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Advocacy and Impact: A Comparison of Administrators' Perceptions of the High School Counselor Role

This article compares administrators' perceptions of the high school counselor role in a Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) versus the perceptions that administrators had of the high school counselor role in counseling departments that had not received the RAMP designation. An analysis of the data revealed that administrators from both RAMP and non-RAMP designated counseling programs had both positive and negative perceptions of the appropriate and inappropriate roles of the school counselor role. The most significant finding in the administrator perceptions was that RAMP administrators viewed their school counselors as having a significant role in collaborating with teachers to present guidance curriculum lessons.

The federal enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) placed a greater emphasis on school personnel being held accountable for bringing all students to high levels of academic achievement. From teachers to administrators to school counselors, everyone involved with public education is taking steps to improve the quality of services in American schools. In the school counseling realm, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) provides direction for school counselors to implement comprehensive, data-driven counseling programs to demonstrate accountability within the field.

School counseling programs that implement the ASCA National Model® (2005) can apply for the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) designation. This designation recognizes that the school counseling program is delivering a comprehensive, data-driven program. At the time of this study, only 10 high schools in the nation had received the RAMP designation from 2003 to 2006. After the RAMP awards were given in 2008, there were 62 high schools with the RAMP designation. A RAMP-designated counseling program is comprehensive, provides services that meet all students' needs, and provides data to prove that it is making an impact on these needs.

Many school administrators have limited opportunities to learn about the ways in which the counselor's role has been reconceptualized in recent years by ASCA (2005), the Education Trust (2003), and the College Board (2006) to reflect a stronger school leadership role. Therefore, school counselors must educate administrators regarding these new role expectations (Amatea & Clark, 2005). If administrators have an accurate perception of the school counselor role, administrators and the counseling department can move in a new direction with regard to the counselor's role within the ASCA National Model. A secondary impact of changing administrators' perception of the school counselor role is to strongly support and affirm the decisions made by the schools that adopted the ASCA National Model. Counseling department members who have received the RAMP designation may achieve some sense of validation that their administrators agree with their roles and that they are able to perform the appropriate tasks of a school counselor.

The author of this study is a school counselor in a high school in the Rocky Mountain region. The author did not work in a RAMP-designated counseling program but was interested in administrators' perceptions of the high school counselor role in both RAMP- and non-RAMP-designated school counseling programs. There appeared to be some role confusion as to what school counselors at the author's school should do, and implementing a RAMP-designated program may have helped to define the role of the school counselor at this high school as well as other high schools of the same district and region. There were no high schools in the Rocky Mountain region with RAMP designation at the time of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are some possible causes for the ambiguity of the school counselor's role in educational reform. The ASCA National Model (2005) and ASCA's (2004) role statement are changing how school

counselors work with students. However, not all school counseling programs are utilizing the ASCA National Model, and not all administrators are aware of the model or the role descriptions of the school counselor within this model. School counselors believe one thing, teachers believe another, and administrators have other ideas about the role of the school counselor (Beesley, 2004; Fitch, Newby, Ballester, & Marshall, 2001; Herr, 2002; Lieberman, 2004). Counselors have been under attack from several stakeholders as to what school counselors do. Now, school counselors not only have to answer this question, but they must also respond to “How are students different as a result of a school counseling program?” (ASCA, 2005, p. 9). School counseling programs that adhere to the ASCA National Model should be able to answer these questions and have clear role expectations; school counseling programs that are not using the ASCA National Model may continue to struggle with an accurate role description for the school counselor.

Historically, there have been challenges that current school counseling programs have faced since the introduction of the ASCA National Model. Lambie and Williamson (2004) stated that “school counseling’s historical narrative constructs the lens through which individuals interpret the profession” (p. 124). The history of school counseling demonstrates that there has been role incongruence since the earliest roles of school counselors were organized and recorded.

The school counseling profession has undergone radical changes in the focus of the role and function of the school counselor. In recent years, the school counselor has moved from a “position-focused service provider to a comprehensive, developmental-guidance specialist” (Foster, Watson, Meeks, & Young, 2002, p. 153). Unfortunately, because not all school counseling programs are making the transition to a comprehensive, developmental program such as the ASCA National Model, counseling programs and personnel have been eliminated from schools, or building principals have assigned non-counseling duties to school counselors (Studer, Oberman, & Womack, 2006). The ASCA National Model (2005) and ASCA’s (2004) role statement clearly define appropriate and inappropriate roles for a school counselor. Within this model, counselors collaborate with administrators as to the functions and roles they provide each year. In utilizing this model and identifying school counselor roles, school administrators should be clear about the appropriate roles of a school counselor, and the school counselor is able to perform duties that benefit all students in the areas of academics, personal/social, and career development (ASCA, 2005).

Within this role defined by ASCA (2004), school

counselors must emphasize that they are educators, not mental health professionals. They serve all students, not just those who have obvious or immediate problems. They must distinguish their role from that of school social workers and psychologists. In some states, school counselors are being replaced by outside community mental health agencies that set up offices in the schools at no cost to the district (Vail, 2005). If school counselors advocate for the roles outlined in the ASCA National Model (2005), it will be difficult to replace them in the educational setting.

According to Lieberman (2004), “The ultimate responsibility for the appropriate and effective utilization of all school-based personnel resides with the school principal” (p. 552). Principals may not be effectively utilizing school counselors in the educational setting because there “has been overwhelming evidence revealing the pervasive confusion which exists regarding any consistent role functions for professional school counselors” (Lieberman, p. 553). Shoffner and Williamson (2000) concluded that because school counselors and school principals are trained separately and have few opportunities to learn about the different roles, responsibilities, and perspectives of each other, it is important to engage in collaborative work that addresses student development and learning goals. This can help clarify the school counselor role. If school counselors and administrators do not define the counselor role, principals will continue to view school counselors as “free agents with flexibility in their schedules to take on assignments no one else in the building will cover” (Vail, 2005, p. 26).

METHOD

Participant Schools

This study took place in high schools across the nation that, as of 2006, had received the RAMP designation and in high schools in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States that had not received the RAMP designation. The profiles of the 10 RAMP high schools included 1 private school, 1 magnet school, and 8 large (student populations between 1,048 and 3,330), comprehensive, public high schools. These schools were located all over the continental United States. The non-RAMP high schools were selected based on similar demographics to the RAMP-designated high schools. The profiles of the high schools that had not received the RAMP designation and that were utilized in this study included 16 large (student populations between 1,430 and 3,777), comprehensive public high schools, 2 private high schools, and 2 magnet schools in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. The non-RAMP high schools from the Rocky Mountain

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region were used to provide counselors and administrators in this region comparison information with RAMP schools. At the time of the study, there were no high schools in the Rocky Mountain region with the RAMP designation.

Research Instrument

The Administrator Questionnaire (see Appendix A) was designed by the author from a combination of input from the ASCA National Model’s (2005) list of inappropriate and appropriate counselor responsibilities and a similar questionnaire used in a past study (Miles-Hastings, 1997). The questionnaire included 35 Likert-scale statements to measure the administrators’ perceptions of the level of importance they assigned to a variety of school counselor roles and their perception that their school counselors actually performed the selected roles. Administrators rated the importance they assigned to each of these roles using a 5-point Likert scale. A 1 on the rating scale indicated that the role was *not important*, a 2 indicated the role was *minimally important*, a 3 indicated the role was *somewhat important*, a 4 indicated the role was *important*, and a 5 indicated the role was *very important*. Administrators also rated their perception that their school counselors actually performed the selected roles. This was on a 5-point Likert scale where a 1 indicated the role was *not performed at all*, a 2 indicated the role was performed *once or twice a year*, a 3 indicated the role was performed *occasionally*, a 4 indicated the role was performed *often*, and a 5 indicated the role was performed *regularly*. The Administrator Questionnaire was mailed to 47 administrators of RAMP-designated high schools and 85 administrators of selected non-RAMP high schools in the Rocky Mountain region.

RESULTS

Of the 132 questionnaires sent, 60 administrators (19 from RAMP schools and 41 from non-RAMP schools) completed and returned the questionnaire. The demographic data of the sample of high school administrators who responded to the questionnaire revealed the following information. Of the respondents, approximately 45% were male and 55% were female. The settings in which the respondents worked were approximately one-fourth (25.4%) urban and three-fourths (74.6%) suburban. Ninety-two percent of the respondents worked in public schools, and 8% worked in private schools. Ninety percent of the administrators worked in comprehensive high schools, and 10% worked in magnet high schools. The average years worked as an administrator was 8.9 years, and the average years worked as an administrator at the current school was 4.8 years.

The average student population at the schools was 1,948, and on average, 5.7 counselors were employed at these schools.

The RAMP and non-RAMP administrators’ perceptions of the 15 appropriate roles of the school counselor were ranked from highest to lowest, determined by their mean scores. This is presented with both the *importance* of these roles and the perceptions that the counselor *actually* carried out these roles. Of the 15 appropriate roles of the school counselor, the highest scores of the RAMP administrators’ perceptions of *importance* of roles included “does individual student academic program planning” ($M = 4.74$), “works with students to provide small- and large-group counseling activities” ($M = 4.32$), and “interprets student records” ($M = 4.32$). Of the 15 appropriate roles of the school counselor, the highest scores of the non-RAMP administrators’ perceptions of importance of roles included “does individual student academic program planning” ($M = 4.71$); “assists the school principal with identifying and resolving student issues, needs, problems” ($M = 4.27$); and “works with students to provide small- and large-group counseling activities” ($M = 4.17$).

Of the 15 appropriate roles of the school counselor, the highest scores of the RAMP administrators’ perceptions of the counselor *actually* carrying out the roles included “interprets student records” ($M = 4.16$); “does individual student academic program planning” ($M = 4.16$); and “advocates for students at individual education plan meetings, student study teams, and school attendance review boards” ($M = 3.68$). Of the 15 appropriate roles of the school counselor, the highest scores of the non-RAMP administrators’ perceptions of the counselor actually carrying out the roles included “does individual student academic program planning” ($M = 4.15$); “interprets student records” ($M = 3.66$); and “assists the school principal with identifying and resolving student issues, needs, problems” ($M = 3.63$).

When the t tests were calculated for the appropriate roles and the administrators’ perceptions of the *importance* of these roles, there were three roles that had a significant difference at the 95% confidence interval of the difference for equality of means between RAMP administrators and non-RAMP administrators. These roles included “collaborates with teachers to present guidance curriculum lessons” ($t = .683$), “counsels students who have disciplinary problems” ($t = 1.008$), and “provides teachers with suggestions for better management of study hall” ($t = -.480$). When the t tests were calculated for the appropriate roles and the administrators’ perceptions of the school counselor *actually* carrying out these roles, there were three roles that had a significant difference at the 95% confidence interval of the difference for equality of means between RAMP

administrators and non-RAMP administrators. These roles included “collaborates with teachers to present guidance curriculum lessons” ($t = 1.067$), “counsels students who have disciplinary problems” ($t = .766$), and “interprets student records” ($t = .499$).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrated that there were differences in administrators’ perceptions of the school counselor role in RAMP-designated counseling programs. The major differences in the perceptions were that administrators from RAMP-designated schools perceived their school counselors to be in the classroom delivering guidance curriculum more often than counselors from non-RAMP-designated programs. Also, administrators from RAMP designated schools perceived school counselors to “counsel students who have disciplinary problems,” “provide teachers with suggestions for better management of study hall,” and “interpret student records” more so than the non-RAMP school administrators. Other than these statistically significant differences, all administrators perceived their counselors to work in the academic, personal and social, and career development areas with their students.

These results encourage non-RAMP counseling programs to do two things: first, the non-RAMP counselors can deliver the guidance curriculum to all students through increased classroom guidance lessons. After incorporating guidance curriculum into their roles as school counselors, the non-RAMP programs will be better aligned with the ASCA National Model (2005). Secondly, as administrators from both RAMP- and non-RAMP-designated programs share similar perceptions, it may mean that the non-RAMP counseling programs are already implementing some of the components of the ASCA National Model and may be ready to apply for the RAMP designation. Applying for the RAMP designation provides a written framework for what school counselors do and demonstrates to all stakeholders, including administrators, how students are different as a result of the school counseling program.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

At the time of this study, there were only 10 RAMP-designated high schools in the nation to be utilized. Because of this small number, the number of responses from RAMP-designated school administrators was limited. As of November 2006, it had only been 3 years since the inception of the ASCA National Model. VanZandt and Hayslip (2001) indicated that transformation to a developmental program may take approximately 6 years and this is

holding true based on the increase in the number of schools since this study that have achieved the RAMP designation.

The second limitation was that the data collected from non-RAMP schools included only high schools in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. These results may not reflect all administrators’ perceptions across the nation, but at the time, the author was only interested in this region because there were no RAMP schools in the region. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to administrators’ perceptions from other geographic locations.

The third limitation was that only perceptions of high school administrators were utilized in this study. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to elementary and middle school administrator perceptions. Further studies may be necessary at the elementary and middle school level, as there were a total of 121 RAMP-designated schools at these levels in 2008.

A final limitation of the study may be factors affecting internal and external validity. Because non-RAMP schools were matched with RAMP schools that share similar demographics, there was no random selection of participants; all RAMP high schools were utilized, which affected internal validity (Fink, 2003). Further, the response rate was only 45%, which brings up issues with external validity. According to Price, Murnan, Dake, Dimmig, and Hayes (2004), “external validity of survey results is concerned with the generalizability of the responses of the sample respondents to the population from which the sample was drawn” (p. 19). During the follow-up phone interviews, it was found that one RAMP school had school counselors who also performed minor disciplinary actions, such as after-school detentions and Saturday schools. The school counselors from this school were considered part of the leadership team and also performed supervision of school activities. For these reasons, some of the data of RAMP administrators’ perceptions regarding discipline issues were skewed by this school’s respondents.

FOLLOW-UP TO THE STUDY: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Since the present study concluded, the author’s school continued to align with the ASCA National Model (2005) and received the RAMP designation in 2007. The counselors were able to collect data that showed that the guidance lessons delivered to students during their free time were making a difference in students’ perceptions about graduation requirements, career planning, the college search process, and the student’s ability to determine post-

The results of this study demonstrated that there were differences in administrators’ perceptions of the school counselor role in RAMP-designated counseling programs.

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graduate plans. These data were shared with the school counseling advisory council and the advisory council decided that if these lessons were making a positive impact on the students who were attending during their free time, then all students should have access to these lessons. The only way to ensure that all students received these lessons was to have teachers allow counselors to come into the classroom. The school's administration worked with teachers to allow counselors access to students during their scheduled courses. School counselors at the author's school are now allowed to provide guidance curriculum at least twice a year to all four grade levels. The school counselors rotate the academic core classes in which the lessons are taught. English, science, and social studies subjects allow counselors to present in the classroom.

Another positive outcome of becoming RAMP designated and having data to demonstrate to all stakeholders that counselors provide important classroom curriculum has been the implementation of a freshman and sophomore seminar for all 9th and 10th graders. Some lessons of the freshman seminar and all of the sophomore seminar are taught by school counselors at the author's school. These seminars are now reflected on the students' transcripts as a pass/fail grade. Because the grade is placed on the transcript, students are more motivated to complete all assignments given in these courses. As the program has gained strength and support from stakeholders, it is in the plans to create a junior and senior seminar that also will be reflected on each student's transcript. Over the last 4 years of implementing this classroom curriculum, a higher percentage of students are selecting 2- and 4-year colleges and universities for their postgraduate plans. The percent of students attending 4-year colleges and universities has remained the same, but the percent of students attending 2-year and career and technical schools has increased. The counselors at this school believe that the opportunity for classroom curriculum is helping to educate all students on the importance of postgraduate planning. Before the counselors were allowed to go into the classrooms, only the motivated students were willing to attend the curriculum sessions during their free time.

Because RAMP administrators believe it is important for their school counselors to provide guidance curriculum lesson to all students, it is recommended that more schools align with the ASCA National Model to define their appropriate role within the school. Having access to all students during scheduled time to deliver guidance lessons can have a positive impact on students' attitudes, skills, and knowledge about making appropriate postgraduate plans.

CONCLUSION

ASCA has recognized an additional 52 high schools as having a RAMP-designated school counseling program since these data were gathered. Having more schools with the RAMP designation will provide a richer body of data to evaluate and replication of this study would provide more insight and information into administrator perception of counselor roles. As indicated in the present study and the events that occurred in the author's school after the study was completed, data can be used as an advocacy tool to support greater involvement of the school counselor in appropriate roles, such as providing classroom guidance. Providing data and evidence of student success as a result of school counseling interventions will help change perceptions and gain support for appropriate school counseling roles that will ultimately result in greater student success. ■

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APPENDIX A

Administrator Questionnaire

This research study has been designed to solicit high school administrators' perceptions of the role of the high school counselor.

On the left side of the questionnaire, rate the level of importance you assign to the following counselor roles on a scale of 1 to 5. (1 indicates the role is not important, 2 indicates the role is minimally important, 3 indicates the role is somewhat important, 4 indicates the role is important, and 5 indicates the role is very important.)

On the right side of the questionnaire, rate the extent you perceive that your counselors actually perform these selected roles on a scale of 1 to 5. (1 indicates the role is not performed at all, 2 indicates the role is performed once or twice a year, 3 indicates the role is performed occasionally, 4 indicates the role is performed often, and 5 indicates the role is performed regularly.)

Importance	<i>The High School Counselor</i>	Actual
1. 1 2 3 4 5	Does individual student academic program planning	1 2 3 4 5
2. 1 2 3 4 5	Does data entry	1 2 3 4 5
3. 1 2 3 4 5	Interprets cognitive, aptitude, and achievement tests	1 2 3 4 5
4. 1 2 3 4 5	Prepares individual education plans	1 2 3 4 5
5. 1 2 3 4 5	Counsels students who are tardy or absent	1 2 3 4 5
6. 1 2 3 4 5	Prepares school attendance review boards	1 2 3 4 5
7. 1 2 3 4 5	Works with one student at a time in a therapeutic, clinical mode	1 2 3 4 5
8. 1 2 3 4 5	Assists with duties in the principal's office	1 2 3 4 5
9. 1 2 3 4 5	Counsels students who have disciplinary problems	1 2 3 4 5
10. 1 2 3 4 5	Monitors the cafeteria	1 2 3 4 5
11. 1 2 3 4 5	Counsels students as to appropriate dress	1 2 3 4 5
12. 1 2 3 4 5	Collaborates with teachers to present guidance curriculum lessons	1 2 3 4 5
13. 1 2 3 4 5	Registers all new students	1 2 3 4 5
14. 1 2 3 4 5	Disaggregates data	1 2 3 4 5
15. 1 2 3 4 5	Supervises after-school activities	1 2 3 4 5
16. 1 2 3 4 5	Analyzes grade point averages in relationship to achievement	1 2 3 4 5
17. 1 2 3 4 5	Performs clerical record keeping	1 2 3 4 5
18. 1 2 3 4 5	Assists in teaching classes when teachers are absent	1 2 3 4 5
19. 1 2 3 4 5	Advocates for students at individual education plan meetings, student study teams, and school attendance review boards	1 2 3 4 5
20. 1 2 3 4 5	Counsels athletes on mental imagery	1 2 3 4 5
21. 1 2 3 4 5	Works with students to provide small- and large-group counseling activities	1 2 3 4 5
22. 1 2 3 4 5	Supervises study hall	1 2 3 4 5
23. 1 2 3 4 5	Assists the school principal with identifying and resolving student issues, needs, and problems	1 2 3 4 5
24. 1 2 3 4 5	Makes home visits to students in trouble	1 2 3 4 5
25. 1 2 3 4 5	Computes grade point averages	1 2 3 4 5
26. 1 2 3 4 5	Coordinates and administers cognitive, aptitude, and achievement tests	1 2 3 4 5
27. 1 2 3 4 5	Counsels students who have disciplinary problems	1 2 3 4 5
28. 1 2 3 4 5	Designs the master schedule	1 2 3 4 5
29. 1 2 3 4 5	Ensures that student records are maintained as per state and federal regulations	1 2 3 4 5
30. 1 2 3 4 5	Signs excuses for students who are tardy or absent	1 2 3 4 5
31. 1 2 3 4 5	Interprets student records	1 2 3 4 5

32. 1 2 3 4 5 Provides teachers with suggestions for better management of study hall 1 2 3 4 5
33. 1 2 3 4 5 Performs disciplinary actions 1 2 3 4 5
34. 1 2 3 4 5 Recruits students for clubs and activities 1 2 3 4 5
35. 1 2 3 4 5 Sends students home who are not appropriately dressed 1 2 3 4 5
36. From your viewpoint as an administrator, are there duties or roles your counselor(s) perform that are not included above? If so, what are they?

37. Due to your students' needs, what school counselor roles are considered to be most critical in your school?

38. Other comments:

ABOUT YOUR COUNSELING PROGRAM:

<i>Do you have . . .</i>	Yes	No
39. A counseling program that has earned the RAMP designation?	_____	_____
If yes, how many years has this designation been held?	_____	
40. A school counseling program management agreement?	_____	_____
41. A school counseling calendar of events?	_____	_____
42. A school counseling program advisory council?	_____	_____
43. A yearly program evaluation to appraise the progress of the program development and goals?	_____	_____
44. A districtwide school counseling curriculum?	_____	_____
45. A schoolwide counseling curriculum?	_____	_____

ABOUT YOU AND YOUR SCHOOL:

46. Years as administrator: _____
47. Years as administrator at current school: _____
48. Gender: M F
49. School enrollment: _____
50. Rural/urban/suburban setting: _____
51. Public/private: _____
52. Number of school counselors at your school: _____
53. If specialty school, what type? _____