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The Importance and Implementation of Eight Components of College and Career Readiness Counseling in School Counselor Education Programs



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ABSTRACT

School counselor education program administrators (N = 131) responded to an online questionnaire where the importance and extent of implementation of The College Board's National Office of School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) Eight Components of College and Career Readiness in their school counselor education program were assessed. The mean importance of the components was rated between 'moderately important' and 'very important' by participants, and the components were 'usually' implemented in the curriculum of their programs. Implications of this study include the need for increased attention in graduate-level school counselor training programs on equity-focused college and career readiness counseling and knowledge of current national initiatives.

School counselors must be prepared to develop the academic, college/career, and personal/emotional domains of every child. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) defines a school counselor's role as one of leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change agent (ASCA, 2012). As such, school counselors are positioned to identify the needs of students, focus on their future goals and aspirations, and assist in the educational preparation required to fulfill those goals (Hines, Lemons, & Crews, 2011). With 24 states mandating K-12 school counseling programs, six states mandating programs in grades 9-12, and even fewer

advocating for local districts to adhere to the ASCA recommended 250:1 student-to-counselor ratio (ASCA, 2013), it is increasingly more difficult for districts to effectively support a comprehensive developmental model. However, there is evidence that positive academic achievement outcomes exist in students graduating from K-12 schools that have a fully implemented ASCA National Model program (Wilkerson, Pérusse & Hughes, 2013), and that adding just one more school counselor to a high school increases college enrollment by 10% (Hurwitz & Howell, 2013).

As of 2014, 43 states had adopted the Common Core State Standards in an effort to dramatically change the way all students are equipped with the academic skills necessary for successful post-secondary training and education (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). However, beyond core academics, it is widely recognized and accepted that students need learning and innovation skills, information, media and technology skills, and life and career skills to compete in the 21st century (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009).



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Fifty years ago in the United States, the goal for education included attaining one's high school diploma as a necessity to enter the workforce as "career ready" (Tyler, 1974). However, there is a growing need for advanced training beyond high school to compete in our global economy (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). In *The Condition of College and Career Readiness*, American College Testing (ACT, 2013) reported that only 26% of students taking the ACT met the benchmarks for all four subject areas (including math, reading, writing, and science). Within this total number of students who have met the readiness benchmark for all four areas, widespread disparities existed by race/ethnicity. Forty-three percent of Asian American students met all four benchmarks, compared to 33% White American, 14% American Indian, 10% Hispanic, and 5% African American students (ACT, 2013). In comparison, 43% of students met the benchmark for The College Board's SAT in the three areas of critical reading, math and writing in 2013 (College Board, 2013). These statistics equate to large percentages of students needing to take some form of remedial coursework in their first year of college.

Despite the challenges and limitations facing school counselors, research continues to reveal the vital role they play in developing equitable student college and career readiness skills. Leaders at The College Board have undertaken several large-scale reviews and

recently completed a national survey regarding school counselors. Their "School Counselor Landscape and Literature Review" highlights the gap in labor market skills, including an "estimated need of 97 million middle and highly skilled workers in American businesses, yet only 45 million Americans currently possess the necessary education and skills to qualify for these positions" (College Board, 2011, p. 1). In their report entitled, "Poised to Lead," Hines, Lemons, and Crews (2011) asserted that school counselors are in a position to identify the barriers to college and career readiness skills within the context of their schools, and advocate strongly for change. The authors linked three critical factors that must be addressed to support school counselors in promoting systemic change in the area of college and career readiness. These factors included: pre-service training programs with college and career readiness counseling preparation; appropriate hiring, supervision and evaluation practices by administrators; and closing the disparity between counselor ideal and reality roles. (College Board, 2011; Lapan & Harrington, n.d.; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2001). Because it is essential that professional school counselors carry out the work of equity-based college and career readiness, this study focused on how master's level school counseling students are prepared to offer services to K-12 students that include The College Board's National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA) Eight Components of College and Career Readiness

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Counseling (2010).

School Counselor Preparation

Students who enter a graduate school program preparing professional school counselors find variation in the number of required credits, courses offered, fieldwork experiences, and faculty experience (Pérusse & Goodnough, 2001). Many programs do not yet offer a college admissions course for school counselors, much less one that is equity-based (The College Board, 2010). Curriculum and coursework may also vary among programs and differ based on whether they are accredited. For example, there were 224 master's level programs accredited by The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs in 2013 (CACREP, 2014). The CACREP (2009) Standards provide a uniform framework for counselor educators to prepare their students. All CACREP-accredited counselor preparation programs must be at least 48 hours and include coursework that addresses the following topics: 1. Professional orientation and ethical practice; 2. Social and cultural diversity; 3. Human growth and development; 4. Career development; 5. Helping relationships; 6. Group work; 7. Assessment; and 8. Research and program evaluation. A supervised 100-hour practicum and 600-hour internship experience is also required by CACREP Standards (CACREP, 2009). The CACREP Board is in the process of revising their standards for 2016. In the most recent published draft of the 2016

standards (CACREP, 2013), provisions for promoting equity-based college and career readiness are evident.

According to Conley (2011), college readiness is defined "as the level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed in a credit-bearing general education course at a post-secondary institution, without remediation" (p. 1). This preparation includes the knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary to successfully complete a college course, and be able to move on to the next course level in the subject area (Conley, 2011). To assimilate the skills needed for college and career readiness, NOSCA identified eight components of college and career readiness counseling for students in grades K-12. These include:

College aspirations: building a college-going culture based on early college awareness by nurturing in students the confidence to aspire to college and the resilience to overcome challenges along the way. Maintain high expectations by providing adequate supports, building social capital and conveying the conviction that all students can succeed in college;

Academic planning for college and career readiness: to advance students' planning, preparation, participation and performance in a rigorous academic program that connects to their college and

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career aspirations and goals;

Enrichment and extracurricular engagement: ensuring equitable exposure to a wide range of extracurricular and enrichment opportunities that build leadership, nurture talents and interests, and increase engagement with school;

College and career exploration and selection process: to provide early and ongoing exposure to experiences and information necessary to make informed decisions when selecting a college or career that connects to academic preparation and future aspirations;

College and career assessments: to promote preparation, participation and performance in college and career assessments by all students;

College affordability planning: providing students and families with comprehensive information about college costs, options for paying for college, and the financial aid and scholarship processes and eligibility requirements, so they are able to plan for and afford a college education;

College and career admission process: to ensure that students and families have an early and ongoing understanding of the college and career application and admission processes so they can find the postsecondary options that are the best fit

with their aspirations and interests.

Transition from high school graduation to college enrollment: connecting students to school and community resources to help the students overcome barriers and ensure the successful transition from high school to college (College Board, 2010, p. 3).

This research study was designed to address the question of what school counselor educators throughout the country perceive to be important and what they are teaching their students in relation to The College Board's NOSCA Eight Components of College and Career Readiness Counseling.

Method

Procedures

Entry-level school counselor preparation programs were identified using several sources (e.g., CACREP and ASCA directories, and state-level school counseling association websites). Three hundred and twenty two programs were identified. An email message was sent to the department chair or school counseling program coordinator of each identified program containing a link to the online survey. The survey was initially distributed at the end of the Spring semester of 2010, and a reminder was sent early in the Fall semester.

Participants

A total of 131 submissions were received from the online survey, for a return rate of 41%.

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The initial request to complete the survey yielded 71 submissions (22% of all potential respondents), while the second request yielded an additional 60 submissions (19%). Given the amount of time that elapsed between the initial survey request and the reminder, the data were sorted by program characteristics unlikely to change in the relatively short amount of time between participation requests (number of credits, specializations offered, and CACREP approval) and examined to identify duplicates. Five duplicate entries were identified, leaving 126 usable surveys and an effective response rate of 39%. Of those 126 participants, 72 (57%) identified their program as CACREP accredited.

Instrument

The online survey consisted of four parts. The first three parts assessed program characteristics such as the number of credits, screening methods, faculty experiences, and course requirements and were provided to assess changes over time since Pérusse, Goodnough, and Noël (2001) reported on them. The fourth part of the online survey is the focus of the present study, and consisted of an instrument designed to assess the perceived importance and extent to which respondents incorporated the NOSCA Eight Components into their school counseling program curriculum. External validity was achieved by working directly with the NOSCA staff at The College Board to create the survey instrument (V. Lee, personal

communication, 2012). Respondents were asked to rate the perceived importance and extent to which each of the 11 concepts (see Table 1) were currently taught in their master's level school counseling program, yielding a total of 22 items. All items used to assess the NOSCA Eight Components are presented in Table 1 on page 34. The perceived importance of the items was obtained by asking participants "How IMPORTANT do you believe each item below is, in terms of the preparation of Master's level School Counselors?" Responses to each item were provided using a 4 point scale where 0=unimportant, 1=somewhat important, 2=moderately important, and 3=very important. The extent of implementation was obtained by asking participants to "please indicate to what extent these concepts are taught to your Master's level School Counseling students." Responses to each item were provided on a 4 point scale where 0=never, 1=sometimes, 2=usually, and 3=always. The internal consistency estimates were .89 for the 11 perceived importance items and .90 for the 11 extent of implementation items.

Results

To assess the perceived importance and the extent of implementation of the eleven NOSCA items, descriptive statistics were calculated and are presented in Table 1 (see page 39). The mean importance ratings indicated that participants viewed each of the items to be between 'moderately important'

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Table 1.

Perceived importance and extent of implementation ratings for the 11 items assessing the NOSCA eight components of college readiness counseling

NOSCA Component	Item stem	Importance	Extent of Implementation	r^*
		M(SD) N=121	M(SD) N=120	
1	Build an equity-focused culture of college readiness counseling	2.56(.67)	2.28(.72)	.60
2	Advance the academic rigor necessary for equitable educational outcomes which connect to student career aspirations and/or future options	2.54(.67)	2.31(.70)	.52
3	Understand the importance of a wide range of extracurricular opportunities within the school and community to increase students' connectedness to school	2.41(.69)	2.08(.79)	.42
5	Use college admissions assessments (SAT, PSAT, etc.) appropriately to enhance students' college and career readiness	2.13(.84)	2.06(.82)	.52
1	Encourage the highest possible career aspirations in students	2.77(.50)	2.56(.63)	.47
7,4	Engage students and their families in completing college application and admissions requirements	2.46(.66)	2.10(.85)	.56
6	Help families plan for the financial costs of higher education, beginning in the elementary grades and continuing K-12	2.22(.82)	1.79(.92)	.62
8	Ensure successful transitions from high school to college	2.58(.68)	2.40(.74)	.55
1	Create a K-12 college-going culture within their schools	2.37(.78)	2.18(.83)	.53
1	Appreciate educational equity, especially in relation to the college opportunity gap	2.67(.55)	2.43(.71)	.49
	Be knowledgeable of national initiatives, such as "Race to the Top."	2.39(.77)	2.03(.80)	.63

*all correlations significant at $p < .001$

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and 'very important.' The item perceived to be most important was "encourage the highest possible career aspirations in students." This item was rated 'very important' by 76.2% of the respondents, nearly a full standard deviation higher than the lowest-rated item "use college admissions assessments (SAT, PSAT, etc.) appropriately to enhance students' college and career readiness," which was rated 'very important' by 37.3% of the sample. The items "appreciate educational equity, especially in relation to the college opportunity gap" (rated 'very important' by 67.5% of sample) and "ensure successful transitions from high school to college" (rated 'very important' by 64.3% of sample) were the next most highly rated by participants, while the item "help families plan for the financial costs of higher education, beginning in the elementary grades and continuing K-12" (rated 'very important' by 43.7% of sample) and "create a K-12 college-going culture within their schools" (rated 'very important' by 50.8% of sample) were the next lowest rated.

The mean ratings of the extent of implementation of the items indicated that school counselor education program administrators 'usually' include the NOSCA Eight Components of College Readiness Counseling in their curriculum, and the three items with the highest perceived importance ratings were also given the highest implementation ratings by participants. The item participants indicated was implemented

the most often was "encourage the highest possible career aspirations in students." This item was rated to be 'always' implemented in the curriculum by 59.5% of the sample, and was approximately one standard deviation higher than the lowest-rated item, "help families plan for the financial costs of higher education, beginning in the elementary grades and continuing K-12," which was 'always' implemented in the curriculum by 23.8% of respondents. The items "appreciate educational equity, especially in relation to the college opportunity gap" and "ensure successful transitions from high school to college" were the next most highly rated by participants, both of which were 'always' implemented by 50.8% of the sample. The items "be knowledgeable of national initiatives, such as 'Race to the Top'" and "use college admissions assessments (SAT, PSAT, etc.) appropriately to enhance students' college and career readiness" were the next lowest rated, and were 'always' implemented by 27.8% and 30.2% of the sample, respectively.

To assess the degree to which school counselor education program administrator ratings of the importance of the NOSCA Eight Components of College Readiness Counseling were related to inclusion in their program's curriculum, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated between the importance and extent of implementation rating for each of the 11 items. The correlation coefficients, presented

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in Table 1, ranged from .42 to .63 ($M = .54$, $SD = .06$) and indicated that the relationship between perceived importance and implementation is moderately strong. The strongest relationship exists between the importance and implementation ratings of the item “be knowledgeable of national initiatives, such as ‘Race to the Top’” ($r = .63$), while the weakest observed relationship exists between the importance and implementation ratings of the item “understand the importance of a wide range of extracurricular opportunities within the school and community to increase students’ connectedness to school” ($r = .42$).

Discussion

The results of this study reveal that, in general, school counselor educators agree that there is indeed some importance and relevance to preparing future school counselors to practice equity-based college and career readiness counseling. The moderate correlations observed between the perceived importance and extent of implementation ratings suggest that some counselor educators may have a sense of the NOSCA Eight Components as a menu from which to select school counseling program content in relation to equity-based college and career readiness counseling and are implementing the Eight Components in somewhat of a piece-meal fashion according to their own beliefs as to what is “most important” and may not be regarded by some as a comprehensive whole. However, the NOSCA Eight Components of College and

Career Readiness were created to guide school counselors while implementing college and career readiness programming in K-12 schools. It is considered a systemic approach for school counselors to “build aspirations and social capital, offer enriching activities, foster rigorous academic preparation, encourage early college planning, and guide students and families through the college admission and financial aid process” (College Board, 2010, p. 2). According to NOSCA, in order for successful implementation in K-12 schools to occur, school counselor educators need to stress to their students the importance of each of the NOSCA Eight Components to ensure that school counseling students implement all the components into their school counseling curriculum.

Reform efforts

At the heart of the re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2011, is “graduating every student college and career ready” (U. S. Department of Education, 2011, p. A-1). Current education reform efforts have been aimed at reducing the achievement gap that exists between ethnic minority and low-income students, compared to their non-minority and high-income peers (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002; Improving Head Start for School Readiness, 2007). School counselor preparation programs participating in this study place an overall moderately important rating to items related to equity and college readiness counseling, yet implementation of each is consistently rated lower.

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Race to the Top is an essential component of current education reform. Government funding is awarded to states which identify innovative strategies to improve college and career readiness, particularly in the lowest performing schools (U. S. Department of Education, 2014). Results indicated moderate importance in the area of being knowledgeable of national initiatives, such as “Race to the Top,” and to a slightly lesser extent, the implementation of this in respondents’ programs. This finding runs counter to the emphasis placed on college and career readiness in the literature (ACT, 2013; College Board, 2013; College Board, 2011; Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014; Conley, 2011; Education Trust, 2009; Hines, Lemons, & Crew, 2011; Hurwitz & Howell, 2013; Lapan & Harrington, n.d.; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2001). A strong relationship ($r = .63$) exists between level of importance and extent of implementation for this item, suggesting that as school counselor education program administrators perceive this topic to be of less importance and are less likely to implement this as a core component of their curriculum.

Our findings indicate that school counseling program administrators view the process of financing postsecondary education as less important than most other aspects of college and career readiness counseling.

Concomitantly, opportunities for future

school counselors to acquire knowledge and skill in financing postsecondary education occur less frequently than any other component of college and career readiness. The relative lack of importance or inclusion in the graduate-level school counseling curriculum may translate into undesirable school counseling practice, as McDonough and Calderone (2006) found most of the 63 counselors from urban high schools they interviewed “did very little beyond providing basic information” (p. 1710) in preparing students and families to finance postsecondary education. As highlighted by Poynton, Lapan & Marcotte (in press), financial planning can usefully be viewed as a barrier to career development – a barrier that affects both the setting and implementation of career choice goals. Given the high ratings school counseling program administrators in this study assigned to both the importance and implementation of encouraging the highest possible aspirations in students, approaching the task of providing high quality financial planning assistance can be bolstered by explicitly acknowledging the relationship between financial planning and achieving the highest possible postsecondary aspirations.

Limitations

Several limitations inherent to this study should be kept in mind while interpreting the findings. Although the survey was intended for the “school counseling coordinator” representing each program, the views of this

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person may not reflect the views of other program faculty. A self-selection bias may also be present in our results; those who took the time to respond to our survey may be different in their views of the NOSCA Eight Components than those who did not. While our measurement of the NOSCA Eight Components has face validity and satisfactory internal consistency, concurrent validity has not established.

Future research


Future research assessing the importance of and extent to which equity-focused college and career readiness knowledge and skills are provided to future school counselors should consider providing surveys to multiple faculty from each institution and other methods for acquiring this type of information, such as syllabi review and surveys of school counseling graduate students. Future longitudinal research assessing the extent to which acquiring equity-focused knowledge and skill (e.g., knowledge of various financial aid forms, ability to identify achievement and opportunity gaps) affects school counseling practice and student outcomes is also needed. Since counselor educators rated elements of the NOSCA Eight Components as moderately important, further research is needed to understand the source of their knowledge and beliefs (e.g., assessing whether beliefs were informed by the NOSCA Eight Components themselves or from other related knowledge and beliefs such as social justice advocacy).

Conclusion

Equity-based college and career readiness has recently become elevated to the public agenda. In June, 2014, First Lady Michelle Obama presented her “Reach Higher” initiative to an audience at the American School Counselor Association conference (Obama, 2014a). In July 2014, national leaders in school counseling and college advising were convened to discuss ways to prepare school counselors to help all students realize their post-secondary plans (Obama, 2014b). In November 2014, the efforts to create systemic change in the area of college opportunity were furthered through a White House convening at San Diego State University. Outcomes of this convening included formalized strategic action plans between universities, professional school counselors, and community partnerships (Center for Excellence in School Counseling and Leadership, 2014).

The Reach Higher (2014) initiative lists four specific foci to help all students understand what they need to finish their education: exposing students to college and career opportunities, understanding financial aid, encouraging academic planning and summer learning opportunities, and supporting high school counselors. The first three foci are student-centered and highlight specific activities to which school counselors can positively contribute, while the final focus is counselor-centered. School counselors have not garnered such national attention since the

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National Defense Education Act [NDEA] of 1958 (NDEA, 1959). ASCA has updated their standards to focus more explicitly on college and career readiness through the creation of the recently-released Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College- and Career-Readiness Standards for Every Student (ASCA, 2014). The need for school counselors to be prepared to assist all students with their post-secondary plans has garnered national attention, and is the start of an important chapter in the history of the school counseling profession. 

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