

Development and Field Test of an Employment Interview Instrument for Secondary

School Counselors

Marybeth Green

Overland Park, Kansas

Howard Ebmeier

University of Kansas

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the major components of a secondary school counselor's job and translate these job responsibilities into an instrument that could be used by school administrators to identify high quality secondary school counselors during the employment interview. A review of literature resulted in the identification of 37 competencies deemed essential in defining a quality secondary school counselor. The competencies were then used in the development of an instrument that was evaluated utilizing school counselors and administrators.

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The selection of staff members is one of the most important tasks in which school administrators engage (Applegate, 1987; Caldwell, 1993). Research indicates that the quality of the school staff has a strong and direct impact on the effectiveness of a school (Shirk, 1999). Errors made in the selection process have direct impact on the school and have far reaching consequences for students, administrators, other teachers, and the functioning of the school as a whole (Emley & Ebmeier, 1997). Indeed, studies by Engel and Erion (1984) found that school administrators believed that hiring high quality staff members was central to the academic success of their schools.

Most school administrators are heavily dependent on an interview system for the selection of staff members. It has historically been the primary part of the hiring process (Eder, 1999) and is the most commonly used method to gather data about prospective employees (Ebmeier, 2003). Because of the heavy reliance on the selection interview, many researchers have investigated the components of the interview process. According to Schmitt (1976), there had been ten notable, published reviews of the literature and many more modest efforts in the past five decades (Arvey & Campion, 1982; Eder & Buckley, 1988; Hakel, 1989; Harris, 1989; Mayfield, 1964; Schmitt, 1976; Ulrich & Trumbo, 1965; Webster, 1982; Wagner, 1949). Later studies utilizing meta-analysis took into account both published and unpublished validation research and concluded that the interview process is a valid selection tool for identifying quality candidates (Conway, Jako, & Goodman, 1995; Cronshaw & Weisner, 1989; McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994).

Although there is extensive knowledge about interview techniques for classroom teachers, less is known about the qualities of an effective process for interviewing and identifying school counselors. This lack of an extant research base contributes to many problems with school counselor selection. In addition, many building principals do not understand the guidance and counseling role and how it can contribute to student achievement, to school improvement, and to a positive school climate (Kaplan & Evans, 1999). They are generally unfamiliar with the national and state standards for preparing counselors and often view counselors as resources to be used to fulfill administrative needs and goals (Baker, 2001). Indeed, the school counselor's role is not well understood, especially when contrasted with the better-defined jobs of classroom teacher or school psychologist (Austin, 2004).

To add more complexity, school counseling training programs have conflicting and often varied theoretical perspectives, and thus, have trained counselors differently (American School Counseling Association, 2003). School counselors began as vocational counselors nearly 100 years ago but they have evolved to address all children in the comprehensive domains of academic, career, and personal/social development. During this evolution, differing philosophical perspectives developed between and among academic counselors, career counselors, and personal/social or mental health counselors regarding a school counselor's role, function, purpose, and focus. These changes and varying models have left school counselors, school administrators, teachers, and parents in a state of confusion regarding the role of a school counselor (Hatch & Bowers, 2002).

The school counseling profession also continues to struggle with the assignment of quasi-administrative and non-counseling duties while attempting to institutionalize the appropriate role of school counselors (Dahir, Martin, & House, 2000). For example, almost one third of the sample of future administrators rated discipline as an important or highly important duty. This is contrary to ASCA's guideline regarding using counselors as disciplinarians. Also, more than half of the participants indicated that record keeping was a significant duty. To ask school counselors to use their skills and knowledge simply to make schedule changes and administer tests is a misuse of their education (Coy, 1999). Just as pre-service training has varied for school counselors, so too have administrative expectations for school counselors based on administrative pre-service training (or lack of it) with regard to school counseling programs (Hatch & Bowers, 2002).

School counselors often engage in functions that are only remotely related to either their training or their professionally determined roles or activities (Baker, 1996). Scheduling, participation in disciplinary functions, and conducting clerical duties absorb much of a school counselor's time (Fitch, Newby, Ballestero, & Marshall, 2001). However, those duties are not considered core elements of a counselor's role by the ASCA or by other school counselor organizations. The time that the school counselor spends performing non-counseling-related tasks compromises his or her ability to complete tasks that are associated with the training the individual received and with state and national role standards. Both employers and employees are struggling with identifying what school counselors should know and be able to do.

In recent years, as school districts have decentralized the responsibility for personnel decisions and implemented wider, site-based management practices, the principal's role in the personnel selection process has increased significantly (Seyfarth, 1996). Results from a school counselor selection study revealed that principals were the most influential persons when it came to hiring school counselors (Beale, 1995). Since the selection of school counselors determines in large measure the overall quality of school counseling programs, it is important that administrators make sound hiring decisions.

The purpose of the present study was three-fold. First, the primary goal was to identify the major components of an "ideal" counselor's job through an examination of the literature and national recommendations. The second goal was to translate these job descriptions into an employment interview instrument that administrators, who were familiar with their roles and responsibilities of counselors, could use to identify high quality secondary school counselors and to field-test that instrument. The final goal was to provide job descriptions and interview instruments that, when used through staff development activities, might help improve the understanding of typical building principals regarding the proper role of counselors. This could help building principals better select and utilize counselors' skills in their schools.

### Method

Over the last few years, standards for the school counseling profession have emerged from professional organizations, educational institutions, and state certification offices. All of these organizations have added focus to the job responsibilities of school counselors. These organizations and their products include the following:

- The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) handbook entitled, *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs*. This handbook provides a model for the implementation, management, and evaluation of school counseling programs and a framework for determining the role of the school counselor in implementing the model. It answers the question, "What do school counselors do?" (ASCA, 2004)
- The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2002) professional standards document for school counselors that describes in observable form what accomplished school counselors should know and be able to do.
- The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) recognition program for counselors who have met predetermined NBCC standards in their training, experience, and performance on the National Counselor Examination for Licensure and Certification (NCE).
- The National Certified School Counselor (NCSC, 2004) specialty credential program that describes the educational background, knowledge, skills, and competencies of the specialist in school counseling on a national level.
- The Praxis Series School Guidance and Counseling test that focuses on the measurement of knowledge and skills required of the professional school counselor (ETS, 2003).
- The school counselor education programs accreditation by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)

based on a common body of knowledge and skills that are assumed to underlie the practice of school counseling (Holcomb-McCoy, Bryan, and Rahill, 2002).

- The Education Trust Foundation's (2000) identification of what school counselors need to know to be able to help all students succeed academically. This initiative is known as the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI).

Documents derived from these professional organizations, university programs, and agencies charged with testing and certification served as the bases for identifying the major components of a school counselor's job. An extensive review of the existing literature and various professional organizations' standards (briefly summarized above) was conducted and resulted in the identification of 37 competencies deemed essential for being identified as a high quality secondary school counselor. Each competency, as detailed in Table 1, must have appeared in the majority of publications from the organizations previously referenced or the extant literature. Questions for the interview instrument were constructed to measure the essence of each competency and scoring rubrics for each question were included. (See Table 2 for example questions and scoring rubrics.)

### **Table 1**

#### ***Counseling Domains/Competencies Serving as the Basis of the Questions***

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##### *Knowledge of Students*

##### A. Human Growth and Development

- Physical Growth and Development
- Theories of Psychological Development
- Exceptionality

## B. Career Development

- Theories of Career Development
- Career Planning and Decision Making
- Assessment/Resources/Technology

## C. Academic Development

- Learning in the Classroom
- Educational Planning and Decision Making
- Skills for Learning

### *Knowledge of School Counseling*

#### A. Knowledge of Theories/Methods

- Counseling Theories and Techniques
- Group Counseling
- Individual Counseling
- Crisis Intervention

#### B. Program Components

- Development
- Implementation
- Evaluation

#### C. Delivery of School Counseling Program

- Guidance Curriculum Delivered to All Students
- Individual Student Planning
- Responsive Services
- Systems Support

#### D. Legal/Ethical Issues

- Ethical Standards
- Applicable Laws

#### *Working with Others*

##### A. Professional Issues

- Leadership and Professional Roles
- Professional Development

##### B. Equity, Diversity, Fairness

- Multicultural/Pluralistic Trends and Theories
- Strategies for Working with Diverse Populations

##### C. Family-School Involvement

- Creating Partnerships with Families and Communities
- Consulting and Coordination
- Promoting Positive School Climate
- Fostering an Emotionally, Socially, and Physically Safe Learning Environment

#### *Informational Competencies*

##### A. School-Based Data/Information

- Standardized Testing
- Grades/Enrollment
- Surveys/Needs Assessments

##### B. Assessment

- Basic Concepts of Testing
- Strategies for Selecting, Administering, and Interpreting Assessments

C. Computer Literacy

- Computer Literate
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**Table 2*****Example Questions with Rubrics***

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*Describe the physical growth and developmental characteristics of a high school adolescent.*

Level 3 – Displays a clear understanding of developmental patterns, exceptions, and extent that students follow patterns. Can cite examples of things that would be of interest to students.

Level 2 – Describes generally accurate knowledge of age group’s developmental characteristics. Lacks sensitivity to individual differences within student groups.

Level 1 – Displays minimal knowledge of developmental characteristics. Sees students as an undifferentiated group.

*Describe several school counseling theories and identify the one that you most closely follow.*

Level 3 – Demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of established and emerging school counseling theories. Possess a thorough knowledge of techniques and processes that form the foundation for effective school counseling with a diverse population. Demonstrates a clear description of how a counseling theory is reflected in their counseling skills.

Level 2 – Displays generally accurate knowledge of specific school counseling theories. Vague description of how a school counseling theory is reflected in his/her counseling skills.

Level 1 – Displays difficulty with identifying school counseling theories. Does not relate how a school counseling theory is reflected in their counseling skills.

*Describe the leadership role of a school counselor.*

Level 3 – Views the leadership role as an opportunity to increase the visibility and impact of the school counseling program. Views it as an opportunity to inspire others to consider new possibilities and to realign resources on behalf of students. Optimistic that school counselors can influence conditions for student success through inner drive and courage. Works to build networks of people thinking together, sharing information, and collaborating to tackle difficult challenges. Strives to implement a vision in which every student succeeds.

Level 2 – Views working with others as a means of improving the school counseling program. Works cooperatively with others for the betterment of the school by framing this work as to how it can help students.

Level 1 – Leadership is contingent upon deriving value for the school counselor's own goals. Believes cooperation with others is necessary but desires to keep committee memberships to a minimum.

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A panel of eight currently-practicing secondary school counselors in the Kansas City metropolitan area then critiqued the questions and scoring rubrics for content validity, readability, and clarity. The feedback was compared to the literature review and alterations were made to the interview instrument as needed.

To establish concurrent validity of the instrument, central office administrators responsible for the supervision of secondary school counselors in school districts in the Kansas City metropolitan area were contacted and asked to participate in this study. Four school districts agreed to participate in this research project. To ensure diversity in the interviewed sample, these central office administrators were asked to select secondary school counselors who were considered to be excellent school counselors and secondary school counselors who were considered to be average school counselors. The authors of this study were not aware of the ratings prior to the interviews.

Thirty-seven interviews of these nominated secondary school counselors were conducted over the telephone during a time period of two months. Interviews ranged from 40 to 50 minutes in length and followed the same procedure. In addition to responses to the interview questions, participants were asked to respond to personal demographic information for this study: age, gender, race, highest educational level achieved, and years of secondary school counseling experience. After the interviews had been completed, the names and assigned identification numbers of the school counselors who participated in the study were sent to their respective central office administrator responsible for the supervision of school counselors. The central office administrator assigned each participant a rating of either average or excellent. All of

these central office administrators were former counselors, possessed advanced degrees in school guidance and counseling, and were generally familiar with the national studies used as a basis of questions construction.

### *Validity*

Validity refers to whether an instrument measures what it claims to measure. Face validity, content validity, and concurrent validity were the approaches used to determine the overall validity of the interview instrument. The interview instrument appears to have face validity as determined by the evaluation of the questions and scoring rubrics by the expert panel of eight currently practicing secondary school counselors. The feedback from the expert panel was compared to the literature review, and alterations were made to the interview instrument as needed.

Content validity refers to the match between the items in the instrument and the underlying domain that the instrument is attempting to measure (McDaniel et al., 1994). To possess content validity, the instrument must represent the content material covered. For example, since the instrument is designed to identify high quality secondary school counselors, one would expect that the questions asked during the interview would be directly related to the qualities of an excellent secondary school counselor as opposed to general personality characteristics or duties of a principal. To serve as a foundation of interview question development, the competencies had to have been identified by the following professional organizations or university programs and agencies charged with testing and certification: ASCA, Kansas Comprehensive School Counseling Program Model (2001), CACREP, TSC, NBPTS, NBCC, NCSC, and Praxis

Series School Guidance and Counseling. Secondary school counselors currently working in the field evaluated the instrument for content validity.

To establish concurrent validity of the developed interview instrument, the scores obtained from the interview instrument were compared to ratings assigned by central office administrators responsible for the supervision of the school counselors who participated in the interview

### *Reliability*

The reliability of a given instrument refers to the extent to which the instrument can provide consistent measurements on repeated occasions. To increase reliability, scoring rubrics were developed for each question. Cronbach's Alpha statistic was calculated to check for consistency of responses and to determine the reliability of the instrument. All sub-scores plus the total score had qualitatively "excellent" alpha reliabilities between 0.93 and 0.99.

### *Description of the Sample*

The school counselor participants were obtained from four large suburban school districts in the Kansas City metropolitan area. Thirty-seven counselors, 12 (32.4%) male and 25 (67.6%) female, participated in this study. The average age of the participants was 51.91 (SD = 9.26) years, with a range from 30 to 63 years. Most of the participants had earned a masters' degree (n = 31, 93.8%) and two (6.1%) had earned doctoral degrees. The participants' years of experience as practicing school counselors averaged 18.03 (SD = 10.13) years, with a range from 4 to 38 years. Most of the participants (87.7%) were Caucasian.

## Results

The objective of this study was to develop and field test an instrument designed to improve the chances of hiring quality secondary school counselors. Thirty-seven questions were developed based on the extant literature, professional group standards, requirements necessary for certification, and the curricular programs of preparatory universities. These interview questions represented four interrelated domains: knowledge of students, knowledge of school counseling, working with others, and informational competencies. Thirty-seven secondary school counselors' responses to each of these interview questions were rated based on a scoring rubric comprised of three levels of responses (Level 3 = very effective response, Level 2 = effective response, and Level 1 = ineffective response). Lastly, central office supervisors assigned each of their respective school counselors a rating of either average or excellent.

Correlation coefficients were computed among the five research variables and are displayed in Table 3. The results of this analysis indicated all correlations were statistically significant and were greater than or equal to 0.52. In addition, all the sub-scales were highly correlated as expected.

A t-test was also calculated using each of the sub-scale scores and total score as the dependent variable with ratings of the secondary school counselor (excellent vs. average) serving as the categorical independent variable. Each of the five t-tests was statistically significant. Secondary school counselors rated as "excellent" had higher average scores on each of the five scores as compared to secondary school counselors who were rated as "average" as indicated in Table 4.

**Table 3*****Correlations Between Research Variables***

<b>Research Variables</b>	<b>Total Score for Instrument</b>	<b>Knowledge of Students</b>	<b>Knowledge of School Counseling</b>	<b>Working with Others</b>	<b>Informational Competencies</b>
Administrator Rating	.60***	.52***	.58***	.62***	.59***
Total Score		.95***	.97***	.97***	.95***
Knowledge of Students			.89***	.89***	.89***
Knowledge of Counseling				.92***	.88***
Working with Others					.93***

Note. n=37. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 4*****t*-tests on Research Variables by Rating, with Means and Standard Deviations**

Variable	Excellent Category		Average Category		
	t-value	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Total Score for Instrument	4.45***	87.09	18.92	59.29	17.61
Knowledge of Students	3.63***	21.09	4.96	14.93	5.08
Knowledge of School Counseling	4.25***	30.39	7.51	20.57	5.47
Working with Others	4.61***	21.52	4.52	14.29	4.81
Informational Competencies	4.37***	14.09	3.09	9.50	3.11

Note. df=35. \*\*\*p < .001.

## Discussion

The purpose of the development of this interview instrument was to provide a tool administrators could use to identify counselor candidates deemed effective. The validity correlations were high for selection instruments. Indeed, the correlations were higher than common standardized tests used for admission into colleges and various post-graduate professional schools (Julian, 2005; Kuncel, et al., 2005; Kuncel, Hezlett, & Ones, 2001; Stilwell, Thornton, & Pashley, 2005 ). These findings are supported by previous researchers (Shirk, 1999; Evans, 2003; Allshouse, 2003; Longenecker, 2005; Cowens, 1999; Emley & Ebmeier, 1997) who used similar approaches to interviewing classroom teachers with excellent results. Collectively, these studies combined with the present study support the notion that selection instruments based upon job-related criteria and containing clear scoring rubrics can be very useful.

Although good results were obtained from this study, the correlations estimates probably underestimate the true concurrent validity of the instrument for two reasons. First, there was unavoidably some error variance introduced by the lack of precise definitions of counseling effectiveness employed by the central office administrators from the various school districts when rating the counselors. Although they all possessed advanced degrees in school guidance and counseling and were generally familiar with the document used as a basis of interview question construction, no effort was undertaken to ensure they all used the same criteria to rate the counselors in their district. This lack of training provided to the central office evaluators, probably served to decrease inter-rater reliability and the correlations subsequently obtained.

Second, there was an unavoidable sampling ceiling effect when the counselors were selected. Counselors who failed the initial employment process or were released for poor performance were not included in the sample. These situations either introduced undesirable error variance or limited variability, which likely dampened the correlations. Similar problems haunt statisticians working with the LSAT, GRE and, GMAT.

A second limitation of the study was the manner which the data were collected. All 37 of the counselors were interviewed by one of the authors of this study who possessed an advanced degree in counseling, extensive experience in the field, and had constructed the questions and rubrics. Obviously, this led to great internal consistency across interviews and an accurate interpretation of the rubric scoring guides. If less qualified individuals or those not familiar with the questions and scoring rubrics found on the instrument were to have collected the data for this study, the correlations discovered likely would have been lower. The extent and degree to which training is required to accurately use the developed instrument is at this point unknown. Clearly, individuals with backgrounds in counseling would need less preparation time than the typical principal. Indeed, if building administrators are to effectively use the instrument developed in this study, substantial training and practice would be necessary. This training and familiarization with the roles of counselors necessary to understand the questions and scoring rubrics could produce a very positive outcome; a much clearer understanding of the role of the counselor and a more discriminating employment selection process. Experience using other similar interview tools indicates that without training but with good questions and clear rubrics a 70%-75% accuracy rate

from a known standard can be expected. With several hours of training, the accuracy rate usually increases to 95%. Clearly, this is one area that deserves additional research.

While the instrument described in this paper is effective in identifying superior and average counselors, it is probably too long to be used in the normal employment interview situation. As such, shorter versions of the basic instrument have been created for use in school systems. These shorter versions require from 15-30 minutes to administer and are computer-based where the responses of the candidate are recorded and summary results produced. Based on statistical estimates (Spearman-Brown formula), these shorter versions are still reliable (0.70-0.90) yet considerably more user and candidate friendly. As mentioned above, however, the accuracy of these abbreviated instruments in the hands of typical administrators, who may lack advanced training in the principles of counseling, is not known.

From examination of the demographic data collected during the interview, the counselor instrument appears to be biased in favor of younger candidates who have finished graduate preparation programs within the last 15 years. Given that these individuals are more recent graduates of university programs, which have likely adopted many of the newer standards upon which this instrument was based, this finding is expected. Experience on the job and normal in-service activities do not appear to prepare counselors to adequately answer questions based on more recent ideas about the role of counselors in schools found in the national studies. Obviously, care needs to be taken when interpreting scores from older secondary guidance counselor candidates. In addition, since the interview protocol was designed for secondary

counselors, the utility of using the instrument without modification for elementary counselor positions is unknown. In addition to precautions about possible age bias, one must also be cognizant of the purpose of the counselor instrument. It was designed to identify secondary counselors considered effective by their central office supervisors. It was not constructed to predict other possible definitions of effectiveness such as residual gain on standardized tests, parent satisfaction, student satisfaction, or career longevity.

Lastly, it is not suggested that the process for selecting school counselors be reduced to a single 37 question structured interview (or the shorter versions from AASPA). On the contrary, what was examined was a piece of a very complex puzzle. All of the data about an applicant should be considered within the context of the merit of each piece of the application puzzle. This effort was designed to improve the quality of one piece of the applicant's portfolio of information so that, taken in total, a clear picture of his/her competence can be fairly and accurately assessed. The counselor interview described in this paper seems to possess good reliability and validity estimates, however; it should be only one piece of information upon which employment decisions are made.

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### Author Note

Howard Ebmeier, Ph.D., is an associate professor at the University of Kansas where he specializes in employment selection practices in education. He has written numerous books and articles about the selection process and consults widely. He was a former school administrator and teacher in several states.

Mary Elizabeth Green, Ed.D., is the Director of Guidance at Shawnee Mission Northwest High School in Shawnee Mission, Kansas. She has experience at both the elementary and secondary levels of school counseling. Professional organizations of which she is a member include American School Counselor Association and National Association for College Admission Counseling.