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Enhancing the Administrator-School Counselor Relationship

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Winona State University

College of Education

Counselor Education Department

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CAPSTONE PROJECT

Enhancing the Administrator-School Counselor Relationship

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Enhancing the Administrator-School Counselor Relationship

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Abstract

This paper explores several published articles reporting on the relationship between administration and school counselors in the United States. The paper provides evidence of past and current administration perceptions of the school counseling position and explains how these perceptions have affected the school counseling profession, position, and roles within the school system. The paper also suggests steps that school counselors should take to promote an environment of understanding and respect for their new vision role within the school, specifically the use of the model and standards set by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). In addition, this paper emphasizes the importance of the relationship between administration and school counselors while also examining research-based suggestions and guidelines for the two parties to follow that develop and enhance this relationship.

Keywords: ASCA

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Introduction

The relationship between administration and school counselor is critical because of administration's role as leader within the building. After all, the administrator is the individual who determines the effectiveness of the school-counseling program. Collaboration between administration and school counselors is essential for the development of school counseling guidance programs that are effective and accountable to reaching the academic goals at the district, state, and national level (Finkelstein, 2009; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). The development of this relationship requires that administration and school counselors have a shared understanding of the appropriate roles and activities that the counselor should perform. Yet, administrators often do not fully understand the counselor's role or potential impact as a leader within the educational system.

History has indicated a pattern of considerable confusion and variance surrounding the school counseling position. This ambiguity has negatively impacted the relationship between administrator and school counselor. The majority of research demonstrates a discrepancy between professional school counselors' roles according to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and administrations' perceptions and endorsement of appropriate school counselor activities (Finkelstein, 2009). Despite the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) attempts to clarify the school counselor's role, considerable debate remains amongst professionals. Such discrepancy and confusion surrounding the position have led to a broad, vaguely defined job description for school counselors. Thus, resulting in a pattern of devaluing the position and administration assigning inappropriate activities to school counselors. Unfortunately, these differences of opinion, mostly regarding appropriate time spent on tasks and

the overall role of the counselor have critical implications for the administrator-counselor relationship and, most importantly, for student educational outcomes (Dodson, 2009).

Review of the Literature

The School Counselor Role

The school reform agenda of the 1990s as well as other earlier school reform initiatives were passed to enhance the quality of education in the United States so that our country and our students would succeed in a competitive, growing global market (Dahir, 2001). Each reform emphasized the nation's dire economic future without a total restructuring of the educational system. These initiatives opened the eyes of the American School Counselor Association as none of the education reform agendas mentioned school counseling as important in improving student success in school.

Researchers believed that the small size of the school counseling community, the lack of understanding of the roles of school counselors, and lack of research done by school counselors contributed to the omission of school counseling from these reforms. The awareness of this omission prompted ASCA to advocate for its school counseling programs and to develop "think tank" groups of counseling trailblazers who worked to create a clear role of the school counselor within the educational system. Through this effort, the following definition of school counseling was embraced by ASCA (1997) (Dahir, 2001):

Counseling is a process of helping people by assisting them in making decisions and changing behavior. School counselors work with all students, school staff, families, and members of the community as an integral part of the education program. School counseling programs promote school success through a focus on academic achievement prevention and intervention activities, advocacy, and social-emotional and career development. (p. 322)

Even through all of this work, the contribution of school counseling programs to the educational system was still ignored. ASCA became concerned with the importance on standards and the potential future nonexistence of school counseling programs and its effectiveness in the educational system (Dahir, 2001). The ASCA Governing Board developed the National Standards for School Counseling programs in July of 1994. These standards were important to set so that counselors, administrators, and the community had an understanding of the role of a school counselor and of the school counseling program. ASCA then defined what students should know and accomplish as a result of participating in a school counseling program. These measureable standards were labeled the ASCA National Standards for Students. The standards are ASCA's vision in achieving educational expectations and challenges of tomorrow's world (Dahir, 2001).

In recent years, the ASCA leadership has recognized the need for a more unified vision of the school counseling profession (ASCA, 2005; Dahir, 2001). ASCA supports school counselors' efforts to help students focus on academic, personal/social and career development so they achieve success in school and are prepared to lead fulfilling lives as responsible members of society. Presently, professional school counselors use and uphold the third edition of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model and standards set through this model. Further, the School Counselor Competencies are used in a continued effort for a unified vision by outlining the knowledge, attitudes and skills that ensure school counselors are equipped to meet the demands of our profession and the needs of our Pre-K-12 students. As a result, school counselors currently provide services to students, parents, school staff and the community through delivery of school guidance curriculum to students, individual student planning, providing responsive services to students in a confidential and ethical manner, and supporting the

total school counseling program and the system of school counseling (M. Fawcett, personal communication, April 24, 2014). The current definition of the role of the school counselor from the Education Trust (2009) is:

A profession that focuses on the relations and interactions between students and their school environment in order to reduce the effects of environmental and institutional barriers that impede student academic success. School counselors foster educational equity, access, and academic success in a rigorous curriculum to ensure that all students graduate from high school ready to succeed in college and careers.

Administrator Perceptions of the School Counselor Position

School administration often determines what tasks are given priority by counselors, so their perceptions of the counselor's role can have a strong impact on the tasks that counselors are actually assigned. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) published national standards (1997) and the ASCA National Model (2003), emphasizing the important role that school counselors have in helping all students have access to educational and career planning (Amatea & Clark, 2005). However, administration's perceptions may not always be congruent with the ASCA role standards that school counselors are upheld to (Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005). Role confusion has been a problem within the school counseling profession since its inception (Amatea & Clark, 2005). Differences between administration and school counselors regarding the appropriate roles and duties of school counselors contribute to this confusion (Finkelstein, 2009).

Many school administrators have limited opportunities to learn about the way in which the counselor's role has been re-conceptualized in recent years by the American School Counselor Association (Dodson, 2009). This is a result of their differing philosophies, but also, the result of a lack of coordination between administration and school counseling graduate training programs (Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, Q, 2009; Gysbers, 2001). For example, a survey investigation of perceptions of the school counselor's role found that pre-professional school counselor education students viewed school counseling as a "professional role with specific duties and responsibilities," while pre-professional administrator students viewed counselors as "staff members completing duties at the request of the administration" (Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, Q, 2009). One can see how such confusion over the counselor's role might easily ensue and why the number of unnecessary tasks and responsibilities expected of the school counselor are so extraordinary. Because school counselors and school administrators are trained separately and have few opportunities to learn about the different roles, responsibilities, and perspectives of each other, it is important to engage in collaborative work that addresses student development learning goals (Dodson, 2009).

It may not always be administration's lack of understanding of counselor roles that leads to the poor allocation of school counselor's time. Kirchner and Setchfield (2005) suggest the demands of the work settings impinge on both roles. The number of mandates and school reform initiatives that focus on accountability, student achievement, and equity has also impacted the relationship between administration and counselor as well (Finkelstein, 2009; Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, Q, 2009). Administration face declining budgets, increasing instructional and managerial regulations, and complex, time-consuming legal issues, all while balancing daily emergencies (Amatea & Clark, 2005). The added pressures of the job force school leaders to delegate

responsibilities to other staff members including professional school counselors. Administration oftentimes pushes administrative duties onto counselors when they become overwhelmed, giving them responsibilities that are inconsistent with their training and labeled inappropriate by ASCA (Gysbers, 2001).

In their study, Leuwerke, Walker, and Qi Shi (2009) examined 337 Iowa administrators' exposure to the ASCA National Model to explore the impact of different information sets on their perceptions of school counselors. They hypothesized that in general, administrators have not been extensively exposed to the ASCA National Model (2005), but that those who were provided a brief information session about the model, school counseling outcome research, or both information sets would support counselor time allocations more consistent with the ASCA National Model (2005) compared to those not exposed to a brief information session. Further, those exposed would rate appropriate school counselor activities as more important and inappropriate tasks less important compared to administrators not exposed to a brief information session.

The results found that over half of all participants reported no exposure to the ASCA National Model (2005); strongly supporting the researchers' hypothesis that administrations have not been exposed to the model. The remaining participants reported very little exposure (20%), some exposure (24%), and a great deal of exposure (3%), and extensive exposure (.6%) to the ASCA National Model. Seventy-three administrators reported discussing the model with a professional school counselor, while 43 respondents learned of the model at a conference or meeting, 18 learned through continuing education, and 6 reported exposure through pre-service training (Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, Q, 2009). Though administration exposure to the ASCA

National Model was found to be quite limited in this study, the main mechanism of exposure when participants were exposed to the model was through personal contact with a school counselor.

Effects of Administrator Perceptions on the School Counselor Position

Professional school counselors find their jobs difficult when there is a lack of support from their administration (Amatea & Clark, 2005). Further, when the school counselor is called upon to assume duties that are inappropriate and inconsistent with the mission of the counseling program, the program and the counselor are devalued (Gysbers, 2001; Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, Q, 2009).

As a result, school counselors have been asked to rethink their roles (Amatea & Clark, 2005). Many professionals have encouraged school counselors to see themselves as educational leaders, student advocates, and social change agents (American School Counselor Association, 2005) in addition to providing direct guidance and counseling services to students. For example, some authors (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Gysbers, 2000) have described school counselors as leaders and “instrumental in the integration of community-wide mental health services.” Other authors have suggested that the school counselor play a powerful role in (a) promoting student advocacy, (b) developing higher educational and career aspirations in students, (c) eliminating educational practices that maintain inequities among disadvantaged student groups and hinder opportunities, and (d) using data to identify educational practices that may help or obstruct student progress (Stone & Clark, 2001). Lastly, Light (2005) challenges school counselors and counselor educators to take a more proactive role in preparing themselves to assume leadership

roles in the school and to reshape the role expectations that administration holds regarding their position.

These advances are encouraging and empower professional school counselors to reorganize or develop a comprehensive, developmental school-counseling program and to use data to demonstrate positive student outcomes (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, Q, 2009). However, these issues will not cease to exist until school counselors advocate and educate administrators regarding the new role vision and expectations of school counselors outlined in the ASCA National Model. According to Dodson (2009), if school counselors advocate for the ASCA roles, it will be “difficult to replace them in the educational setting.”

School Counselors and Administrators as Advocates for the New Vision Role

School administrators and school counselors have something in common: they both want to see students succeed (Finkelstein, 2009). Although their individual roles and responsibilities are quite different, both face difficulties and challenges in their efforts to improve student outcomes (Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, Q, 2009). Schools are expected to compensate for the shifts in society that affect children and their families in addition to providing direct guidance and counseling services to students (Amatea & Clark, 2005). When administrators and counselors can effectively work together, their efforts stand a far better chance of making a difference and helping these students to succeed (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Gysbers, 2001).

School counselors must be aware of the new vision roll of the school counselor and be prepared to advocate for appropriate activities for their position as school counselors. To evaluate the appropriateness of assigned activities, school counselors must approve given activities that align with the American School Counselor Association National Model. School counselors are the greatest advocates for their position. The American School Counselor

Association suggests that counselors establish their identity immediately and clearly articulate and define the role that school counseling programs play in promoting student achievement and educational success today (Dahir, 2001).

They can no longer rely on their reputations and good intentions as helpers within the educational setting (Dahir, 2001). They must be accountable for their efforts by conducting research and evaluating their school counseling programs in order to prove validity and effectiveness (ASCA, 2005). In her research, Dahir (2001) stresses that accountability can dramatically change the value and perception of school counseling in today's educational reform agendas. Further, school counselors are also challenged to document effectiveness and promote school counseling's contributions to the educational agenda so that school counseling programs are mentioned and valued within the educational system.

School counselors cannot advocate for the importance of their role in the educational system alone. School counselors need the support of administration to improve guidance and school counseling services in schools. Administrators are leaders in education and it is crucial that they understand how to assist counselors in creating the best school counseling programs possible (Light, 2005). Administration's understanding and appreciation of the counselor's roles and responsibilities can lead to more effective practices for both administration and school counselor (Finkelstein, 2009). Therefore, school counselors must be willing to educate and discuss the importance of ASCA's vision and its new role with administration. Until school counselors communicate their role and create a comprehensive awareness of their position within the educational system, school counseling will be overlooked and considered an unimportant

resource in education. It is truly in the hands of school counselors to advocate for the success and preservation of the system of school counseling.

School counselors and school administrators are trained separately and have few opportunities to learn about the different roles, responsibilities, and perspectives of one another. Therefore, it is important that graduate educational programs create opportunities for both pre-professional administration and school counselor students so that they may engage in communication and collaborative work in order to bridge the gap of misunderstanding. Thus, creating a team of professionals who are competent, assertive, and use their roles to benefit students and increase student success outcomes.

The use of the ASCA National Model can facilitate the conversation that school counselors must have with their administration. Departments that adhere to the ASCA Model are able to answer questions and have clear role expectations (Dodson, 2009). If administrators have an accurate perception of the school counselor role, administrators and the school counseling department can move in a new direction with regard to the new vision role within the ASCA National Model (Amatea & Clark, 2005). However, Dodson (2009) warns that counseling departments that are not using it may continue to struggle with an accurate role description for the school counselor and the counseling department. This further creates an atmosphere where the school counselors will continue to be devalued and undertake inappropriate activities.

Although administrator participants in Leuwerke, Walker, and Shi's (2009) study reported relatively little exposure to the ASCA National Model (2005), brief exposure to information about school counseling found to impact several aspects of administrators' perceptions of school counseling. For example, the exposure to different types of information

about school counseling was found to impact administrations' recommendations of how counselors should spend their time. Therefore, professional school counselors should develop routine, regular communication with administration using multiple resources to better inform administrators about the appropriate roles and activities for counselors (Finkelstein, 2009). One of the greatest recommendations for school counselors interested in expanding this communication with their administrators is to follow the ASCA National Model (2005). This resource will help to inform individuals regarding the appropriate roles and responsibilities that counselors are trained for and prepared to perform as they have been shown to be the greatest resource for informing administration about their role using the ASCA National Model (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). Further, Finkelstein's (2009) study examined the administrator-counselor relationship and identified the following outcomes as producing positive reactions from administration (Finkelstein, 2009).

- A mutual understanding of the definition of the counselor's role
- A foundation of trust and communication methods
- Counselors' ability to solve problems, advocate on behalf of all students, and effect change within the school.
- Actions counselors make that highlight their impact on student outcomes.
- Effort to use the ASCA National Model to communicate.
- Active effort to maintain the relationship with the administration.

The trend in these outcomes is a foundation of understanding, a respectful working relationship, and the school counselor's use of research, data, and of course, the ASCA National Model to properly advocate and work with students successfully. According to another survey

endorsed by both administration and counselors, Kirchner and Setchfield (2005) revealed the 10 most important characteristics of an effective relationship agreed upon by their administrator and school counselor participants:

1. Open communication that provides multiple opportunities for input to decision making.
2. Opportunities to share ideas on teaching, learning, and school wide initiatives.
3. Sharing of information about needs within the school and the community.
4. School counselor participation on school leadership teams.
5. Joint responsibility in the development of goals and metrics that indicate success.
6. Mutual trust between the administration and school counselors.
7. Shared vision of what is meant by student success.
8. Mutual respect between the administration and school counselors.
9. Shared decision making on initiatives that impact student success.
10. A collective commitment to equity and opportunity.

As one can see through Finkelstein (2009) and Kirchner and Setchfield's (2005) studies, the relationship between administration and school counselor is meaningful to both parties. Themes from both studies focus on open communication, shared visions, mutual respect and trust. However, the noticeable theme from the second survey established more of a shared leadership role within the school. Both administrator and school counselor survey participants agreed upon these important characteristics. The roles of administrators and counselors should build upon each other as natural partners based on knowledge and trust for the job that each professional performs, complementing one another in the service of students and ultimately, increasing student achievement (Dodson, 2009).

Counselors and administrators would be well served by improving their relationship (Dahir, 2001; Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, Q, 2009). Both parties must seek to develop and maintain a positive and trusting relationship built upon open dialogue. When administrators are informed of the school counseling position and the standards they must uphold, professional school counselors feel adequately supported. Further, when the school counselor position is understood and they are assigned appropriate duties, they report increased career satisfaction, commitment, and are able to more effectively and assuredly implement programs within their schools (Dodson, 2009).

Discussion

Despite the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) attempts to clarify the school counselor's role, considerable debate surrounding the school counselor position remains. These differing opinions have led to a broad, vaguely defined job description for school counselors that is often devalued and many times, ignored in school reform agendas. This paper discusses a hope for the future of the school counseling profession and the important relationship between school counselors and administration. As more counselors work from the ASCA National Model (2005), administrators may start to understand the role of the school counselor and how counselors should be allocating their time during the school day.

School administrators play a key role in the success of their school counselors and of the counseling program. Administration usually selects, hires and dismisses school counselors. They also direct on-the-job training, supervise, and establish school counselor roles and functions. Their perceptions of school counselor roles and functions may significantly influence administrator expectations, decisions, and their ability to support their school counseling programs. Administrators' support of school counselors' roles are fundamental and will set school counselors up for success in reaching their new vision roles. Further, collaboration between administration and school counselors is essential for the development of guidance programs that are effective and accountable to reaching the academic goals at the district, state, and national levels.

Professional school counselors will continue to be the strongest advocates for their professions and for the academic, social, and career developmental needs of their students. School counselors need to be aware of their administrators' knowledge and perceptions of their position and be willing to provide him or her with brief and non-dynamic information about the

school counseling position (Dodson, 2009). This information may aide counselors in advocating for their profession, impact administrations' view and opinion of how counselors should allocate their time and helps to decrease the number of inappropriate tasks assigned to school counselors. However, failing to understand administrators' perceptions and have this conversation could cause a counselor to perform unethically, be assigned inappropriate activities, experience a decrease in pay or even lose his or her position.

Overall, consistent respectful communication focusing on the ASCA National Model (2005) and understanding the perceptions that administrators hold will enhance the counselor's relationship with his or her administration considerably. Thus, creating an environment in which school counselors are valued, understood, and held to the standards set by the American School Counseling Association.

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