

Examining Hispanic Counseling Students' Worries: A Qualitative Approach  
Javier Cavazos Jr., Victor I. Alvarado, Iliana Rodriguez, and John Robert Iruegas  
University of Texas-Pan American

### Abstract

This study examined the worries and concerns of 24 Hispanic counselors-in training. The four most reported worries were training and preparedness, non-counseling duties, finding a school counseling position, and effectiveness. Results indicate that although Hispanic counselors-in training are concerned about their effectiveness and competence as school counselors, they are also concerned about placement in a position that involves non-counseling (e.g., paperwork) duties. This study provides evidence for the continued need of advocacy for the school counseling profession.

### Examining Hispanic Counseling Students' Worries: A Qualitative Approach

According to Jordan and Kelly (2004), "Understanding beginning practicum students' worry is important, as worries...may be constricting and limit the counselor from taking risks, growing and moving forward in their professional development..." (p. 102). Although there have been calls for future research to examine counseling students' worries, no such studies have been conducted. In fact, only one study has examined counseling students' worries (Jordan & Kelly), and this study included a majority of Anglo participants (i.e., 20 out of 23). Because of the importance of studying students' worries and the fact that Hispanic counselors differ from Anglo counselors (Nelson & Jackson, 2003), the current study was a replication of Jordan and Kelly's study.

Initially, the current article provides a literature review that focuses on the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) National Model, social justice, and non-counseling activities. Second, findings from surveys with 24 Hispanic counselors-in-training are presented. And finally, a discussion regarding the importance of these findings is provided, implications for practice are presented, and recommendations for future research are offered.

#### Literature Review

School counselors have a plethora of responsibilities that focus on students' personal, social, and career development (Studer, 2005). The ASCA National Model and social justice represent school counselors' roles and responsibilities to help students in the aforementioned areas. In addition, middle and high school counselors

are encouraged to use the ASCA National Model to help students prepare for post-secondary education (Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007).

The ASCA National Model is a framework that school counselors use to help students via guidance curriculum, student planning, responsive services, and systems support (Studer, 2005). First, guidance curriculum involves activities designed to introduce students and parents to important issues. For example, presentations are used to disseminate information regarding higher education and financial aid (Villalba et al., 2007). School counselors at all levels have been provided time limits for conducting guidance curriculum activities (i.e., 20-35%, elementary; 25-35% middle/junior high; and 15-25%, high school). Second, student planning includes advisement and assessment (Studer). Despite academic tracking based on perceived ability levels, school counselors should encourage students to enroll in challenging coursework in preparation for higher education (Villalba et al.). Time distribution for student planning includes (a) 5-10%, elementary; (b) 15-25%, middle or junior high; and (c) 25-35%, high school (Dahir, Sheldon, & Valiga, 1998). Third, responsive services include individual and group counseling (Studer). Counseling services must be readily available as many students suffer from depression and low self-esteem (Villalba et al.). Recommended time distribution for responsive services includes 30-40% for elementary school counselors, 30-40% for middle or junior high school counselors, and 25-35% for high school counselors (Dahir et al.). And finally, systems support refers to professional development (e.g., conferences) and collaborating with professionals to bring services to students (Studer). For example, school counselors can communicate with teachers of English Language Learners (ELL) to learn about the needs of these students (Villalba et

al.). Time distribution for systems support is the following: 10-15% for elementary, 10-15% for middle or junior high, and 15-20% for high school (Dahir et al.). In summary, the majority of school counselors' responsibilities include classroom presentations, individual counseling and advisement, and collaborating with school personnel.

In addition to guidelines set forth from the ASCA National Model, school counselors are encouraged to promote social justice. According to Bosworth and Walz (2005), "School counselors are in an ideal position to work for social justice and advocate for all students" (p. 42). Moreover, social justice advocacy involves the promotion of success at the student-level, school-level, and public-level (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Support at the student-level includes empowering students to challenge oppressive practices (Lea, 1998). For example, school counselors can help students understand the detrimental effects of low expectations and academic tracking, thereby providing students with an opportunity to challenge these oppressive practices (Lea). In addition, school-level support includes the understanding that change must occur beyond the personal-level (Ratts et al.), that is, school counselors must help students outside of personal counseling. For example, in order to help gay and lesbian students, school counselors must change the curriculum to include gay and lesbian issues, influence school policy to punish homophobic remarks and behaviors, and help students locate a gay or lesbian organization (Crisp & McCave, 2007). And finally, public-level support involves changing policy to meet the needs of students who have been oppressed by school policies (Ratts et al.). School counselors are in a position to implement policy changes to help students gain access to higher education (Villalba et al., 2007).

Although the ASCA National Model and social justice represent the *ideal role* of school counselors, the *actual role* varies considerably. The focus on the discrepancy between what school counselors should be doing and what they are actually doing has received attention in the school counseling literature (e.g., Nelson, Robles-Pina, & Nichter, 2008; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). For example, research has illustrated that although school counselors prefer to spend their time with counseling-related activities, many school counselors are involved in non-counseling activities, such as testing (Rayle & Adams, 2007), scheduling (Perera-Diltz & Mason, 2008), registering students for school (McLeod, 2005), and requesting and receiving records (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004). Involvement in non-counseling activities results in role confusion, role stress (Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005; Falls & Nichter, 2007), and role overload (Coll & Freeman, 1997). In addition, some factors that influence the actual role of the school counselor include (a) the school principal's perception of appropriate duties, (b) years of experience as a practicing school counselor, and (c) the school level (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school).

In a study of school principals' perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate tasks for school counselors, Perusse et al. (2004) found that school principals supported non-counseling activities, such as registration, scheduling, administration of achievement tests, and organizing student records, as part of the school counselor's role.

Additionally, in a study of 361 school counselors, Scarborough and Culbreth (2008) found that counselors with more years of experience were more likely to engage in activities that they preferred. To explain this finding, Scarborough and Culbreth

commented, “It takes years of experience to be able to effectively implement the variety of interventions that the school counselor is expected to perform” (p. 455). In their analysis of high school counselors’ roles, Nelson et al. (2008) also found that counselors with more years of experience reported more counseling activities than counselors with less years of experience. And finally, Rayle and Adams (2007) found that school counselors’ daily work activities differed depending on the school level. That is, while high school counselors reported that most of their tasks included non-counseling activities (i.e., administrative and planning), elementary school counselors reported that they spent most of their time with classroom guidance.

Although there is ample research regarding school counselors’ (a) roles and responsibilities (e.g., Ratts et al., 2007; Villalba et al., 2007) and (b) non-counseling duties (Falls & Nichter, 2007; Nelson et al., 2008; Perusse et al., 2004; Rayle & Adams, 2007; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008), less attention has focused on counseling students’ worries and Hispanic counselors-in training. After reviewing the literature, only two studies were found: Jordan and Kelly’s (2004) study of counseling students’ worries and Nelson and Jackson’s (2003) study with Hispanic counselors-in training.

In a study with Anglo counselors-in training, Jordan and Kelly (2004) used a survey to qualitatively examine counselors’ worries and concerns. Participants responded to an open-ended question that was designed to uncover their worries as beginning counselors. Jordan and Kelly found that competence, effectiveness, and fulfilling requirements were the three most reported worries. First, competence involved worries about “correct” counseling. Participants reported worries such as “I will say the wrong thing” or “Am I doing it [counseling] right” (Jordan & Kelly, p. 103). Second,

effectiveness included worries about helping future clients. For example, many participants mentioned the following worries: “That I will not be effective” or “not helping enough” (Jordan & Kelly, p. 103). Furthermore, participants reported worrying about fulfilling requirements, including practicum hours or finding a sufficient number of clients to counsel. In summary, Jordan and Kelly found that most worries (35.7%) involved competence and effectiveness as future counselors.

Nelson and Jackson (2003) interviewed eight Hispanic counselors-in training about important factors in their professional development. The following themes emerged from data analysis: knowledge, personal growth, experience, relationships, accomplishment, costs, and perceptions of the counseling profession. Nelson and Jackson concluded that knowledge, personal growth, and experience were also important in the professional development of Anglo counselors, while relationships, accomplishment, costs, and perceptions of the counseling profession were unique to Hispanic counselors. This finding provides evidence that (a) Hispanic counselors differ from their non-minority counterparts and (b) the efficacious need for research that compares Anglo and Hispanic counselors (Nelson & Jackson).

The current study was conducted with Hispanic counselors-in training to determine their worries and concerns as future counselors. The research questions guiding the current study included the following: (a) are Hispanic counselors-in training worried about the same issues as Anglo counselors-in training? (b) are Hispanic counselors-in training concerned about their effectiveness and competence as future school counselors? and (c) are Hispanic counselors-in training worried about placement in a position that involves non-counseling duties, such as paperwork and scheduling?

Based on an extensive literature review of school counselors' roles and responsibilities, our contention is that some of the most idealistic students will make a conscious effort to influence the implementation of a job description in line with national standards (e.g., ASCA National Model). We also hypothesized that participants would report worries about their effectiveness and competence as school counselors.

### Methods

A total of 24 school counseling graduate students (i.e., 22 females and 2 males) were recruited from a practicum one course at a university in the southwestern United States. At the time of data collection, the school counseling graduate program was not accredited by the Council for Accredited of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to participant recruitment, and participants were informed that their participation was voluntary. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 50, and average age was 33.41. Each participant self-identified as Hispanic, Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, or Latino. The term Hispanic is used to describe participants, which is consistent with previous literature (Nelson & Jackson, 2003).

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Participants were provided a demographic sheet and questionnaire with the following stimulus question: "What are some of the worries that you have as a beginning counselor?" Participants' responses lasted between 5 and 10 minutes.

The lead author analyzed responses and identified common themes. He had experience in qualitative journal writing, analysis of personal interviews, and background in grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data analysis

proceeded as follows. First, he used open-coding data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify sentences that had specific meaning units. In the context of the current study, each participant's worry was considered a specific meaning unit (i.e., a total of 114). Second, he used the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss) to compare and contrast meaning units from one transcript with meaning units from subsequent transcripts. This method allows researchers to generate emergent themes from qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin). Third, he organized meaning units into a thematic hierarchy. A total of 31 themes emerged from data analysis. Some themes could have been combined, but it was important to provide each worry with appropriate identification and meaning assignment.

### Results

A total of 114 worries were reported, with an average of 4.4 worries from each participant (See Table 1). 24.1% of total worries involved (a) the future (e.g., "Will I find a counseling position") and (b) non-counseling duties (e.g., "Given other duties instead of counseling students"). It is important to mention that participants who reported a worry about non-counseling duties also reported worries about their effectiveness or competence as school counselors. In addition, participants reported a moderate number of worries regarding training and preparedness (13.3%). One participant mentioned "not being adequately trained," and another participant mentioned that she did not know if her school counseling graduate program "was providing sufficient preparation." Moreover, participants reported concerns about serious issues (4.2%) such as death and suicide. And finally, participants were moderately worried about techniques. One participant mentioned "using appropriate techniques," and another participant was

Table 1

*Beginning Hispanic school counselors' worries, percentage of total worries, and sample worries and concerns.*

1. Training/preparedness	13.3	Not adequately trained
2. Non-counseling duties	12.5	Given other duties instead of counseling students
3. Future	11.6	Finding a job
4. Effectiveness	9.3	I will not be an effective counselor
5. Appropriate techniques	6.9	Not being able to reflect meaning
6. Competence	6.6	Not knowing what to say
7. Serious issues	4.2	How to handle death and suicide issues
8. Licensure and academic	4.2	Passing the certification tests
9. Client relations	4.2	Not being able to connect with the client
10. Emotion	3.3	Fear of crying with a sad story
11. Clients' goals	2.5	Helping clients meet goals
12. Stress	1.7	Job anxiety
13. Ethics	1.7	Knowing exactly when confidentiality should be breached
14. Doing harm	1.7	I worry that in my intent of helping someone I may end up hurting him/her
15. Help from co-workers	1.7	Learning to reach out from a friend
16. Enjoyment	1.7	Will I enjoy counseling?
17. Group counseling	1.7	I worry that the group may turn against me

18. Homework assignments	.8	I may not have enough activities that I can assign my clients/students
19. Supervision	.8	That I may get into trouble with my supervisor
20. Parents' complaints	.8	Handling the stress of parents' complaints
21. Blame	.8	Being blamed for others
22. Professional	.8	Maintaining a professional reputation
23. Non-compliance from other counselors	.8	I will be shunned by other counselors
24. Court	.8	Subpoenaed at early stage in counseling
25. Advocacy	.8	Losing the battle of fighting for the rights of counselors
26. Advice	.8	Not give advice
27. Bias	.8	Having some kind of unknown bias
28. Simplicity	.8	Counseling does not seem too difficult? Am I doing something wrong?
29. New career	.8	Starting with a new career
30. Note-taking	.8	Jotting down little information
31. Curriculum	.8	Following the curriculum accurately

*Note:* Sample N=24, N of total worries=114.

worried about “not being able to apply appropriate techniques with a client.” Although it is important to highlight the most reported worries, it is also important to point out the least reported worries. Relatively few worries included doing harm to clients (1.7%), ethics (1.7%), and supervision from practicum professors (0.8%).

## Discussion

There are numerous differences between results from the current study and Jordan and Kelly's (2004) study with Anglo counselors-in training. First, although Jordan and Kelly found that competence and effectiveness were the two most supported worries (35.8%), these worries only represented 15.9% of worries in the current study. Second, while Jordan and Kelly found that effectiveness, competence, and fulfilling requirements were the three most identified worries of Anglo counseling students, the current study found that training and preparedness, non-counseling duties, and finding a school counseling position were the most reported worries of Hispanic counseling students. It is also important to mention that worrying about non-counseling duties was not found in Jordan and Kelly's study. Furthermore, the current study found that many worries involved serious issues, such as death and suicide, which was not found in Jordan and Kelly's study. And finally, although none of the participants in Jordan and Kelly's study reported concerns about techniques, the current study found that use of appropriate techniques represented 6.1% of total worries. Participants mentioned reflection of meaning, using sufficient number of open-ended questions, or knowing when to conclude a counseling session as some of their concerns as future counselors.

None of the participants mentioned a worry that involved some aspect of helping students pursue higher education. The ASCA National Model is a framework that school counselors are supposed to use to help students pursue higher education (Villalba et al., 2007). Based on results from the current study it is difficult to determine why participants did not mention a worry in this area. However, there are several possibilities. First, participants from the current study felt confident in their ability to find

and disseminate college information to students. Second, school counseling graduate programs are not doing a sufficient job of facilitating information to graduate students. It is possible that participants from the current study did not know that their role as a school counselor includes helping students pursue and succeed in higher education. Third, it is possible that participants did not understand the stimulus question and assumed the researchers were inquiring about their concerns about individual counseling and not their role as a school counselor. This possibility appears less likely as many participants reported worries and concerns directly related to their role as future school counselors (e.g., non-counseling duties and not being able to find a job). Finally, maybe counselors-in training do not find the ASCA National Model to be important and relevant.

Based on the results from the current study there are a number of implications for practice and research. First, counselor educators must help future school counselors alleviate some of their fears and concerns. Since future school counselors were worried about finding a school counseling position upon graduation, graduate programs must do a better job of helping school counseling graduates enter the workforce. This may include informing students about job possibilities in various geographic areas and helping students locate job fairs in their community. In addition, future school counselors from the current study reported worries that involved training or preparedness. Research regarding the perception of effectiveness of school counseling programs from future or current school counselors is lacking (Milsom, 2002). Therefore, it is important that future research cull practicing school counselors' opinions and perspectives regarding their perception of their graduate training. Results could provide insight into

the relationship between graduate preparation and practice. Furthermore, the current study included participants from a non-CACREP school counseling program, so participants from other programs may or may not report the worries that emerged in the present study. It is highly possible that participants from a CACREP program would not be the most concerned about *training* or *preparedness*.

It is important to note that involvement in non-counseling duties was the third most reported worry in the present study. Research has illustrated that school counselors are given a plethora of paperwork and other non-counseling duties (e.g., Falls & Nichter, 2007). School counseling graduate programs must do a better job of promoting advocacy for the school counseling profession. That is, in addition to focusing on theory counselor educators must pay close attention to the fact that many school counselors do not spend the majority of their time “counseling.” Thus, counselor educators should help school counselors (a) convey to school principals the role of the school counselor, (b) develop strategies to prevent numerous administrative responsibilities, and (c) incorporate self-reflection strategies to prevent role confusion or counselor burnout. Once school counseling graduate programs help their students advocate for the school counseling profession (i.e., helping school counselors actually counsel), it is possible that they will not be as concerned about non-counseling duties since they will be able to advocate for themselves. However, counselors-in training may not be trained to advocate for the school counseling profession, as indicated by one participant from the current study who was worried about, “Losing the battle of fighting for the rights of counselors.”

Since 24 Hispanic participants were surveyed for the current study, generalizability of the results is not known. In addition, because these university students attended the same Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), their experiences and worries may differ from those attending other universities. Additionally, participants were recruited from a practicum one course in a school counseling graduate program. Students in other classes (e.g., first class in a school counseling graduate program) may differ from those who participated in the current study. Lastly, a comparison was not made regarding school counselors across building levels. For example, we did not compare if elementary counselors were worried about the same issues as high school counselors.

### Conclusion

The perception of future school counselors is that school counseling positions involve administrative responsibilities and other non-counseling duties, which appears to be based on the reality of the school counseling profession (Falls & Nichter, 2007; Nelson et al., 2008; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). Results from the current study indicate that Hispanic counselors-in training are worried about their effectiveness and competence as school counselors but are also concerned about placement in a position that involves administrative responsibilities. This study provides evidence for the continued need of advocacy for the school counseling profession and the efficacious need for research that explores strategies to prevent school counselors from being consumed with non-counseling duties.

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### Author Note

Javier Cavazos Jr. is a graduate student at The University of Texas-Pan American. He will graduate with a Masters in Guidance and Counseling in December 2008. He has worked as a research assistant for the past two years in the department of Educational Psychology. He conducts literature searches, co-writes journal articles, prepares manuscripts for submission to journals, and gains Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for research studies. In addition, he was a member of g-force, an organization designed to help students pursue higher education. He traveled to high schools in South Texas to talk to students about the importance of higher education. During this experience he was appalled to learn what teachers thought about their Latina/o students, that is, teachers believed that many Latina/o students did not have the ability to pursue higher education. Based on this experience he formulated the following research interests: resiliency among Latina/o students, helping Latina/o students overcome barriers to higher education, and coping methods used by successful Latina/o students. Javier has published three peer reviewed journal articles with professors from UT-Pan American, and he has presented at 18 national, state, or local conferences on various research topics. He currently resides in South Texas with his extended Hispanic family. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Javier Cavazos, Jr., 2327 North First, Harlingen, Texas 78550, (956) 357-4550, (956) 381-2395 (fax), ljcavazos@broncs.utpa.edu

Dr. Victor Alvarado is a professor in the Educational Psychology department at The University of Texas-Pan American. He received his doctorate from Western Michigan University, in Educational Leadership with an emphasis in Counseling. Victor

has conducted research in Counseling, Quantitative Analysis of Topographic Brain Mapping under the sponsorship of NASA, and published in a number of peer reviewed journals and presented at numerous national and international conferences. Victor has also practiced and taught counseling for many years. In addition to teaching and conducting research in a variety of areas, he has mentored a number of graduate students pursuing advanced degrees.

Iliana Rodriguez is a graduate student at The University of Texas-Pan American. She will graduate with a Masters in Guidance and Counseling in December 2008. In addition to teaching at an elementary school, she has developed a keen interest in research. Therefore, she joined a research team that focuses on helping Hispanic students pursue and succeed in higher education. She currently has one article under review in a peer-reviewed journal, and she will present research findings at the American Educational Research Association's annual conference in San Diego, California. Her ultimate goal includes a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and helping Hispanic students pursue higher education. Iliana currently resides in South Texas with her family.

John Robert Iruegas is an undergraduate student at The University of Texas-Pan American. He will graduate in May 2010 with a Bachelors of Arts in Psychology and minors in Leadership Studies and Addiction Studies. Currently, John Robert is actively involved in student-life as a member of several student organizations, including student government. As an active member of the student-body, John Robert has participated in numerous community service events. In addition to participation in student organizations and community service, he has developed a keen interest in research. He

is currently working on an article that focuses on helping Hispanic students overcome barriers and challenges to higher education. Although he enjoys research and the process of uncovering new knowledge, his ultimate goal includes working with children. Therefore, he would like to obtain a doctoral degree in Psychology in order to open his own clinic. John Robert currently resides in Edinburg, Texas.