A Phenomenological Study of High School Counselor Advocacy as it Relates

to the College Access of Underrepresented Students

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Abstract

Data indicate that minority students, economically disadvantaged students, and first-generation students are underrepresented in four-year colleges. Contemporary models encourage school counselors to act as advocates in their schools while addressing inequities and promoting the college access of underrepresented groups of students. This phenomenological study explored the definition and practice of high school counselor advocacy as it relates specifically to increasing access for students traditionally underrepresented in four-year colleges. Results indicate a priority and value of school counselor advocacy, however participants also emphasize challenges to advocacy that lie in their schools, communities, and even in the school counselors themselves.

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Research indicates many of our youth intend to continue their education after high school. In a study by Venezia and Kirst (2005), 88% of high school students surveyed plan to attend a post-secondary institution after graduation and 73% of ninth graders plan to attend a four-year college after graduation (Gibbons, Borders, Wiles, Stephan, & Davis, 2006).

However, research suggests there is a wide gap in college enrollment and graduation rates between students traditionally underrepresented in four-year colleges (i.e. first-generation, African American, Latino, and economically disadvantaged youth) and their peers. While African-American and Latino students comprise 32% of the college age population (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2006), only 18% of students at 4-year colleges and universities are African-American or Latino (Hawkins & Clinedinst). Also, according to Horn, Bobbitt, and the National Center for Education Statistics (2000), first-generation students who are considered "highly qualified" enroll in four-year colleges and universities at a lower rate than their peers. Socioeconomic status also has an impact on the college enrollment rates of all students (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). Forty-eight percent of economically-disadvantaged students do not enroll in college following high school graduation as compared to 11% of their peers in the highest income quartile (Terenzini, et al.).

Research (Sciarra & Whitson, 2007; Trusty, 2002) suggests an improvement of environmental school factors and parental involvement positively impacts African-American and Latino student achievement. In addition, research (Horn et al., 2000;

Horn & Kojaku, 2001; Trusty & Niles, 2003; Trusty, 2004; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001) indicates the completion of a rigorous (advanced math and science) course of study increases college access and graduation rates for underrepresented groups. Mathematics courses often function as a barrier to college for students who fail to achieve in these courses (Trusty & Niles, 2003).

Additionally, literature on advocacy within other educational contexts begins to define advocacy for increased college access. Sutton (1998) examined the use of teacher advocacy and social scaffolding in three college preparatory programs for students traditionally underrepresented in college. Sutton found these teacher advocates played an essential role in the academic success of their students and secondary data from these programs showed participating students had increased grade point averages and college going rates.

These data and strategies imply that school counselors, through their professional roles and responsibilities, are in a unique position to advocate for increased college access for underrepresented students. The Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (2003) both call for school counselors to utilize advocacy to ensure educational equity and access within their schools (American School Counselor Association, 2003; The Education Trust, 2003). Scholars (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2003; Baker, 2004; House & Hayes, 2002; House & Martin, 1998) suggest school counselor advocates should teach students how to help themselves; educate students and parents on how to navigate educational bureaucracies; and teach students and families how to access academic support systems to promote academic success. In

addition, challenging policies and practices systemically is an essential part of school counselor advocacy (Bemak & Chung, 2005; House & Martin).

The notions of advocacy have been formalized in the counseling profession by the Advocacy Competencies (American Counseling Association, 2003). These competencies are based on a social justice philosophy and emphasize the impact of cultural, economic, political and social systems on the development of students (e.g. homelessness, educational policies). Effective advocacy includes a systemic focus, which means that some advocacy efforts are focused on the student, some are focused at the school level, and some interventions are in the public arena (Lewis, Arnold, House & Toporek, 2003). Also, Brown and Trusty (2005) developed advocacy competencies for professional school counselors which are the dispositions, knowledge, and skills essential to the effective practice of advocacy.

Despite the emphasis in the theoretical literature on school counselor advocacy and these advocacy models, research regarding school counselors' perception or behavior as it relates to advocacy for college access has been limited. The only contemporary research on school counselor advocacy located was conducted by Field (2002). Field examined school counselors' personal definitions of school counselor advocacy.

Her results suggested advocacy entailed going above and beyond what was normally requested of the counselor and maintaining an individual focus on the student. Additionally, school counselors stressed the importance of advocacy as a belief system as well as a personal willingness to be unpopular. Finally, school counselors believed advocacy was learned through formal training and indirect modeling by colleagues that

were successful advocates. Field also found several barriers to advocacy such as vague job descriptions; a general feeling of being undervalued within the school environment; and the potential of an administrator to either support or inhibit an advocacy initiative. Often, administrators did not understand how to properly utilize school counselors in their dual roles as mental health professionals and as educators. Instead, administrators often assigned clerical tasks (Field, 2002; Field & Baker, 2004).

The literature stresses the importance of school counselor advocacy, however there is an absence of research examining school counselor advocacy in relation to the pronounced gap in college access. This qualitative study sought to explore the practice of high school counselor advocacy as it relates specifically to increasing access for students traditionally underrepresented in four-year colleges. The following research questions were used to guide this study: (a) How do high school counselors define school counselor advocacy within the context of increasing college access for underrepresented students? (b) How do high school counselors advocate for underrepresented students? and (c) How do high school counselors describe personal and environmental factors that impact school counselor advocacy within this context?

Method

Site Selection and Participants

The school counselors were drawn from a moderately sized school district in the Southeastern United States. The district had over 53,000 students and 88 schools. Within the district, approximately 56% of the students were either African-American or Latino and approximately 52% of the students were economically disadvantaged. This single school district was selected due to the large number of students that are

underrepresented in four year colleges. Also, the district was one of the largest in the state and had the highest number of students in poverty of the large districts. Additionally, the three high schools chosen within the district serve differing student populations. Finally, the site selection was convenient as the researcher was previously employed in this district. This study drew school counselors from these three high schools to explore similarities as well as differences.

The first high school was urban in setting and served 1300 students. Approximately 88% of the student body was African-American or Latino and over 50% were economically disadvantaged. The school was low-performing with only 52% of the students performing at grade level. The second high school was suburban in setting and served over 1700 students. Approximately 49% of the student body was African-American or Latino and approximately 25% were economically disadvantaged. The school was high-performing with 84% of the students performing at grade level. The final high school was also suburban and served over 1700 students. Approximately 79% of the student body was African-American or Latino and approximately 39% were economically disadvantaged. The final high school was also low-performing with 55% of its students at grade level.

While this study was not specifically about low versus high-performing schools, these criteria were used to purposefully sample because a difference in the achievement level of a school may impact school counseling behaviors including advocacy (Fitch & Marshall, 2004). In addition, higher achievement levels of students may indicate greater college-going rates. The researcher examined whether context

impacts the use of advocacy and therefore selected three schools that have very distinct differences but also share similarities.

All 18 school counselors at the three high schools were asked to participate in this study, and 12 chose to participate. A formal letter was sent to all participants at each site explaining the study and asking for their participation along with an informed consent form. With the initial letter, the researcher included sample interview questions so that participants could make an informed decision about their participation. The initial letter was followed up with email and phone contacts with all participants. Nine of the school counselors were self-identified as White, two were self-identified as African-American, and one was self-identified as Latino. The age range for the school counselors was self-identified as 26 to 62. The mean age was 46.3, the median age was 44.5, and the standard deviation was 9.69. Additionally, the educational experience of the school counselors ranged from three to 37 years. The mean years of experience were 15.67, the median was 14.5, and the standard deviation was 9.01. Finally, there were nine women and three men that participated.

Procedures

In this study, inquiry sought to understand how school counselors describe and define advocacy. A phenomenological design was used for this study. "A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p.57). Phenomenological design was used to more thoroughly describe a phenomenon, school counselor advocacy.

Semi-structured interviews with open ended questions were used to gain the perspectives of the school counselors at the three high schools. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The interview questions were guided by the research questions, the Advocacy Competencies for Professional School Counselors (Brown & Trusty, 2005) and related research. Questions were initially formulated and then revised following a pilot study. The pilot study was similar in design to the research study and was composed of interviews with five educators in one low-performing high school. A sample interview protocol is available in Appendix A. The questions were structured to allow the school counselors to create their own options for responding and not feel constrained by the perspective of the researcher (Creswell, 2005). Interviews are advantageous because they allow the participant to provide a more detailed perspective and for the researcher to guide the focus of the study (Creswell).

School counselors were asked a total of 13 questions. The researcher was interested in how each school counselor personally defined advocacy for college access for underrepresented students. In addition, school counselors were asked to identify advocacy behaviors that they use and environmental factors that impact school counselor advocacy. Further information about interview questions is available from the first author upon request (See Appendix A).

Data Analysis

After the data was collected, a preliminary coding scheme was developed based upon the research questions, literature, Advocacy Competencies, and the pilot study. Theoretical perspectives as well as the researcher's values impacted what codes were

used (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In addition, an initial analysis of the data was conducted to create additional codes. Initial codes were words, phrases, or ideas that stood out after a preliminary review of the data. This master list of codes was then used to analyze all data (Bogdan & Biklen). Qualitative research analysis is an ongoing process that involves continual reexamination of the data throughout the study. "Data analysis is not viewed as the final stage of qualitative research but as part of a rotating cycle, which can offer spaces for collecting new and better data and can lead to preliminary reports and interpretations" (Yeh & Inman, 2007, p.385).

A secondary analysis also was conducted to develop larger themes or clusters of meaning (Moustakas, 1994) within the data. Similar codes were grouped together to develop these clusters of meaning. A final analysis enabled the researcher to detect emergent themes within the data. These emergent themes were advocacy behaviors by school counselors that were not directly related to the research questions.

The themes were then used to provide a textural and structural description of the participant's experience. These data then were compared amongst school counselors at the same school and then between the three schools. Finally, the researcher completed the data analysis by writing a final description that provided the core meaning of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Establishing Trustworthiness

The researcher acknowledges her status as an insider to the phenomenon, or school counselor advocacy, being studied. The researcher took additional steps to ensure the data represented the perspectives of the participants and not the researcher. In order to establish trustworthiness within this study, this researcher conducted

member checks following each interview to verify the accuracy of the data. Participants were asked to verify the accuracy of their statements. This researcher also made use of a peer debriefing. Peer debriefing occurred after each visit to the field (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

In addition, the researcher made use of field notes and a self-reflective journal. Field notes and the self-reflective journal were written and reviewed after each interview. The field notes and journal assisted the researcher in personal self-reflection and the bracketing of assumptions and judgments about school counselor advocacy (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007). Finally, the use of a variety of data collection techniques (i.e. interviews, field notes, and the self-reflective journal) enhanced the trustworthiness of this study by providing data from several sources and frames of reference (Denzin, 1978).

Results

The data from this study were organized in to three themes that correlated with the research questions: advocacy definition, advocacy behavior, and advocacy factors. Table 1 summarizes the school counselors' responses into themes and sub-themes.

Table 1
Research Themes

Advocacy Definition	Advocacy Behavior	Advocacy Factors
Empathy	Communication	Personal Background
Parental Role	Family Empowerment	Student Ability
Ethical Disposition	Use of Data	Poverty
	Systemic Change	Role Confusion
		District and State Barriers

Advocacy Definition

When asked to describe advocacy generally, the first word used by many of the school counselors was empathy. Over half of the school counselors stressed that successful school counselor advocates must have empathy for students as well as a genuine sense of caring about their well-being. One school counselor said, "I've even had an administrator say to me, you're a good counselor but you're too softhearted. Meaning that by softhearted, I'm going to go to bat for my student that needs the opportunity." The school counselors in this study felt they had to fulfill this expectation, and be the one who cares for students because other educators may have to focus more on academics and test results.

In addition to empathy, over half of the school counselors described advocacy as taking a parental role with the student. School counselors stated that they need to take this role because many of the students lacked a parental advocate. One school counselor said as advocates, "you become the auntie, the big sister, and the mom for that student." Others felt that the purpose of the parental role was not only to fill a void but a high standard as to how students should be treated. Students deserved the highest level of care and one school counselor defined advocacy as, "treating the child across from you as if they were your own."

The school counselors also emphasized the importance of their ethical disposition towards advocacy. They were split in to two groups when describing their ethical disposition. Half of the school counselors believed they had an ethical responsibility to all students, and no one group of students deserved special treatment. As it pertains to this study, they did not feel that school counselors should advocate

more for students that were underrepresented in four year colleges. Advocacy for college access was a counseling function that all students should benefit from, regardless of their personal circumstances.

This first group of school counselors believed advocacy was a part of the traditional role of a school counselor. One school counselor said advocacy was, "synonymous with being a good counselor" and another school counselor agreed saying, "if you're not advocating, then you're just not a good counselor." Additionally, one school counselor asked "how can you be a counselor and not be an advocate?"

This belief that advocacy is essential to school counseling contrasts with the belief that advocacy is somehow different from and in addition to traditional counseling. The other half of the school counselors did believe advocacy used a different set of communication skills than traditional counseling, and in order to be an effective advocate and challenge student obstacles one needed to go above and beyond normal expectations. One school counselor stated, "I think advocacy is different because it is not something you would do just one-on-one. I think advocacy you are using a different skill set, you are not simply listening and reflecting. You are a lot more active."

A third type of perspective was expressed by one school counselor. This school counselor did not see a need for advocacy to increase college access for underrepresented students.

> School counselors have not had that much difficulty getting the students that have the qualifications in to the colleges. Colleges have been very good about that regardless of race or economic status. Often times we're confronted by the do well enough attitude (of students), and not to excel.

He seemed to place the responsibility for college access primarily on the students and their families. Unlike the other school counselors, he did not stress the importance of advocacy for college access as a counseling function.

Advocacy Behaviors

In addition to defining advocacy, school counselors described exactly how they advocate for students. They discussed the importance of communication, family empowerment, the use of data, and systemic change. Most of the school counselors emphasized the importance of a one-on-one relationship with students. These data illustrate that most of the school counselors believe one-on-one attention is most integral for advocacy, rather than a focus on all students or comprehensive programs and systemic change.

While describing communication, a few of the school counselors highlighted the importance of trust. School counselors felt getting to know the students would enable them to form relationships with students and parents, and to earn their trust. A school counselor stated that "when kids trust you, and feel like you're advocating for them, you're going to get more business." Also, many of the school counselors stressed the importance of college information and exposure for students. School counselors use this relationship and trust to convey necessary information about college to students and families. School counselors believed providing information about college was the biggest piece of advocacy. One school counselor said, "I will bend over backwards to make sure parents and students know what's going on."

In addition, most of the school counselors in the study valued the contribution of the family and viewed family empowerment as integral to an increase in college access.

One school counselor described the importance of family empowerment by saying, "the parents don't know what going to college is all about, so if someone does not step up to the plate and say this is what you do and point them in the right direction, its game over." Another school counselor agreed by stating, "One of the things that I tell the parents that often breaks the ice, I say you're younger than I am but if I didn't do this for a living I wouldn't know what to do either."

Finally, the school counselors were split in their use of data. A few of the school counselors used data daily, while the others were very uncomfortable using data and did not use it regularly. They explained that school counseling is about a personal relationship with students and the excessive use of data depersonalized the experience. However, data is used by the majority of the school counselors to encourage talented students to take upper-level courses, such as honors and Advanced Placement. Additionally, one school counselor said he uses data to challenge unfair policies relating to course enrollment although he did see the need for standard policies and procedures. "Rigid rules when they are arbitrary, and not based in data, and you have evidence that this kid can handle it, then I think they need to be challenged. At the same time, I don't think you should throw out guidelines and prerequisites. You need ability, but you also need effort."

In particular, the school counselors at the suburban, high-performing high school stressed the importance of data due to their principal's leadership style and reliance on data. The principal believed his emphasis on data meant advocacy by the school counselors was not needed. One of the school counselors disagreed somewhat with her principal and believed advocacy was still needed. "I am like a lawyer going to represent

my client. The mentality that I have to go fight to get my kids in classes, where at other schools the principal does not even know what's going on."

In general, the school counselors in this study do not use data to promote systemic change. They also did not discuss data as it relates to an achievement gap in their schools, except to identify student ability as an advocacy factor that is out of their control. While describing advocacy behaviors, they do not use data to evaluate their programs to identify gaps so that they can serve more students. The use of data is focused more at the individual, instead of at the school-wide level. School counselors also have difficulty identifying any inequities in their own schools.

However, four school counselors did discuss how they challenge or deal with systemic barriers to college access. One school counselor said effective advocacy entailed advocating with administration because she felt "sometimes they are more about the school and we're more about the student." In addition, two school counselors questioned the existence of lower-level courses in their schools. One tackled this systemic issue in her school by questioning her principal about the types of teachers he placed in these classes: "…by the same token they do not staff their lower level math classes with the best teachers. If you get your least desirable teachers in your lower-level classes, it's like a purgatory for kids." A third school counselor also studied the curriculum at her school to identify systemic issues. "I think at least from my perspective as lead (counselor), it's helping to look at the overall picture of courses. Because until we increase rigor across the board in all classes, it's much harder to increase rigor in honors and AP."

Only one school counselor in the study explicitly used the term systemic change when describing her advocacy behaviors. All of the school counselors in the study were asked during the interview how they used data to promote systemic change and had difficulty answering the question. The school counselors either did not understand and asked the researcher to repeat the question, or they just answered the question as to how they use data generally.

Advocacy Factors

Finally, the school counselors in the study were asked to describe personal as well as environmental factors that impacted the use of advocacy. They emphasized their own personal backgrounds, student ability, poverty, the role confusion of school counselors, and finally, district and state barriers. Half of the school counselors described in great detail their experience as a first-generation college student and how this experience has motivated them to advocate for their students. This is an interesting outcome of the study because many of the school counselors would be identified themselves as underrepresented as it pertains to college access. One school counselor said she was a first-generation college student and she believed the only reason she began college was through the outreach of a college admissions officer.

> To be honest, I was one of the ones, the admissions officer called me and was like we have your application, but you haven't sent in your housing stuff, what are you doing? It was an admissions person and he was like come check it out and talked to my mom and made her comfortable enough to allow me to go and that was it for me.

Another school counselor was also the first in her family to go to college and said this experience motivated her. "I feel these kids' pain, because I am one of those. I tend to push them probably more because they need more help."

In addition to their experiences of being the first in their family to attend college, half of the school counselors discussed either a nonexistent or a negative relationship with their school counselor in high school. One school counselor said, "not to say that we didn't have it, but I don't remember anyone in high school saying hey do step 1, 2, and 3. And I'm sure if someone would have done it I would have taken part in it." Many of the school counselors perceived their school counselor as one who met only with the top students that were going to college.

In contrast to the lack of a relationship many of the interviewed school counselors had with their school counselor, a few of the school counselors actually had a negative relationship. While discussing her school counselor, one school counselor said "I found the way that counselor operated as very offensive because I knew in my core even though I was the oldest and neither of my parents had gone to college, I knew that I was going."

Second, a barrier to advocacy and college access discussed by over half of the school counselors was the academic ability of their students. According to the school counselors, this lack of ability for some students directly correlated with their inability to complete higher level mathematics courses. Many students struggle with the most basic courses such as Algebra I but even when students successfully pass this course, they still may not be able to take college preparatory mathematics. One school counselor said, "a student who does not do well in Algebra I, which may be for a variety of

reasons, and they score low and they are steered into technical math and then they never have the opportunity to get what they need to get to go to a four year school."

Many of the school counselors described student ability as something that is fixed, and cannot be changed, particularly once a student is in high school. They are very willing to advocate for the gifted student that is placed in low-level classes, but did not share how they advocate for students that have less academic ability. School counselors in the study were asked specifically about empowering students, and many responded by continuing to emphasize making college information available so students and families would understand the college admissions process. Many of the school counselors do not connect the role of the school counselor or specific behaviors to improving academic achievement.

Third, many of the school counselors at the two low-performing high schools discussed barriers to advocacy that originated in the family or the community. The school counselors felt the poverty of families as well as the families' own educational experiences contributed to their values toward and involvement in their children's education. They believed many of the parents do not participate in their children's education and that is one of the reasons school counselor advocacy is needed. This belief may drive the disposition to take on a parental role with students and may conflict with the school counselors' expressed desire to empower families.

In addition, many of the school counselors at the two low-performing high schools felt one of the primary reasons for their lack of time was that other school personnel did not understand the role of a school counselor. One school counselor said to some degree she understood why administrators assigned these duties to school

counselors because "when you want the job done and done well, who do they choose, the counselors." Another school counselor acknowledged she is partly to blame for the role confusion between school counselors, administrators, and other school personnel.

> I don't know, I just do what I do. Those are all lovely things to do, we need to be set up doing the models with the ASCA model. I think we do those things, it's just that we haven't sat down and categorized all that. That's probably why I have a hard time verbalizing this (advocacy). Because I don't think that way. But I think that is partly my fault for not setting it up the other way and letting teachers know and administrators know and school board members know and all the folks coming and criticizing our school know what we should be doing.

The school counselors at the suburban high school did not describe many environmental barriers in their school or discuss being confused about their role like the school counselors in the other two high schools.

In addition to barriers within the school and community, many of the school counselors at two of the high schools are able to focus their attention outside of their school and community and discuss barriers at the state and district level. One of the school counselors works at a low-performing high school that has received significant media attention for the low achievement of its students. She expressed frustration that district level administrators dictate policies and procedures for the school without understanding their unique needs. She felt these policies and procedures inhibited school counselor advocacy and made it more difficult for their students to reach their goal of college. Many school counselors also discussed the importance of an improvement in test scores. Pressure is placed on teachers to improve scores and this

can be a barrier to placing students in higher-level courses, particularly in low-achieving schools such as the ones in this study.

School counselors from the high-achieving high school also discussed the new graduation requirements that have been passed in the state. The new requirement stated all students must complete higher levels of mathematics, including Geometry. School counselors did not know whether all of their students are capable of passing these courses. A school counselor said, "I don't have the magic answer as to whether Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II, and an advanced math which is college ready is within everyone's reach, and we're just not hitting it or if that's just a rigorous standard and some people (can't make it)." Another school counselor said she agreed that mathematics is important, "but to send the message out that everyone must be university prep is having your head in the sand." The school counselors from this high school believed this policy would prohibit some students from even graduating high school instead of the intended result of preparing more students for college. They believed not all students can meet this rigorous standard. They said all students are different and have different ability levels and should therefore have different options both in high school and in post-secondary education.

Discussion

While many themes on definitions, behaviors, and context are illuminating in the results mentioned above; one overarching finding worthy of discussion is whether advocacy itself is indeed traditional school counseling or if it is something different. School counselors identified themes like establishing relationships, empathizing, taking a parental role, encouraging high level course taking, and disseminating information.

While these seem critical to supporting underrepresented students in access to four year colleges, they do not seem congruent to contemporary descriptions of school counselor advocacy in the literature (e.g., systemic change, breaking down barriers, disaggregating data).

School counselors who felt advocacy was a part of traditional counseling were more likely to describe advocacy as working with individuals in special situations once a relationship has been established. They stressed the importance of relationships and getting to know students well so they can advocate if needed. This tendency to focus only on the individual when advocating aligned these findings with earlier research (Field & Baker, 2004). The majority of the school counselors did not identify issues of equity in their schools and they did not use data to identify these issues. Their inability to identify personal and school barriers indicates the school counselors have difficulty turning a critical eye on themselves and their schools. Further, it is interesting to note that many of these school counselors also had difficulty with the concept of advocating only for a particular group of students such as those underrepresented in a four-year college.

Also, even though they did discuss collaborating with teachers, administrators, and families, they rarely intervene in the system of the school or community to promote equity. The school counselors seemed to blame the families and the communities for low student ability and apathy. The school counselors' stated value for family involvement was contradictory because at one point they discussed the importance of the family, but then they quickly transitioned to discussing family barriers and the

importance of taking on a parental role for students that did not have strong parental involvement.

In contrast, a smaller portion of the school counselors in this study who believed advocacy is an addition to their traditional role more clearly defined advocacy (e.g., more systemically as something a school counselor does with individuals, groups, families, other educators, and the community) and their role within the school. They also were more comfortable as educational leaders and collaborating with other educators. These school counselors described advocacy behaviors that align more closely with the theoretical literature (Bemak & Chung, 2005; House & Martin, 1998).

Finally, many of the school counselors had difficulty articulating their roles. With the exception of one school counselor, none of the school counselors in the study were exposed to reform models such as the ASCA National Model, TSCI, or ACA Advocacy Competencies during their graduate education, nor had they participated in professional development in advocacy or leadership. The school counselors were not comfortable with terms such as advocacy, data, or systemic change, which aligned with earlier research (Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004) that found school counselors and administrators did not highly value counseling functions that utilized advocacy or data to promote systemic change. The reticence of many of these school counselors to actively advocate for their students in a systemic rather than individual manner may be explained by a factor called Nice Counselor Syndrome (NCS) (Bemak & Chung, 2008). NCS is described as school counselors who strive to be likable and promote harmony within their schools. The drawbacks of NCS include a reluctance to appear confrontational by challenging policies, practices, and inequities in their schools as well

as a sense of powerlessness. In addition, these school counselors are often very willing to take on any task that is assigned to them, further blurring their professional role and responsibilities. In general, the school counselors in this study were very hesitant to critique their own schools and challenge the status quo. They also expressed role confusion and described a variety of administrative barriers to advocacy.

Limitations

The researcher believes that context has an impact on the use of school counselor advocacy so this phenomenon may appear differently in different situations or school settings. The study of advocacy within this particular context is very narrow, so therefore school counselors that advocate within different contexts may define advocacy differently. However, context in this study, while important, had less influence than anticipated. There was limited variance amongst different participants and schools despite distinct contextual differences. This limitation may be attributed to the narrow focus of this study and the focus of the interview questions. The negative aspect of interviews is that the perspectives gained are filtered through the views of a few participants (Creswell, 2005). Subjects that chose to participate were particularly interested in this topic or felt they were knowledgeable about this subject and may therefore have skewed the results. Finally, the researcher acknowledges personal biases and an insider status with the participants being studied.

Implications for Professional School Counselors

Bemak & Chung (2008) offer 16 recommendations for moving past NCS and becoming more effective advocates. These include aligning advocacy efforts with the school mission; using strategies that are data-driven; identifying social and cultural

factors in the school and community that affect students' overall development; and developing personal and political partners. Also, comprehensive school counseling models might assist in addressing systemic issues (e.g., equity audits and developing closing the achievement gap action plans; American School Counselor Association, 2003). School counselors could also address systemic issues by utilizing data, examining and challenging unfair policies and procedures, and offering professional development for faculty on college access (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Erford et al., 2003; House & Sears, 2002).

Within the context of this study, data can be used to prove the effectiveness of advocacy. School counselors can examine enrollment trends in college preparatory classes, graduation rates on the college preparatory pathway, and enrollment rates in four-year colleges and universities. Positive trends indicate advocacy by school counselors is successful, and by noting negative trends, changes can be made in advocacy efforts as well as the school counseling program to better meet the needs of students.

Additionally, the literature consistently identifies course taking and mathematics in particular as essential to success in college. School counselors seemed to endorse the idea of all students in higher level classes, but school counselors did not see their role in improving academic success. School counselors must engage in policy level discussions at the school, district, and state levels and find ways to contribute to the academic success of students as an essential step toward college access.

Also, school counselors have to resolve their conflicting beliefs surrounding parents/families. School counselors in this sample suggested educating, empowering,

and involving families is a must. However, they too suggested school counselors must take on the parent role and expressed distrust and low expectations of the contributions of some families. It seems advocacy for this issue will require both family empowerment and filling voids when families are unable or unwilling to help.

Finally, school counselors would benefit from school counselor preparation and professional development which focuses on advocacy and leadership. Theoretical literature (House & Sears, 2002) states school counseling graduate programs have an important role to play in training school counselor advocates and graduate programs have mostly neglected to educate school counselors on issues such as educational reform, systemic change, political climates, and the power structures which exist in schools and communities.

Conclusion

An understanding of advocacy for college access could be deepened by including underrepresented students and their families in the study. According to Gibbons et al. (2006) and Venezia and Kirst (2005), high school students rarely utilized their school counselor for guidance about college and viewed their school counselor as not very helpful. Further research could also examine advocacy for other topics (e.g., culturally relevant practices) and in different settings (e.g., elementary and middle school).

Advocacy is critical for school counselors as they work to implement programs that are comprehensive while also tackling inequities in their schools. One school counselor in the study reinforced the importance of advocacy by saying:

I really hold myself to a standard. I'm sarcastic sometimes, but I'm idealistic. And

I truly believe in what we do, in the difference we make. And what scares me is

that there is so much to be done, and the nervousness in my stomach (asks)

have I done what I'm supposed to do?

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Appendix

Interview Questions for School Counselors

1a. How do you define school counselor advocacy?

2a. What is advocacy as it relates to increasing access for underrepresented students to attend a four-year college or university? (probe: going above and beyond, advocating for special situations, attacking problems at a systemic level, family advocacy)

3a. What dispositions (values, beliefs) do you believe that school counselors need to be an effective advocate to increase college access?

4a. Tell me how your personal background and experiences impact your use of advocacy to increase college access, if they do? Probes: what drives you? In a positive or negative way, personality issues?

5a. How important do you think advocacy is in increasing college access for your students?

6a. What barriers, if any, exist in your school that prevents you from being a better advocate to increase college access for your underrepresented students?

7a. In your community?

8a. In your school district? Probes: systemic issues, community/student issues, administration, time, roles, etc.

9a. What knowledge is essential to being an effective advocate to increase college access in your opinion? (i.e. resources, parameters, dispute resolution, models, systemic change)

10a. What skills do you feel are essential for effective advocacy to increase college access? (i.e. communication, collaboration, problem-assessment, problem-solving, organizational skills, self-care)

11a. The following functions may be performed by a school counselor in an advocacy role. Tell me how you use these functions, if you do, to increase college access for your students. Probe: Give examples and explain why they do or do not use.

    I.   Challenge low-level coursework as well as rigid requirements for upper-level coursework (i.e. PreAlgebra, Technical Math)

    II.   Empower students by teaching self-help skills (i.e. organization, test taking, study skills, etc.)

    III.   Educate parents and students on how to navigate the school bureaucracy (i.e. prerequisites and waiver policies)

    IV.   Use data to promote systemic change (ex. Disproportionate # of minorities in low-level courses vs. honors, etc.)

    V.   Offer staff development to promote high expectations for all students

    VI.   Any additional functions you would like to add.

12a. From your perspective, how is advocacy different from traditional counseling duties, roles and responsibilities?

13a. Is there anything else about your counseling practices and/or school policies pertaining to the issues we have discussed that you think I should know but haven't asked about?

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