

The Role School Counselors Believe They Should Adopt in Dropout Prevention

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Abstract

The ASCA National Model's theme and element definitions were used to investigate the school counselor's role in dropout prevention. The domains recommended by the What Works Clearinghouse (staying-in-school, progressing-in-school, and completing-school) were used to determine how accountability should be assessed. Results indicate that counselors view delivery system as the primary role they should adopt followed in order by advocacy and collaboration, systemic change, and leadership. Counselors did not indicate a preference for any one assessment domain except when comparing the completing-school and progressing-in-school domains. In that comparison, the progressing-in-school domain was the preferred method of demonstrating accountability in dropout prevention.

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Students dropping out of high school constitute a major problem facing education in this country. Every year, approximately 1.2 million young people, roughly 7,000 each school day, do not graduate from high school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Only about 70% of students earn their high school diploma on time. Moreover, this rate varies markedly as a function of race and ethnicity with 57.8 percent of Hispanic, 53.4 percent of African American, and 49.3 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students graduating with a regular high school diploma as compared to 76.2 percent of white students and 80.2 percent of Asian Americans (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

Dropping out of school is associated with a multitude of negative consequences for both the student and society. Dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed, involved with the legal system, be in poorer health, have lower incomes, receive government assistance, and commit high risk acts, thereby increasing dollars spent on government programs, such as welfare and incarceration (Baum & Payea, 2004; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Laird, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006; Manning, 2005; Stallings, 2007). One estimate puts the social expense for losses and interventions resulting from dropping out of high school at more than 200 billion dollars for a class of students over their lifetime (Stallings, 2007).

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research about which school counseling interventions and services are effective in dropout prevention or about what the primary role the school counselor should be in these initiatives. There is some recent research from statewide evaluations in Nebraska and Utah that higher graduation rates are

associated with schools with favorable ratios of students-to-counselors and comprehensive developmental guidance programs (Carey & Harrington, 2010). Nevertheless, it still remains unclear which specific interventions are impactful.

Over the years, a variety of dropout-prevention roles and interventions have been recommended to both school counselors and educators in general. For example, Neile, Balfanz, and Herzog (2007) supported the use of an early identification system for students at risk for dropping out of school. They reported that students in the middle grades and early in high school send out empirically identifiable distress signals in such forms as test scores, report card grades, behavior marks, attendance records, special education status, and English language learner status years prior to dropping out of school. They urge educators to tune into these distress signals as soon as possible and to create needed interventions.

With respect to relevant interventions, services, and programs for drop-out prevention, school counselors have been instructed to provide a variety of such services and assume myriad roles. One of the most common and traditional of these is group counseling (e.g., Blum & Jones, 1993; Larsen & Shertzer, 1987; O'Hara, Reed, & Davenport, 1978). Blum and Jones (1993), for example, proposed and evaluated an academic group counseling and mentoring intervention for at-risk middle school students. Larsen and Shertzer (1987) emphasized helping potential dropouts to develop more positive self-concepts through group counseling, and O'Hara et al. (1978) provided 'supportive' group counseling with 10th and 11th graders who evidenced several risk factors associated with dropping out of high school. More recently, Bemak, Chung, and Siroskey-Sabdo (2005) proposed empowerment groups for academic

success as an innovative approach to preventing failure in at-risk, urban African American girls in high school.

A number of more contemporary roles and interventions have also been espoused. Bemak and Chung (2005) stressed the importance of school counselors serving as student advocates in order to bring about social justice and equity for all students. This role is vital particularly in urban environments in which social inequities, achievement gaps, and dropout rates tended to be especially pronounced for racial/ethnic minorities as compared to middle class white students. Ho (2001) discussed the school counselor's role with at-risk children and families in terms of collaborating with community agencies to provide family-centered integrated services. Finally, citing the decrease in available community services coupled with such worsening social conditions as poverty, homelessness, and substance abuse, Lockhart and Keys (1998) advocated for school counselors to function as mental health service providers to at-risk students and their families. However, all of these recommendations about the school counselor's role in dropout prevention were offered largely without the benefit of either empirical support or professional consensus.

With the advent of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2003), standards were promulgated for how professional school counselors and their comprehensive school counseling programs are to function. The Model "provides a framework for the program components, the school counselor's role in implementation and the underlying philosophies of leadership, advocacy and systemic change" (ASCA, 2003, p. 9). Although the model asserts the importance of facilitating student development in three domains (academic, career, and personal social), the "...school counselor's chief

mission is still supporting the academic achievement of all students so they are prepared for the ever-changing world of the 21st century" (ASCA, 2003, p. 8). This priority is emphasized throughout the document; for example, "the ultimate goal of a school counseling program is to support the school's academic mission" (ASCA, 2003, p. 52).

Given this strong emphasis on the school counselor's academic mission in the National Model, and the fact that dropouts represent a major failure of the educational system, it is curious that no explicit mention was made in the Model about what role school counselors are to play in dropout prevention. At the same time, the Model does specify program components that are relevant to meeting the needs of at-risk students and to addressing the dropout problem. These components include the four themes – leadership, advocacy, collaboration/teaming, and systemic change – and the delivery system element. Unfortunately, the Model does not provide guidance about which of these should serve as the school counselor's primary emphasis in initiatives to reduce the dropout rate.

The accountability system is another element of the Model that is relevant to the school counselor's role in dropout prevention. It answers the question: "How are students different as a result of the program?" (ASCA, 2003, p. 23). Although accountability is an important emphasis in the Model and in education generally, no professional standards or guidelines were offered regarding how the school counselor's effectiveness in reducing the dropout rate should be assessed. For example, is effectiveness and accountability of a school counseling program in dropout prevention an all or none phenomenon, i.e., the student either graduated or dropped out? Or do

some other measures of accomplishment such as at-risk students being promoted or making progress in school better reflect that effectiveness or impact?

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role middle and high school counselors believe they should adopt in dropout prevention. Role was operationalized in terms of the four National Model themes – leadership, advocacy, collaboration/teaming, and systemic change – and the delivery system element that school counselors could engage in with respect to dropout prevention. Thus, the ASCA National Model served as the conceptual framework for the study. Specifically, definitions relevant to dropout prevention based on the four Model themes and the delivery system element were constructed and employed to investigate counselors' views regarding their preferred dropout prevention role.

With respect to accountability, the National Model also does not specify standards for assessing the effectiveness of school counselor interventions in dropout prevention. Best practices for assessing school counselor accountability in this area are yet to be established. However, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) of the Institute of Educational Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education has formulated three domains for evaluating the effectiveness of dropout prevention interventions in general. In the current study, those three WWC domains served as the means for operationalizing accountability of school counseling in dropout prevention. The domains match accountability with respect to staying-in-school, progressing-in-school, and completing-school. The staying-in-school domain measures whether the student remains enrolled in school or dropped out of school without earning a high school diploma, as well as the number of school days enrolled. The progressing-in-school

domain includes the number of credits earned, grade promotion, whether the student is making normal progress toward graduation, and highest grade completed. The final accountability domain, completing school, measures whether the student earned a high school diploma or GED (WWC, 1999).

Four research questions were investigated in this study: (1) What do school counselors believe should be their primary role in dropout prevention? (2) Does that role differ as a function of the school level (middle or high school) at which the counselor is working? (3) What do school counselors believe is the most appropriate way for assessing effectiveness in dropout prevention? (4) Does their view of the most appropriate way for assessing effectiveness vary as a function of school level (middle or high)?

Method

Participants

Participants for the study included school counselors from four of five school districts involved in a consortium that focused substantial resources on dropout prevention. The districts were chosen using convenience sampling based on their focus on reducing dropout rates. All of the districts are located in the same state and are within 60 miles of each other. These districts employ 135 middle school counselors and 155 high school counselors. The 170 counselors that made up the study sample represented a total response rate of 59% with 50.4% (68/135) of the middle school counselors and 65.8% (102/155) of the high school counselors participating. The sample included 34 males and 136 females with 129 Caucasian, 35 African American, 4

Hispanic, 1 Asian, and 1 multiracial counselor. The mean years of school counseling experience of the total sample were 10.35 years ($SD = 7.31$).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were administered a survey that included three sets of statements. The first set of statements, which consisted of five items, covered demographic information about the sample – years of experience working as a school counselor, gender, race, current level of practice (middle or high school), and their school district.

The second set of statements, which is displayed in Appendix A, consisted of ten items describing different possible roles for school counselors in dropout prevention. The statements were developed based on both the ASCA National Model and recommendations in the previously-discussed literature (i.e., Bemak et al., 2005; Blum & Jones, 1993; Ho, 2001; Larsen & Shertzer, 1987, Lockhart & Keys, 1998; Neile et al., 2007; O'Hara et al., 1978) about prescribed roles for school counselors in dropout prevention. Each statement was designed to correspond to either an element or theme in the National Model. The four themes – leadership, advocacy, systemic change, and collaboration/teaming – were represented by two items each. Two items were selected to represent each theme in order to produce a brief instrument that, school counselors would be likely to respond to in order to yield a high participant response rate for the study. Two additional statements represented the National Model element, delivery system. Each of the 10 items was rated on a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree [1] to strongly agree [5]) with respect to whether school counselors believed that it should be their primary role in dropout prevention. Prior to being administered to the participants, an instrument validation study was conducted In order to ensure that the

10 items possessed face and construct validity. The results of that study are discussed below.

The third set of statements, which is displayed in Appendix B, consisted of six items that asked participants what they believe to be the most appropriate way to measure the effectiveness of school counselors' efforts in dropout prevention. The survey statements were created based on the 2008 What Works Clearinghouse domains that have been used to measure the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/September2008>) in general. Two statements were used to represent each of the following domains: staying-in-school, progressing-in-school, and completing-school. Participants used the same five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree [1] to strongly agree [5]) to rate each of these items.

An initial study was conducted with a panel of 24 school counseling graduate students serving as independent evaluators in order to assess the perceived face and content validity of each survey item. The students were enrolled in a course in which the ASCA National Model was a major focus of study and instruction. The purpose of the study was to determine whether the overwhelming majority of these independent evaluators (i.e., $\geq 75\%$) affirmed (a) that the content of each of the role items was measuring the ASCA National Model theme or element that it was intended to measure and (b) whether each of the accountability items was measuring the What Works Clearinghouse domain it was intended to measure. Using written definitions based on the National Model elements and themes, the evaluators were asked to assign each of the 10 role items to the one National Model theme or element category that it best represented. Similarly, using written definitions based on the What Works

Clearinghouse domains, the evaluators assigned each of the 6 accountability items to the one What Works Clearinghouse domain that it best represented.

Results of the validation study indicated that, working independently, the overwhelming majority of evaluators assigned eight of the ten role items in dropout prevention to the National Model element or theme for which it was intentionally written. Mean inter-rater agreement for these eight items was 90% (range = 75-100%). However, the remaining two statements (one which was intended to measure leadership and the other systemic change) did not yield consistent responses from the evaluators. An inspection of the items revealed some confusing wording that required additional editing. As a result, the wording of the two ambiguous statements were amended and corrected to distinctly represent the theme they were intended to represent. At this point, it was the judgment of both the author and the co-author that content of these two revised/reworded items clearly represented their intended elements and that additional validation was not indicated.

With respect to the accountability items of the survey, the results revealed that, working independently, the overwhelming majority of evaluators asserted that each of the items did measure the type of dropout prevention outcome – staying-in-school, progressing-in-school, or completing-school – for which it was intended. Mean inter-rater agreement for these six items was 91% (range = 79-100%). As a result, no changes were made in the wording of any of these items.

Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the dependent variables of the study.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for the Role and Assessment Domain Dependent Variables for the Total Sample of Middle and High School Counselors

Dependent Variable	N	M	SD
Role			
Leadership	161	6.68	1.77
Collaboration	161	8.80	1.13
Advocacy	161	8.94	1.24
Systemic Change	161	8.02	1.36
Delivery	161	9.16	1.16
Assessment Domain			
Progressing in school	160	6.04	1.88
Completing school	160	5.72	1.79
Staying in School	160	5.88	1.95

Primary Role

The question about whether school counselors' views of what their primary role (i.e., advocacy, collaboration/teaming, delivery system, leadership, and systemic change) should be in dropout prevention vary as a function of the school level in which they are employed was investigated via a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on the five role dependent variables with school level as the independent variable. The result of the analysis indicated that there were no significant differences in the way that middle and high school participants perceived the primary role of the school counselor in dropout prevention, $F(5,155) = 0.893$, Pillai's Trace = 0.28, $p = 0.488$.

Given that there was no difference as a function of school level, the data for middle and high school counselors were pooled in order to answer the question about what school counselors believe their primary role should be in dropout prevention. Because the five role dependent variables were assessed using the same measurement metric

with the same participants, they represented repeated measures (Kirk, 1995). As a result, a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed in order to determine if school counselors accorded differential importance to one or more of the five roles (Kirk, 1995). Results of this analysis indicated that they did [$F(4,157) = 79.159$, Pillai's Trace = .669, $p < .000$.], but this omnibus test does not identify which role(s) is (are) viewed as the primary one(s) for school counselors in dropout prevention.

In order to determine where the significant difference(s) were, sequential post-hoc comparisons (see Table 2) for each of ten possible unique role pair-wise comparisons (e.g., leadership with collaboration, etc.) were conducted using Fisher's Least Significant Difference (LSD) test (Howell, 2007) with Bonferroni-Holm (Holm, 1979) adjustment. This adjustment is a conservative statistical procedure for controlling type 1 error rate. Rather than conducting each comparison test at the conventional .05 level, it involves adjusting those values downward in accordance with the number of comparisons tested. As can be seen in Table 2, those p values ranged from a stringent (.005) level to a more conventional (.05) level.

With one exception that will be discussed below, the results indicated that each of the pair-wise comparisons was significant at the levels at which it was tested (ranging from .005-.01). The post-hoc comparisons revealed that counselors expressed a clear pattern of preferences. The roles of delivery system and leadership emerged as the most and least preferred primary roles respectively for counselors in dropout out prevention. In each of the pair-wise comparisons in which it was involved, delivery system ($M = 9.16$, $SD = 1.36$) was always rated as the significantly more preferred

Table 2*Post-Hoc Role Pair-Wise Comparisons with Bonferroni-Holm Adjustments*

Comparison	p values	Mean Difference	Significance
Leadership/collaboration	.05/10 = .005	-2.118	<.001
Leadership/advocacy	.05/9 = .0056	-2.261	<.001
Leadership/delivery	.05/8 = .00625	-2.478	<.001
Leadership/systemic change	.05/7 = .0071	-1.348	<.001
Collaboration/delivery	.05/6 = .0083	-.360	<.001
Collaboration/systemic change	.05/5 = .01	.770	<.001
Advocacy/systemic change	.05/4 = .0125	.913	<.001
Delivery/systemic change	.05/3 = .0167	1.130	<.001
Advocacy/delivery	.05/2 = .025	-.217	<.005
Collaboration/advocacy	.05/1 = .05	-.143	<.098

Note. *p* values represent the level at which each comparison was tested. The collaboration/advocacy comparison (mean difference of -.143) was the only comparison that **was not** significant ($p = .098$) as the probability of attaining such a difference by chance was not equal to or less than .05 *p* value at which it was tested.

primary role for the school counselors in dropout prevention. Similarly leadership ($M = 6.68$, $SD = 1.77$) was always rated as the significantly less preferred choice in each of the comparisons in which it was involved. Thus, the school counselors believed their primary emphasis in dropout prevention should be in the delivery system area (i.e. providing individual and group counseling to students at risk of dropping out and providing a comprehensive National Model guidance program to all students). Conversely, they believed that the least amount of time should be spent in providing leadership for dropout prevention efforts (i.e. leading in identifying students at-risk for dropping out of school using data about known risk factors or serving as the school's leader for the school's initiatives in dropout prevention).

As the non-significant ($p > .05$) pair-wise comparison in Table 2 indicates, school counselors viewed collaboration ($M = 8.80$, $SD = 1.13$) and advocacy ($M = 8.94$, $SD =$

1.24) as similar in importance as far as a primary emphasis in dropout prevention.

However, as can be seen from the other comparisons in which each is involved, both collaboration and advocacy were each seen as significantly less important than delivery system ($M = 9.16$, $SD = 1.36$); yet significantly more important than the leadership ($M = 6.68$, $SD = 1.77$) as a primary role for school counselors in dropout prevention.

Collaboration involves working with agencies outside of the school system that provide services to at-risk students and serving as a member of a school's dropout prevention team, while advocacy includes working proactively to remove barriers to learning and advocating for needed services for students at-risk for dropping out of school.

Finally, systemic change ($M = 8.02$, $SD = 1.36$), although regarded as a significantly ($p < .0071$) more important role than leadership ($M = 6.68$, $SD = 1.77$), was seen as the second least important role for school counselors to adopt in dropout prevention as indicated by the comparisons in which it was involved; i.e., significantly less important than ($p < .0125$) advocacy ($M = 8.94$, $SD = 1.24$), than ($p < .01$) collaboration ($M = 8.80$, $SD = 1.13$), and ($p < .00167$) delivery system ($M = 9.16$, $SD = 1.36$). The systemic change role involves working for changes at the school level that will assist at-risk students in graduating and identifying and proposing evidenced-based, drop-out prevention interventions that the school/school system could adopt.

Accountability

A MANOVA was conducted using the three assessment domains as the dependent variables with school level as the independent variable in order to determine whether differences existed in how school counselors believed their effectiveness in dropout prevention should be evaluated as a function of the school level in which they

were employed. The results of the analysis indicated that there were no significant differences in the way that the middle and high school counselors believe their effectiveness in dropout prevention should be assessed, $F(3,156) = .438$, Pillai's Trace = .008, $p = .726$.

Given there was no difference as a function of school level, the data for middle and high school counselors were pooled. Because the three assessment domain variables also constituted repeated measures, a repeated measures analysis of variance was performed to determine whether school counselors accorded differential importance to these approaches for assessing effectiveness in dropout prevention (Kirk, 1995). Results of this analysis indicated that they did [$F(2, 158) = 4.286$, Pillai's Trace = .051, $p = .015$.], but once again this is an omnibus test that does not pinpoint which difference (s) is (are) significant.

To locate the difference(s), sequential post-hoc comparisons (see Table 3) for each of three possible unique pair-wise comparisons (i.e., staying-in-school with progressing-in-school, staying-in-school with completing-school [graduating], and progressing-in-school with completing-school) were conducted using Fisher's LSD test with Bonferroni-Holm adjustments (i.e. tested at values ranging from .0167-.05) to control type 1 error. The only significant ($p < .004$) comparison was progressing-in-school ($M = 6.04$, $SD = 1.88$) versus completing-school ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 1.79$). Thus, school counselors thought that it was more appropriate to evaluate their effectiveness based on whether students made progress in school (i.e. the number of credits earned in a given year by students identified as at-risk for dropping out and/or the highest grade completed by students at-risk for dropping out) rather than by whether students

completed school (i.e. the number or percentage of students who earned a high school diploma and/or the number or percentage of students who earned a GED).

Table 3

Post-Hoc Assessment Domain Pair-Wise Comparisons with Bonferroni-Holm Adjustments

Comparisons	p values	Mean Difference	Significance
Progressing/completing school	.05/3 = .0167	.325	<.004
Staying in/progressing in school	.05/2 = .025	-.163	<.095
Staying in/completing school	.05/1 = .05	.162	<.153

Note. p values represent the level at which each comparison was tested. The progressing/completing school comparison (mean difference of .325) was the only comparison that **was** significant ($p < .004$) as the probability of attaining such a difference by chance was less than .0167 p value at which it was tested.

However, they did not assign greater importance to measuring their effectiveness in terms of students progressing-in-school versus students merely staying-in-school (i.e. by the number of students who dropped out in a given year and/or by number of days students identified as at-risk for dropping out who were enrolled in a given year). In addition, they did not favor staying-in-school measures of dropout prevention effectiveness over completing-school measures or vice versa.

Discussion

Primary Role

The results of this study revealed that middle and high school counselors do not differ significantly in what they believe their primary role should be in dropout prevention. They put the most emphasis on delivery system and the least emphasis on leadership and systemic change with collaboration and advocacy receiving similar, but intermediate emphasis.

That delivery system is the preferred primary school counselor role in dropout prevention is not surprising. Historically, delivery system has been the traditional

emphasis in comprehensive school counseling programs. As we noted earlier, early identification of students at-risk for dropping out and providing interventions such as group counseling for them have repeatedly been recommended in the school counseling literature (e.g., Blum & Jones, 1993; Neile et al., 2007). In addition, an emphasis on delivery system is in accordance with the 1999 ASCA Position Statement on Dropout Prevention/Students-At-Risk, "Professional school counselors work with other educators and community resources to provide early identification and intervention for potential dropouts and other students who may be considered at-risk through a comprehensive, developmental, K-12 counseling program" (http://asca2.timberlakepublishing.com//files/PS_Dropout%20Prevention.pdf).

But what are the implications of this delivery system focus for practice? What specific components and interventions should be emphasized in a school counseling delivery system concerned with dropout prevention, and where does a school counselor go to find guidance about this issue? Although results of the current study do not provide that level of specificity, a recent conceptual article offered some tentative theory and literature-based recommendations (White & Kelly, 2010). Supporting our assertion about the absence of empirically-supported school counseling interventions for reducing dropouts, the authors reported that their 23-year review of school counseling journals revealed only six published studies that addressed interventions to reduce school dropout. Only one actually included dropout as a dependent variable, and that study lacked a control group (Wirth-Bond, Coyne, & Adams, 1991).

Given the absence of a school counseling intervention evidence base for reducing dropouts, White and Kelly (2010) drew upon related literature (i.e., attendance, truancy,

school completion, school failure, and school dropout) for their recommended delivery system 'best practices'. Their best practices are "promising strategies for preventing school dropout" (2010, p. 228) grounded in a resiliency framework that addresses both reducing risk factors for dropout and enhancing strengths or protective factors for remaining in school. The protective factors White and Kelly (2010) identified involve interventions (a) to enhance social support (e.g., institute a peer mentoring system), (b) to monitor and mentor at-risk students (e.g., identify them and track their progress, coordinate an adult mentor program), (c) to enhance personal and social skill development (e.g., teach social, coping, and problem-solving skills), and (d) to impact parent involvement (e.g., involve parents in dropout prevention programs and identify a family advocate in the school). Interventions that address risk factors focus on (a) academic instruction (e.g., assisting teachers in providing more academic instruction by coordinating adult classroom volunteers and spending less time on behavior management, training teachers [i.e., consulting] on effective classroom management), and (b) academic support (e.g., teach study skills and time management, develop/coordinate adult/peer tutoring).

Of more than passing concern from the present study, however, are the results that leadership and systemic change, two of the most important themes of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2003), were significantly less important than delivery system and ranked last and next to last respectively as the primary school counselor role in dropout prevention. It is difficult to know why leadership and systemic change were ranked low considering that school counselors who employ these skills probably have a much greater potential to impact the dropout rate in a school system as a whole than

school counselors who focus solely on delivery system. Although it remains a question for future research, we hypothesize that effective leadership and systemic change initiatives would seem to have a greater capacity to reach and effect change for a larger number of at-risk students than more traditional delivery system interventions such as group counseling and classroom guidance.

However, there are several possible explanations for the low preference in dropout prevention for leadership and systemic change roles by school counselors. First, the National Model is still relatively new. Moreover, most of the literature about leadership and dropout prevention is directed toward the leadership role of principals and not school counselors (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, Lapointe, & Orr 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003). Similarly, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Keys & Lockhart, 1999) the literature about systemic change agents once again focuses primarily on the role of principals (e.g., Fullan, 2009; Fullan & Levin, 2009) rather than on role of counselors as change agents (McMahon, Mason, & Paisley, 2009). As such, it may be that the curriculum in school counselor education programs has been slow to change and to incorporate literature on these topics in required courses. As a result, recent graduates may not have been sufficiently exposed to literature in these areas and may not have acquired the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to function as effective leaders and systemic change agents for dropout prevention. In addition, given that the average school counselor in this study had more than 10 years of school counseling experience and therefore was trained prior to the advent of the National Model, it is highly unlikely that leadership and systemic change would have been emphasized or even taught while these counselors were completing their training

programs. Therefore, many of the more experienced counselors also may not have acquired the skills and/or the attitudes that support leadership and systemic change as important school counselor roles.

A second possibility is that the counselors possess these skills, but they do not feel comfortable employing them because functioning as leaders and systemic change agents is perceived as incurring greater risk than functioning in the more traditional delivery system mode. Thus, their peers and administrators may have socialized them into a safer and largely delivery system role. In addition, personality factors that draw individuals to counseling (wanting to please and help others) may make it difficult for school counselors to depart from their traditionally sanctioned role and to engage in activities that involve questioning authority and well established policy which is often necessary for leaders and systemic change agents. Functioning as leaders and systemic change agents may involve confronting policies and practices that are overtly or covertly non-supportive of traditionally underserved students or that unfairly privilege students from wealthy, well-educated, and influential families. These can be risky endeavors with respect to job security and/or working relationships with administrators, teachers, and other colleagues and stakeholders.

An important question for future research is why leadership and systemic change rank so much lower in importance as roles for school counselors in dropout prevention. For example, is lack of knowledge/skill and/or comfort/confidence in leadership and systemic change instrumental in school counselors' preference for delivery system as their primary role in dropout prevention? Notwithstanding the answer to these questions, it is likely that greater attention will need to be focused on leadership and systemic

change in both pre-service school counselor preparation and in professional development for practicing school counselors if these roles are going to assume greater prominence in dropout prevention in comprehensive school counseling programs. For example, placing school counseling interns during their internships in leadership team experiences with principal interns, assistant principals, and the school principal can help them to develop the attitudes (i.e., confidence and self-efficacy), knowledge, skills, and habits to enable them to participate more fully as leaders and systemic change agents once they have secured employment as professional school counselors.

Finally, advocacy and collaboration followed delivery system as the primary roles school counselors believe they should adopt in dropout prevention. The ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2003) strongly endorses school counselors as advocates in helping to remove barriers that contribute to students dropping out of school. The role of the school counselor is to bring about social justice and equality for all students. In particular, school counselors must serve as student advocates for students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Bemak & Chung, 2005) as these students are especially at-risk for dropping out of school. With respect to collaboration, Taylor and Adelman (2000) emphasized that school counselors working with school, home, and community resources can help solve the dropout problem. By collaborating with outside agencies to provide counseling and other needed services, school counselors will be better able to help those students who have traditionally been marginalized by the system to strive academically in the future.

Accountability

Accountability is a central element of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2003) and has important implications for the dropout prevention initiatives of school counselors. "Accountability and evaluation of school counseling programs are absolute necessities ... Now more than ever school counselors are challenged to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs in measurable terms" (ASCA, 2003, p. 59).

Accountability requires school counselors to demonstrate "how students are different as a result of the school counseling program. School counselors must collect and use data that support and link the school counseling programs to students' academic success" (ASCA, p. 59).

Although the National Model provides school counselors with useful accountability tools – results reports, school counselor performance standards, program audit – it does not explicitly address how they should assess their effectiveness in dropout prevention. It also does not indicate the type of data to be collected in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of a comprehensive school counseling program in reducing the dropout rate. Is that best reflected solely by whether students graduate from high school? Or is it best reflected by an increase in the length of time they remain in school prior to dropping it, by the amount of progress they are making in school (e.g., number of credits earned or whether they are promoted), or by some other measure? Similarly, guidelines for evaluating school counselor effectiveness in dropout prevention also cannot be found in the school counseling literature as only one school counseling study even included dropout as a dependent variable (Wirth-Bond et al., 1991).

The What Works Clearinghouse domains – staying-in-school, progressing-in-school, and completing-school – do provide school counselors with three relevant vantage points from which to evaluate their effectiveness in dropout prevention. Using these domains in this study, counselors favored measures of student progress toward graduation over measures of whether students actually completed school.

This result suggests that school counselors believe that the effectiveness of their programs is more immediately evident and best reflected by its proximal impact on student progress rather than on the more distal outcome of school graduation. The progressing-in-school domain allows students, parents, and administrators to see short-term successes on a daily, monthly, or quarterly basis. School counselors have ready access to several documents or records (i.e., transcript and report cards) that support use of the progressing-in-school domain as a measure of dropout prevention effectiveness.

If school counselors chose to use the completing-school domain solely, they would need to wait several years until a student earned (or failed to earn) a high school diploma or a GED certificate to establish that their dropout prevention interventions were either successful or unsuccessful with that student. School counselors certainly view completing school as a relevant and desirable goal, but they may also view it as involving a variety of factors that are somewhat outside of their direct control and that therefore do not represent the best test of their effectiveness. On the other hand, delivery system interventions such as individual student planning (e.g., course advising) and other school counseling interventions (e.g., advocacy) might be viewed as more likely and more immediately to impact the number of credit hours that students earn,

whether they are promoted, etc., and therefore indicate whether students are making progress toward graduation and also remaining in school. A reservation about using the staying-in-school domain is that it would only consider a student's attendance as an indicator of progress. Therefore both the staying-in-school and completing-school domains have some limitations as solo measures of counselor effectiveness in dropout prevention. Nevertheless, all three domains can be used to assess effectiveness, but the progressing-in-school domain has the advantage of allowing for changes to be made in measuring the effectiveness of interventions as students move from one semester to the next.

Limitations of the Study

Although the study employed a fairly large sample of participants (170) and achieved a good overall response rate (59%), it is not without limitations. The participants represented a convenience sample of middle and high school counselors drawn from four of five school districts involved in a consortium limited to one state. The focus of the consortium was on increasing high school graduation rates and reducing dropouts. The largest district in the consortium also emphasized and aided its counselors in developing ASCA National Model school counseling programs, and several of those programs had achieved RAMP status recognition or were in the process of preparing and applying for that recognition. Thus, one might speculate that these districts and their counselors were among the more 'forward thinking' in terms of dropout prevention efforts and the school counselors' initiatives in that area. As such, these factors may limit the generalizability of the results of the study.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that school counselors view their primary role in dropout prevention as epitomized by the delivery system element of the ASCA National Model and that they view leadership and systemic change, two of the more important and contemporary themes of the Model, as much less central to these initiatives. But school dropout remains an intractable educational problem and one that has been referred to as the 'silent epidemic' (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

It can be argued that this problem is so severe, so ingrained, and so intractable that if the school counselor's role and efforts are focused solely or even primarily on delivery system that those efforts will continue to be met with only modest success. Successfully addressing the dropout problem may require placing much more emphasis on the themes of the ASCA National Model rather than just on the delivery system element. Specifically, school counselors may need to assume much greater responsibility for an active leadership and a systemic change agent role in dropout prevention both within and outside of their schools. In that regard, future research and new training initiatives may be required in order to shed light on how school counselors can more comfortably and effectively incorporate leadership and systemic change modes in their daily practice. In short, a much fuller and more complete implementation of the themes of the ASCA National Model would seem to be indicated if school counselors expect to help educators and society to effect a significant reduction in the school dropout rate.

Finally, until now guidelines about how school counselor accountability in dropout prevention should be documented have been unavailable. Using the three What Works

Clearinghouse domains for evaluating dropout prevention effectiveness, school counselors in this study preferred to see their effectiveness in dropout prevention evaluated by the progress that students make in school as compared to whether students actually graduate from school. Progressing-in-school measures the type of student changes (i.e., indicators of student progress toward graduation) that reflect the more proximal and immediate outcomes of comprehensive school counseling interventions (e.g., individual student planning) as opposed to the more distal and less controllable outcomes (i.e., whether students actually graduate) of education in general. As such, measures from the progress-in-school domain need to be incorporated routinely in school counseling intervention studies of dropout prevention, albeit measures of the other two domains can be informative as well.

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Appendix A

Final Dropout Prevention Role Items

What do you believe the school counselor's primary role should be in dropout prevention?

Please circle the response¹ that best represents your belief about the role in each of the statements below.

The school counselor's primary role in dropout prevention should be:

1. To serve as the school's leader or coordinator (i.e., the person in charge) for the school's initiatives in dropout prevention. ² (L)
2. To serve as a member of a school's dropout prevention team. (C)
3. To serve as an advocate for needed services for students at-risk for dropping out of school. (A)
4. To identify and propose evidenced-based, national drop-out prevention interventions that the school/school system could adopt. (S)
5. To provide direct counseling (individual and/or group) services to students at risk for dropping out. (D)
6. To collaborate with agencies outside of the school system which provide services to students at risk for dropping out of school. (C)
7. To serve as the individual in charge of identifying students at-risk for dropping out of school using data about known risk factors. (L)
8. To provide a comprehensive counseling program as described in the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) National Model to all students. (D)
9. To guide school reform efforts that assist at-risk students in graduating. (S)
10. To work proactively to remove barriers to learning for at-risk students. (A)

¹ Participants used the following five-point Likert response scale with each item: Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Not Sure; Agree; Strongly Agree.

² ASCA National Model element or theme represented by the item: (L) = Leadership, (A) = Advocacy, (C) = Collaboration/Teaming, (S) = Systemic Change, and (D) = Delivery System.

Appendix B

Items Based on the What Works Clearinghouse Domains Used to Assess Accountability in Dropout Prevention

What do you believe is the most appropriate way for assessing the school counselor's effectiveness in dropout prevention? *Please circle the response¹ that best represents your belief about the most appropriate way of assessing the school counselor's effectiveness in each of the statements below.*

The most appropriate way to measure the school counselor's effectiveness in dropout prevention is:

1. The number or percentage of students who earned a high school diploma.² (C)
2. By the number of students who dropped out in a given year. (S)
3. The number of credits earned in a given year by students identified as at-risk for dropping out. (P)
4. The number of days students identified as at-risk for dropping out that were enrolled in a given year. (S)
5. The number or percentage of students who earned a GED. (C)
6. The highest grade completed by students at-risk for dropping out. (P)

¹ Participants used the following five-point Likert response scale with each item: Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Not Sure; Agree; Strongly Agree.

² What Works Clearinghouse domain represented by item: (C) = Completing School, (S) = Staying in School, and (P) = Progressing in School.

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