

## The School Counselor Perspective: Preparing Students to be College and Career Ready within a Comprehensive School Counseling Program

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### Abstract

The preparation of students to be college and career ready is a main goal for many school counselors, teachers, administrators, and parents. In the present-grounded theory study, five school counselors were interviewed to discover their experiences with counseling in a school that is implementing a comprehensive developmental school counseling program and that also promotes 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, with an emphasis on college and career readiness. The findings are explained through the conditional/ consequential matrix, and reveal that counselors have diverse views on their own preparation and perceptions of the school counselor role, common core, data-driven assessments, as well as career and technical education, which are all interdependent with the comprehensive school counseling model.

### Introduction

The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) position regarding the role of a professional school counselor emphasizes the promotion of student achievement through direct and indirect services provided to students through a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2012b). Comprehensive school counseling programs that are effective in improving student achievement collaborate with parents and other educators to ensure all students with equitable access to a variety of learning opportunities and rigorous curriculum options (ASCA, 2012b). In preparing students to be college and career ready, professional school counselors work with students and their families through the process of selecting courses and internships that are rigorous and relevant to students' college and career goals and interests (ASCA, 2013). Professional School counselors are advocates as well as liaisons among education stakeholders to ensure students' academic achievement and preparation for life. The comprehensive school counseling model is preventative in design, while developmental in nature with programs that promote student achievement, and is determined by student data and grounded with standards in academic, career, and personal social development (ASCA, 2012a).

The ASCA's *National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (2012a) focuses on improving student achievement through a comprehensive school counseling program motivated by student data and the national standards to engage students in the learning process (Scarborough & Luke, 2008; Thompson & Moffett, 2008). The effectiveness of a comprehensive school counseling program is based on counselors analyzing school and school counseling program data to determine if changes occur with students through the implementation of a comprehensive program (ASCA, 2012a; Clark & Breman, 2009; Light, 2005; Scarborough & Luke, 2005). Two major domains of the national standards are academic development and career development. The standards for academic development guide professional school counselors to incorporate strategies and activities in the learning environment that support and maximize all

students' abilities to learn (ASCA, 2012a). The career development standards direct school counseling programs to afford all students with the skills and knowledge, along with opportunities to apply those skills and knowledge during and after the transition from high school into the world of work or post-secondary education (ASCA, 2012a).

Research demonstrates that a comprehensive school counseling program creates opportunities for student learning and achievement when professional school counselors are implementing what is considered best practice as related to the ASCA national model for school counseling programs (ASCA, 2012a). A study by Scarborough and Luke (2008) examined the perspectives of successful school counselors implementing a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program. Clark and Amatea (2004) studied the perceptions of K-12 teachers regarding necessary counseling and guidance services delivered by professional school counselors within their schools as it relates to comprehensive program planning and training. Thompson and Moffett (2008) explored whether performance based, data-driven projects in counselor preparation programs enhance professional school counselors' capabilities to effectively collaborate and advocate for all students. Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, and Jones (2004) investigated the perceptions of school counselors and principals concerning the national standards for school counseling programs. A comprehensive counseling program provides necessary services for students to become college and career ready for life after high school graduation.

As part of the preparation of students to be college and career ready, professional school counselors play a key role in the guidance and services offered to assist students. A national comprehensive survey conducted by Hart Research Associates (2011) assessed 1,507 high school graduates of 2010, on their high school experience and its role in preparing them for life concerning work or post-secondary education. The findings revealed a sense of ownership from the students that some claimed they could have done more to improve their preparation for life after high school; however, "49% said high school prepared them well for both college and work" (Hart Research Associates, 2011, p. 9). Professional school counselors are a factor in providing college and career information to all students, as well as working with students to confirm their understanding and application in the learning process of preparing to be college and career ready (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Stipanovic, 2010; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). It is imperative to student preparation and achievement that school counselors implement the standards of the national model of comprehensive counseling to best serve all students.

In order to identify information students had about college and the acquisition of this information, Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, and Perna (2009) performed multiple descriptive case studies on fifteen high schools, which revealed students at the junior and senior level had more knowledge about college than freshmen and sophomores. Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson, and Li (2007) acknowledged the needed support of school counselors for students when their parents do not have the knowledge or resources to guide them toward college and career readiness. Interestingly, Perna et al. (2007) noticed students do not proactively seek contact with school counselors regarding college application if their high school has a low college enrollment rate. Many times, the schools with students who need the most college counseling do not receive it. A survey administered to high school students about the college

information provided to them by their professional school counselor and teachers depicted that majority of the students expressed an intention to pursue post-secondary education primarily to fulfill career-oriented goals (Alexitch, Kobussen, & Stookey, 2004). Students are beginning to realize that college and career readiness are connected in the skills and strategies needed for successful in both areas.

Similarly in 2010, Public Agenda conducted a survey of over 600 young adults, between the ages of 22-30, for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2010), regarding their high school guidance experience in preparing for college after high school. The young peoples' survey results portrayed harsh judgments about their school counselor giving them fair or poor ratings, despite the fact that those students had gone on to some form of higher education after high school (Johnson et al., 2010). The report concluded that based upon the young adults' responses, the current system is underserving students, whom it intended to help with the transition from high school to college or work.

The purpose of the current study was to examine the experiences of professional high school counselors in an exemplary comprehensive school and counseling system when working with students on college and career readiness goals.

### **Methodology**

This research used a grounded theory methodology, where "truth is contextual, approximated, and refined with additional examination" (Hays & Wood, 2011, 289). Grounded theory builds theory from data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), with the goal of explaining a particular phenomenon. In this instance, counseling and preparing students to be college and career ready within a comprehensive school was the phenomenon under study. Grounded theory provides a method for guiding research based on other peoples' perspectives in order to construct meaning for a phenomenon grounded on those interpretations of interactions (Clark & Amatea, 2004). Consistent with grounded theory, researchers used a semi-structured research guide to address specific processes and patterns within this model of comprehensive schooling and counseling in preparing students to be college and career ready after high school graduation.

### **Participants**

Five participants from a public high school in New York State took part in this study. Four of the participants were certified school counselors, and one participant was recognized as the school counseling coordinator. Two participants identified as Caucasian females, two males identified as Caucasian, and one male identified as African American. Participants' professional experience in education ranged from 4-29 years, with the younger staff members having more experience at the high school level, while the more experienced counselors had a variety of experiences at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

### **Research Site**

The research site was selected based on the school district's honors and commitment as a 21<sup>st</sup> century learning community. The school's mission statement for the district emphasizes preparing students by engaging them in meaningful learning experiences that involve collaboration with the community, parents, and other businesses and organizations. It is the

vision that graduates from this school district will be able to surpass in complexities of the constantly changing world by acquiring the skills of critical thinking and problem solving, as well as an ability to produce relevant, high quality products. In assisting students with the demands of higher education coursework and career challenges, the high school is one of eleven in the state of New York designated as a comprehensive high school. A comprehensive school is one that offers academic as well as career and technical training at one location. The high school has a student-led credit union, courses for advanced placement and college credit, and integrates critical thinking, problem solving, self-direction, and creativity in preparing students to be college and career ready.

### **Sampling & Data Collection Procedures**

Purposive sampling was employed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Hays & Wood, 2011) and data collection occurred through triangulated individual interviews and one focus group session with four of the five participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interviews lasted between 50-60 minutes, and the focus group session was 43 minutes in duration. All interviews and the focus group session were conducted and transcribed verbatim by the primary researcher. A total of 149 pages of transcription were coded and analyzed. All transcripts were sent to the participants for member checking to ensure accuracy of the participants' responses. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant in order to maintain confidentiality.

### **Researcher as Instrument**

The primary researcher is a Caucasian female who is a certified English teacher with seven years of middle and high school teaching experience. Additionally, she is doctoral candidate in Teaching and Leadership, with an interest in school counseling and preparing students for the world of work or college after graduation. The second researcher identifies as a Caucasian female, certified as a teacher and school counselor, and currently working as a School Counselor educator. The second researcher's past scholarship with comprehensive school counseling programs was influential in the designing and implementation of the present study. The collective past experiences contributed to the primary and secondary researchers' expectations pertaining to this study, and these expectations were bracketed through ongoing discussions and memoing. A third member of the research team included a coder, who identifies as a Caucasian male doctoral student with school counselor certification and eight years of experience as a middle school counselor.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis transpired through the open and axial coding of the six transcripts. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), open coding and axial coding go hand in hand and the breaking apart and blocking data into categories for analysis allows researchers to hypothesize themes and concepts from patterns within that data. The researchers met to discuss independent coding, and identified and discussed all points of disagreement to consensus. The primary researcher generated a list of general codes for the data and the research team met to deliberate. The research team discussed the codes used for specific sections of data, and created a codebook of eighty-four codes. This codebook later reduced to twenty smaller themes, and ultimately finished with six main themes within the emergent model of counseling and preparing students in a comprehensive school (Hays & Wood, 2011). The emergent theoretical model for understanding the phenomenon of counseling and preparing students within this study became

evident during the analysis of the data using the Conditional/ Consequential Matrix (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The Conditional/ Consequential Matrix organized the data into six selective themes: Causal Conditions, Phenomenon, Context, Intervening Conditions, Actions, and Consequences.

## **Results**

The professional school counselors' endeavors to prepare students to be college and career ready within a comprehensive school counseling program are portrayed in Figure 1: Emergent model of counseling and preparing students in a comprehensive school. Corbin and Strauss (2008) explained this paradigm as the Matrix, enriching analysis through an organization of information into the causal conditions that lead to the phenomenon, which the context, intervening conditions, and actions all influence, and ultimately produce consequences. Although these findings are not necessarily generalizable to a larger population, the data offer detailed description and insight into what is working and not working within this comprehensive school context. These components of grounded theory are present in accordance with Corbin and Strauss's (2008) methodology of grounded theory and analysis within qualitative research in the following sections. Detailed participant quotes and descriptions are offered to provide participants' thoughts and observations about the related components, including how their work prepares students for college and career readiness.

### **Causal Conditions**

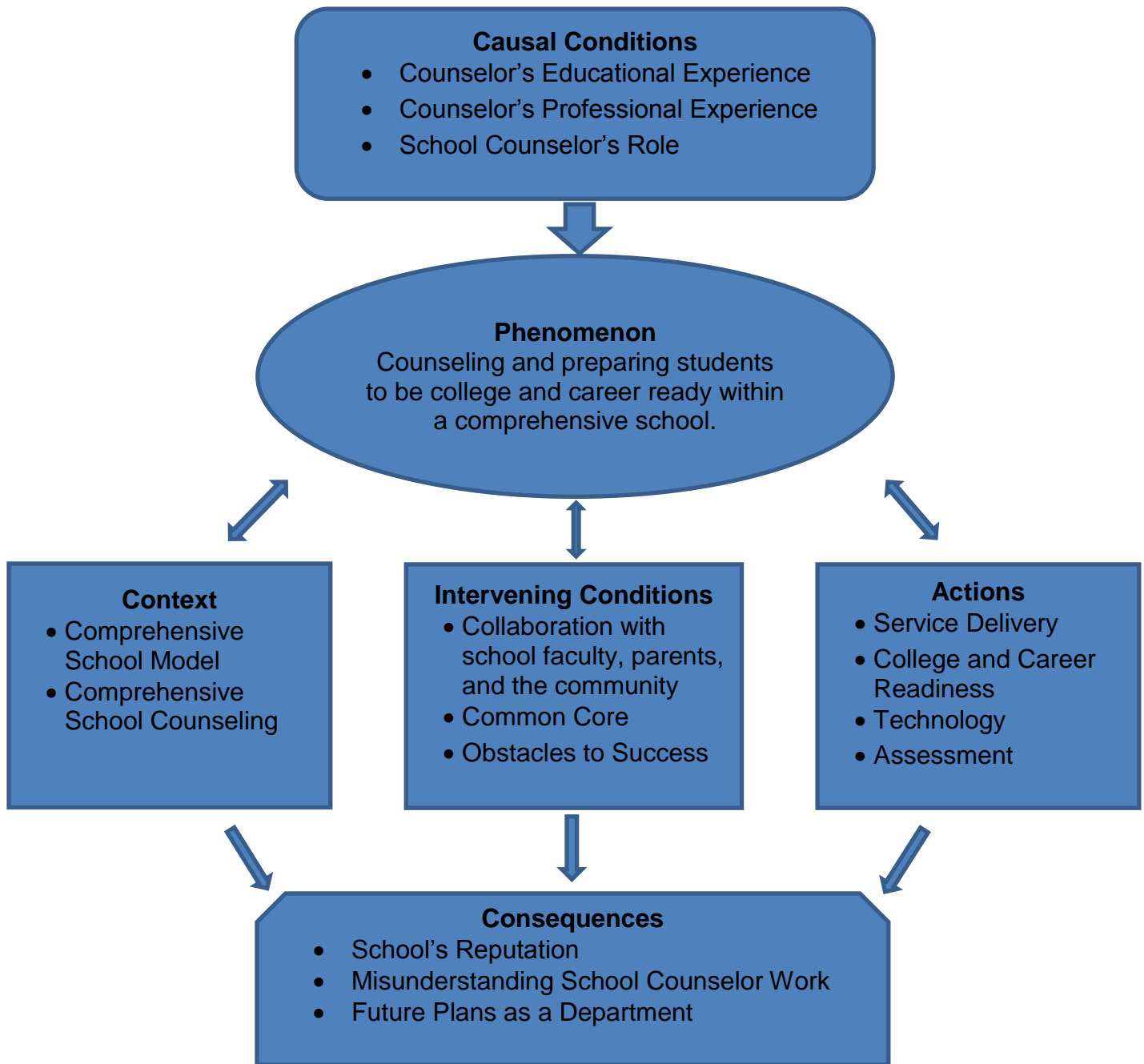
According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), the conditions within the conditional/ consequential matrix interact with the internal actions to create a context for those conditions. In this study, three main causal conditions emerged from the data: counselor's educational experience, counselor's professional experience, and the school counselor's role. All five participants shared their educational experiences by describing their schooling and certification backgrounds, philosophies on education and/ or counseling, reason for choosing this particular profession, and personal information related to choices made regarding school and counseling.

### **Educational experience.**

When asked about her educational experience and reason for choosing this particular profession, Rachel discussed her aspiration to work in an educational setting by sharing her mother's role as a school nurse, and stated, "something appealed to me about working in a school...I just wanted to be in that setting." Another participant, Travis, shared a more personal account of his educational experience and reason for wanting to work as a professional school counselor.

I grew up in one of the city schools here...and in a tough neighborhood. People in my neighborhood didn't graduate from high school and the graduation rate was like fifty percent. I grew up with a lot of people that I watched never graduate, stay on the street, kind of the things you typically hear. They are in prison or dead or still on the corner doing stuff, so I think for me I never had a school counselor that I identified with and I feel like some of my friends didn't either, and had they had somebody, that connection may have kept them in school. So, I mean I think that is part of what drove me back into education.

**Figure 1:** Emergent model of counseling and preparing students in a comprehensive school.



**Professional experience.**

The second causal condition was counselors’ professional experience, which included data related to years of experience, professional experiences as a counselor or stakeholder in education, and a description of a “typical” workday, although all participants stated that no day at school is typical. Robert, one of the more experienced counselors, shared that every morning he checks his daily schedule with the counseling secretary and has meetings with students about schedules and academics, contacts parents, meets with teachers and addresses teacher referrals of

students, reviews transcripts, updates records, handles students with social-emotional counseling needs, and implements conflict-resolution meetings between students. Robert's description of a "typical" day represents the appropriate duties identified in the ASCA's framework for school counseling programs (ASCA, 2012a).

Anthony, a counselor with several years of experience, described his "typical" day at school as "...MASH...Band-Aid surgery...truly it is...a typical day...my day is that... you know and I am not going to speak for the other counselors, we all do things a little bit differently." Anthony incorporated a medical metaphor for describing how he handles situations throughout the day. His priority is whatever the issue is at that moment in time, and that the social-emotional needs always come first, "You know if we are scheduling or if I got a group on guidance type...I will always [attend to] the social-emotional piece before the regular routine...my priority is the needs of the kids." Anthony, as well as the other participants, discussed the students as the most important aspect of their work. The students' needs come first and then all other responsibilities of the job are handled accordingly as students are the main priority at this school.

### **Professional school counselor role.**

Each participant provided unique views and definitions regarding the professional school counselor's role. Robert explained his role as a school counselor in the following statement, "As a school counselor, I am an advocate for students. Counselor responsibilities also cover academic advisement and social-emotional development, college and career preparation, course scheduling, as well as other options for after high school such as the military." Travis's description of his role as a school counselor focused on the comprehensive school counseling program and the attempt to "do it all" with paperwork demands and the social emotional needs of the students.

Try to do it all and that's part of being a comprehensive school counseling program. I think academics naturally takes a lot of time in that a lot of our paperwork, busy type of work is academic focused. In terms of what takes up most of our time, I would say the social-emotional piece just really drives a lot of what we're doing.

Rachel's understanding of the professional school counselor's role included more networking and relationship building among students, teachers, and parents, as she commented, "I would say that I serve as kind of a liaison...between students and parents, students and teachers, teachers and parents...I'm kind of like the middleman in terms of relaying messages."

### **Phenomenon: Counseling and Preparing Students**

The causal conditions of the counselors' educational and professional experiences as well as the description of the school counselor role led to the phenomenon of school counselors preparing and counseling students to be college and career ready within a comprehensive school. The research findings capture complexities of life, and should not simplify the phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), as the school counselors demonstrated how they see themselves serving students to be college and career ready at the high school level through their interview responses. When asked how they would describe their students, each school counselor responded with similar descriptions of a diverse student body of academic, social, and economical needs.

Anthony explained, “They [students] have a lot of choice. I think that they get...a lot of needs met, because I do see we are a very eclectic population. We’re eclectic socio-economically. We’re eclectic social-emotionally.”

Robert’s description of his students corresponded with the other counselors’ responses regarding the differences in students’ academic ability as he stated, “Students vary greatly from highly academic to struggling and/ or indifferent to school and classes.” All participants commented on the socio-economic and social-emotional diversity among the student population when describing their work to prepare students for college and careers. Travis explained the socio-economic diversity of his students, however that the district is not racially diverse.

Our district’s diverse in terms of...money and locale...we have you know students who are in trailer park...poor, kind of rural areas...Up to very wealthy, suburban students and everybody in between...I think there’s a great number of diversity in terms of that. Racially, we are not very diverse at all...as a school.

The counselors focused on the diversity of the student body regarding socio-economic status, social-emotional needs, and academic abilities when discussing how they prepare students to be college and career ready within this comprehensive school.

### **Context**

Within the conditional/ consequential matrix, the context is a component that represents the properties or conditions in which the action strategies manage and carry out the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Scarborough & Luke, 2008). The comprehensive school model and comprehensive school counseling program are two main elements of the context that frame the actions of the school counselors and coordinator at this school. The maintaining and providing of comprehensive services to as many students as possible on their caseloads through the School to College and Career Initiative, strategic school plan, a built in counseling curriculum, and social-emotional support, all while adhering to graduation requirements were indicated by the counselors during their interviews and within the school’s public guidance documents.

### **Comprehensive school model.**

When discussing the comprehensive school model, Beth explained her involvement in the School to College and Career Initiative, which builds connections between businesses in the community and the school.

I’m really actively involved in is what’s called School to College and Career...where we take members of the school district, all the counselors, administrators, teachers and students, community members, and business partners, and what we’ve been doing actually is working on a project called Career Pathways. Where we are trying to establish five career pathways and align our classes with what we already have here in some of our comprehensive programs like our Construction Technology and Automotive Technologies.

Robert shared his views on the concept of the comprehensive school model and the school’s strategic plan, which encompasses all grade levels. There is a strategic plan in place for the



school as a whole and each grade level has a specific plan and goals for assisting students with getting through high school effectively. The comprehensive model of schooling is a huge benefit to students because they do not have to leave campus. They are able to establish relationships with peers, teachers, and the community, while completing their academic and career programs in one building.

**Comprehensive counseling program.** For some students, the counselors expressed how they are the only real service and support system those students have towards finishing school as college and career ready. When defining the comprehensive counseling piece, Travis commented that they are true counselors, who work with students at both academic and social levels.

Though we are true counselors, we just focus on education as opposed to you know doing mental health kind of things. Although, I feel like we are doing a fair amount of that [mental health] still within our role. Good, bad, or indifferent, I mean we're the only service that some students have. So, you know there is a guidance piece where we are helping students make decisions going forward, however I am a support and an advocate for students in the building.

### **Intervening Conditions**

Corbin and Strauss (2008) explain how the intervening conditions are the responses of individuals or groups regarding situations, problems, or happenings that lead to consequences. Three major themes emerged from the data in relation to the intervening conditions, similarly to the context, which also influence the action strategies employed by the school counselors and coordinator. The intervening conditions identified were collaboration with school faculty, parents, and the community, the Common Core, and obstacles to success. These three conditions play a major role in the counseling and preparing of students to be college and career ready.

### **Collaboration**

The collaboration among school counselors with other school faculty, parents, and the community appeared relatively strong despite the lack of parent involvement in the scheduling of academic courses and graduation requirements. All of the participants spoke highly of administrative support and guidance, a positive and supportive community base, and an open door policy to parents and students. Rachel described the administration's supportive role within her work, "I see them, as only supporting us and you know backing the decisions that we make with kids. They trust our professional judgment most of the time." Beth shared her positive experience working with administration when she first arrived at the school.

When I came here there was a long-term, well-established principal and I lucked out. He just opened his door and said, hey, let's work together. We worked really closely together... on all kinds of initiatives, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics) initiatives, School to College and Career.

The relationships between the administration, the professional school counselors, and the coordinator appear to be supportive in offering programs that prepare students to be college and career ready. Teachers and social workers also play a role in that collaboration as Travis explained, "We have a Foundations program, which is a counseling curriculum built into our

English and Social Studies classes. And our social worker and one of our counselors actually push in those classes.” All of the counselors articulated the importance of a working relationship among the social worker, counselors, and teachers in preparing students to be college and career ready.

### **Common core**

The Common Core was more of a challenge for counselors to discuss, as some expressed discomfort with not understanding how it will affect their work or if it is another reform tactic that is here today and gone tomorrow. The professional school counselors revealed they had received very little training on the Common Core standards, and three of the counselors did not believe the Common Core would affect their work with students. Anthony shared his professional experience with comprehensive school counseling and the common core as being cyclical.

Over the last twenty-two years...there's been significant changes over those twenty-two years in requirements, in cores, and whatnot. I do believe that all of that stuff is cyclical. What we are doing right now really isn't a whole lot different than what took place ten, twenty years ago. It's been semantic change and...you know we've seen this before.

When asked about her perception of the Common Core standards, Beth stated, “The Common Core is about understanding text, really looking at text, and knowing how to utilize text... because the reality is there is much more technical writing and higher level writing and reading in the real world and college.”

### **Obstacles to success**

The third intervening condition was obstacles to success, and participants provided different responses to what they considered as obstacles that may or have prohibited success in their work. Robert expressed how parent involvement was one obstacle he had encountered, “Parental involvement is one obstacle within this type of work. Either parents are overly involved or it is difficult to get the parents to participate in school-related activities.” Making connections and building trusting relationships with students was a challenge for Anthony, as he explained, “I think one of the bigger obstacles...is some of the traumatic issues that they [students] are dealing with are barriers to you connecting with them. I think that's...what we have to work hard at every day.” The social-emotional needs of the students were a serious obstacle for Travis's success at work. He discussed how the students' needs were almost more than what the school counseling department could handle, and because of this, he attributed mental health issues as a possible contributor to students dropping out of school, which hinders their preparation to be college and career ready.

Again, I hate to...going back to...it's the mental health piece. It's just there's only so much we can do in a school building and students that have more needs...there's not a whole to offer for them to keep them here. I've had a couple of students dropout this year and every single one of them I would identify as having some sort of mental health need that wasn't addressed. And it wasn't for a lack of trying and providing services, I mean calling...mental health counselors and set up a time...a follow through at home doesn't always get a student there.

## **Actions**

Actions identified within the study are processes developed to carry out or manage the phenomenon in combination with the context and intervening conditions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Service delivery, college and career readiness, technology, and assessment were the four major themes of actions utilized by the school counselors and coordinator in counseling and preparing students.

## **Service delivery**

Service delivery included, but was not limited to, data regarding classroom guidance, scheduling with students, conflict resolution, and accountability. Anthony mentioned the percentage of time he spends at work as “counseling versus guidance functioning, I would say 80/20 counseling.” Majority of his time is spent on counseling students in comparison to the 20% of time he attributes to guidance functioning. Rachel’s explanation of the amount of time she spends on service delivery related tasks focused on individual student planning, despite her description of the guidance services she provides to students.

It’s funny too because sometimes what people will say or hear is that we are school counselors who offer guidance services. So, we’re not guidance counselors, but [provide] guidance services like making schedules or meeting with kids about failing grades and college planning and career planning and things like that, and then the counseling piece obviously is separate. I see it as equal parts of different things.

## **College and career readiness**

College and career readiness involved data related to college preparation, career pathways, and career and technical education. Robert explained along with using the internet program, *Naviance* to promote college and career readiness, counselors also attempt to engage parents in this process.

The school hosts Parents’ Night for 9<sup>th</sup> graders, 11<sup>th</sup> graders, and seniors throughout the year to present information to students and parents regarding career programs offered in-house as well as at an alternative learning site, if the program is not offered here at the school. The presentations may include workshops with college or financial aid advisors on how to navigate the process of applying to programs or schools.

In preparing students and parents for college and career exploration, Anthony described how the information presented includes informing teachers.

What we present to the parents is what we present to the kids, but more intimately...throughout the kid’s educational experience we do groups and seminars, so they get doses of an academic standpoint, in addition to a career standpoint. The faculty is really apprised in the same fashion.

## **Technology**

Students, parents, teachers, and counselors use *Naviance* and *School Tools* to increase communication among all stakeholders, and promote college and career readiness within this

school. *Naviance* provides opportunities for students to explore the requirements and expectations of different colleges and careers. Robert commented on how the school uses this program to promote and present information to students related to going to college or choosing a career path.

Through the *Naviance* System, students are able to interact with information regarding various programs of study either related to career or college preparation. Each student has an account and is able to access that account at their convenience. There is also information on the counselors' webpage regarding information about college and available scholarships.

Travis explained how the student networking program, *School Tools*, provides parents with the ability to check their student's progress, since the school no longer mails report cards home. He explained, "There is a parent portal, so a parent can see what classes a student is taking, and what their running average is."

### **Assessment**

Assessment concentrates around counselors' responses to assessing work success, self-assessment of school counseling interventions with students, parents, and teachers, as well as examples of success at work. The assessment discussion was a challenge for the participants, particularly with self-assessment concerning counseling interventions used with students, parents, and teachers. Many of the answers to the questions about success resulted in examples of what the counselors considered successful within their work. Anthony had trouble replying to the assessment questions, as did all of the other participants; however, he attributed "steady enrollment and good results" as signs of doing something right.

What evaluates success? If enrollment is steady, you're doing something right...and if you are garnering good results, kids are equipped with the next step. That's probably the best evaluation, but there's a story behind all of that.

When asked how she assesses success of her work as it relates to the Common Core, career and technical education, or counseling in general, Rachel wasn't sure how to answer the questions. She was uncertain of how she assessed her own work.

I don't know how I assess that. I mean certainly when a kid comes down and issues you a Thank You card...and you [counselor] were so helpful with the college application process, and I [student] wouldn't have been able to...I had a kid this year who was accepted to the Naval Academy, and it's because he is amazing.

Robert explained how he assesses his work with the comprehensive school programming as well as with the career and technical education preparation by conducting follow-up meetings as well as through on-going conversations with students.

I am able to assess the success of my work with guiding students into the appropriate pathways per their interests and needs. Students who are successful with this form of preparation leave with certifications and a specific skill set that will be beneficial to

obtaining a job after graduation or going on to a college that can continue to help them grow and learn.

### **Consequences**

The outcome or results of the actions are the consequences within the conditional/consequential matrix (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Three themes formed within the interview data that led to the consequences, which were the school's reputation, misunderstanding school counselor work, and future plans as a department.

### **Reputation**

The school counselors mentioned various times during their interviews about the school's reputation, especially related to the career and technical programs. There were several references to families and the community as a whole already being aware of what the school district had to offer in terms of educational and training opportunities for students. In a conversation with Rachel about how career and technical programs are promoted to students, she stated, "I think mostly word of mouth and from other kids...seeing what the programs are." When discussing how the school serves students, Anthony explained, "I think we deal with a very broad spectrum of issues here. Not that all schools don't, I think that we make a commitment to address all those issues in all kids. I don't know that every school does that." Although the school relies on its reputation to promote the career and technical programs available to students, the school has a strong reputation for supporting all students' needs.

### **Misunderstanding**

The misunderstanding of school counselor work ranged in responses among the participants, but each answer led back to others not understanding the educational system and vice versa. Anthony pointed out the misunderstandings between public education and the private sector.

I think one of the big barriers between public education and the private sector is just the lack of understanding what each one does and what they need. You know it's very easy on the outside saying you need to be doing X, Y, and Z...they don't understand our world.

Beth's description of her professional work presented points on how the role of a school counselor is not clearly understood and what the job entails from her experience.

I would say right now I work to create a cohesive unit...we are all working together to support students and looking at students as a whole. Like a lot of people focus and say, oh school counselor, what's that? They're scheduling, no. This job is so much more about kids and supporting kids and intervening...working with administration and teaming to really reach kids...get them to figure out how do I get through high school...where do I want to go after high school.

### **Future planning**

The plans for the counseling department extended from working more cohesively to including parents more in the academic process to comments about very little change or no

change being needed for the department in order to best serve students. Travis's view on the future plans for the department stemmed from the counselors lack of understanding with the Common Core.

So, teachers certainly will be and I think that the state isn't quite sure how to make us [counselors] accountable yet...And we've actually started to have discussions as a department that we should probably get a head and really start thinking about what it might look like.

Beth talked about changes in the department in terms of counselors as well as herself working with other departments to increase the quality of services provided to all students within the school district. She stated, "I work with kids at risk, kids at alternative schools, increasing our intervention services here...looking to increase and improve our Special Education delivery of services, because if you look at the state regulations, the diplomas are changing."

### **Discussion**

The emergent model of counseling and preparing high school students in a comprehensive school as seen in Figure 1 outlines the casual conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, actions, and consequences that emerged from the data collected. Overall, the counselors at this particular school are working to address students' diverse needs as well as acknowledging the need for improvements within the department to strengthen the services provided to all students. The effectiveness of a comprehensive school counseling program is dependent upon counselors analyzing data within the school as well as within the counseling program to determine whether changes have occurred with students (ASCA, 2012a; Clark & Breman, 2009; Light, 2005; Perusse et al., 2004; Scarborough & Luke, 2005). Yet, it seems this group of high school counselors could be doing more to utilize student data. There was no mention of data related to students' graduation rates, college entrance rates, or finding work after high school rates by the professional school counselors in their interviews. The student data should drive the implementation of appropriate services for all students; however, there was no evidence of data driving the implementation of comprehensive services at this particular school.

Utilizing data in the performance of the counselor's role was not evident within this study. There were brief discussions about enrollment numbers within programs, which according to the counselors showed whether a program was effective in the promotion of a specific career or technical skill offered at the school. Dropout rates cited by a couple of the participants related to the increase of students dropping out to the increasing social-emotional needs of the student body. With the rise in diversity among student bodies, it is necessary for researchers to conduct future studies that examine the social-emotional needs of students and how that influences the counseling and guidance services received at the high school level (Clark & Breman, 2009). Future practices of school counselors should incorporate collaborative work with teachers to enhance student performance with regard to their academic, career development, and social-emotional needs (ASCA, 2012a; Clark & Amatea, 2004), while using data to influence change within the school promoting educational equity for all students (Perusse et al., 2004). The professional school counselors need improvement and training with utilizing student data to direct instruction and services to all students.

Research on what is considered best practices for student learning and achievement regarding the ASCA national model of school counseling programs shows that counselors who provide opportunities for students increase learning and achievement (ASCA, 2012a; Clark & Amatea, 2004; Scarborough & Luke, 2008), and the school counselors in this study acknowledge the standards and national model of school counseling. The academic development and career development domains of the national standards (ASCA, 2012a) appear to be addressed by the professional school counselors through their service delivery and use of technology to promote college and career information to students. The school counselors are providing information about college as well as options for the career pathways with an emphasis on the career portion. The community is supportive of the school district per the counselors, and the school relies on mostly word of mouth and the school's reputation to promote the career programs to students. Although there are stereotypical beliefs about the trades and career education being marketed to minority and low social status students (MacLeod, 1995; Stipanovic, 2010), these counselors seem to be providing equal opportunity for all students to choose or mix academics with career preparation. Research supports career counseling because of increased student success in transitioning through life roles (ASCA, 2012a; Stipanovic, 2010); however, it is unclear if the services and opportunities the professional school counselors offer at this school are contributing to student success.

The school counselors and coordinator provided insight and detailed description into how they navigate the counseling and preparing of students to be college and career ready after high school. The findings answer some of the questions that guided the study, but reveal a lack or void with the use of data that should drive their decisions when serving all students. Each of the counselors and coordinator were able to define the role of the school counselor, which portrayed an emphasis on being an advocate for students as well as a liaison among different stakeholders. According to Erford, House, and Martin (2007), professional school counselors understand the context and environment in which they work, while seeing the connection between their work and the school's mission, and use explicit accountability measures to be effective and responsible for their work. The participants showed a strong understanding of the students and their needs, yet reported only working with small numbers of students on a daily basis. The participants regularly working with smaller numbers of students contradict best practices according to the comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2012b). Future research should address best practices of school counselors per the ASCA standards, and if those practices and services are available for all students.

Career preparation and promotion to students were the most evident within the interview data. Solid career counseling increases career awareness and exploration, which allows choices between whether students would rather continue with post-secondary education or begin a pathway to a career related to their interests (Hart Research Associates, 2011; Stipanovic, 2010). According to the professional school counselors, this school district has delivered comprehensive schooling for several years, and currently relies on the school's positive reputation, along with the use of internet programs to promote and implement programs of study and college opportunities to students and their families.

Many of the findings are comparative to the literature focused around best practices for comprehensive school counseling. However, some of the findings challenge what is considered best practice due to the excessive student need for social-emotional support according to the counselors. Three of the five counselors expressed spending most of their day dealing with the counseling component of school counseling, and spent only a small portion of time on direct services such as setting schedules and other paperwork. In Rachel's description of services she delivers to students, she focused on the individual planning (course scheduling, failing grades, college and career planning), yet stated that these activities are part of her guidance work. Guidance refers to large group work with life-skill types of activities, and these types of activities were not evident in the counselors' interviews. Additionally, there was a lack of parent involvement with the scheduling of student courses and programs, despite knowledge of active parent involvement improving student achievement (McMullen, 2012).

The Common Core was a topic of contention with four of the participants. Three of the participants believed the Common Core would not affect their work, and two participants refused to comment due to a lack of understanding and implementation of the standards in the school. One participant mentioned that during a faculty meeting there were only enough Common Core materials for the teachers, and the counselors were not included in the discussion. Due to the relatively new nature of the Common Core, more training for professional school counselors is suggested. Future trainings for school counselors should include information clearly explaining the counselor's role in working with students and teachers to improve and support achievement while aligning to the Common Core State Standards.

Similar to the difficulties with answering questions related to the Common Core, the assessment of the counselors' interventions used with students, parents, and teachers, as well as the assessment of work success were challenges for counselors to discuss. Their responses focused around personal examples of students saying thank you, or students coming back years later and having a successful story to tell. The school counselors did not specifically discuss the success of their students, and based on their interview responses, the counselors do not have a full understanding of accountability. The participants struggled with questions of how they assess what they are doing and if their services are working for students. The disconnect with assessment and the use of data among the counselors ultimately affects the decisions regarding the counseling and preparing of students to be college and career ready.

Accordingly, school counselors and school counseling supervisors can consider these findings as they plan, implement, and evaluate their comprehensive school counseling programs. Additionally, school counseling site supervisor may wish to incorporate some of these findings into their support of school counselors-in-training, in efforts to increase their effectiveness in providing K-12 students' services aimed at college and career readiness (NOSCA, 2014). Luke and Bernard's (2006) model of supervision can be used for this purpose. Moreover, school counselor educators are encouraged to incorporate more intentional pedagogical practices to experientially illustrate a range of ways in which school counselors can successfully enact best practices (Scarborough & Luke, 2008). In the future, it is expected that school counseling professional organizations and accreditation bodies will develop policies and standards to reflect an increased emphasis on college and career readiness.



### **Limitations**

There were a few limitations to the study, such as small sample size from one school, the inclusion of only high school perceptions, the counseling coordinator was not a certified counselor, and the perception data is limited in itself. The school was selected for examination due to its declaration on their school website as being an exemplary comprehensive school that implements a comprehensive school counseling program. Participation was voluntary, and four out of the six certified high school counselors agreed to the interviews. None of the three middle school counselors agreed to participate in the study. The counseling coordinator is hired by this particular district and is in this role without certification as a school counselor.

During a few of the individual interviews, counselors seemed on edge by positioning themselves with arms crossed or sitting behind a table, and a couple of them let out a deep breath at the end of the interview. Pressure to answer questions “correctly” during the interviews appeared to be a possible limitation to the collection of information. The before and after behaviors of the participants during the interviews and focus group session revealed a slight tension. In the focus group session, one participant barely spoke at the beginning of the session, but after the coordinator left the room, that participant along with everyone else seemed more at ease and open with their responses. These tensions may relate to anxiety with participating in a one-on-one interview or from talking among colleagues about their work and how they view themselves in the professional setting.

### **Conclusion**

The diverse classroom demographics throughout the United States reflect a myriad of student needs in the interconnected areas of academic achievement, social-emotional adjustment, and career development (Clark & Breman, 2009). The professional school counselor must work as an advocate for students’ academic achievement, social-emotional needs, and career development, while also collaborating with other stakeholders to create a school and community climate that works to remove the barriers that impede upon student success (ASCA, 2012b). Many schools continuously strive to improve student achievement, and school counselors play a vital role in helping students to plan for success (ASCA, 2012a). With the current *Reach Higher* initiative (ASCA, 2014), school counseling has become a part of the national dialogue on college and career readiness. The initiative emphasizes increasing support and resources to school counselors in helping to ensure that all students understand the requirements they need to complete during their education in preparation for college or a career after high school (ASCA, 2014). The findings from this grounded theory support the *Reach Higher* initiative by illuminating some of the areas of strength, as well those areas potentially in need of ongoing foci across a comprehensive developmental school counseling program.

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