Obstacles and Successes in Implementing the ASCA National Model in Schools

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Abstract

Researchers surveyed CACREP school counseling program graduates from a southeastern university to explore successes and barriers in implementing a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program. Findings included significant differences across school levels in programmatic change ($p < .001$) and responsive services ($p = .041$). Furthermore, primary/elementary school counselors were significantly different from middle and high school counselors in conducting more guidance lessons and collecting enumerative data ($p < .01$).

Obstacles and Successes in Implementing the ASCA National Model in Schools

The role of the school counselor professional has been a subject of debate throughout the profession's history. It wasn't until the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) created the ASCA National Standards which identified student competencies in the academic, career, and personal/social domains that school counselors began to take a more vigorous stance on their involvement as leaders of comprehensive school counseling programs (Dahir, 2001). At the turn of the century, the ASCA National Model® was designed to augment the National Standards (ASCA, 2003), and to serve as a template for professional school counselors who are attempting to transition from a traditional, service-oriented approach to a one that is programmatic, comprehensive in design, and developmental in nature. The comprehensive developmental school counseling (CDSC) program provides counselors with the means to be accountable for student growth academically, vocationally, and personally/socially (Camizzi, Clark, Yacco, & Goodman, 2009). CDSC programs are not a new concept. This approach first emerged in the 1970s (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001) and continued to evolve throughout the following decades. Nevertheless, school counselors have been slow to transition into a programmatic orientation despite the fervent efforts of the ASCA.

Comprehensive, Developmental School Counseling Programs

School counseling literature is replete with information and discussion regarding comprehensive, developmental programs, (Foster, Young, & Hermann, 2005; Galassi, Griffin, & Akos, 2008; Pérusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2003; Poynton, Schumach & Wilczenski, 2008; Schwallie-Giddis, ter Maat, & Pak 2003; Walsh, Barrett,

& DePaul, 2007) and the positive impact of CDSC programs is growing. Lapan, Gysbers, and Sun (1997) revealed that high school students enrolled in a fully implemented CDSC program had a more positive perception of school. In another study, Gysbers, Lapan, Blair, Starr, and Wilmes (1999) found that school counselors reported substantial increases in activities compatible to their training and education when working in a CDSC program.

Other studies focused on school counselor essential tasks that supported a CDSC program. Foster et al. (2005) asked school counselors about their engagement in activities that centered around the academic, career, and personal/social development of students, as well as the frequency they performed activities in each of these domains. From their responses, it was concluded that school counselors were performing activities that mirrored those considered essential in a CDSC program. In contrast, a study by Scarborough and Culbreth (2008) found discrepancies between the way school counselors actually spent their time compared with how they preferred to spend their time. Specifically, school counselors indicated a preference for providing direct interventions with students as opposed to engaging in non-counseling duties. Differences between school counselors were reported based on the school level in which they were employed and their years of experience. High school counselors were least likely to work in the way they preferred, whereas elementary school counselors were more likely to perform appropriate, preferred tasks. These findings are similar to the greater satisfaction expressed by school counselors who performed duties suitable to their training compared to the dissatisfaction expressed by school counselors who performed inappropriate duties (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006).

In a study by Poynton et al. (2008), Massachusetts school counselors' primary concern in implementing a CDSC program was how it would influence their daily professional life. Their secondary concerns were their ability to assess outcomes of interventions and the impact and value of the model on students and families. Many of these participants believed that the outcomes of their work were not valued or expected.

Although the literature highlights the positive outcomes brought about by a CDSC program, there is less knowledge surrounding the extent to which school counselors have implemented a CDSC program. In one study (Oberman & Studer, 2008), 51% of the surveyed school counselors reported that they had not instituted a CDSC program in their schools, 26% of the participants reported working in a comprehensive, developmental counseling program, and 23% reported that they were in the process of implementing this type of program. This present study was undertaken to expand these results by investigating the barriers and aids that influenced the implementation of a CDSC program.

Purpose of the Study

Although developmental programs have been in existence for the past 40 years, the National Standards and the ASCA National Model are relatively recent professional developments. Therefore, more research is needed on how school counselors use these prototypes in developing their programs (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). In addition, obtaining an understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder the development and implementation of a CDSC program may assist counselor educators and practitioners in addressing programmatic change that more accurately addresses

the developmental philosophy espoused by the ASCA. To obtain information surrounding these concerns, the following research questions were asked:

1. What impediments and supports do school counselors identify in implementing a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program?
2. What tasks do school counselors perform that are aligned with the standards of practice in a CDSC program?
3. What strategies do school counselors employ to promote school counselor role transformation?

Method

Participants

Data were collected from graduates of a CACREP school counselor program from a research university located in the southeastern portion of the United States. Participants were located through a stored database of program graduates, former students who provided valid e-mail addresses for graduates we were unable to locate, and a search on area school website directories. Eighty one graduates from the years 2003-2009 were identified as research participants due to their in-depth training in implementing the ASCA National Model. This knowledge was gained when the participants were school counselors-in-training and they were required to develop a CDSC program in partnership with the school counselor(s) at local schools. The project required activities such as analyzing the report card of the assigned school, developing and conducting a needs assessment, planning a program based on all the components and themes of the ASCA National Model, designing program and counselor evaluations, and presenting the finished product to stakeholders. Seventy-seven graduates who

graduated during this time period were sent an e-mail that included an explanation of the study and a link to complete the survey that was designed on *MRinterview*.

The initial email was followed by two reminder emails in one-week intervals. Recipients were provided a consent form with consent indicated by survey completion, and responses were automatically collected and stored as part of the web-based survey package. Respondent information was not attached to responses, thereby maintaining confidentiality. To increase the response rate, a $25 *Target* gift card was offered as an incentive for survey completion. Individuals who completed the survey and wished to be eligible for the gift card provided their e-mail address, and a random number was computer generated to identify the winner of the gift card. The winner was notified and received the gift card through surface mail. Participants who indicated that they had not been employed as a school counselor were thanked for their participation and their responses were removed from the data. Fifty-three individuals (65%) out of a total of 81 responded, but not all completed the entire survey; 48 (59%) completed the entire survey. Therefore, the number of participants reported in the results section will vary depending on each individual survey item.

Of the 50 respondents who answered demographic items, 46 (92%) were female and four (8%) male. There were 48 respondents who identified as Caucasian (96%), with one (2%) who identified as African American, and one (2%) Native American. Forty-four participants (83%) had less than five years of school counseling experience. Fifty-two respondents responded to the question regarding their current school level. Of the 52, 31% (n = 16) of the respondents were employed in school level 3-5. One (2%) indicated employment in the K-2 level; due to this sole K-2 respondent, the K-2 school

levels were merged with the 3-5 school levels for a K-5 primary/elementary category (*n* = 17) that comprised 33% of the respondents. Fifteen percent (*n* = 8) were employed at the middle school, and 52% (*n* = 27) were employed at the high school level. Approximately 54% (*n* = 28) indicated that they were employed at the same school (or schools, if placed in multiple schools) in which they were first employed as a school counselor.

Table 1

Respondent Demographic Data

Variable	Number of Respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	50		
Female		46	92%
Male		4	8%
Race	50		
Caucasian		48	96%
African American		1	2%
Native American		1	2%
Years' of Experience	53		
5 or Less Years		44	83%
6-10 Years		7	13%
11-15 Years		1	2%
16-20 Years		1	2%
Grade	52		
K-2		1	2%
3-5		16	31%
6-8 Middle School		8	15%
9-12 High School		27	52%
Place of Employment			
At 1st School Employed	52		
Yes		28	54%
No		24	46%

Note. Frequency counts vary due to some respondents not answering all items or marking multiple responses to one item.

Instrumentation

A survey was designed using the exact definitions of each component and theme as identified in the *ASCA National Model Workbook* (ASCA, 2004). A pilot study was conducted using a random sample of the identified participants. As a pilot study, we sent the survey to eight (10%) of the graduates to determine the clarity of questions and instrumentation format. These pilot participants were asked to complete the entire survey, report the amount of time it took to complete, and provide feedback on questions or directions that were unclear. The survey was revised based on their feedback. The researchers did not conduct further psychometric analyses of the instrument due to the high face validity of the instrument and the nature of the revisions suggested by the pilot sample.

The survey consisted of five sections. The first section of the survey included demographic questions. Items in the second, third and fourth sections prompted participants to respond using a four-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all to 4 = completely) to indicate their perception of how well their school counseling program met the standards of a CDSC program when they first arrived at their present school, and their perceptions of the extent to which the program met these standards at the time of taking the survey. The second section contained three questions pertaining to participants' perception of the extent to which their current school counseling program met the standards of a CDSC program when they first arrived at their present school, their perceptions of the extent to which their program met these standards at the time of taking the survey, and the factors that contributed to any perceived change. Section three included questions related to the various components and themes of the ASCA

National Model as defined by the ASCA. The delivery system encompassed four questions regarding the guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and systems support. The management component comprised of three questions in regard to management agreements, advisory councils, and planning calendars. The accountability component included four questions regarding perception of data collection and analysis, school counselor performance evaluation, collection of enumerative data, and extent to which data are shared with stakeholders. The foundation component contained one question regarding the school counselor program mission and philosophy. The fourth section contained one question for each of the themes: leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change. The fifth section provided participants with an open-ended response format to provide information on barriers or strengths that assisted or hindered in their implementation of a CDSC program.

Psychometric Properties

Although reliability and validity coefficients were not calculated, the instrument had face validity since the ASCA definitions from the ASCA Workbook (2004*)* were used to construct the questions. Face validity is defined as the degree that an instrument subjectively relates to a given construct as judged by individuals taking the instrument (Furr & Bacharach, 2008).

Statistical Analysis

One-way ANOVAs were utilized to compare mean values for each variable (i.e., ASCA National Model component questions) across the three groups: (1) primary/elementary, (2) middle, (3) high school. Tukey's HSD test was used to explain

any significant main effects. In the event that any statistical assumption of an ANOVA was violated, non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis tests were employed and subsequent Mann-Whitney *U* tests were used to facilitate pairwise comparisons to explain any significant main effects. Statistical significance was considered at a $p < .05$ level. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 17.

Results

Non-significant main effects were found for foundation ($p = .619$), management ($p = .972$), and themes ($p = .696$). Significant main effects were found for the delivery, $F(2, 48) = 7.434$, $p = .002$, and the accountability, $F(2, 47) = 4.223$, $p = .02$ components (Table 2). In terms of delivery, Tukey's HSD test showed a significant difference between primary/elementary ($M = 3.67$) and high school ($M = 3.03$), $p = .001$. The primary difference for the accountability component was found between primary/elementary ($M = 3.00$) and middle/junior high ($M = 2.25$), $p = .03$.

Non-significant main effects were found for the philosophy/belief element within the foundation component ($p = .619$). Non-significant main effects were found within the guidance component including individual student planning ($p = .351$), responsive services ($p = .054$), and systems support elements ($p = .06$). Non-significant main effects were found within the management component including agreements ($p = .784$) and advisory council elements ($p = .798$). Non-significant main effects were found for data effectiveness ($p = .883$), performance ($p = .189$), and data sharing ($p = .363$) within the accountability component between the three groups. A significant main effect was found for the enumerative data element, $F(2, 47) = 10.10$, $p < .001$ within the accountability component, with significant differences found between

Table 2

Means of School Levels and ASCA Components

Dependent Variable	(I) Grade Level	(J) Grade Level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.[a]
Foundation	Primary/elementary	Middle/junior high	.183	.399	1.000
		High school	.341	.293	.753
	Middle/junior high	Primary/elementary	-.183	.399	1.000
		High school	.157	.366	1.000
	High school	Primary/elementary	-.341	.293	.753
		Middle/junior high	-.157	.366	1.000
Delivery	Primary/elementary	Middle/junior high	.292	.232	.643
		High school	.630*	.170	.002*
	Middle/junior high	Primary/elementary	-.292	.232	.643
		High school	.338	.213	.358
	High school	Primary/elementary	-.630*	.170	.002*
		Middle/junior high	-.338	.213	.358
Management	Primary/elementary	Middle/junior high	-.050	.300	1.000
		High school	-.059	.221	1.000
	Middle/junior high	Primary/elementary	.050	.300	1.000
		High school	-.009	.276	1.000
	High school	Primary/elementary	.059	.221	1.000
		Middle/junior high	.009	.276	1.000
Accountability	Primary/elementary	Middle/junior high	.750*	.285	.034*
		High school	.491	.210	.071
	Middle/junior high	Primary/elementary	-.750*	.285	.034*
		High school	-.259	.262	.983
	High school	Primary/elementary	-.491	.210	.071
		Middle/junior high	.259	.262	.983
Themes	Primary/elementary	Middle/junior high	.208	.246	1.000
		High school	.093	.181	1.000
	Middle/junior high	Primary/elementary	-.208	.246	1.000
		High school	-.116	.227	1.000
	High school	Primary/elementary	-.093	.181	1.000
		Middle/junior high	.116	.227	1.000

Note. **p* <.05.

primary/elementary (*M* =3.53) and middle/junior high (*M* = 1.88), *p* = .001, and primary/elementary and high school (*M* = 2.33), *p* = .001.

The assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated when analyzing the guidance curriculum. A non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test yielded a significant main effect for guidance curriculum, χ^2 (2, *n* = 51) = 17.151, p < .001. Subsequent Mann-Whitney *U* tests found significant differences between primary/elementary and middle/junior high, Mann-Whitney *U* = 31.50, *p* = .029, primary/elementary and high school, Mann-Whitney *U* = 57.00, *p* < .001, and a non-significant difference between middle/junior high and high school, Mann-Whitney *U* = 80.00, *p* = .202.

Approximately 31% of the participants ranked their program between a 3 and 4 upon first arriving compared with approximately 55% who ranked their current program between a 3 and 4; an increase for all school levels. Primary/elementary school mean scores increased from 2.13 to 2.87, middle school mean scores increased from 2.75 to 3.00, and high school mean scores increased from 2.28 to 2.68. Although there was no significant difference within each school level, change in aggregate mean scores was statistically significant (*p* < .001) with the mean of 2.39 for their perception of the program when they first arrived at their present school to a mean of 2.85 for their perception at the time of the study.

Researchers analyzed the themes inherent to the National Model across school levels to determine the areas that were most representative of a CDSC model. The results were non-significant. Refer to Table 3 for subsequent means and standard deviations among the three groups.

Table 3

Means of School Levels and ASCA Components

Variable	School Level	*M*	*SD*
Foundation	Elementary	2.93	0.884
	Middle	2.75	1.165
	High	2.64	0.870
Delivery	Elementary	3.67	0.386
	Middle	3.38	0.551
	High	3.03	0.579
Management	Elementary	2.20	0.649
	Middle	2.25	0.598
	High	2.25	0.714
Accountability	Elementary	3.00	0.688
	Middle	2.25	0.655
	High	2.51	0.630
Themes	Elementary	3.08	0.540
	Middle	2.88	0.641
	High	2.99	0.552

Note. Based on a 4-point Likert scale indicating how well the program meets the CDSC program element (1 = Not at all and 4 = Completely).

Discussion

The ASCA National Model provides a template for school counselors to use in developing a comprehensive, developmental program. Yet, even as the benefits of CDSC programs are receiving recognition, change is slow and perceptions are difficult to alter. Although research has been conducted on school counselors' perceptions of the development and implementation of a CDSC program (Poynton et al., 2008), the extent to which respondents were knowledgeable of how to implement a CDSC program is less clear. As posited by Sink and Yilik-Downer (2001), the more knowledgeable and confident school counselors are in implementing a CDSC program, the more vested they are in creating change. In this study, participants received

extensive training in the development and implementation of a school counseling program using the ASCA National Model in graduate training prior to becoming employed as school counselors. The purpose of this study was to understand specific issues that aided or frustrated efforts to develop a CDSC program. A discussion regarding program change and the various components and themes in addition to study limitations follows.

Program Changes

It was encouraging to note a positive change in participants' perception of their current school counseling program compared to their assessment of the program when they first arrived as a school counselor. Although there were no significant differences between each school level, there was a greater difference in mean scores at the primary/elementary level (M = 2.93) than at the middle school (M = 2.75) and high school level (M = 2.64). Scarborough and Culbreth's (2008) research indicated that high school counselors were least likely to work in the way they preferred, whereas elementary counselors were more likely to perform appropriate, preferred tasks. This conclusion may be linked to Baggerly and Osborn's (2006) conclusions that school counselors express greater satisfaction when performing duties suitable to their training compared to the dissatisfaction expressed by school counselors performing inappropriate duties. More extensive research is needed to further explore whether primary/elementary school counselors are more readily able to make a program shift and express more job satisfaction compared to their middle school and high school peers.

Delivery

In the delivery services component there was a significant difference between school levels for the guidance curriculum and responsive services. Primary/elementary school counselors incorporated guidance lessons into their programs significantly more than did high school counselors; this corresponds with the greater amount of time primary/elementary counselors should spend in this area compared to their colleagues at other school levels (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000).

In regard to the responsive services area, the mean for each of the school levels was “better than average” with primary/elementary school counselors revealing the highest Mean (*M* = 3.67) followed by middle school counselors (*M* = 3.38) and high school counselors (*M* = 3.03). An overall difference was observed between high school, middle, and elementary school counselors, yet a pairwise comparison showed non-significant differences between school levels. This result may be due to the study not having enough power with a potential Type II error (i.e., additional participants could be sought in future studies). More research is needed to better understand the types of responsive services that are provided at each school level.

Management

The management component was the area least incorporated into all of the program levels (tied with accountability at the middle school level). The majority of participants in this study were only recently inducted into the profession with approximately two-thirds indicating less than five years of school counseling experience. It is possible that due to the participants’ novice status that engaging in management agreements and/or forming and leading an advisory committee are tasks that create

discomfort. It may be perceived that more experienced counselors are in a better position to initiate these tasks. Yet, this component is instrumental in guiding program change. For instance, agreements, action plans, use of time and data, an awareness of who will be conducting what activity, when the activity is to be conducted, and the time frame for plans are all tasks that regulate the process. A well-constructed plan that identifies benchmarks and personnel responsible for tasks may ease program transition. More information is needed in determining how program management plans are executed, and who is responsible for these plans.

Accountability

In the accountability component school counselors across all school levels were collecting data “slightly better than average.” It is difficult to understand the reason counselors are not engaged in collecting and analyzing data more frequently, particularly with the demand for program accountability. School counselors are more likely to have a more comprehensive background in assessment and evaluation than do teachers and/or administrators (Ekstrom, Elmore, Schafer, Trotter, & Webster, 2004), and when school counselors who do not demonstrate program effectiveness change from the status quo is difficult.

Counselor educators may wish to consider involving school counselor interns in action research activities on a topic that would benefit the school site to which they are assigned. This theory to application process could leave a lasting impression at the school site and provide the intern with a concrete method of putting research into practice while gaining more confidence in collecting and analyzing additional data in other areas. Furthermore, this type of activity would accentuate the integration of the

school counseling program to the academic mission of the school and highlight the assimilation of the school counseling program with the greater school community.

Foundation

The foundation component defines the program and answers the questions, Who are school counselors? What are the needs of our students? How are school counselors integral to the mission of the school? (Cobia & Henderson, 2003). At all school levels this component was incorporated “less than average.” Primary/Elementary school counselors scored the highest (*M* = 2.93) in adhering to their mission statement and program competencies compared to middle (*M* = 2.75) and high school (*M* = 2.64) counselors. Without a clear statement that defines the program, identifies school counselors as leaders of the school counseling program, and assimilates the school counseling program into the school mission, it is uncertain as to how stakeholders gain awareness of this educational program.

CDSC Program Change Considerations

Participants noted that program transformation was facilitated when principals and other decision-makers supported their efforts. Correspondingly, when employed in a state that mandates CDSC programs, the transformation from a service approach to that of a developmental approach made the transition easier. It was notable that tenure decisions were an issue in leading a transformed program, and in some cases implementing a new approach to school counseling was not actively pursued until job security was assured. Respondents employed at multiple schools indicated difficulty in creating and implementing a successful developmental program. Time constraints make this change difficult especially when there is only one school counselor employed in a

particular school. Change takes time, and focusing on one or two steps may lessen frustration while revealing the impact of the school counseling program. It has been suggested that program transformation takes a minimum of five to six years (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000).

When asked for specific factors to which they attributed change and the barriers and helpful aids in making the transition to a CDSC program, the most frequently reported responses and corresponding percentages based on the individuals who responded to this question include:

- Supportive administration, especially those who have taken a course in school counseling, and faculty (39%)
- Collaboration among counselors in the same school system or district (20%)
- The ASCA National Model & Website information (13%)

Open-ended responses that were less commonly reported but also provide an understanding of transitional aids include:

- A new school provided an opportunity to lead a CDSC program
- Addition of guidance classes and small groups to work within the responsive area
- Using a needs assessment and using data to show improvements
- Experience as a school counselor
- Understanding the school climate
- A supportive PTA and community relations
- Actual plans that included an organized time management system and data collection system

- State mandates to follow a CDSC model

Researchers asked a second open-ended question requesting participants to provide information on their individual role in developing a CDSC program. The most frequently reported open-ended responses and corresponding percentages include:

- Multiple tasks that restrict engaging in new activities (15%)
- Educating staff, faculty, and administrators about the CDSC program (15%)
- As a new school counselor contributions are minor (13%)
- Taking small steps and not making radical changes (13%)

Individual results that were less commonly reported but make the research on developing CDSC programs better understood were:

- Having the unique opportunity to replace a previous counselor which allowed an opportunity to sit with administration to discuss my role.
- Multiple schools makes transition difficult
- Having the ability to shift non counseling responsibilities to others

Limitations

The results of this study provide intriguing preliminary findings regarding the obstacles and successes of implementing a CDSC program; however, as this study sought responses from a relatively small sample of professional school counselor graduates from one university in the southeast, results have limited external validity and the potential for committing Type II errors is possible. Additionally, this sample was made up of predominately Caucasian female respondents mostly working in high schools and elementary schools; a more diverse sample equally representing school counselor at each level would provide greater generalizability. No reliability or validity

coefficients were calculated for the instrument utilized to gather data in the study. While the instrument contains high face validity due to questions being derived directly from the ASCA National Model, the psychometric qualities of the instrument are uncertain and subsequent outcomes of the study should be interpreted with caution. Face validity is not as empirically relevant as content and construct validity but contains important implications for the practical utility of a given instrument and the honesty with which participants respond to items (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008).

An additional limitation is that the participants were graduates of a school counseling program that emphasized a CDSC program through coursework and active collaboration with area school counselors in designing a program that mirrored this philosophy. Therefore, it is also possible that the results may have been influenced by cognitive dissonance, the anxiety that one feels when a person holds two conflicting thoughts (Brehm & Kassin, 1996), such as being trained in one model and performing in a different model. However, because participants were able to provide a justification for the state of their program, and responses were anonymous, it is possible that sincere attitudes were expressed.

Future studies can include an increased sample size, instrumentation with more established psychometric properties, participants from a broader geographical region, the inclusion of perceptions of a CDSC program from different constituents (e.g., principals, teachers, parents, etc.), and more specific questions to more clearly identify the obstacles and successes of implementing a CDSC program.

Summary

Although it appears that school counselors appreciate the benefits of a CDSC program, they are discovering that its implementation is difficult. As sociological, economic and political issues have redefined and continue to shape the school counselor's role, ongoing investigation into the barriers and successes associated with implementing a CDSC program is required. As programs change to mirror the philosophy of the ASCA, more school counselors will be able to engage in tasks that are consistent with their training to better meet the vocational, academic, and personal needs of all students.

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Author Note

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