

**Change-Agent-for-Equity (CAFE) Model: A Framework for  
School Counselor Identity**

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### **Abstract**

Significant recent influences in the profession have provided clear direction about what school counseling programs should look like but have not explicitly defined the professional identity necessary to enact these programs. A Change-Agent-for-Equity (CAFE) Model draws from the American School Counselor Association National Model (2003, 2005, 2012) and the tenets of the National Center for Transforming School Counseling (Martin, 2002), proposing that the school counselor's professional identity is central to school counseling programs and program outcomes. A case scenario is presented to illustrate the CAFE model in context.

*Keywords:* change agent, equity, school counselor, school counseling, professional identity

## **Change-Agent-for-Equity (CAFE) Model: A Framework for School Counselor Identity**

Now, more than ever, school counseling programs are expected to promote change for *all* students, their schools, and the community. With an emphasis in the field on closing multiple and complex gaps: (e.g., achievement, attainment, opportunity, etc.), the primary charge of school counseling has become about promoting change for equity and access for every student (ASCA, 2010, 2012; CSCORE, 2011; Chen-Hayes, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2011, NOSCA, 2011).

This article conceptualizes a model of professional school counselor identity that has been influenced by professional landmarks in the field in the last 15 years. The proposed model inverts the ASCA Model's diamond graphic in order to put the identity of the school counselor at the core of professional school counseling programs: a "change-agent-for-equity," or "CAFE" identity. Critical to this model are the school counselor's values and beliefs that make up his or her professional identity.

### **Professional Identity**

The professional identity of a counselor is a combination of three components according to Healey and Hays (2012); perceived competency in the field, beliefs and values, and social-cultural expectations. Professional identity in counseling has also been described as an ongoing growth process that begins in the preparation program and continues throughout one's career (Brott & Myers, 1999.). However, school counseling has long struggled with defining professional identity as a whole field as well as individually among school counselors (Baker, 2001; Brott & Myers, 1999; Gray &

McCollum, 2003; Harris, 2009; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Webber & Mascari, 2006; Paisley, Zomiek-Dagle, & Getch, 2006).

A lack of professional clarity has created a vacuum that stakeholders such as principals, superintendents, and legislators have used to define roles for school counselors. Unfortunately, these roles rarely reflect a change-agent, equity-oriented professional identity and instead focus on non-counseling administrative needs such as discipline, paperwork, and scheduling. Additionally, threats to school counselor positions have been many. Budget cuts, skyrocketing caseloads, the creation of graduation “coaches” or technicians, and the use of outdated, inappropriate labels that misidentify school counselors and school counseling programs (e.g., guidance or pupil personnel services), have too many stakeholders questioning the purpose and value of school counselors.

Fortunately, the concept of a “school counseling program” has become more clearly defined in recent years due to significant landmarks and movements in the field. To that point, the profession has witnessed a surge of ongoing advocacy efforts and outcome research endeavors in school counselors’ roles in closing equity, achievement, opportunity, and attainment gaps (Chen-Hayes, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2011). These efforts have been led by several prominent organizations including the Education Trust’s National Center for Transforming School Counseling (2012), the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (2011), the Center for School Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation (2011), the National Association of College Admission Counseling (2010), the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2009) and the American School Counselor

Association (2012). Moreover, the third revision of the ASCA National Model (2012) highlights the need for school counselors to define themselves as a central and indispensable position within the school. The Model's infusion of key themes (leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change) as well as an emphasis on data-driven practices (e.g., closing-the-gap results reports) demonstrates a clear shift towards the need for school counselors with a change-agent, equity-focused professional identity.

However, these publications and efforts have not always clearly explicated what it means for a school counselor to possess a change-agent, equity-focused identity. While major movements and critical documents in the field have given essential structure to school counseling programs, in too many locales, school counselors still lack a unifying public model of professional identity.

### **CAFE Model**

Professional empowerment has continuously been an issue for school counselors because of the historic lack of professional identity in the field of school counseling. The historic lack of professional identity has been perpetuated by stakeholders and systems that either do not understand, or misunderstand school counseling (Brott & Myers, 1999; Gray & McCollum, 2003; Harris, 2009; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Webber & Mascari, 2006; Paisley, Zomiek-Dagle, & Getch, 2006). The change-agent-for-equity or "CAFE" model sets out to name and solidify school counselors' professional identity. Embracing the change-agent-for-equity identity at the deepest possible level of professional self gives school counselors, both individually and collectively, an origin of empowerment and a source of strength.

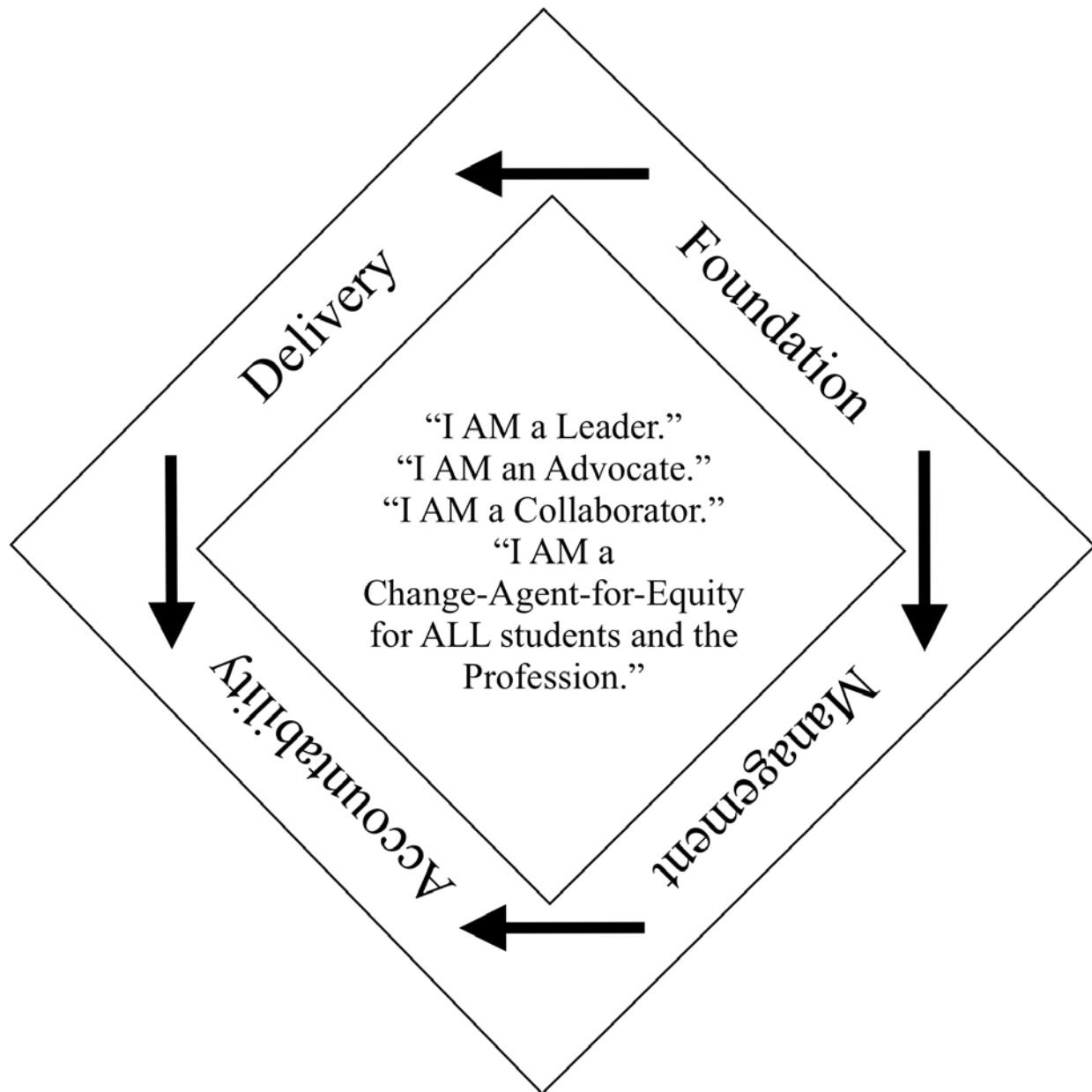
## **Key Elements of the CAFE Model**

**What is a change agent?** Merriam-Webster's definition of "agent" includes the following "1, a person who acts on behalf of another; 2, a person or thing that takes an active role or produces a specified effect: agents of change" (Merriam Webster, 2011). Applying this definition to the professional school counselor places him or her in a dynamic position of influence, one starkly different from the isolated and peripheral functioning of earlier school counselors or outdated "guidance" counselors. Specifically, action and advocacy, as interpreted by "acts on behalf of another" are assumed in this definition. Furthermore, the phrase "produces a specified effect," suggests influence on, and even alteration of, the status quo. Given the question that is at the crux of the ASCA Model (2012), "how are students different as a result of what school counselors do?" the identity of change agent for equity is fundamental for school counselors in answering this question.

**What is equity?** Equity is "justice according to natural law or right; specifically: freedom from bias or favoritism," (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2012). For the school counselor, equity refers to the fair treatment of students. "Equity" is not synonymous with "equality," it does not suggest that all students should be treated the same but rather that all students deserve to be treated fairly and that no student, or group of students, is favored over others.

**CAFE values and beliefs.** The CAFE model draws from the ASCA Model diamond graphic to create a framework for school counselor identity (see Figure 1). As depicted, the themes of leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change, are instead at the center, representing the school counselor's professional identity.

**Figure 1.** Change Agent for Equity (CAFE) Model



The program components are alternatively on the outer level, representing that they radiate out from the school counselor’s professional identity. The CAFE model purports that school counselor professional identity comes first, thereby generating equity-focused school counseling programs.

The authors hold that a professional school counselor who embodies the CAFE identity will hold as a set of values and beliefs representative of the themes of the ASCA Model: leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change (2012). The ASCA Model maintains that these themes are “areas” and “skills” (p.1) but the CAFE model suggests that they exist at a deeper level whereby the school counselor identifies self as a leader, advocate, collaborator, and change agent. We believe that a school counselor with a change-agent-for-equity identity is more likely to practice ethical decision-making, multicultural competence and data-driven evaluation because the CAFE identity drives him or her to such practices. Finally, we believe that a school counselor with this identity will create programs that include the data-driven ASCA Model core components because the program will be a manifestation of his or her professional identity and will aim to create change and address equity issues on multiple levels.

**CAFE practices.** The identity of change-agent-for-equity is explicit and becomes the force behind change directed and equity focused practices and outcomes. More so, because equity for all students is the ultimate goal of one’s work, the school counselor with the CAFE identity maintains an inclusive and systemic view, one that sees both the micro and macro spheres of potential influence. Furthermore, the school counselor relies not only on his or her own data, observations and experiences of these injustices but also on the data, observations and experiences of others such as students, co-workers and colleagues.

We also contend that the CAFE school counselor promotes change beyond the school counseling program, understanding the connections between systems that



influence his or her students. Essential to modus operandi of the CAFE school counselor is the ability to examine equity gaps and influence change at diverse and multiple levels (i.e., from assisting the individual student to lobbying legislators for school counselor positions). In other words, regardless of the scope of change or the targeted setting for change, the school counselor takes a similar approach and follows a similar process. At the school level, the CAFE school counselor may advocate for an ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) student who also qualifies for testing into a gifted program, or may serve as advisor to a newly formed Gay Straight Alliance rallying to stop the marginalization of GLBT students. At the district level, for example, the CAFE school counselor may present new or innovative ideas and practices for colleagues at a local conference, serve on a board that examines district school counseling practices or be a mentor for newly hired school counselors. At the state level, the CAFE school counselor may serve on or chair a committee within the state school counselor organization, lobby at the state capitol for legislation related to school counseling positions or represent the state school counseling community in meetings with community leaders. At the national level, the CAFE school counselor may attend or present at a national conference, provide lesson plans through a national school counseling network, or publish material for school counselors.

Driven by the desire for change, he or she is naturally drawn to problems of social justice and seeks out inequities and imbalances both within the school, as well as within the profession. The identity as change-agent-for-equity becomes central and especially critical in the face of systemic barriers, serving as a touch point to bolster the school counselor's professional resilience in challenging times. In fact, the school

counselor with a strong CAFE identity, because of the inherent system of beliefs and values, may utilize more productive coping strategies in the face of obstacles or possess more professional resilience.

The CAFE school counselor also promotes his or her work regularly to stakeholders with great pride and seeks out opportunities to highlight the work that results from his or her professional identity. This identity of change-agent-for-equity is not a self-absorbed one but rather one in which the school counselor believes that his or her professional purpose is to contribute to change on a variety of levels and within a variety of settings, in very active ways. The CAFE school counselor also embraces the terminology of “Professional School Counselor” over “guidance counselor” because it speaks to the professionalism of the school counselor’s role, embodies the depth and breadth of commitment he or she brings to the field, and supports the identity of change agent (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). He or she considers school counseling a career, rather than a job, and operates beyond the traditional boundaries of the day-to-day. In concert, the work of the school counselor through the school counseling program, and the outcomes of that work, will manifest and reinforce the identity as change agent, and thus spur more action towards change. All of these practices encompassed within the CAFE professional identity are in stark contrast from the former role of school counselors as primarily supportive in nature and ancillary to the functioning of schools and the achievement of students, and albeit absent from professional involvement outside of the school arena (Baker, 2001; Lambie & Williamson, 2004).

### **An Application Example of the CAFE Model**

To illustrate how the change-agent-for-equity identity might play out in a given scenario, we will utilize a recent equity issue; racial disparity in school disciplinary practices. The Center for Civil Right Remedies at the UCLA Civil Rights Project recently published its first study, “Opportunities Suspended: The Disparate Impact of Disciplinary Suspension from School” (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). This sobering report highlights the impact that school suspensions have on future high school dropouts and incarceration rates, especially for African-American students and those with disabilities. Key national level findings follow:

- National suspension rates show that 17%, or 1 out of every 6 Black schoolchildren enrolled in K-12, were suspended at least once. That is much higher than the 1 in 13 (8%) risk for Native Americans; 1 in 14 (7%) for Latinos; 1 in 20 (5%) for Whites; or the 1 in 50 (2%) for Asian Americans.
- For all racial groups combined, more than 13% of students with disabilities were suspended. This is approximately twice the rate of their non-disabled peers.
- Students with disabilities and Black students were also more likely to be suspended repeatedly in a given year than to be suspended just once. The reverse was true for students without disabilities and for most other racial/ethnic groups. (Losen & Gillespie, 2012, p. 7).
- Most disturbing is the fact that one out of every four (25%) Black children with disabilities enrolled in grades K-12 was suspended at least once in 2009-2010.

Given the issue of racial disparity in suspension practices, what follows is a hypothetical description of the phases a CAFE school counselor might proceed through upon viewing this report.

### **Thought Phase of a CAFE School Counselor**

First, the CAFE school counselor, who self-identifies, “I am an advocate” is more likely to come across or seek out such a report because he or she possesses a systemic view of school counseling and actively seeks out information beyond the school itself to inform him or her about the world in which students reside. Further, he or she recognizes the inherent equity issue of some student groups systemically being suspended at grossly higher rates than others and understands the significance of the data presented at national, state and district levels. Questions the CAFE school counselor is likely to consider at this phase are:

- “What change needs to happen here?”
- “What do I believe about the capacity for change?”
- “What ethical, multicultural or advocacy issues are at play including specific achievement, opportunity, and attainment gaps?”

As the CAFE school counselor begins to transition from the phase of thought to the phase of action, he or she reflects upon the question, “how does this apply to students in my school?” and delves into other sources such as district or school-based data and policies on discipline practices to discover the extent of the issue. Once the scope of the equity gap at his or her school has been determined and identified as a need to be addressed, the CAFE school counselor, who identifies, “I am a change-agent-for-equity” considers the next question, “what can I do to create change?”

Not only does the CAFE school counselor act from his or her identity but he or she also engages the Foundation components (ASCA, 2012) of the school counseling program. In planning to address the equity gap and to discuss it with other stakeholders, the CAFE school counselor regards its alignment with the program's beliefs, vision, mission and goals.

### **Collaboration Phase of a CAFE School Counselor**

Given the extent of the equity gap, in this case suspension rates between differing groups of students, the CAFE school counselor determines who is likely to support further action. At this phase the CAFE school counselor may consider these questions:

- “How and to whom does this change need to be highlighted as critical?”
- “How can I take the initiative in promoting change?”
- “With whom and with what other efforts can I/we join to promote change?”

Identifying with, “I am a collaborator,” the CAFE school counselor begins by approaching those within the school such as administrators, other school counselors, teachers and staff. If collaborators exist at the local school level then the CAFE school counselor presents the information he or she has collected and brainstorms with them to develop a plan of action. If the CAFE school counselor however, determines that collaborators do not exist at the local school level, he or she persists, still driven by the goal of equity and by the identity, “I am a change- agent-for-equity.” The CAFE school counselor may seek out other schools or school counselors who faced a similar equity gap and research professional literature in order to find out what has been done and to determine best practices. Information gained from these collaborations may then be

brought back to the local school level to persuade action and to encourage potential local collaborators.

All the while, the CAFE school counselor is cognizant of the Annual Agreement. He or she is wise to the notion that tracking time can help to leverage where time is being spent and *not* spent, such that it may highlight for stakeholders that more time should be appropriated to work that helps to remedy equity gaps. The advisory council, whether it serves as the team of collaborators or not for this particular issue, it is consulted on the issue and informed of potential plans for action. Along with the identity, “I am a collaborator,” the CAFE school counselor understands that addressing an equity gap like suspension rates *requires* collaborators and cannot be done alone. Therefore, while the CAFE school counselor is tenacious in the pursuit of addressing the gap. He or she is also diplomatic and strategic, careful not to lose support for the issue itself by otherwise alienating others who can potentially help.

### **Action Phase of a CAFE School Counselor**

Having identified suspension rates among students as an equity issue, investigated its scope, and reviewed related data and policies, the CAFE school counselor begins to implement a plan of action developed with the collaborators as well as measures of evaluation. Questions to be considered at this phase, which are now discussed with the collaborators, may include:

- “What are the primary objectives to be addressed?”
- “What is the most effective and efficient way to promote the change?”
- “Who will take on what responsibilities? What is the timeline for change?”
- “How will the efforts towards change be documented?”

At this point, the CAFE school counselor, identifying “I am a leader,” works to empower the skill sets of the collaborators and to inspire a vision of what it would mean for suspension practices to be equitable in the school. With regard to this particular issue, the collaborators may choose to implement any or all of the following or more:

- In depth research on and/or visits to other schools that have had a similar gap and have successfully addressed it
- A town hall style meeting and/or needs assessment with various groups (e.g. school staff, families, students) to get feedback on disciplinary practices
- A review and revision of suspension and disciplinary policies and/or practices within the school
- School wide programs that promote positive school climate and behavior such as social/emotional skill building programs, anti-violence programs, mentoring programs, peer leadership and mediation, etc. to assist with lowering suspension rates for all students
- Large group guidance or small group counseling on topics that promote positive school climate and behavior such as self-efficacy, academic improvement skills and motivation

Within the action phase, the CAFE school counselor considers the Delivery component (ASCA, 2012) of the school counseling program so that the interventions meet the scope of the need and maximize the potential for change. For example, a small gap in suspension rates between student populations may necessitate small group counseling sessions for targeted students while a school wide needs assessment may demonstrate a need for an overhaul of discipline practices and policy where an

expansive gap exists. The CAFE school counselor will not only be involved with the interventions that emerge from the school counseling program to address the gap but he or she will also be active with the overall action plan that he or she and the collaborators have developed.

### **Evaluation Phase of a CAFE School Counselor**

At the point at which all elements of the action plan to address suspension rates have been implemented, the CAFE school counselor takes time to examine resulting process, perception and outcome data, comparing across time and between student groups. During this process he or she looks for indicators of progress and or a lack thereof, e.g. number of students impacted by the interventions (process), attitudes of students towards current discipline policies (perception) and actual suspension rates (outcome). Questions at this phase, for the CAFE school counselor and/or collaborators may include:

- “How will I/we know if change has occurred? How will I/we determine the next steps to promote change?”
- “Which are the most significant data points, either positive or negative?”
- “How and with whom will the results of the change be shared?”

Addressing the disparity in suspension rates between student groups could be a Closing the Gap intervention, a school wide intervention, a core counseling curriculum intervention, a small group intervention or some combination of several of these depending upon the extent of the equity gap. Therefore, when arriving at the evaluation phase, the CAFE school counselor considers the Accountability component (ASCA, 2012) based upon the interventions delivered in the action phase.



Of ultimate importance to the CAFE school counselor are the opportunities to share the changes made with stakeholders and to engage in self-reflection. The CAFE school counselor is equipped with the knowledge of how to interpret, display and present key data points for multiple audiences and actively seeks venues to share them. At the “evaluating” stage, the CAFE school counselor will engage in practices that celebrate and appraise the plan for change. Such evaluative activities may include organizing an event to commemorate positive change and results, examining and presenting pre and post data or outcomes, gathering the collaborators to reflect on the plan and results, hearing and noting concerns or providing accolades related to the change and results, as expressed by stakeholders. Additionally, he or she is realistic about the fact that systemic change takes time, but believes that even small progress is still progress. For the CAFE school counselor, change for the sake of student equity, whether large or small, refuels the values and beliefs at the core of his or her identity, “I am a change-agent-for-equity,” and sets the cycle for creating change in motion again.

## **Implications**

### **School Counselor Preparation**

School counselor preparation programs that embrace the CAFE model will integrate the idea of identity development from admissions through graduation. Bringing in student candidates who show potential for having or developing a CAFE identity is a logical first step. For example, the admission process may include such aspects as application or interview questions focused on a change agent identity. Admissions may also include bringing in practitioners who can gauge candidates for existing change

agent identity characteristics, equity-based practices or the potential to develop either or both.

Inculcating the language of change agency and equity throughout courses by all instructors can demonstrate to students a unified vision of professional identity. Such language can be included in course syllabi and utilized when teaching core concepts in courses that are both theoretical and skills-based. Additionally, courses can further cement the CAFE identity for students by bringing in practitioners who can speak to how change agency and equity are evidenced in their schools or by pointing students towards additional opportunities, technologies, resources or groups that serve the purpose of creating change or promoting equity.

Assessment has particular importance for measuring the professional identity of students. If school counselor programs seek to put into the field competent practitioners who are grounded in ethical practice, motivated for social justice and who will be additive to the schools, communities and profession in which they work, then it is important to for school counseling preparation programs to use regular assessments to determine the extent to which students embody the CAFE identity. One means of assessing this identity is to build in opportunities for students to reflect specifically on their professional identity at beginning, middle and end points of the program. This type of reflection can take many forms including course essays on professional identity, journaling, blogging, the creation of professional portfolios, and discussions of reactions to professional events or speakers, peer-to-peer feedback or through supervision.

### **School Counselor Practice**

Critical to nurturing the professional identity and practices of school counselors in the field towards the CAFE model, is supervision. Unlike many of their community-based and mental health counseling counterparts, school counselors are not required to participate in ongoing supervision once they are in the field. Given the variety of stakeholders, issues, responsibilities and expectations school counselors must manage, supervision could be tremendously advantageous in addressing such issues as ethical dilemmas, professional burnout, self-care and staying current with professional trends. School district supervisors and/or counselor educator programs can consider providing supervisory services to practicing school counselors in order to provide opportunities for them to reflect on and in many cases, bolster their CAFE identity and equity-focused practices. Whether provided through peer support, clinicians in the field or university faculty, supervisory opportunities can help school counselors examine the challenges of and recommit to a professional identity as a change-agent-for-equity.

### **School Counseling Research**

The CAFE model presents the potential for a number of research topics especially given that the concept of professional identity in school counseling has historically been vague. As a starting point, an instrument based on the CAFE model may prove useful for assessing the professional identity of pre-service school counselors, in-service school counselors as well as potential graduate students in school counseling programs. Additionally, an examination of how school counselors embody the ASCA model themes in their work would highlight which, if any, of the themes are more prevalent based upon school setting or other individual variables. A

study comparing self-reports on items related to professional identity with the ASCA school counselor competencies may demonstrate levels of school counselors' congruence and incongruence in identity and practice. Finally, examining outcome data specific to minimizing equity gaps in schools may reveal school counselors who identify with one or more of the themes of leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change thereby reinforcing the CAFE model of professional identity.

### **Conclusion**

School Counseling as a profession, finds itself at an intriguing point in its history. Within the profession there has been much progress made in defining what school counseling programs should look like, what function they should serve and what outcomes they should generate. However, now more than ever, extreme and consistent cuts to education budgets in many states still put school counselors on the chopping block. As school counseling celebrates some significant milestones, the direction of education post-No Child Left Behind reform is yet uncertain. School counseling programs, even comprehensive ones based on the ASCA National Model, may not be enough to close gaps for all students if they are not put into place by school counselors who clearly, and with congruity of thought and action, identify themselves as change agents for equity.

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### **Biographical Statement**

Dr. Erin Mason is an Assistant Professor in the department of Counseling at DePaul University and a former professional school counselor. Her primary research interests are in the area of school counselors' professional identity and school counseling program implementation.

Dr. Ockerman is also an Assistant Professor at DePaul University, previously worked in the school counseling field, and has done work in the area of school counselor training and preparation. Her research interests are in the preparation of school counselors, girls' relational issues, and cyberbullying.

Dr. Chen-Hayes, a former counseling practitioner in school, college and community settings, is Associate Professor and coordinator of the school counseling program at Lehman College of the City University of New York. Dr. Chen-Hayes' scholarship includes works in the areas of implementing standards-based, data-driven professional school counseling programs to close achievement, opportunity, and attainment gaps, multicultural and social justice counseling and school counselor's roles in educational leadership.