

Ecological Barriers to Comprehensive School Counseling Program Implementation

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Abstract

According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), schools designated with Recognized American School Counselor Model Programs (RAMP) demonstrate alignment with the ASCA National Model, widely recognized as the standard for comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCPs). Empirical investigations of the barriers to achieving the RAMP-designation have primarily focused on the intra- and interpersonal characteristics of the schools' counselors, with little attention to macro-systemic factors. Grounded in McMahon et al.'s (2014) ecological school counseling framework, we investigated whether macro-systemic characteristics including region, institution type, community setting, and program funding significantly and uniquely predict RAMP-designation above and beyond school counselors' inter- and intra-personal characteristics. Using a national sample ($n = 1,641$) of practicing school counselors, our results revealed that school region, institution type, and community setting significantly and uniquely predicted RAMP-designation. Implications for future research, advocacy, and policy for CSCPs and RAMP are discussed.

Keywords: ASCA National Model, Recognized ASCA National Model (RAMP) program, ecological school counseling (ESC), school counseling, comprehensive school counseling program

Comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCPs) took root inconsistently across the United States in the 1980s (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006), were studied in the late 1990s (Gysbers et al., 1999; Lapan et al., 1997), and eventually standardized by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) in the early 2000s (ASCA, 2003). In 2004, the ASCA created the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) designation to incentivize schools to implement the ASCA National Model with fidelity. In the past decade, the

ASCA (2019) and school counseling researchers have noted that the school counselor serves as a systemic change agent invested in promoting social justice and ensuring that students have equitable educational opportunities (Hilts et al., 2022; McMahon et al., 2014).

Since its inception, the ASCA National Model has evolved from a framework clarifying school counselors' roles and responsibilities to a model rooted in guiding themes of leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change with the purpose of maximizing student achievement and development (ASCA, 2019; Milsom & Morey, 2019). In addition to delivering individual, classroom, small group, and schoolwide services, school counselors collect data that demonstrates how students are different because of school counseling programs (ASCA, 2019). Research results suggest that CSCPs level the playing field for students in academic (Carey & Dimmit, 2012; Dimmit & Wilkerson, 2012; Wilkerson et al., 2013), career (e.g., Lapan et al., 2012), and social/emotional (e.g., Whiston et al., 2011) domains, yet implementation gaps and pervasive barriers persist.

McMahon et al. (2014) presented ecological school counseling (ESC) as a theoretical framework through which school counselors can holistically conceptualize and deliver the primarily atheoretical ASCA Model. The authors posited that if school counselors are committed to and engaged in social justice advocacy, the profession must expand the lens through which school counselors identify and address system and student needs (McMahon et al., 2014). In the current study, we employed the ESC framework to investigate barriers to school counselors' implementation of a RAMP-designated program.

As the profession strives for consistency, researchers have only recently begun examining RAMP characteristics compared with non-RAMP schools (Mullen et al., 2019a) and school counselors' attitudes concerning barriers to RAMP implementation (Hilts et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2022). That said, the extant literature has only minimally investigated the extent to which types of barriers, through an

ecological lens, may predict RAMP status (Mullen et al., 2019a). Therefore, we examined – from an ecological perspective – whether (a) the proportion of schools with school counseling programs that have achieved the RAMP-designation differ based on macro-systemic variables (i.e., geographic region, community setting, institution type, program funding); and (b) macro-systemic factors significantly and uniquely contributed to predicting school counseling programs' RAMP-designation above and beyond inter- and intrapersonal variables (i.e., school counselors' lack of confidence, lack of school partner support, time constraints).

Throughout this manuscript, we discuss the ASCA National Model and RAMP interchangeably under the broader umbrella of CSCPs because both are deeply rooted in aspects of CSCPs. As asserted by school counseling scholars, although not all CSCPs have the RAMP-designation, all RAMP-designated programs must demonstrate, with evidence, the application of core components of CSCPs (e.g., Duquette, 2021).

A Brief Overview of Research Trends: From CSCPs to the ASCA Model to RAMP

In the past two decades in particular, school counseling research has progressed from studying CSCPs (e.g., Carey & Dimmit, 2012; Dimmit & Wilkerson, 2012; Sink & Stroh, 2003), to examining the ASCA Model (Carey, Harrington, Martin, & Hoffman, 2012; Fye et al., 2018) to more recently investigating RAMP-designated schools (e.g., Akos et al., 2019; Goodman-Scott & Grothaus, 2017). This progression in research seemingly aligns with ASCA's efforts to standardize practice. Although there has been an uptick in investigating outcomes of RAMP-designated schools, there have been conflicting findings (Akos et al., 2019; Goodman-Scott et al., 2020; Wilkerson et al., 2013). In some cases, researchers' results underscored the positive relationship between RAMP-designated schools and student achievement (e.g., Jones et al., 2019; Wilkerson et al., 2013) and achievement-related (e.g., Akos et al., 2019) outcomes. Conversely, other researchers reported a lack of differences in student outcome measures based on RAMP designation (Goodman-Scott et al., 2020, and increases in absenteeism and lower academic achievement in RAMP schools (Milsom & Morey, 2019).

In the current study, we focus on the ecological barriers to RAMP while acknowledging that RAMP-designation is rare. Specifically, despite RAMP being acknowledged by the ASCA as evidence of a model program (ASCA, 2019), as of November 30, 2022, out of approximately 135,000 K-12 schools in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b), just 483 school counseling programs across 40 states currently maintain the RAMP-designation (ASCA, n.d.).

Comprehensive School Counseling Program and RAMP Implementation

The ASCA National Model serves as a framework for school counselors to design and implement school counseling

programs that facilitate optimal student outcomes with an emphasis on student achievement (e.g., grade point average, dropout rates) and achievement-related data (e.g., parental involvement, disciplinary referrals, and suspension rates; ASCA, 2019). Within this framework, school counselors must define, manage, deliver, and assess their school counseling programs to ensure they are efficiently and effectively facilitating student outcomes.

In the late 1990s, researchers (e.g., Gysbers et al., 1999; Lapan et al., 1997) began to investigate the relationship between comprehensive program implementation and its impact on school counseling practice and student achievement (Milsom & Morey, 2019). For instance, Gysbers et al. (1999) found that participation in non-counseling roles (e.g., clerical tasks) negatively impacted program delivery, engagement with school partners (e.g., students, parents, teachers), and school counselor visibility. Since this earlier foundational work, there is a growing body of literature demonstrating how CSCP and RAMP implementation contributes to structuring both the inter- and intra-personal experiences of school counselors. Namely, working within a school with higher levels of CSCP implementation is positively associated with self-efficacy (Bodenhorn et al., 2010; Ernst et al., 2017; Mullen & Lambie, 2016), emotional intelligence and leadership (Hilts, Liu, & Luke, 2022; Mullen et al., 2019b), job satisfaction (Fye et al., 2018; Moyer, 2011; Pyne, 2011), lower levels of burnout (Fye et al., 2018, 2020; Moyer, 2011), and stronger professional identity (Cinotti, 2014; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008).

CSCP and RAMP Research on Student Outcomes

In the past decade, numerous state-based studies have examined the positive impact of CSCP implementation on student outcomes. For example, in multiple studies conducted by Carey, Harrington, Martin, and Hoffman and Carey, Harrington, Martin, and Stevenson (2012)) in both Utah and Nebraska, the researchers discovered a positive relationship between comprehensive program delivery and student outcomes such as higher attendance rates and reading and math proficiency scores, and lower discipline and suspension rates. In contrast, the researchers found that school counselors who spent more time providing crisis counseling were more likely to work in schools with lower graduation grades, and higher disciplinary and suspension incident rates. In another state-based study, Lapan et al.'s (2001) results revealed that middle school students in schools with more fully implemented CSCPs reported less conflict with peers, felt safer attending their schools, had better relationships with teachers, earned higher grades, and were more likely to believe that their education was important and applicable to their future in comparison to schools with lower scores of CSCP implementation. Other researchers' results revealed that elementary school students who attended RAMP-schools or in schools with higher levels of CSCP implementation scored higher on achievement tests (Sink & Stroh, 2003; Wilkerson, 2013). In a more recent study based in North Carolina, Akos et al.'s (2019) results suggested that

RAMP was positively related to attendance, specifically at the middle school level, as well as for minoritized students (e.g., Latino and economically disadvantaged). In sum, it is evident that there is a growing body of literature underscoring the efficacy of CSCP and RAMP implementation.

Although there is empirical literature highlighting the positive impact of CSCP and RAMP implementation, there are also conflicting results. For example, Goodman-Scott et al. (2020) found that there was not a statistically significant difference in student outcomes between RAMP and non-RAMP schools in Georgia and Virginia across elementary, middle, and high school levels. Similarly, Akos et al.'s (2019) results indicated that, except for attendance at the middle school level, there was a nonsignificant relationship between RAMP status and student achievement. In another study comparing elementary students from RAMP schools to non-RAMP schools within a large school district, Milsom and Morey (2019) found that students from non-RAMP schools had higher attendance rates and course grades than students who attended RAMP schools. Given that their results contradicted previous studies, the researchers concluded that further research is necessary to understand the impact of RAMP.

In recent years, scholars have also begun conducting qualitative research to better understand school counselors' lived experiences implementing a RAMP-designated program. For instance, Duquette (2021) examined the experiences of eight elementary school counselors' who successfully navigated the RAMP process. The researcher found that, even with a lack of confidence to pursue implementing a RAMP, participants were motivated to do so through both intrinsic (e.g., desire to learn, leave a legacy) and extrinsic factors (e.g., requirement of their position). This seemed to corroborate the findings in both Goodman-Scott and Grothaus (2017) and Goodman-Scott et al.'s (2022) study which discovered that school counselors who pursued RAMP reported that they did so to facilitate their credibility and prestige and enhance their ability to collaborate with school partners and address students' needs.

Barriers to CSCP and RAMP Implementation

Despite the evidence highlighting the positive impact of CSCP and RAMP implementation on school counselors' practices and attitudes and student outcomes (e.g., Akos et al., 2019), the movement toward CSCP implementation has been slow (Chandler et al., 2018; Fye et al., 2018). Barriers to the implementation of CSCPs include limited school partner support (Hilts et al., 2019; Lapan et al., 2012), school counselors' confidence in implementing a RAMP (Goodman-Scott et al., 2022; Hilts et al., 2019), role conflict and role ambiguity (Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017), high case-loads (ASCA, 2019; Lapan et al., 2012), assignment of non-school counseling duties (Chandler et al., 2018; Hilts et al., 2019), and the time and financial costs required to complete the RAMP application process (Duquette, 2021). For example, in examination of the attitudes of a national sample of school counselors, Hilts et al.'s (2019) results indicated that

lack of confidence and school partner support, as well as general time constraints significantly predicted RAMP status. Similarly, Taylor et al.'s (2022) exploratory study of a school counseling cohort preparing to apply for the RAMP-designation over a two-year period found that barriers included lack of training and knowledge of CSCPs and systemic barriers (e.g., staffing changes, superintendents' knowledge of school counselors' roles).

Levels of program implementation also seem to vary by grade level (Dahir et al., 2009), type of district (Butler & Constantine, 2005), and school demographics (Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012; Mullen et al. 2019b). In a recent study, Mullen et al. (2019a) examined the characteristics of both RAMP and non-RAMP public schools across the United States. The researchers' results indicated that non-RAMP schools were more likely to be Title I eligible, located in city, township, and rural communities, have fewer full-time employees and students, and possess characteristics associated with less economic advantages, including having higher rates of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. Researchers have recommended further investigation that considers individual qualities of school counselors and school-level systemic variables to better understand potential factors that facilitate or impede RAMP implementation (e.g., Mullen et al., 2019a). Scholars have also upon school counseling researchers to employ an ecological lens to investigate school counseling practice (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018, Hilts, Liu, Li, & Luke, 2022).

Ecological School Counseling

Although the ASCA National Model (2019) does not describe a specific theoretical foundation, it is fundamentally grounded in the notion that school counselors function as leaders and systemic change agents (McMahon et al., 2014). In response to the atheoretical nature of the ASCA National Model, McMahon et al. (2014) contends that ecological school counseling (ESC) provides a theoretical framework that aligns with the National Model's core components and guiding themes. The ESC framework demands school counselors to holistically consider the multisystemic influences of the environment when conceptualizing and tackling issues that occur within the school because changes to any part of the system can impact the functioning of the entire school ecosystem (Hilts, Liu, Li, & Luke, 2022; McMahon et al., 2014).

McMahon and colleagues (2014) suggested that conceptualizing the ASCA National Model through an ecological framework may allow school counselors to meet the needs of all students more effectively. The ESC offers a framework which demonstrates how school counseling program implementation can be understood from a broad, systemic perspective. For instance, school counselors can intervene at the institutional level by means of establishing a vision and mission statement and identifying programmatic goals reflective of their school's needs (McMahon et al., 2014). The manage component is reflected at the institutional level via school improvement planning, program evaluation, and the

use of data (ASCA, 2019; McMahon et al., 2014). The ASCA's deliver component occurs at the individual and interpersonal levels and can include interventions such as instruction, counseling, and appraisal and advisement (ASCA, 2019; McMahon et al., 2014). Last, the assess component of the ASCA National Model (2019) can be conceptualized at all ecological levels (e.g., inter- and intra-personal, and systemic; McMahon et al., 2014). Taken collectively, ecological school counselors understand the various systems and levels of interpersonal contexts to enable them to advocate for comprehensive programming to better address the needs of the various systems within the larger school environment (ASCA, 2019). To date, the use of the ESC framework (McMahon et al., 2014) to investigate school counseling practice has only been minimally examined (Hilts, Liu, Li, & Luke, 2022); however, researchers have proposed incorporating this framework to support students in gentrified neighborhoods (Bell & Van Velsor, 2017).

Authors have used different terminology to discuss the various contexts which comprise an ecosystem. For the purposes of this study, we use Cook's (2015) term *intrapersonal factors* to refer to school counselor's self-efficacy for implementing various aspects of the ASCA National Model, and *interpersonal factors* to refer to school counselor's perceptions of the various types of support they receive from school partners, including teachers, parents, and administrators, for implementing components of the ASCA National Model. We use Ratts and Greenleaf's (2017) term *systemic factors* to refer to contextual aspects of the school community, in this case, the school's institution type (e.g., public versus non-public), region of the country, community setting (e.g., suburban, urban, and rural), and school counselor's perceptions regarding funding for the implementation of the school counseling program.

Examination of Ecological School Counseling

Researchers have started to gain a better understanding of school counseling practice through the explicit use of an ecological lens (Hilts, Liu, Li, & Luke, 2022). For instance, Hilts, Liu, Li, and Luke (2022) used hierarchical multiple regression to investigate the extent to which ecological factors significantly predicted school counselors' engagement in leadership. The researchers found that sociocultural factors (i.e., current socioeconomic status, age, identifying as a school counselor of color), professional developmental experiences (i.e., leadership experience), and intra- and interpersonal factors (i.e., multicultural competence, leadership self-efficacy, psychological empowerment) uniquely contributed to the variance in school counseling leadership. Despite systemic factors not uniquely contributing to their model, Hilts, Liu, Li, and Luke (2022) posited that this result may be overshadowed by the amount of influence from other ecological levels. In another study, Goodman-Scott et al. (2018) examined differences in student-level outcomes (e.g., student grade point average, graduation) based on school-level (e.g., student-to-counselor ratios, Title I status) factors. Indeed, the researchers' results suggested that both student-

to-counselor ratios were associated with student-level outcomes such as student grade point average. These results highlight the utility of using an ecological perspective to understand the impact of school-level factors on student outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

Although the ESC (McMahon et al., 2014) provides a conceptual framework for RAMP implementation, it is a relatively new approach with scant empirical research (Hilts, Liu, Li, & Luke, 2022). Further examination of the fundamental constructs of the framework could offer important implications for school counseling training while generating further empirical support for this conceptual framework. Namely, this may help to expand an understanding of the ESC in a RAMP implementation context, specifically. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine whether macro-systemic variables such as community setting (urban, suburban, rural), institution type (public vs. non-public), geographic region of the United States, and school program funding for curriculum materials and technology) uniquely contribute to explaining the variance in RAMP status beyond inter- and intra-personal factors (e.g., confidence, support from school partners, and time constraints) that had been previously established as predictors of RAMP status (Hilts et al., 2019). We sought to address the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between RAMP status and selected macro-systemic factors (i.e., the school's geographic region, community setting, institution type, and school counselors' attitudes toward lack of program funding)?
2. To what extent do macro-systemic variables (i.e., the school's geographic region, community setting, institution type, and school counselors' attitudes toward lack of program funding) explain the variance in school counselors' RAMP-designation above and beyond the effects of micro-level factors (i.e., participants' lack of confidence in delivering aspects of the ASCA National Model, lack of school partner support, and time constraints)?

Method

Participants and Procedures

After institutional review board approval to use archival data, we studied a sample from a previous study (Hilts et al., 2019). ASCA members were recruited via email and a one-time posting on ASCA Scene's Open Forum, a social network for school counselors, school counseling students, and counselor educators. From the approximately 31,000 invitations, we received responses from 2,203 school counselors who were members of ASCA. In accordance with the informed consent, discontinuing the survey indicated a decision to leave the study. Therefore, of the 2,203 returned questionnaires, we removed 474 incomplete surveys,

resulting in a complete sample of 1,729. Participants worked at the following school levels: elementary/primary, 30.4% ($n = 499$); middle/junior high, 21.0% ($n = 342$); high/secondary school, 35.1% ($n = 575$); combined K–12, 5.4% ($n = 88$); and other, 8.2% ($n = 135$). Regarding school type, 23.3% ($n = 379$) worked in urban schools, 43.9% ($n = 714$) in suburban schools, and 32.9% ($n = 536$) in rural schools. The geographic representation included the following regions of the United States: Southeast ($n = 613$; 37.4%), Midwest ($n = 400$; 24.4%), West ($n = 368$; 22.5%), and Northeast ($n = 256$; 15.6%). Hiltz et al. (2019) provided complete demographic information from the sample.

Instrumentation

The inter- and intra-personal and macro-systemic variables investigated in this study were selected from the School Counselor Perception Questionnaire (SCPQ; Hiltz et al., 2019). Based upon a review of the literature, the SCPQ was designed to identify inter- and intra-personal characteristics and macro-systemic variables that may be perceived by school counselors as impediments to RAMP implementation. Specifically, the authors of this study created the SCPQ to capture themes identified in previous studies as hindrances to CSCP implementation (Hiltz et al., 2022). Principal component analysis of the SCPQ revealed six common perceived barriers among school counselors to implementation of RAMP; (a) lack of confidence in implementing aspects of the ASCA National Model; (b) lack of administrative support; (c) time spent on clerical and office work; (d) lack of teacher and parent support to implement aspects of the ASCA National Model; (e) time spent on testing and monitoring; and (f) time constraints (Hiltz et al., 2019). All eigenvalues for this six-factor model were above 1, the scree plot revealed a clear “elbow” (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018), and the model accounted for 76% of the variance (Hiltz et al., 2019). The three inter- and intra-personal factors used in the current study—confidence in delivering aspects of the ASCA National Model, lack of teacher and parent support, and time constraints—were identified as predictors of RAMP status in a previous study by Hiltz et al. (2019). We also included four macro-systemic variables, consisting of community setting (urban, suburban, rural), institution type (public versus non-public schools), geographic region of the United States (i.e., South, Midwest, West, and Northeast), and school counselors’ attitudes toward lack of program funding. For this latter variable, we combined three items—school counselors’ attitudes toward lack of program funding, lack of funding for curriculum materials for their school counseling program, and lack of funding for technology for their school counseling program—into a single variable with good reliability ($\alpha = .80$). All items were self-report; the inter- and intra-personal variables and school counselors’ attitudes toward lack of program funding variable were measured using a 5-point Likert-scale (1 = *not at all relevant*, 2 = *somewhat relevant*, 3 = *moderately relevant*, 4 = *very relevant*, 5 = *extremely relevant*).

Data Analysis

We screened data for outliers and removed any extreme cases and invalid data responses, including instances of straightlining. Data were screened for univariate outliers by examining frequency distributions. We screened for multivariate outliers or unusual combinations of scores using Mahalanobis distance (Mertler et al., 2021). Using the degrees of freedom and the χ^2 criterion calculated at each iteration, we removed multivariate outliers. In addition, missing data were removed using the listwise deletion method thus eliminating cases with two or more missing responses. Through these methods of screening the sample size was reduced from $N = 1,729$ to $n = 1,641$.

While logistic regression does not require adherence to assumptions of normality, linearity, or equal variance, it is sensitive to multicollinearity or highly correlated predictor variables (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2018). Therefore, we screened the data for multicollinearity using multiple regression analysis. All variables included in subsequent analyses had tolerance statistics greater than .10, indicating that multicollinearity was not present. There was also no reason to believe the participants did not meet the independence assumption (e.g., measurements were not repeated or matched).

Results

Preliminary analyses were run to investigate relationships among RAMP status and the assessed macro-systemic variables (i.e., the school’s geographic region, community setting, institution type, and school counselors’ attitudes toward lack of program funding), independent of the previously investigated (Hiltz et al., 2019) inter- and intra-personal factors of interest (e.g., participants’ lack of confidence in delivering aspects of the ASCA National Model, lack of school partner support, and time constraints). First, we ran a chi-square test of the proportional differences in RAMP status by geographic setting (urban, suburban, or rural). Results showed a significant difference ($\chi^2(2, N = 1,629) = 15.01, p < .001$) among the three settings, with RAMP status achieved by 8.44% of urban schools, 12.89% of suburban schools, and 6.53% of rural schools. Follow up chi-square analyses showed significant differences between urban and both suburban ($\chi^2(1, N = 1,093) = 4.86, p = .03$) and rural ($\chi^2(1, N = 1,250) = 13.55, p < .001$) settings, but not between suburban and rural communities ($\chi^2(1, N = 915) = 1.20, p = .27$).

A chi-square test was also run to investigate whether the proportion of schools achieving RAMP status differed between public and non-public schools (including religious and non-religious private schools as well as online and traditional charter schools). These results also showed a significant difference ($\chi^2(1, N = 1,638) = 7.84, p = .005$), with a higher proportion of RAMP status among public (10.60%) vs. non-public (3.38%) schools.

A *t*-test investigating (squared) mean differences in participants’ attitudes toward lack of funding by RAMP status

showed that participants from non-RAMP ($M = 87.24$, $SD = 65.81$) schools indicated this as a more relevant barrier to RAMP implementation compared to participants with RAMP status ($M = 71.78$, $SD = 69.25$), $t(1,634) = 2.83$, $p = .004$.

A final chi-square test was run to investigate whether the proportion of schools achieving RAMP status differed by the geographic region in the United States in which the school was located. These results also showed an overall significant difference ($\chi^2(3, N = 1,497) = 20.32$, $p < .001$), with a significantly higher proportion schools having achieved RAMP status in the Southern region (14.03%) compared to the Midwest (8.75%), Northeast (5.86%), and West (7.07%) regions. There was no significant difference among the proportions in the Midwest, Northeast, and West regions.

Results of Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting RAMP Status

To address our second research question, we ran logistic regression to examine variables predicting RAMP status (see Table 1). Model 1 included the inter- and intra-personal factors (participants' lack of confidence in delivering aspects of the ASCA National Model, lack of school partner support, and time constraints). We then separately added each of the four macro-macro-systems variables (school's community setting, with rural as the reference group; school counselors' attitudes toward lack of funding; public vs. non-public school status; and school region in the US, with South as the reference group) as Models 2 – 5. Finally, in Model 6, we entered the block of all four of the macrosystem variables to the original block of three inter- and intra-personal factors. These results are presented in Table 1. The area under the ROC curve—which reflects how well the model successfully classified the data on a scale from 0–1—for the final model was .74, which is considered acceptable by conventional standards (Hosmer et al., 2013).

The first regression analysis, which included three inter- and intra-personal variables as predictors of RAMP status, significantly explained 8% of the total variance in RAMP status. Within Model 1, we found that participants' confidence ($OR = 1.05$, $p < .001$) and school partner support ($OR = 0.84$, $p < .001$) significantly predicted RAMP status, whereas time constraints ($OR = 0.93$, $p = 0.07$) was not a significant predictor.

Of the four macro-macro-systems predictors added to the Model 1 separately, the macro-macro-systems variables including being in a suburban compared to a rural setting ($OR = 2.09$, $p < .001$); being from the Southern region of the United States compared to the Midwest ($OR = 1.69$, $p = .02$), Northeast ($OR = 2.95$, $p < .001$), and West ($OR = 1.77$, $p = .02$); and being employed within a public school compared to a private school ($OR = 3.58$, $p < .01$) were significant predictors of RAMP status, when controlling for the microsystem variables. In the final model (Model 6), which explained 13% of the total variance in RAMP status, all three inter- and intra-personal factor predictors were significant—confidence ($OR = 1.06$, $p < .001$), school partner support ($OR =$

$.85$, $p < .001$), time constraints ($OR = .88$, $p < .01$)—along with suburban setting compared to rural ($OR = 2.17$, $p < .001$), South geographic region compared to Midwest ($OR = 1.61$, $p = .03$), Northeast ($OR = 2.89$, $p < .001$), and West ($OR = 1.77$, $p = .02$), and public status ($OR = 3.90$, $p < .01$). Conversely, the macro-macro-systems variable, lack of program funding, did not significantly and uniquely contribute to the final model. Furthermore, macro-systems variables significantly and uniquely contributed to the total variance in participants' RAMP status above and beyond that explained by inter- and intra-personal variables (Likelihood Ratio $\chi^2(4, N = 1,497) = 26.16$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

School counseling practice is shaped by the broader sociopolitical and educational landscape (Gysbers, 2010). Since the 1980s, the school counseling profession has focused on standards, programming, and evidence as central tenets. Conventional wisdom underscores the need to develop and evaluate programs through an ecological lens (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018; Hiltz, Liu, Li, & Luke, 2022, McMahan et al., 2014). Given the need for school counselors to address systemic barriers and inequities impacting student achievement (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017), it would be prudent for the profession to empirically investigate and conceptualize barriers to CSCP implementation through an ecological lens (Goodman-Scott et al., 2020; Hiltz et al., 2019; Hiltz, Liu, Li, & Luke, 2022). Thus, the current study aimed to fill this void in the literature by examining the extent to which RAMP status could be predicted by ecological factors.

Our results revealed a final model comprising the following variables (a) school counselors' confidence in delivering aspects of the ASCA National Model; (b) school counselors' attitudes toward school partner support; (c) general time constraints; (d) public school setting; (e) suburban school setting; and (f) Southern regional location in the United States that significantly predict the RAMP status of a school, explaining 13% of the total variance in RAMP-designation. Further examination of our results suggested that macro-systems variables significantly and uniquely explained RAMP status, beyond the variance explained by the inter- and intra-personal factors of school counselor's confidence in delivering aspects of the ASCA National Model, school counselor's attitudes toward school partner support, and general time constraints. Public schools, suburban schools, and schools within the Southern region of the United States were more likely to have the RAMP designation. The results are consistent with an emerging body literature which supports ecological theory for understanding school counseling practice (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018; Hiltz, Liu, Li, & Luke, 2022). We found that not only are characteristics of school counselors and their relationships with teachers and administrators important for understanding its relationship with the RAMP attainment, but that school-level systems variables pertaining to the school setting are also important.

Our results are consistent with other researchers who have found that systems variables such as community set-

Table 1
Regression Model Summary and Coefficients for Predicting RAMP Status

Predictor	B	SE b	OR	p	95% confidence interval		Pseudo R ²	Δ Pseudo R ² (from Model 1)
					Lower bound	Upper bound		
Model 1								
Confidence	0.05	0.01	1.05	<.001	1.03	1.08	.08	-
Support	-0.17	0.02	0.84	<.001	0.81	0.88		
Time	-0.07	0.04	0.93	0.07	0.86	1.01		
Model 2								
Confidence	0.05	0.01	1.06	<.001	1.03	1.08	.10	.02
Support	-0.17	0.02	.08	<.001	0.80	0.88		
Time	-0.08	0.04	0.92	0.05	0.85	1.00		
Setting: Urban	0.33	0.26	1.38	0.21	0.82	2.33		
Setting: Suburban	0.74	0.22	2.09	0.001	1.37	3.20		
Model 3								
Confidence	0.06	0.01	1.06	<.001	1.03	1.08	.09	.01
Support	-0.17	0.02	0.85	<.001	0.81	0.88		
Time	-0.07	0.04	0.94	0.11	0.86	1.01		
Funding	0.04	0.03	0.96	0.20	0.91	1.02		
Model 4								
Confidence	0.06	0.01	1.06	<.001	1.03	1.08	.10	.02
Support	-0.17	0.02	0.84	<.001	0.81	0.88		
Time	-0.10	0.04	0.91	0.03	0.84	0.99		
Public vs. Non-Public	1.33	0.47	3.58	0.007	1.41	9.07		
Model 5								
Confidence	0.05	0.01	1.06	<.001	1.03	1.08	.11	.03
Support	-0.17	0.02	0.84	<.001	0.81	0.88		
Time	-0.10	0.04	0.89	0.02	0.81	0.99		
Region: Midwest	-0.56	0.22	0.59	0.02	0.38	0.92		
Region: Northeast	-1.11	0.31	0.34	<.001	0.18	0.63		
Region: West	-0.58	0.24	0.56	0.02	0.34	0.92		
Model 6								
Confidence	0.06	0.01	1.06	<.001	1.04	1.09	.13	.05
Support	-0.16	0.02	0.85	<.001	0.81	0.89		
Time	-0.13	0.04	0.88	.003	0.80	0.96		
Setting: Urban	0.46	0.27	1.58	0.09	0.93	2.68		
Setting: Suburban	0.78	0.22	2.17	<.001	1.41	3.35		
Funding	-0.03	0.03	0.97	0.37	0.92	1.03		
Public vs. Non-Public	1.36	0.48	3.90	.005	1.52	10.00		
Region: Midwest	-0.48	0.23	0.62	0.03	0.40	0.97		
Region: Northeast	-1.06	0.32	0.35	<.001	0.19	0.64		
Region: West	-0.57	0.25	0.56	0.02	0.34	0.92		

Note. N = 1497. Area under ROC curve = 0.76. Reference group for setting is rural. Reference group for region is South.

ting, influence school counseling practice (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016; Lapan et al., 2012; Mullen et al, 2019a). More specifically, Mullen et al. (2019b) found that suburban schools were more likely to have the RAMP designation than both urban and rural schools, and that non-RAMP schools had higher percentages of students who were eligible for free and reduced lunch, which are less common in suburban schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022a). Mullen and colleagues suggested that school-based and community resources are important for RAMP implementation. Therefore, it is possible that our finding that public schools were more likely than non-public schools to have RAMP designation, which extends the current body of knowledge, reflects the importance of funding for achieving RAMP designation.

School counselors' attitudes regarding lack of funding for the school counseling program, and curriculum and technology and curriculum for the school counseling program,

when analyzed as separately from the other macro-systems variables, predicted RAMP status; however, funding did not significantly contribute to the overall model. It is possible that program funding did not contribute the model because the factor shared variance with community setting (e.g., urban, rural, suburban).

Implications and Directions for Future Research

The results of this research study suggest that the ecological school counseling model can serve as a framework in guiding examination of contextual variables that influence school counselor's implementation of a RAMP-designated program. Specifically, our findings support the importance of considering broader contextual issues when seeking to understand variables that are related to school counselor's implementation of the ASCA National Model. More research is needed to understand why suburban schools, schools in

the Southern region of the United States, and public schools are more likely to have RAMP status. There is some indirect research that suggests that suburban and public schools are afforded economic privileges associated with funding, however, this would not seem to explain why schools in the South were more likely to have RAMP status, given that schools in Northeast and Midwest regions of the United States are typically better funded than schools within South (Leins, 2020). Therefore, it may be helpful to examine whether state departments of education and ASCA-state branch policies in the Southern region are supportive of RAMP attainment through leadership, professional development, and policy.

To more effectively traverse barriers to RAMP implementation, school counseling preparatory programs can be intentional about building capacity for emerging school counselors to address inter- and intra-personal characteristics and macro-systems variables when pursuing the attainment of RAMP. For example, counselor education programs may deliberately partner with urban and rural school districts and design opportunities for pre-service school counselors, teachers, and principals to engage in school-university partnerships (Cameron & Protivnak, 2020). School counselors are more successful when they collaborate with families, and community and school partners which may be especially important in lower socioeconomic communities (Hines et al., 2020). Thus, through interdisciplinary preparatory work, teachers, school counselors, and administrators may enter the field with foundational understanding of each unique professional identity. This is particularly important since researchers have found that administrators do not always understand appropriate roles of school counselors (Ruiz et al., 2018) and that providing principals with information about the ASCA National Model can influence their attitudes toward how school counselors should use their time (Leuwerke et al., 2009).

In addition, school counselors can collaborate with district personnel to establish policy with guidelines to train administrators, teachers, and other relevant educational partners in understanding the ASCA National Model and how to apply for RAMP. This is especially important since school leaders and personnel may have a limited view of school counselors which can impede school counselors' ability to collaborate with educational partners to implement a CSCP (Hines et al., 2020). To increase school counselors' confidence and partner support, policymakers could focus school counseling training, professional development, and supervision with ongoing, targeted support on leadership and ASCA Model implementation (Hilts, Liu, Li, & Luke, 2022; Hilts, Peters, et al., 2022). With intentional administrative support and appropriate professional development and supervision, school counselors may be better positioned to perform relevant tasks, implement comprehensive programs, and collect data to facilitate positive student outcomes. Furthermore, school counseling training – at the university level and in practice – may focus on facilitating understanding of linkages and processes within and between macro-systems (Cook, 2015). Just as human development is shaped by

multisystemic contexts, so too are school counselors' practices in their pursuit of RAMP implementation.

A potential next step for policy research would be to better understand the underlying mechanisms concerning macro-systems predictors of RAMP attainment. For example, Gagnon and Mattingly (2016), in partnership with the University of New Hampshire's Carsey School of Public Policy, published a brief revealing that only 17.8% of school districts met the ASCA's recommended 250:1 student-to-school counselor ratio. In the brief, the authors highlighted the considerable discrepancy in school counselor access across each state and region. The authors found that poor, diverse city school districts had higher student-to-school counselor ratios, while rural school districts were less likely to employ school counselors in general. This seems to corroborate Hilts et al.'s (2023) results which revealed school environment factors (e.g., racial/ethnic makeup of students and faculty, specifically identifying as White) predicted school counselors' 250:1 student-to-school counselor ratio. Taken collectively, emerging research further punctuates the importance of state and federal legislators to have an invigorated and sustained commitment in addressing equitable access to school counselors.

Another possible consideration to address time constraints from an ecological lens is for researchers and policymakers to look beyond the individual school counselor's time management, services provided, and individual-level advocacy. For instance, researchers may further investigate other macro-systems variables such as state-level funding, school community members' political ideologies, and demographics of both students and school personnel and how these factors may contribute to school counselors' CSCP and RAMP implementation. If future research suggests that funding is more of a challenge to pursuing RAMP in rural and urban schools and non-public schools, school administrators, school counselors, and other educational partners need to acquire a better understanding of how to advocate for resources within those community environments (e.g., forging school-family-community partnerships).

Limitations

We investigated school counselors' attitudes toward variables that serve as barriers to RAMP implementation, and school counselor's self-report regarding the community setting in which they are employed (e.g., urban, suburban, rural), and did not directly measure the variables (e.g., student-to-school counselor ratio, actual funding). Since the current study relied on subjective, self-reported data and responses were anonymous, there is no way to verify self-reported RAMP status. Additionally, because all participants were members of the ASCA, these findings may not accurately reflect the experiences of school counselors who are not members of the ASCA. Another potential limitation is response bias. Gibson (2016) asserted that participants belonging to a professional counseling organization may have higher levels of professional identity and leadership development, which has been shown to have a positive correlation

with level of ASCA National Model implementation (Mullen et al., 2019b). Finally, the School Counselor Perception Questionnaire is relatively new instrument created by members of the research team (Hilts et al., 2019), who identified support for the factor structure, and the instrument requires further psychometric evaluation.

Conclusion

The results from this study reinforce and extend the existing body of literature (Fye et al., 2018; Hilts et al., 2019; Mullen et al., 2019a) regarding factors that may contribute to school counselors' ASCA National Model implementation. Regression analysis revealed that macro-system variables – living in the Southern region, practicing in a suburban setting, and working in a public school – uniquely contributed to predicting RAMP status beyond microsystem variables. These findings further underscore the notion that factors influencing RAMP attainment may be multifaceted (Mullen et al., 2019a) and that the ESC framework (McMahon et al., 2014) offers a promising approach for gathering and understanding data and designing interventions to efficaciously implement best practice (ASCA, 2019). Moreover, conceptualizing student and school needs from an ecological lens represents a valuable departure from traditional, more linear evaluation methods. Just as the ESC implores school counselors to understand students' multiple contexts to meet their needs more effectively, we applied the model to understand better how various contexts influence RAMP implementation. The school counseling profession must address barriers to CSCP implementation so that school counseling practitioners can support students in overcoming barriers to learning and achievement.

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