

Current Administrative Perceptions of School Counselors: Kansas

Administrators' Perceptions of School Counselor Duties

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Abstract

This study examined Kansas administrators regarding their current perceptions of the role of school counselors. The study involved over 500 building administrators from elementary, middle, and high schools across rural, suburban, and urban districts in Kansas. The findings indicate that there is a clear opportunity to educate administrators on the role of professional school counselors and the standards of the profession for which counselors are accountable.

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School principals arguably serve as a major influence on professional school counseling (Armstrong, MacDonald & Stillo, 2010; Duslak & Geier, 2016). By virtue of their leadership role and authority, school principals impact and often largely determine, the role of school counselors in their buildings by assigning counselors' direction, duties and tasks, and time priorities (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Duslak & Geier, 2016; House & Hayes, 2002; Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones., 2004). School principals and school counselors have different perceptions regarding the job responsibilities appropriate for and consistent with the professional role of the school counselor (Perusse et al., 2004; Shoffner & Williamson, 2000). While "fair share" duties are part of any school counselor's contracted role, accepting tasks or duties regardless of professional fit can blur the school counselors' role (Armstrong et al., 2010). Often building principals have assigned school counselors with additional unrelated and time-consuming duties that fit more closely with administrative or administrative assistant functions rather than counseling functions (Armstrong et al., 2010; Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Leuwerke, Walker, & Shi, 2009). As a result, the professional identity of school counselors may become ambiguous due to the dissimilar views of the school counselors' role held by school counselors and administrators (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Cisler & Bruce, 2013). Administrator perceptions thus appear to play a significant factor in determining how counselors spend their time.

To aid counselors in advocating for and clarifying their role and skill set, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) first adopted national standards for

school counseling programs which defined what students should know and be able to do as a result of involvement with a school counseling program (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). These student standards were endorsed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), American College Testing, College Board, National Association for College Admissions Counselors, National Alliance of Business, and the National PTA. Subsequently, ASCA developed a national comprehensive program model (ASCA, 2012) to facilitate a consistent framework for counseling as a comprehensive program of the school. School counseling professional preparation programs are focused on a unique blend of developing both the educator and the counseling practitioner. School counselors enter the profession expecting the role of facilitating student development in personal-social, academic, and career domains and delivering prevention and direct intervention services to students based on the school counseling program model developed by ASCA (2012). This national model helps to shape local, state, and national counseling and educational standards. While national and state standards exist, local administrators often determine whether state and national school counseling initiatives are permitted and can either choose to facilitate such systemic change proposals, or not (Fullan, 2016; Lopez, 2002).

Support and application of the vision related to the role of the professional school counselor is necessary (Armstrong et al., 2010; Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009). Transparent roles and expectations need to be defined for both parties so congruency with professional standards can be met. A collaborative, working partnership between the counselor and administrator is imperative (Armstrong et al.,

2010; Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Janson, Millitello, & Kosine, 2008). Zalaquett (2005) characterized the relationship as "natural partners" if counselors and administrators can trust that each are professionals with specific roles and responsibilities, as many aspects of these two roles are interdependent and both may be able to perform their functions more effectively with mutual understanding and support (Janson et al., 2008). The values of mutual trust, respect, communication, shared vision, and decision making are critical for forming effective working relationships between principals and counselors (College Board, 2012). Meyers (2005) recommended that counselors build partnerships with principals by developing a respectful collaboration, which includes sharing information and developing leadership skills.

It is in the best interest of both principals and counselors to work together to define the role of a counselor in schools. Principals can be overwhelmed by their roles and duties, but if there is a strong partnership and mutual understanding of the counselor's role, principals are less likely to assign administrative duties to counselors (Zalaquett, 2005; McGlothlin & Miller, 2008). Support and collaborative work amongst administrators and school counselors can lead to clearer roles. In addition, career satisfaction and commitment are increased when counselors feel supported and assigned duties appropriate for their professional training (Atici, 2014).

So how do principals learn about what roles are appropriate for professional school counselors? In a focus group of Kansas counselors, school counselors anecdotally reported that principals presumably form opinions based on past experiences, training, or current experiences about school counselors (Lane & Kemble, 2016). Thus, the researchers found it important to survey school administrators in

Kansas to determine current perceptions of roles and job duties of school counselors and determine the current understanding of state and national school counseling programs. The purpose of this exploratory, descriptive study was to assess existing perceptions and beliefs of Kansas school building administrators, or principals, to determine if further educational and professional development opportunities are needed.

Research Questions

The current study was driven by two main research questions: (a) What are the perceptions of building administrators regarding the role and job duties of K-12 school counselors? (b) How familiar are administrators with school counseling programs?

- How familiar are administrators with the ASCA National Model?
- How familiar are administrators with the Kansas Comprehensive School Counseling Program and Kansas Curricular Standards for School Counseling?

Methods

Participants

The study sample consisted of 568 school principals from the state of Kansas. The Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) provided a list of 1,411 administrators from all the public and private K-12 institutions in the state. Upon institutional review board (IRB) approval, the potential participants received an email one week before the start of the survey explaining the nature of the study and informing them of the timeline of the study. After an initial contact, 50 elected to opt-out of the study. The remaining 1,361 participants were sent information about completing an online survey. Some participants reported technical difficulties in completing the survey and not all the questions required a response, creating a varied response rate for each question. Due

to the aggregate and descriptive nature of the survey, no participants were excluded for incomplete responses. The highest question response from 568 participants represents a 41.7% response rate while the lowest question response of 420 participants represents a 30.8% response rate. This range is close to the average response rate of 34% for web surveys (Shih & Fan, 2008). Demographics were collected at the end of the survey, with approximately 420 responses for each question. The demographic information is presented in Table A1 and Table A2.

Instruments

Participants were asked to complete an online survey with five sections. The first section was a series of questions regarding the administrator's familiarity with school counseling standards and programs, the current type of school counseling at the school, if any, and the roles and responsibilities counselors might be assigned within the administrator's school. Three Likert-type and six Yes/No/Uncertain questions were used to determine the familiarity of administrators with various aspects of school counseling programs in Kansas such as the ASCA National Model and the Kansas Comprehensive School Counseling Program. The next set of questions asked about the administrator's current school counseling program. The first of these questions asked whether the administrator currently had a school counselor working for them. If so, the participant was asked questions about the licensure of the school counselor, whether the school counseling program adhered to the ASCA National Model and the Kansas Comprehensive School Counseling Program guidelines, and whether it was a Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP). If the administrator did not currently have a school counselor, the survey then asked if the administrator had previously worked with

a school counselor, and then proceeded to the next set of questions. The final five questions of this section asked participants to indicate who was responsible within each school for the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS); high-stakes testing; individual plans of study; college and career standards implementation; and the social, emotional, and character development (SECD) standards.

In the second section, participants were given 28 individual statements taken from the *Appropriate Activities of School Counselors* handout (ASCA, n.d.); examples of appropriate activities include, individual student academic program planning, and collaborating with teachers to present school counseling core curriculum lessons. Participants categorized each statement into one of three categories: appropriate, inappropriate, or neutral. This section compared administrators' perceptions of acceptable job responsibilities with recommendations from ASCA.

The School Counselor Activity Rating Scale (SCARS; Scarborough, 2005) was the third section of the survey. The SCARS instrument utilizes a verbal frequency scale to identify how often an activity occurs as opposed to the strength of agreement generally used for Likert-type scales (Scarborough, 2005). With permission, the language was adapted to match the target population of school principals instead of school counselors. The 48 questions on the SCARS are divided into five categories; counseling activities, consultation activities, curriculum activities, coordination activities, and other activities.

Fourth, participants were to estimate the percentage of time school counselors spend on activities from the five categories on the SCARS. Slider activities utilize a number line with a movable indicator. Participants were asked to have all five of the

areas sum to 100%. There were two sliders. One measured the perceived amount of time being spent in each of the five categories. The other asked for school principals' desired level of time spent in the five categories.

In the final section, 10 questions were asked about the demographics of the participants and their schools. The first four questions focused upon the demographics of the participants' schools. The next four questions addressed the participants' professional experience. The last two questions asked about the participant's gender and ethnic identification.

Procedures

Data collection methods were guided by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian's (2009) recommendations aligned with social exchange theory. The recommendations from Dillman, et al. (2009) seek to establish trust, increase the benefits of participation, and decrease the costs of participation. These recommendations can be met through ensuring confidentiality and security of information, providing information about the survey, providing social validation, making it easy to respond, and minimizing requests to obtain personal or sensitive information. As mentioned previously, an invitation email was sent one week before the start of the survey collection. Reminders were sent twice a week during the two weeks that the survey was available. The survey was administered through Qualtrics software made available by Kansas State University. Descriptive statistics were analyzed through both Qualtrics and the SPSS Statistics software. A short report of some of the findings was sent to participants who requested a copy approximately four months after the survey ended.

Results

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, descriptive statistics were primarily used on the data collected. Most of the data are expressed as frequencies with percentages of the collected responses from each question given.

In the first section addressing administrator familiarity with counseling programs, 89% of administrators reported they were either *not very familiar* or *not at all familiar* with the ASCA National Model (see Table A3). In addition, 76% of the administrators surveyed responded that they were *not very familiar* or *not at all familiar* with the Kansas Comprehensive School Counseling Program and 65% were *not very familiar* or *not at all familiar* with the Kansas Curricular Standards for School Counseling.

When asked if the administrator currently had a school counselor working in their school, 448 (83%) of the administrators reported they did. Of the 92 that did not, over half (58%) reported that they had previously worked with a school counselor. For the administrators who did employ a school counselor, 345 (81%) identified their counselor as a licensed professional school counselor. In contrast, only 99 (23%) indicated that the school counseling program utilized the ASCA National Model, with 54 (13%) no and 276 (64%) being uncertain. Additionally, when asked if the school counseling program at their school was a RAMP program, 9 (2%) responded yes, 163 (38%) reported their program was not a RAMP program, and 255 (60%) were uncertain. At the time of this publication, Kansas has not had one school receive RAMP distinction from ASCA. Finally, 186 (44%) marked that their school utilized the Kansas Comprehensive School Counseling Program guidelines, with 28 (7%) responding no and 212 (50%) responding as uncertain. In the final five questions, school counselors were marked as being

responsible for coordinating MTSS/RTI at 50 (10%) schools, high-stakes testing at 165 (32%) schools, individual plans of study at 142 (31%) schools, college and career standards at 78 (15%) schools, and the SECD standards at 343 (67%) schools.

When reporting the second section, researchers noted the percentage that administrators' responses agreed with the ASCA listing of appropriate and inappropriate duties (see Tables A4 and A5). Measures of interrater agreement, such as Cohen's kappa and Krippendorff's alpha, test the agreement between raters but do not allow matching rater responses against an expert response set. Because of this, the researchers had to establish an arbitrary scale to measure how well the administrators' response matched with the ASCA categorization of activities. Researchers compared the percentage of administrators whose response was the same to the percentage who responded with the opposite choice. Responses that matched at 66% or above were regarded as high agreement between the ASCA recommendations and administrators' perceptions, with 33-65% being moderate agreement and less than 33% signifying low agreement. In addition, if over 66% chose the opposite response, the researchers interpreted this as high disagreement, with 33-65% meaning moderate disagreement, and less than 33% being low disagreement. The option of choosing a neutral response necessitates these different interpretations. In the activities ASCA listed as appropriate roles for school counselors, zero activities were ranked as low agreement, six activities were ranked as moderate agreement, and eight ranked as high agreement. In addition, all the activities showed low disagreement.

When examining the activities that ASCA (n.d.) listed as inappropriate, seven activities ranked as low agreement with six of these also ranking as moderate

disagreement: coordinating paperwork and data entry of all new students (31%, 34%); coordinating cognitive, aptitude, and achievement testing programs (17%, 56%); computing grade point averages (GPA, 26%, 40%); maintaining student records (20%, 49%); supervising classrooms or common areas (22%, 40%); and coordinating schoolwide individual education plans (IEPs), student study teams, and school attendance review boards (15%, 50%).

Discussion

The current study investigated beliefs of Kansas school administrators to determine the current roles and perceptions of school counselors and the current understanding of state and national school counseling programs. The purpose of this descriptive study was to assess current perceptions of Kansas principals to determine if further education and professional development opportunities are needed.

The results indicate that Kansas administrators do not fully understand the role of today's school counselor. Based on the findings of this research, regarding the perceptions and beliefs currently held by Kansas school building administrators or principals, the need for further education and professional development is supported. If 89% of Kansas administrators are not familiar with the ASCA model, and 76% of the Kansas administrators are not familiar with the Kansas Comprehensive School Counseling Program, the need for communicating the profession's goals and expectations of school counselors to building leadership seems crucial. Another area of need noted in the results of this study is administrators' lack of awareness of the Kansas Curricular Standards for School Counseling. If 65% are not familiar or aware school counselors have their own curricular standards to meet, it would explain how

counselors are being assigned duties outside of their professional expertise. The beliefs administrators have regarding appropriate and inappropriate duties for counselors appear to be based on a lack of knowledge of the counseling profession, which could be altered if better professional development was available.

Implications

Though the role and duties of school counselors have been studied for many years (Agresta, 2004; Ametea & Clark, 2005; Bardhoshi & Duncan, 2009; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005), the researchers felt it necessary to gather current perspectives on the evolution of the role of the school counselor and assess principal perceptions of school counselor duties and responsibilities in Kansas. With approximately 9 out of 10 building principals indicating they are unfamiliar with the ASCA National Model, and close to 3 out of every 4 administrators being unfamiliar with the Kansas Comprehensive School Counseling Program, there is a clear opportunity to educate administrators on the role of professional school counselors and the standards of the profession for which counselors should be accountable.

Preparatory Programs

Study results suggest that there is a need to strengthen Kansas school administrators' knowledge regarding the appropriate role, duties, and standards for school counselors and their programs. According to Armstrong and colleagues (2010), building principals and school counselors "are trained separately and have few opportunities to learn about the roles, responsibilities, and perspectives of each other" (p. 4). This study supports previous research which calls for more emphasis to be given to the understanding of appropriate roles of school counselors (Amatea & Clark, 2005),

and the expansion of teaching the didactic principal-counselor relationship in preparatory programs (Armstrong et al., 2010; Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Shofner & Williamson, 2000).

If the professional preparation programs of both principals and counselors address the distinct and complementary role of both the counseling and the principal prior to entering the field and provide the opportunity for information and discussion regarding the expertise and role of each respective profession, counselors and principals might be better able to bridge these differences. Further, with ongoing collaboration between school administrator and counselor education graduate programs, specific roles and duties of counselors and administrators could be clarified. These suggestions could alleviate the lack of understanding concerning the role of counselors and place more of an emphasis on the integral role that school counselors can provide through the delivery of a comprehensive school counseling program. School counselors, principals, and faculty of university programs need to join forces to build collaborative, team-based approaches (Beesley & Frey, 2006).

Professional Development

While stronger collaboration in preparatory programs is needed, there is also a need to strengthen working relationships of current counselors and administrators in the field. Strong professional relationships between principals and school counselors are imperative to enhance communication and collaboration. These relationships can become strained when principals and school counselors disagree on the roles and responsibilities of the school counselor. Many of the findings in this study highlight the lack of understanding of the role and responsibilities of the school counselor that

currently exists among administrators. In addition, the findings note the value of placing a greater emphasis on professional development programs for practicing administrators. Professional development on the roles, duties, and standards outlined by the Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) and ASCA would likely be beneficial as principals often determine counselor roles and tasks without fully knowing the full role and capabilities of today's school counselor.

School Counselor Advocacy

While recommendations call for increased opportunities for building principals to learn about school counseling programs, it is also necessary for school counselors to better advocate for their professional role. School counselors should not only advocate for students but also themselves. For example, an administrator was quoted in a study (Dollarhide et al., 2007) as stating: "School counselors need to advocate for themselves. They need to make sure principals know that they do a variety of things. They counsel kids with issues, they work on transitions, and they do problem solving with kids and families" (p. 365). School counselors are responsible to communicate with the principal and other key stakeholders their roles, how students are different as a result of their efforts, and what they intend to do to continue to improve the program and its services in the future. It is equally important that counselors are held accountable for their work within the structure provided by national and state models appropriate to their professional role including their work being informed by data. Counselors could utilize other advocacy strategies such as educating legislators regarding the role of the school counselor and seeking legislation to legally define the professional duties of a school counselor (Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006).

Limitations of the Study

This study focused on current perceptions of school administrators on counselor duties, responsibilities, and job expectations, but only in the state of Kansas. It cannot be assumed that school administrators in other states would respond in the same manner. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of the survey sample identified as serving in a rural setting in Kansas. It is important to note that current trends in Kansas indicate a shortage of licensed school counselors, and in rural settings personnel resources tend to be especially scarce. Finally, due to the exploratory nature of this study, the statistical analyses are limited, and further research and more robust studies are warranted.

Future Research

Future research is suggested in the areas of preparatory programs, professional development, and school counselor advocacy. A need exists to provide understanding of the appropriate roles of school counselors, and how school counselors can complement the role of school administrators through the development of principal-counselor relationships. Future research could investigate offering education and information on the role of school counselors in administrative preparatory programs and its impact on administrators and school environments. Additionally, research should examine collaborative efforts between training programs initiated by counselor education programs to further strengthen the working relationships of school counselors and principals (Armstrong, et al., 2010).

Future researchers could examine ways of delivering professional development to current school administrators on the role of school counselors. Principals have the power to stop change and define school counseling programs (Dollarhide et al., 2007;

Armstrong et al. 2010), making it imperative for school counselors to have support from building principals as they implement and maintain strong counseling programs. Further study is needed regarding the impact that professional development may have on increasing principals' understanding of standards, roles, and appropriate duties of professional school counselors.

Finally, researchers should investigate best practices for developing advocacy skills in school counselors. School counselors are trained to advocate for their students but often are not trained on how to advocate for their role or their profession. Limited numbers of school counselors in buildings, with many buildings in Kansas only having one, or in some cases none, may compound this issue. Advocating for more school counselors or for an entire profession may be challenging. Additionally, Kansas does not mandate school counselors, comprehensive school counseling programs, or desirable student-counselor ratios (250:1) as outlined by ASCA. Student-counselor ratios may be another area of school counselor advocacy worthy of future exploration.

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Appendix A

Table A1

Demographic Information

Demographic	Frequency (N)	Percent
Gender		
Male	238	56.1
Female	180	42.5
Other/Rather not say	6	1.4
Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic White	390	91.1
Black, Afro-Caribbean, African American	4	0.9
Latino or Hispanic American	9	2.1
Asian American	1	0.2
Native American or Alaskan Native	2	0.5
Other	8	1.9
Rather not say	14	3.3
Years as an education professional		
Less than 10 years	13	3.2
10-20 years	128	31.3
21-30 years	166	40.6
31-40 years	89	21.8
Over 40 years	13	3.2

Table A2*School Demographic Information*

Demographic	Frequency (N)	Percent
Grade level		
Elementary school (P-6)	184	43.5
Middle school (6-8)	59	13.9
High school (9-12)	77	18.2
Elementary/middle (P-8)	27	5.4
Middle/high (6-12)	46	10.9
All grade levels (P-12)	30	7.1
Community classification		
Rural	275	65.2
Urban	63	14.9
Suburban	84	19.9
School classification		
Public	398	93.9
Private	26	6.1
School enrollment		
Under 250	168	39.5
250-500	182	42.8
500-750	39	9.2
750-1000	20	4.7
1000-1250	4	0.9
1250-1500	3	0.7
1500-1750	2	0.5
1750-2000	5	1.1
Over 2500	2	0.5
Currently employ a school counselor?		
Yes	448	83
No	92	17

Table A3*School Principal Familiarity With Counseling Programs*

Program type	Very familiar		Familiar		Not very familiar		Not at all familiar	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
ASCA National Model	6	1%	50	9%	222	41%	258	48%
Kansas Comprehensive School Counseling Model	12	2%	116	22%	248	46%	159	30%
Kansas Curricular Standards for School Counseling	20	4%	168	32%	248	47%	95	18%

Table A4*School Principal Agreement With ASCA's Appropriate Activities*

Activities	Appropriate		Neutral		Inappropriate		Total N
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Individual student academic program planning	342	73%	89	19%	36	8%	467
Interpreting cognitive, aptitude, and achievement tests	280	60%	122	26%	64	14%	466
Providing counseling to students who are tardy or absent	346	75%	89	19%	29	6%	464
Providing counseling to students who have disciplinary problems	407	88%	44	9%	14	3%	465
Providing counseling to students as to appropriate school dress	293	63%	116	25%	58	12%	467
Collaborating with teachers to present school counseling core curriculum lessons	419	90%	38	8%	7	2%	464
Analyzing grade-point averages in relationship to achievement	270	58%	121	26%	77	16%	468
Interpreting student records	339	73%	101	22%	23	5%	463
Providing teachers with suggestions for effective classroom management strategies	221	47%	144	31%	102	22%	467
Ensuring student records are maintained as per state and federal regulations	238	51%	139	30%	88	19%	465
Helping the school principal identify and resolve student issues, needs, and problems	429	92%	31	7%	8	2%	468
Providing individual and small-group counseling services to students	446	96%	14	3%	3	1%	463
Advocating for students at IEP meetings, student study teams, and school attendance review boards	392	84%	63	13%	14	3%	469
Analyzing disaggregated data	301	64%	140	30%	29	6%	470

Table A5*School Principal Agreement With ASCA's Appropriate Activities*

Activities	Appropriate		Neutral		Inappropriate		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	N
Coordinating paperwork and data entry of all new students	158	34%	165	35%	143	31%	466
Coordinating cognitive, aptitude and achievement testing programs	259	56%	130	28%	77	17%	466
Signing excuses for students who are tardy or absent	34	7%	131	28%	302	65%	467
Performing disciplinary actions or assigning discipline consequences	56	12%	93	20%	317	68%	466
Sending students home who are not properly dressed	47	10%	89	19%	329	71%	465
Teaching classes when teachers are absent	61	13%	154	33%	250	54%	465
Computing grade-point averages	186	40%	155	33%	122	26%	463
Maintaining student records	227	49%	145	31%	92	20%	464
Supervising classrooms or common areas	188	40%	176	38%	101	22%	465
Keeping clerical records	82	18%	166	36%	215	46%	463
Assisting with duties in the principal's office	127	27%	191	41%	147	32%	465
Providing therapy or long-term counseling in schools to address psychological disorders	177	38%	99	21%	185	40%	461
Coordinating schoolwide IEPs, student study teams, and school attendance review boards	232	50%	167	36%	68	15%	467
Serving as a data entry clerk	32	7%	127	27%	306	66%	465