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An Analysis of School Counselors Time Spent on ASCA Aligned Activities

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Abstract

The high prevalence of youth aging out of the foster care system and the numerous poor outcomes they experience during the transition to emerging adulthood has been well documented. Although addressing the complex needs and concerns of this distinct population can be difficult, mental health counselors maintain the philosophical tenants and training strengths necessary to successfully serve youth aging out of foster care. This article aims to provide counselors with the historical context, developmental framework, and specific challenges needed to better understand this population, as well as suggested counseling implications to address their unique needs by reviewing relevant literature.

Analysis of How School Counselors Spend Their Time

How school counselors spend their time has been an important issue in the field of school counseling for many years (Burnham & Jackson, 2000). Since the inception of the National Model for school counseling programs, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has recommended how school counselors should spend their time to maximize efforts to “address the developmental needs of all students through a school counseling program addressing the academic, career and social/emotional development of all students” (ASCA, 2019c, p. 2). Most recently, ASCA (2019b) recommends that school counselors spend 80% or more of their time performing direct (e.g., instruction, advisement, counseling) and indirect services (e.g., collaboration, consultation, referrals), and the remaining

time on program management, school support service and fair-share responsibilities.

The rationale behind recommendations that school counselors spend the majority of their time on direct and indirect services comes from literature documenting (1) the beneficial impact school counselors have on student outcomes when they provide direct and indirect services, and (2) the positive effects providing these services has on school counselors’ job satisfaction. Research shows that implementing a comprehensive school counseling program (CSCP) aligned with ASCA National Model activities contributes

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to a variety of important student outcomes (Lapan et al., 2019; Wilkerson et al., 2013).

Delivery of direct and indirect services, in particular, is related to increased student achievement, increased student engagement, and decreased discipline problems (Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012); higher participation and graduation rates in career and technical education programs (Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Stevenson, 2012); and better attendance (Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012). The impact of direct and indirect services extends to school counselors, given that school counselors who implement direct and indirect services rather than non-school counseling duties report higher job satisfaction (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Pyne, 2011); while participation in non-school counseling activities predicts burnout (Bardhoshi et al., 2014). Not surprisingly, research assessing school counselors' perception indicates they prefer to spend time on direct and indirect services within a CSCP (Cinotti, 2014; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008).

Despite documented benefits of school counselors spending time on implementing a CSCP aligned with ASCA National Model activities, research indicates that how school counselors spend their time varies (Studer et al., 2011). In Nebraska, school counselors spent about 32% of their time on system support and non-school counseling activities, while school counselors in Connecticut spent between 15% and 50% of their time on non-school counseling activities (Lapan, 2012). Researchers conducting a survey of members of the southern region of ASCA found that 31.5% of school counselors provided small group counseling consistently, 43.1% collaborated with teachers frequently, and 28.8% reported doing non-school counseling and clerical

activities on a consistent basis (Oberman & Struder, 2008). Sink et al. (2008) found that less than half of school counselors studied performed classroom lessons, individual planning, and responsive services within the ASCA recommended time allocation. The lack of consistency regarding how school counselors spend their time, the publication of multiple editions of the ASCA National Model since previous use of time research was conducted, and the lack of research reflecting how school counselors spend their time using a national sample all indicate that current research is needed to understand how school counselors spend their time in relation to updated recommended best practices.

Variables Related to How School Counselors Time is Spent

Multiple variables that impact how school counselors spend their time have been explored in the literature, particularly caseload size, school level and school setting. Typically, school counselors are assigned a student caseload based on grade level (e.g., ninth grade counselor), students' last name, or by career themed pathway (Gysbers & Henderson, 2014). The intent of caseloads is for students to be divided up so that all students have access to an assigned school counselor. On average, school counselor caseloads continue to be nearly twice as much as the ASCA recommendation of one school counselor for every 250 students (ASCA, 2019a). As a result, school counselors with large caseloads have greater difficulty providing direct services and meeting students' needs (McCarthy et al., 2010; Woods & Domina, 2014). In contrast, lower school counselor caseloads are associated with decreased student discipline problems (Lapan, Gysbers et al., 2012; Lapan, Whitcomb et al., 2012); increased GPAs (Goodman-Scott et al.,

2018); higher SAT scores (Parzych et al., 2019); better graduation rates (Lapan, Gysbers et al., 2012; Palmer & Erford, 2012); and increased postsecondary enrollment (College Board, 2012).

The level at which school counselors work (i.e., elementary, middle, high) also impacts how they spend their time. Overall, elementary school counselors are more likely to implement a CSCP aligned with ASCA National Model activities compared to middle or high school counselors (Chandler et al., 2018). Research shows that school counselors at the middle school level are more involved in social-emotional related counseling services and helping students develop skills to improve academically compared to school counselors at the elementary and high school levels (Dahir et al., 2009). And school counselors at the high school level historically place a higher priority on career awareness, academic and career planning, and postsecondary goals (Dahir et al., 2009; Sanders et al., 2017). However, high school counselors spend more time on non-school counseling activities and administrative tasks, and less time working directly with students than they prefer (Nelson et al., 2008; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008).

School setting (i.e., rural, suburban, urban) has also been shown to impact how school counselors spend their time. Research indicates school counselors in rural settings are assigned more non-school counseling activities compared to school counselors in urban settings (Chandler et al., 2018). Other studies indicate school counselors in urban settings spend more time counseling students compared to school counselors in rural and suburban settings (Nelson et al., 2008).

Purpose of the Current Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how school counselors spend their time in relation to ASCA National Model aligned activities, as measured by the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (SCPIS; Clemens et al., 2010). Overall, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent do school counselors spend their time on activities aligned with the ASCA National Model for school counseling programs?
2. How does the number of years licensed/certified, caseload size, school size, percent of students eligible for free/reduced lunch, racial diversity of school, school level, and school setting relate to time spent on ASCA aligned activities?

Method

Participants

At the time of survey distribution, there were 30,380 members of ASCA, 15,160 of which were professional members representing school counselors at K-12 levels. All ASCA professional members actively working in elementary, middle, or high school settings were invited to participate in the survey. A total of 4,598 K-12 school counselors responded to the survey, resulting in a response rate of 30%. In terms of respondent demographic characteristics, 82% identified as Caucasian, 87% identified as female, and 74% reported being between 31 and 60 years of age. In the sample, 58% of school counselors had between one and eight years of experience, 39% worked in schools with 500 to 1,000 students and 54% had student caseloads between 251 and 500 students. Respondents

most frequently worked in racially or ethnically diverse schools (54%) in suburban settings (44%). About half of the schools had less than 50% of the students eligible for free and reduced lunch, and half of the schools had more than 50% of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. All grade levels were represented in the sample; however, the highest number of respondents were from the high school level (37%). Detailed responses for the demographic variables are reported in Table 1.

Sampling Procedures

Prior to conducting the research, permission from the institutional review board was received. First, SurveyShare was used to distribute an initial email to all ASCA members who were K-12th grade school counselors explaining the purpose of the study and providing a link to the informed consent and survey. To increase survey participation, participants had the opportunity to provide an email address (dissociated from individual participant responses) to be entered into a random drawing (Dillman et al., 2014). One week after the initial email was sent, a follow up email with the link to the online survey was sent to all participants who did not complete the survey following the initial email. After three weeks, the link to the online survey was closed.

School Counseling Program Implementation Survey

The SCPIS was developed by Eisner and Carey (2005) and adapted by Clemens et al. (2010) to assess the extent to which school counselors implement components of the ASCA National Model. The SCPIS contains 17 self-report items using a four-point Likert scale. Clemens et al. (2010)

conducted an exploratory factor analysis using the principal axis factor method and oblique rotation with a sample of 341 school counselors. As a result, items on the SCPIS are divided into three subscales including Programmatic Orientation (seven items; Cronbach's alpha .79), Use of Computer Software and Data (three items; Cronbach's alpha .78) and School Counseling Services (seven items; Cronbach's alpha .81). Each SCPIS item has four possible responses indicating the extent to which school counselors implement components of the ASCA National Model including 1 for *Not Present*, 2 for *Development in Progress*, 3 for *Partly Implemented*, and 4 for *Fully Implemented*. The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which school counselors spend their time on activities (i.e., frequency) aligned with the ASCA National Model, therefore, the item responses were adapted with permission to 1 for *I never do this*, 2 for *I rarely do this*, 3 for *I occasionally do this*, and 4 for *I frequently do this*.

Design, Data Screening, and Analysis

A non-experimental survey research design was used to address the research questions. Prior to statistical analyses, data were screened for missing data, multivariate outliers, and the assumptions for multivariate regression. Less than 5% of the data for any variable were missing and Little's MCAR test (1.83, $p = .40$) suggested that the missing values could be treated as missing completely at random. While there were some outliers, results of a sensitivity analysis indicated that none of the outliers were overly influential and all responses were included in the data analyses. The final number of participants for this study was 4,598. Evaluation of the linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity suggested that all the

assumptions were tenable. The linear regression residuals were normally distributed suggesting model inferences are stable.

To address the first research question, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize how school counselors spent their time in relation to the outcome variable time spent on ASCA aligned activities. In addition, a multivariate regression was conducted to address the second research question. The three subscales of the SCPIS were the outcome variables, (a) Programmatic Orientation, (b) Use of Computer Software and Data, and (c) School Counseling Services. The predictor variables were (a) number of years licensed/certified as school counselor (1-3, 4-8, 9-14, 15-20, 21+), (b) student caseload size (250 or less, 251-500, 501-1000, 1000+), (c) school size (<500, 500-1000, 1000+), (d) student socioeconomic status (free/reduced lunch <25%, 25-50%, 51-75%, 75%+), (e) student racial diversity (0 = no, 1 = yes), (f) school level (elementary, middle, high, or other configuration), and (g) school setting (rural, suburban, or urban). Categorical predictor variables were dummy coded. For school level, elementary school was the reference group and for school setting, suburban was the reference group.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to examine the first research question focused on the extent to which school counselors spend their time on activities aligned with the ASCA National Model. Table 2 summarizes the means, standard deviations, and medians for the subscales on the SCPIS. Means and medians for all

subscales were above 3.0, suggesting that on average, respondents *occasionally* spent time on the aligned activities. Programmatic Orientation had the lowest mean and median ($M = 3.01$ and $Mdn = 3.17$) followed by School Counseling Services ($M = 3.37$ and $Mdn = 3.43$) then Software and Data ($M = 3.43$ and $Mdn = 3.67$). The percentage of respondents who had a rating at or below 3.0 (*occasionally to never* doing the activities) was 49.8% for Programmatic Orientation, 28.5% for Software and Data, and 22.6% for School Counseling Services. Four activities had mean values less than 3.0 with over 70% of the respondents reporting they *occasionally, rarely, or never* do the activities. The activities were (a) write a mission statement and use it as a foundation, (b) complete needs assessments regularly and use to guide program planning, (c) analyze student data by ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic level to identify interventions to close achievement gaps, and (d) have my priorities represented on curriculum and education committees.

Multivariate Regression Analysis

A multivariate regression analysis was computed to answer the second research question focused on how the number of years as licensed/certified school counselor, school size, caseload size, school level, school setting, socioeconomic status of students, and racial diversity of school relate to time spent on ASCA aligned activities. Results of the multivariate regression analysis indicated there was a significant relationship with the ASCA aligned activities and the predictor variables (Wilk's lambda = .89, $F = 17.37$, $df = 30, 12927$, $p < .001$), with an R^2 of .11 indicating that 11% of the variance in the outcome variables was accounted for by the predictor variables.

Standardized and unstandardized regression coefficients for predictor variables are reported in Table 3. For Programmatic Orientation, small positive relationships were found for the number of years licensed/certified as a school counselor, school size, student socioeconomic status, and student racial diversity (0 = no diversity and 1 = diverse student population). Small negative relationships were detected for student caseload size and school level (elementary schools versus secondary and other configurations). School setting had no relationship with Programmatic Orientation. For Use of Computer Software and Data, small positive relationships were found for school size, student socioeconomic status, and school level (middle and high). All other predictor variables were not statistically significant. For School Counseling Services, small positive relationships were found for the number of years licensed/certified as a school counselor and student racial diversity. Small negative relationships were found for student caseload size, student socioeconomic status, and school level.

Discussion

Previous research indicates that the implementation of a CSCP that is aligned with ASCA National Model activities contributes to successful student outcomes (Wilkerson et al., 2013). Specifically, direct and indirect services (e.g., instruction, advisement, counseling) have been shown to contribute to increased student achievement (Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012), and improved attendance (Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012). Given these positive outcomes, the present study focused on examining the extent to which school counselors spend their time on activities that are aligned with the ASCA National Model. Specifically, we examined how certain

demographic variables related to the outcome variables. There were interesting findings related to how time was spent on specific ASCA aligned activities. Results also indicated there were small but statistically significant relationships between ASCA aligned activities and predictor variables.

When examining descriptive statistics, findings indicate that school counselors spent the least amount of time on Programmatic Orientation. According to Clemens et al. (2010), Programmatic Orientation measures the extent to which school counselors implement a proactive and organized school counseling program rather than a set of separate reactive services. This finding is noteworthy given previous research has indicated that school counselors reported preferring to spend time implementing a CSCP aligned with the ASCA National Model (Cinotti, 2014; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). Conversely, school counselors reported spending more time on Software and Data. This finding is promising as the ASCA National Model (2019b) emphasizes the importance of data-informed decision-making and provides guidance to school counselors for how to use data. In addition, data can be a powerful tool to address disproportionality, create culturally sustaining systems and practices that guide student supports, and create systemic change (Goodman-Scott et al., 2020).

Related to specific activities, four had mean values less than 3.0 with over 70% of the respondents reporting they *occasionally, rarely, or never* do the activities. The first activity that school counselors were least likely to engage in is writing a mission statement and using it as a foundation for their program. This finding is disconcerting given the ASCA (2016)

Ethical Code B.1.e. delineates that school counselors inform parents of the mission of the school counseling program. Overall, the program mission statement should (1) describe the school counseling program's focus and purpose, (2) align with the school's mission statement and link to district and state mission statements, (3) emphasize equity, access and success for all students, and (4) indicate long range results desired for all students (ASCA, 2019). To develop a mission statement, school counseling programs are encouraged to first make a list of words and phrases that describe appropriate school counselor roles (e.g., leadership, collaboration, advocacy) and what the school counseling program does to support students in reaching the best possible outcomes (ASCA, 2019c). Second, it is important to identify key words and phrases from school, district mission statements which can be incorporated into and aligned with the school counseling program mission statement (ASCA, 2019c). Third, an emphasis should be put on equity, access and success for all students; and how the school counseling program works toward equity and justice should be described (ASCA, 2019c). These steps can then be combined into a powerful and concise mission statement that drives school counseling program implementation and how school counselors spend their time.

The second activity school counselors were least likely to engage in is completing needs assessments regularly and using results to guide program planning. Although school counselors in this study reported using Software and Data frequently, this finding is not surprising as research suggests there is a lack of professional development opportunities that support school counselors in the effective use of data (Young & Kaffenberger, 2011).

A similar finding was that school counselors reported spending the least amount of time disaggregating student data to identify interventions to close achievement gaps. This finding is important given researchers call for school counselors to deliver culturally sustaining direct and indirect services and, in turn, evaluate the effectiveness of those services (Goodman-Scott et al., 2020; Grothaus et al., 2020; Schellenberg & Grothaus, 2011). Furthermore, studies have indicated that school counselors' use of data positively impacts student performance and aids in closing achievement gaps (Ware & Galassi, 2006).

Results of the multivariate regression analysis indicated that number of years licensed/certified, school size, caseload size, school level, school setting, socioeconomic status of students, and racial diversity of school had a small but statistically significant relations to the linear combination of outcome variables. Specifically, related to Programmatic Orientation, small positive relationships were found for the number of years licensed/certified as a school counselor, school size, student socioeconomic status, and student racial diversity. These findings indicate that despite school size or school diversity, school counselors who have experience are more likely to engage in implementing ASCA National Model aligned activities.

It is not surprising that a positive relationship, though small, was found for Computer Software and Data and school level. The literature indicates middle school counselors are more involved in helping students develop skills to improve academically; efforts that require the use of data related to grades and homework completion (Dahir et al., 2009). In addition,

high school counselors spend more time on tasks such as scheduling and advising; requiring use of computer software and student information systems (Nelson et al., 2008; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008).

Finally, for School Counseling Services, small positive relationships were found for the number of years licensed/certified as a school counselor and student racial diversity. These findings are particularly promising given that more frequent direct and indirect services in racially diverse schools means students in these schools are more likely to benefit from these services in important ways (Bruce et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2013; Leon et al., 2011). Small negative relationships were found for student caseload size, student socioeconomic status, and school level. These findings are not surprising given large caseloads are associated with challenges to providing direct school counseling services (McCarthy et al., 2010; Woods & Domina, 2014). In terms of socioeconomic status, previous research has also indicated that economically disadvantaged students have less access to educational resources (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Basque & Bouchamma, 2016; Bellibas, 2016; Pribesh et al., 2011).

This study supports previous research given that school counselors who had higher populations of students with low socioeconomic status reported engaging in School Counseling Services less frequently. Lastly, small negative relationships were found between School Counseling Services and school level. This result supports previous research indicating that elementary school counselors are more likely to implement a CSCP aligned to the ASCA National Model (Chandler et al., 2018).

Implications

The results of this study indicate that school counselors at least occasionally engage in ASCA National Model aligned activities. This is encouraging given the professions continued emphasis on aligning CSCPs with the ASCA National Model and spending the majority of time (i.e., 80%) on recommended direct and indirect school counseling activities (ASCA, 2019c; Cinotti, 2014). However, the majority of school counselors in this study reported spending little time on important activities such as establishing program foundations (e.g., mission statement) and collecting, disaggregating and analyzing data to make program decisions and meet the needs of underserved student populations. In addition, our analysis confirmed that key variables impact how school counselors spend their time. Taken together, these results highlight that school counselors across a variety of settings spend their time differently, and face similar challenges related to time allocation. Therefore, intentional efforts at the state, district and school level are needed so that school counselors' time is spent on ASCA aligned activities, particularly direct and indirect services, and students get access to a CSCP. For example, at the state level, school counselor associations and state departments of education can collaborate to provide professional development focused on the appropriate role of school counselors and best practice recommendations about how school counselors should spend their time. At the district level, professional learning communities can provide mentorship and strategies for school counselors to engage in ASCA aligned activities, particularly direct and indirect services such as instruction, advisement, and individual counseling. School counselors can use district and school level data to determine the needs of

students and allocate their time and activities accordingly. School counselors can also engage in consultation with district and school administrators to navigate barriers that may impede specific school counseling activities. Finally, at the school level, school counselors can utilize use of time logs to determine how and where time is being spent. The data can be presented to school administrators to advocate if necessary.

Limitations

Although this study provides updated and useful information about how school counselors spend their time, limitations of this study are important to consider. The results of this study are based on self-reported survey responses, therefore, school counselors responding to the survey may have responded in socially desirable ways (Heppner et al., 1999). Another limitation of this study is that school counselors who responded to the survey were members of ASCA, therefore, results are not generalizable to school counselors who are not members of ASCA. There was a lack of racial and gender diversity among participants for this study given that the majority of participants identified as Caucasian and female. Finally, the relationships between study variables, which we base our recommendations on, were statistically significant but relatively weak.

Conclusion

The extent to which school counselors spend their time on ASCA National Model aligned activities continues to be an important issue in the field of school counseling (ASCA, 2019c; Burnham & Jackson, 2000). Measuring how time is spent in relation to professional recommendations, identifying areas in need of improvement, and implementing

strategies to effectively and efficiently use time are ways to improve how school counselors time is spent. This study adds an updated account of how a large national sample of school counselors spend their time in relation to recommended best practices. Results of this study provide a snapshot of the current state of the profession and can inform state, district and school level efforts to ensure school counselors spend time on practices that have been documented to contribute to important student outcomes (Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012; Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Stevenson, 2012; Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012; Wilkerson et al., 2013).

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondent's and Respondent's Schools

<u>Predictor Variables</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Years Licensed	1-3	1547	33.6
	4-8	1170	25.5
	9-14	892	19.4
	15-20	591	12.9
	>21	398	8.7
School Size	<500	1516	33.0
	500-1000	1818	39.5
	>1000	1264	27.5
Caseload	<250	1071	23.3
	251-500	2478	53.9
	501-1000	973	21.2
	>1000	77	1.7
Percent FRL	<25%	1029	22.4
	25-50%	1322	28.8
	51-75%	1099	23.9
	>75%	1148	25.0
Diversity	No	2119	46.1
	Yes	2479	53.9
School Level		4598	
	Elementary	1378	30.0
	Middle	999	21.7
	High	1719	37.4
School Location	K-8	233	5.1
	Rural	1501	32.6
	Suburban	2044	44.5
	Urban	1053	22.9

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for the Three Subscales of the School Counseling Program Implementation Survey (N = 4,598)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Median</i>
SCPIS			
Programmatic Orientation (PO)	3.01	.61	3.17
Software and Data (CS)	3.43	.65	3.67
School Counseling Services (SER)	3.37	.45	3.43

Note. SCPIS = School Counseling Program Implementation Survey.