

School Counselors' Role in Dropout Prevention and Credit Recovery

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Abstract

This article introduces credit recovery (CR) programs to school counseling. Traditionally the school counselors' role in CR has been limited to referring students who are, or who have, failed courses. Based on our own findings from a study of a large Midwest high school ($N = 2,000$) CR program, we make specific recommendations for school counselors to advocate for, and intervene with, failing students. Further, we propose a new instructional leadership role for school counselors within the instructional leadership team (ILT) to lead credit recovery efforts within the schools.

School Counselors' Role in Dropout Prevention and Credit Recovery

The onset of credit recovery (CR) programs in the last decade has been an urgent response to ongoing critical challenges for high schools. Some of these challenges include the problem of identifying students at-risk for failing high school, and the need for early intervention efforts with those who fail courses during their freshman year. To remedy dropout, non-graduation, and academic failure in freshman year of high school, numerous experimental early intervention efforts to recover high school credits have been offered in various formats (e.g., summer school, after school programs, weekend programs, and online programs). Currently there is no federal definition of “credit recovery” (CR) programs, and no uniform definition between specific states’ administrative codes or statutes; yet the number has skyrocketed, especially those employing the online format (Center for Public Education, 2012). The most common definition, according to the Center for Public Education is “. . . a structured means for students to earn missed credit in order to graduate from high school” (para. 5).

School Counselors' Role in Dropout Prevention and Credit Recovery

Credit recovery (CR) has been an exclusively academics-centered effort by both the public schools and private educational providers. A school counselor’s role is typically limited to referring failing students to a CR program. The program delivery structure is self-learning (e.g., online course delivery), which involves little-to-no teacher interaction or interaction with other school personnel or peers. Primarily, it is seen as time-sensitive (i.e., want students to quickly get back on track, and stay on track), and outcome-focused (i.e., graduation). Further, problems leading to freshman course failure have

been noted in the CR literature (e. g., McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010; Watson & Gemin, 2008; Balfanz, McPartland, & Shaw, 2002; Roderick & Camburn, 1999). School counselors are equipped to help address many of these (White & Kelly, 2010). However, a comprehensive review of the credit recovery literature and the counseling literature yields no specific recommendations for the role of school counselors to date. The purpose of this manuscript is to introduce the counseling profession to credit recovery, an educational intervention to improve high school graduation rates, and to specifically address the critical role of the school counselor in credit recovery programs, based on recommendations we make from our own research findings (Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2016).

Credit Recovery as Dropout Prevention

White and Kelly (2010) invoked the school counselor's critical role in leading the high school dropout prevention efforts and provided specific strategies addressing both the *protective factors* (social support, monitoring and mentoring, personal and social skills development, parent involvement) and *risk factors* (academic instruction, academic support) associated with student dropout identified in the literature.

Prevatt and Kelly's (2003) review of 259 articles on dropout prevention identified the following categories of programs:

(a) academic (e.g., study skills, reading lab, tutoring); (b) mentoring (e.g., volunteer adults, peer buddy system, teacher-as-advisor); (c) psycho-social skills (e.g., conflict resolution, anger management); (d) teacher/parent training (e.g., behavior management, home visits); (e) school/classroom structure (e.g., reduced class size, adjusted schedules, cooperative learning); (f) vocational/work (e.g., vocational exploration, work release); and (g) monitoring (p. 381).

The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences (USDE-IES) also listed 6 recommendations for dropout prevention. Recommendation 3, “Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance,” suggests a credit recovery approach to dropout prevention, however, it limits the scope of dropout prevention to “additional reading or math courses” and “after school, Saturday school, and summer enrichment programs” (2008, p.10).

As the Center for Public Education’s (2012) summarized the limited amount of extant research devoted to this line of inquiry, CR as dropout prevention programs, are mostly offered online through programs developed by private companies. There have been limited reports containing definitive numbers of students, recovered credits, impact on graduation, program evaluation, or the cost-benefit analysis. Challenges remain for school boards, educators, and policy makers to determine the effectiveness of, and best practices for, credit recovery programs.

In considering a novel approach to this line of inquiry: examining how former failing freshmen experienced their freshman year, what led to their failure during freshman year, what effect their failure had on them and their relationships, and the impact of their own credit recovery, our careful review of the literature on credit recovery facilitated a re-thinking of the credit recovery research that needed to include the perspective of the students themselves for meaningful and necessary change in schools (Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2016).

In a study by the authors, (Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2013; Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2016) a CR program in a large Midwest high school ($N = 2,000$) was

investigated that was designed and implemented to enhance academic performance, was limited in scope to Math, science, history, English, and other core academic subjects mandated for high school graduation. This particular high school's CR program was created by the school psychologist who also attended to other areas of students' well-being (e.g., psychosocial), and who strongly advocated for our involvement in the project. Our study was conducted as a follow-up measure to determine what led to two groups ($n_1 = 26$, $n_2 = 14$) of freshmen students' failure, how they experienced their freshman year of high school, their experience in the credit recovery program, how they were doing since completing CR, and their future goals and plans. From the results of the Pre-CR and Post-CR surveys these students had completed, we were able to conduct interviews that not only illuminated the survey responses, but also yielded rich data that enabled us to make specific recommendations to the administration and school personnel, which we believed would ultimately best serve the students at the school (Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2013).

Recommendations to School Counselors Based on Key Findings

Based on the study's key findings (Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2013; Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2016), specific recommendations to school counselors in how to intervene directly with students, and how to expand their role in the credit recovery effort within high schools can now be presented.

Key Finding 1

We observed some inconsistency between incoming freshman students' academic performance on the state's 8th grade achievement assessment scores and their class placement during freshman year. When these students were not challenged

in those courses, or informed of the most appropriate coursework for their ability level, they also admitted to demonstrating behaviors similar to other failing freshmen (e.g., poor effort, attendance, motivation, etc.). All the CR students we interviewed reported difficulty making the adjustment to high school in their freshman year. In particular, CR students who self-identified as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) reported they had difficulty adjusting to the unfamiliar high school context with a much larger school population than in previous grade levels. Also, some students indicated they were unable to adjust to the different policies in high school. Another subgroup of CR completers we interviewed were the Career Technical Center (CTC) students (n = 5). They disclosed that upon recovering their freshman course credits, they decided to complete their secondary education outside the “immature” high school environment. CTC provided a career-training focus within a small class setting as well as the type of teacher-student relationship and peer relationships more suitable to a workplace setting, suited to their preferred kinesthetic learning style (Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2013; Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2016).

Recommendation 1

School counselors for incoming freshmen need to be in contact with district middle school counselors regarding academic and social/behavioral needs to ensure appropriate class placements and attention to other needs prior to first semester. For example, any inconsistency between the state-level middle school academic assessment scores and academic performance in 8th grade needs to be addressed before scheduling freshmen classes.

Key Finding 2

In total, 14 (36%) of the students we interviewed identified having problems with the teaching styles in mathematics and integrated science classes. For example, students needed to stay in line to get individual help during instructional time and then time ran out, and there was “too much tutoring during class time.” Students also reported having difficulty relating to concepts taught in integrated science, which contain a broader interdisciplinary scientific focus and require a synthetic teaching approach (Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2013; Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2016).

Recommendation 2

School counselors need to be an integral part of all credit recovery efforts. They should be meeting regularly with faculty teaching freshman level classes to support pedagogies that foster optimal learning and to closely monitor students who are struggling in specific classes. Referral of all failing students into credit recovery should be advocated by the school counselors, with particular attention to first semester freshmen.

Key Finding 3

Several students disclosed dealing with ongoing family issues and/or a new family crisis that emerged during their freshmen year. Examples included change of living arrangements due to a family member’s illness or death, family economic issues, divorce, and/or family dysfunction (Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2013; Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2016). Those issues seemed to complicate their adjustment to high school. Reactions that often accompany a major life adjustment can also interfere with the

ability to function in an otherwise normal developmental phase-of-life for teens: the adjustment to high school (Brown, 1990).

Recommendation 3

School counselors need to actively participate in freshman orientation, clearly identifying their role as helpers to incoming freshmen and their families. They should also clarify all the resources that the school and community offer.

Key Finding 4

One prominent finding was that most students ($n = 38$, 97%) took responsibility for failing their freshmen classes. Students identified different reasons for their failure, such as incomplete work, late work, absences, and failing to ask for help when needed. Also noteworthy was that several admitted to allowing themselves to be distracted by “high school drama.” In reflecting on their freshman year during the interviews, these students were able to recognize their own problems handling their freshman coursework/workload, such as poor organizational skills, time management skills, and motivation that led to failing grades. In some cases, students described interactions with their teacher that negatively impacted their learning during their freshman year. For example, when students were convinced that they were neglected by the teacher, they “felt ignored,” and admitted to “giving up,” or if they perceived the teacher did not like them for some reason, then they felt defeated and gave up early. More than half the students divulged their peer group had affected their academic performance and social life. They reported their misbehaviors included fighting with peers on and off school premises and substance abuse (drug and alcohol). A few disclosed being bullied, which

they believed caused them to misbehave, to experience depression or other emotional distress (Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2013; Miura & Tromiski-Klingshirn, 2016).

Recommendation 4

School counselors should have the assistance of school-based mental health counselors and/or school social workers to support and advocate for students dealing with adjustment issues to high school, as well as personal, health, and family issues that may interfere with academic performance and overall functioning during their freshman year.

Role of School Counselors and Credit Recovery

Our study's recommendations to the school counselors fit within the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model's framework. The ASCA Model clearly asserts academic support as one of the school counselor's primary roles (Bleuer & Walz, 2002). Dockery (2012) proposed the school counselor's role in dropout prevention. Carr and Galassi (2012) investigated the perceived roles of school counselors in the four areas identified by the ASCA National Model and found that "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.)" (p. 14).

Based on our study's results and the limitations raised in the Dockery (2012) and Carr and Galassi (2012) regarding the school counselor's role in dropout prevention, we submit the following questions that a high school counselor working with 9th graders

could ask middle school personnel about the 8th graders who will be the incoming high school freshmen:

1. Any 8th graders with 10 or more absences in the current academic year?
Reasons for those absences, if known?
2. Any discrepancies between the eighth-grade standardized achievement test scores and course grades within each respective content area of the achievement test? If possible, ask for a comparison chart between achievement test scores and course grades for each grading period in eighth grade. If not possible to obtain that from the middle school, the 9th grade counselor can create one.
3. What disciplinary issues exist currently? The frequency of occurrences and the nature of the discipline used with each eighth grader should be obtained also.
4. Are there any known family issues and/or other life crises occurring with any of the eighth graders?
5. Are there any known behavioral and/or psychological issues that have occurred in middle school? If so, have they required middle school program intervention (e. g., IEP, school counseling early intervention program, referral to community intervention, etc.)?

The process of asking these questions can be collaborative. School counselors, as members of the professional learning community (PLC) within their schools, for example, can also invite other school personnel to participate; thus, broadening all team members' perspectives on the issues and needs of incoming freshmen. The school counselor's collaborative role in professional learning communities was addressed in Young, Millard, and Kneale (2013), posing four different configurations for school counselor collaborative teams.

Expanding School Counselors' Role as Instructional Leader

The school counselor's role has been included in more of the informal collaborative instructional leadership communities, such as professional learning community (PLC) and culturally responsive teaching (CRT) teams within schools to address the needs of students. However, to date, we were unable to find school counselors included as members of the formal instructional leadership team (ILT) structure, according to the current literature. We believe this is important to note because the ILT is charged to “. . . make key decisions about the school's curriculum, strategic direction, and even staffing” (Fenton, *n.d.*).

Therefore, unless school counselors play a critical role within a formal instructional leadership team, the efforts in, and successful outcomes with, credit recovery programs may be very limited. In order to maximize the impact of school counselors' unique role in credit recovery efforts, we propose implementing the following steps in the process:

1. School counselors need to become a part of the ILT at their high school. Specifically, they should work with the ILT to develop the specific questions to ask middle school personnel about current eighth graders who will be the incoming freshmen the next academic year. They can gain access to middle school personnel through those on the ILT who know the district's middle school personnel. They need to gain support and can ask for collaboration from the ILT in contacting the middle schools to ask the proposed questions.
2. Contact all middle schools in the district and gather the information (ask proposed questions).
3. Once the information has been obtained from each middle school, present a report to the ILT. Discuss best ways to plan for the potential needs of the incoming freshman cohort: who will be involved, specific responsibilities, etc.

Also discuss possible school-wide intervention program to address needs of incoming freshmen.

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Both authors have extensive backgrounds working with high school populations in their respective disciplines.