition, school counselors can examine existing data collected by their individual schools and systems to determine ongoing student progress (ASCA, 2005) or create new data based on school counseling interventions. For example, they can use pre-test and post-test methods to compare data collected before and after school counseling interventions to inform others about school counseling program success. This information can be shared with administrative staff and people in the community. Bruce, Getch, and Ziomek-Daigle (2009) examined graduation tests scores by ethnicity and created an intervention designed to narrow the achievement gap they identified. This type of data-driven programming may help school counselors create a means of connecting with the community by sharing the results of studies and providing an opportunity for school counselors to understand the relationship between being a leader in their respective community and professional school counselor identity.

Counseling Students

Site supervisors can play an integral role in helping school counseling students make the connection between school counselor activities and their professional identity development. For example, supervisors might emphasize the importance of being a leader in local communities. They can ask students to develop activities where they would take the lead in addressing how community-based programs meet the needs of school-aged youth and their families. Or, they can accompany students to community school board meetings and encourage them to participate in advocacy efforts ad-

dressing youth-related concerns. Through these types of activities, school counseling students can begin to make connections between advocacy initiatives in the community and the role of school counselors.

Site supervisors also can help students become comfortable with collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting the results of data to support and advance programs in schools. Through modeling formats like Making Data Work (Kaffenberger & Young, 2007), Get a GRIP (Brott, 2006), and S.O.A.R.I.N.G. in School Counseling (Gilchrist, 2006), supervisors can assist students with data collecting and reporting procedures. They also can offer workshops and teach counseling students how to use these documents to increase student development (see Virginia School Counselor Association, 2008).

School Administrators

Advocacy, collaboration, multicultural awareness, and direct service were all considered to be integral parts of school counselors' identity according to the counselors in this study. To help solidify this identity, the benefits of participating in these activities should be communicated to others. One group that needs to understand the identity of professional counselors is school administrators. School counselors could inform principals that they believe these activities to be important parts of their job and that they would like to determine ways to do these duties more often in their work. Increasing buy-in from principals can include developing reports that can be presented in school-wide meetings showing how advocacy activities, collaboration practices, cultural initiatives, individual, group counseling, and classroom guidance relate to student success. School administrators might begin to perceive these activities as important to school counselors' work if counselors are able to show the effectiveness of these activities in meeting school goals.

Study participants reported they often spend time doing activities not related to their school counselor identity (e.g., scheduling, bus duty, and other non-counseling duties). Again, this can be addressed by informing principals about what school counselors actually do and what they want to do. Ongoing communication should include conversations that define duties that are consistent with school counselors' training and the non-counseling duties that they do as part of being a team player in the school environment. Each should be discussed in relation to the role consistent with their professional school counseling identity.

Researchers

In response to the findings of this study, researchers can design studies that further explore the relationship between school counselors' views of school counseling activities in relation to their actual on-the-job duties and their beliefs about how these activities help define the identity of professional school counselors. For example, qualitative studies (e.g., focus groups) may provide a more multifaceted understanding of the topic and help all school counselors identify

with the importance of these tasks in equipping school counselors for their position. In addition, researchers might seek to examine the reasons behind why school counselors do not perceive leadership and data collection as important aspects of the professional school counselor identity. Continued efforts by researchers are encouraged to emphasize the importance of leadership and data collection to the school counselor identity by examining and reporting the benefits of these activities to school programming, student development, and the school counseling profession.

Conclusion

For decades, professional school counselors have participated in school activities they consider a part of their role and those they would consider are not. As the role of school counselors has transformed over the years, the professional identity of school counselors has changed. The results of this study may help school counselors and educators promote activities important to school counselor identity and be aware of activities that need heightened attention. Educators and practicing counselors alike can play an important role in integrating these tasks into the identity of professional school counselors.

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