Accountability for comprehensive school counseling programs in Iowa

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ACCOUNTABILITY FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL COUNSELING PROGRAMS IN IOWA

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in Education

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Abstract

This paper reports on the increasing trend for school counselors across the country to provide accountability for their comprehensive counseling programs. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) enacted in 2002 provides a rational for this trend. This paper examines related literature and describes implications for counselors, particularly for those practicing in the state of Iowa. A working definition of accountability within the context of education is offered. In an effort to inform professional school counselors of their newly defined responsibilities, the National Model developed by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is explored in detail and suggestions for practicing counselors are provided.
Accountability for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs in Iowa

There is a current trend across the nation for all educators to provide accountability for their programs of study. School counselors are not exempt from this trend. At a time when the professional worth of counselors is at the forefront of debate, school counselors must prove their value to students. Counselors, along with teachers, administrators, and other support staff, must ensure “no child is left behind.” One of the primary means to accomplish this by is providing research-based evidence that established curriculums improve student learning and foster healthy, normal development.

Accountability measures are particularly important for school counselors in the state of Iowa. For over a decade counselors were not legally mandated in public schools. However, with the passage of Senate File 277 in 2007, every school is now required to have a licensed guidance counselor (Senate File 277, 2007). This change recognizes the perceived value counselors have for students in the areas of personal and social development, academic achievement, and career exploration. While professionally advantageous, this change also presents an immense responsibility for counselors to prove their value to students. In order to remain in the Educational Code and ensure mandated status, counselors must prove themselves accountable and justify their financial worth from increasingly limited funds.

Legislative Reforms

The push for greater accountability coincides with the national reforms of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 (Astramovich & Coker, 2007; Dahir & Stone, 2003). As the globalized economy broadens, American students are competing less in the international arena of academics (Hursh, 2005; Paige, 2006). This is in part due to the
increasing gap between high and low achieving students within the United States (Hursh, 2005; Isaacs, 2003; Dahir & Stone, 2003). Discrepancies exist on standardized math and reading scores, and graduation and college acceptance rates vary between minority and majority students (Isaacs, 2003). These discrepancies indicate that teachers and support staff are not meeting all students’ academic and personal needs. Not all students have equal opportunities; some students continue to excel, while others decline.

NCLB argues assessment measures help remedy this inequality by assessing whether or not students meet certain expectations (Paige, 2006). It requires all states to develop standards and benchmarks, standardized tests, and accountability systems to measure student achievement and achievement-related behaviors, such as attendance and graduation rates (Hursh, 2005; Carey & Dimmitt, 2006). NCLB provides students the choice to transfer from schools with low test scores to those with high scores (Hursh, 2005; Carey & Dimmitt, 2006). For schools across the country, including those in Iowa, this poses a major dilemma, because educational funds are tied to student numbers.

This creates a situation where competition is fostered not only for higher test scores but also government dollars. With lost funds, budget cuts are essential. Teachers, administrators, and support staff do not have the job security once expected. Their worth to students is measured solely by their ability to increase test scores (Hatch, 2007).

Core subjects of math and reading become the focus of teacher attention, with elementary teachers devoting an average of 75 percent of their time to the two areas (Cawelti, 2006). This devotion corresponds with the NCLB requirement of 100% pass rate by 2014 (2006). In some cases, high-stakes testing has resulted in the loss of recess, physical education, and the arts, as they are perceived to waste precious instruction time.
(Hargrove, Jones, & Jones, 2000). This carries deep implications for school counselors, because their worth is not directly tied to core areas. Although NCLB does not explicitly include counselors in the reform, counselors are expected to show how their work increases student achievement the same as classroom teachers (Hatch, 2007; Myrick, 2003). Only through this process can counselors ensure their viable place within America’s education system.

ASCA National Model

To meet the changing needs of school counselors, the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) underwent a major shift in professional focus in 2003. It sought to unite all school counselors in the country under a single model of practice. This vision resulted in the ASCA National Model for School Counseling Programs. The National Model defines a school counseling program as developmental and comprehensive in nature (ASCA, 2005). While the idea of a comprehensive model is not new, ASCA’s model does provide a clear vision for all counselors (Myrick, 2003).

As a comprehensive model, school counseling programs should target three primary areas: academic achievement, career exploration, and personal and social development (ASCA, 2005). Rationale behind this model reflects the reactionary impact these areas have on one another. This is primarily evident in the influence personal and social issues have on academic and career success. The services provided by counseling programs serve as tools children and adolescents take with them into adulthood. This focus emphasizes the importance of not only creating successful and emotionally healthy students, but also responsible citizens.
Every service within the comprehensive program falls into four primary components: foundation, management, delivery, and accountability (ASCA, 2005). The model reflects an overarching theme of student advocacy, which ensures the needs of students are met. All stakeholders in student’s lives are included and considered important sources of support, including counselors, support staff, teachers, administration, and parents (ASCA, 2005).

**Foundation.** The foundation component of the ASCA National Model serves as any comprehensive program’s groundwork (ASCA, 2005). Its elements are collaboratively designed by all parties with a vested interest. A solid foundation must include the primary domains of academics, career exploration, and personal and social development (ASCA, 2005). These domains center on the program’s mission statement, which encompasses principles and expectations deemed important for every student (ASCA, 2005; Cobia & Henderson, 2003).

**Delivery system.** The foundation of any comprehensive counseling program is presented to all students through its delivery system. While the foundation serves as the “what,” the delivery system describes “how” the program will be implemented (ASCA, 2005). It consists of four parts: guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system supports (2005). Together, these four areas provide an organized way of delivering services.

Guidance curriculums are developed by individual districts and reflect each program’s mission. It is presented to students via classroom lessons, group work, and parent workshops (ASCA, 2005). Objectives are geared toward the developmental needs of students and center on the ASCA National Standards (2005). Students gain knowledge
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and develop skills in areas like self-awareness, career exploration and planning, and interpersonal relationships (Myrick, 2003).

Individual planning has a preventative focus similar to the guidance curriculum. Action plans and goal setting are an important part of this component, as students plan for their futures (ASCA, 2005). In relation to career exploration, counselors and students may work together to assess student interests and abilities (2005). Parents and/or guardians are often included in this stage (2005).

Response services meet the needs preventative services fail to (ASCA, 2005). In reaction to specific student concerns, counselors provide consultations, individual and small-group counseling, and crisis counseling (2005). An important distinction is made within this component between school counselors and therapists, as the role and ethical responsibility of counselors is to meet the short-term, school-related needs of students (Hatch, 2007). Referrals are made in the event that services are required outside this role.

The last component within the delivery system is the support system. Within the support system, counselors work to maintain and improve program delivery (Myrick, 2003). This includes ways school counselors can use their role to advocate for students. Every person considered part of the program has a responsibility to develop professionally (ASCA, 2005). The counselor serves as a leader encouraging and modeling such growth.

Management system. The management system provides the detailed structure of the program and is accomplished concurrently with the delivery system (ASCA, 2005). It outlines when strategies will be implemented, why prescribed interventions are important, and who will implement them (ASCA, 2005). An advisory counsel is
established that emphasizes teamwork and outlines the role each member serves (2005). Various forms of data are collected, including student-achievement, standards, and competency-related data (Hatch, 2007). Data analysis provides insight into student growth and sets the stage for the final component of the ASCA National Model, accountability.

**Accountability system.** Accountability connects the counseling program to student achievement (ASCA, 2005). Evaluations via program audits provide insights into which components are and are not contributing to student success (2005). Counselor effectiveness is also assessed through the use of basic performance standards (2005). The use of accountability systems allow counselors to prove their worth to students, similar to that of teachers and administrators.

**ISCA Support for the ASCA Model**

In a mutual effort to unite school counselors, the Iowa School Counselor Association (ISCA) supports and promotes the ASCA National Model. ISCA’s support does not reflect a new decision to implement comprehensive programs, however. For years, Iowa counselors have been encouraged to collaborate with students, families, administrators, other educators, and their communities at large to help build comprehensive counseling programs within the state’s schools (IDE, 2001). Within such partnerships, the Iowa Department of Education (IDE) believes the needs of students can best be met. The IDE stresses the corresponding role of school counselors as educators (IDE, 2001). As such, school success is the primary focus of the profession. Personal and social issues should be addressed only in the context that they impede academic achievement.
Accountability in Practice

In the context of counseling and education, accountability is defined as being liable for one's actions and services, particularly in terms of goals, procedures, and outcomes (Myrick, 2003; Myrick, 1990). It includes systematically gathering and analyzing data to determine how program components contribute to school success (Myrick, 2003; Dahir & Stone, 2003). Being accountable also ensures a comprehensive counseling program is in line with ethical codes, state and federal laws, and district objectives (Myrick, 2003).

The terms program evaluation and accountability are often used interchangeably (Astramovich & Coker, 2007). According to Astramovich and Coker, however, program evaluation is a precursor and required part of accountability (2007). When asked to report on program contributions to student success, counselors can turn to component evaluations and data results (2007). Demonstrating accountability can thus serve as a means of communicating the impact of counseling services to stakeholders (2007).

Programs should not be conducted solely for the purpose of providing accountability, however. Counselors should routinely undertake assessments for the inherent purpose of improving services for students (Loesch, 2001).

There exist many theories on how to best provide accountability for a school’s comprehensive counseling program, all of which require methods of evaluation. As a general guide, there are three questions that should be evaluated during the process (Myrick, 2003). First, is there a developed program in place (2003)? Second, what interventions are used to deal with student needs (2003)? And third, what proof exists that the program is making positive changes and increasing student achievement (2003)? Ultimately, the answers to these questions depend upon the specific needs and
characteristics of each school district. While all should have the same program
components in place, all will look differently. The ASCA National Model recognizes
this and provides a flexible outline for evaluation.

ASCA recommends developing the comprehensive counseling program slowly and in
phases, not overwhelming the parties involved (Hatch, 2007). The management system
of the National Model allows for priorities to be set within the program so that specific
school and student needs can be addressed (2007). Priorities are determined by data, as
data should drive all decisions within the Model (2007).

There exist multiple uses for data. Data analysis allows counselors to challenge
existing programs and create a necessity for change (Dahir & Stone, 2003; Hatch, 2007).
This stresses how important it is for counselors to be skilled in data collection,
interpretation, and analysis (Hatch, 2007; Astramovich & Coker, 2007). Three of the
most useful types of data for school counselors are student-achievement data,
achievement-related data, and standards and competency-related data (Hatch, 2007). All
three provide different insights into achievement.

Student-achievement data is used to determine school success and includes examples
such as grade point average, ACT and SAT scores, Iowa Test of Basic Skills scores, and
drop-out rates (Hatch, 2007). Achievement-related data provides information that
supports student success, such as discipline referrals, suspension rates, attendance rates,
and extracurricular activities (2007). Standards and competency-related data reflect the
extent to which students meet the objectives of curriculums (2007). Examples include
the percentage of students who have developed four-year plans and have set and achieved
their goals (2007).
These forms of data provide information pertaining to student success. Process, perception, and results data, on the other hand, provide insights into the effectiveness of the counseling program (Hatch, 2007). Process data reports on the usefulness of services and how the counselor presents those services to students (2007). Perception data gauges what students have allegedly gained in understanding as a result of program delivery (2007). Results data provide evidence of the overall usefulness of program components towards explicit behavior changes in students, such as attendance rates and grades (2007). Together, these pieces of information dictate what should be replicated, what is in need of change, and where gaps in achievement exist (2007). All data should be evaluated on an immediate, intermediate, and long range basis (2007).

*Alternative Accountability Models*


This system helps school counselors connect their comprehensive programs to their school’s mission (Dahir & Stone, 2003). It allows them to evaluate important elements of student data, such as report cards and grade point average (2003). Analysis of data helps counselors assess which areas their programs constructively influence (2003). Within M.E.A.S.U.R.E., all stakeholders are viewed as key factors of change and encouraged to participate and unite as a joint team (2003). Stakeholders continually reanalyze data to assess which program interventions contribute to student achievement
or are in need of restructuring (2003). Lastly, counselors present the results of their work to teachers, support staff, and administrators, helping educate them on their program’s progress (2003).

Another way of using data to set priorities and evaluate program effectiveness can be accomplished through the lens of the Counseling Program Evaluation Cycle (Astramovich & Coker, 2007). This cycle is composed of four phases: program planning, implementation, monitoring and refinement, and outcomes analysis (2007). These stages mirror the four components of the ASCA National Model (foundation, delivery, management, and accountability), and provide a clear guide to developing a comprehensive program and providing accountability (ASCA, 2007).

Data Collection

Various methods of collecting data exist. The Counseling Program Evaluation Cycle describes specific methods of collecting data and assessing process and outcomes. Qualitative methods like behavior observations and client, parent, and teacher interviews can be used, as can quantitative methods such as simple statistics (Astramovich & Coker, 2007; Isaacs, 2003). The use of standardized assessments for topics like depression and anxiety are encouraged (Astramovich & Coker 2007). Results indicate whether or not objectives have been met. Successes and shortcomings should be shared with stakeholders and collaborative opportunities for feedback and further planning should be provided (Astramovich & Coker, 2007).

The Counseling Program Evaluation Cycle and the ASCA National Model encourage the use of pre and posttest measures. While a pretest is a test or survey given prior to treatment implementation, a posttest is given after (Slavin, 2007). Pretests assess what
students already know and should be given one week before the program starts (Hatch, 2007). To increase efficient use, multiple choice questions are best (2007). Time constraints and other responsibilities do not allow for use of essay, fill in the blank, and short answer questions (2007). Question construction should be done carefully to ensure the test adequately and clearly measures what the counselor is purporting to measure (Myrick, 1990). As a result, double negatives should be avoided and language should be developmentally appropriate for the target group (Hatch, 2007).

Pre-post tests provide quantitative evidence of results, which is the crux of accountability. Pre and posttests should be used with caution, however. It is important to first use a control group that does not receive the intervention or curriculum (Slavin, 2007; Myrick, 1990). If no control group is in place, posttest results could be influenced by the simple process of having taken the pretest (Myrick, 1990).

Action Research

The use of action research is another method becoming widely practiced by school counselors (Isaacs, 2003; Rowell, 2006). Action research is a type of study that simultaneously assesses behavior change and cognitive understanding (Isaacs, 2003). Despite criticisms that action research lacks generalizability, a researcher can systematically collect data to measure the effectiveness of a particular intervention or curriculum for a specific school's population (Slavin, 2007; Rowell, 2006). Because the comprehensive counseling program is not composed solely of the school counselor, participatory action research allows all stakeholders to work collaboratively (Slavin, 2007; Hittleman & Simon, 2006; Rowell, 2006).
There exist several approaches to conducting action research. One plan, outlined by Isaacs, involves seven cyclical steps (2003). First, stakeholders collaboratively determine a specific problem and goal (2003). Second, targeted populations are identified and a vision for change is created (2003). Third, desired measurable changes are recognized (2003). These changes center on baseline data or pretest measures (2003). Fourth, a research plan is developed centering on the three domains of the counseling program (academic, career, and personal and social) (2003). Fifth, the plan is implemented and routine evaluations are conducted (2003). Sixth, data is collected and analyzed to assess whether or not goals are met (2003). Last, results are reported to stakeholders and adjustments are made accordingly (2003). During this stage, Isaacs encourages the use of graphic images to communicate results (2003). Visual images, such as bar graphs or histograms allow others to see the degree of change.

Compared to more traditional methods of research, action research is relatively quick. It allows school counselors to work with other vested parties and conduct continuous evaluations of their programs (Rowell, 2006). It also puts counselors on a more equal status with teachers in regards to contributions to student achievement, as teachers have been conducting action research for years (2006).

Evaluation can be done by the counselors who implement program components or by independent researchers. Most research on the topic emphasizes the importance of using third-party evaluators in an attempt to provide objectivity (Astramovich & Coker, 2007). Because school finances often prohibit this practice, the need arises for counselors to be versed in various evaluation models (2007).
Role of Educational Standards

Educators use standard-driven research to provide accountability for their programs and to ensure students learn certain objectives within core-curriculum areas (Dahir & Stone, 2003; Carey & Dimmitt, 2006). The increased use of standards and benchmarks within education has primarily been delegated to classroom teachers and administrators (Dahir & Stone, 2003). Until recently counselors have been largely excluded from this trend (2003). With its many other reforms ASCA has sought to change this disparity.

Standards and benchmarks include knowledge and skills all students should attain as a result of instruction (Dahir & Stone, 2003). To create equal status between counselors and other educators in student achievement, ASCA has created its own set of standards. They provide a specific path for the development of any comprehensive program and clearly outline the role of a school counselor (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). Addressing specific standards through a program’s delivery system helps foster the school’s mission and lessen the achievement gap (Dahir & Stone, 2003). Due to the process nature of counseling, benchmarks are also crucial as they make it possible to gauge results that are not immediately available (Astramovich, Coker, & Hoskins, 2005).

The Iowa Department of Education argues Iowa school counselors can provide accountability for their programs by assessing whether identified standards and benchmarks have been met (IDE, 2001). This can be accomplished by looking at program structure, implementation, and results (2001). Constant revisions help the program grow and increase opportunities for students as they learn coping skills necessary for school and life success, build resiliency, and raise students’ desire for achievement (Dahir & Stone, 2003).
The field of education is ever changing as new trends gain empirical support. Educators must be flexible in their roles and adapt to the varying needs of students. While program evaluation is a relatively new phenomenon, school counselors have an ethical responsibility to include accountability measures into their practices (Brott, 2006). The need arises for counselor educators to provide the training and experiences needed to those entering the profession (Brott, 2006; Astramovich & Coker, 2007; Astramovich, Coker, & Hoskins, 2005). This shift poses a drastic change for practicing counselors and their programs, as they must now seek vigorous professional development opportunities.

Change always presents a certain degree of dissention. Fears of the unknown, a desire to maintain the status quo, and questions of the validity of such changes come to the forefront of debate. The argument arises that focus on accountability takes away from the counseling aspect of the profession. Counselors must spend their time collecting and analyzing data rather than building relationships with students.

Counselors may also be unsure of their ability to gather and interpret data (Myrick, 2003; Astramovich & Coker, 2007). They may equate evaluations as a determiner of their professional capabilities, not as a way to improve their programs (Myrick, 2003; Astramovich, Coker, & Hoskins, 2005). Given the numerous responsibilities already placed upon counselors, some may argue time does not allow for accountability measures and that administrative support required to implement major program changes does not exist (Astramovich, Coker, & Hoskins, 2005).

In order to be leaders of systematic change, counselors must first be willing to open themselves to change and advocate for their profession. This can be advanced by
recognizing personal resistance (Isaacs, 2003). Key indicators include refusal to participate, referral to prior practices, defensiveness about prior programs, referral to former role definitions, and displacement of responsibilities to others, including teachers and administrators (2003).

While development of a comprehensive counseling program requires hard work and possible downfalls, the benefits of accountability should be considered. With a clear program in place, the role of the counselor is clarified to students, parents, teachers, and administrators. School counselors are defined as promoters of student success with extensive training and expertise in counseling, consultation, coordination, and curriculum development and delivery (Isaacs, 2003). Non-counseling duties, such as clerical work and administrative responsibilities will reduce (Myrick, 2003). Providing evidence of the effectiveness of the comprehensive counseling program gives credence to the counselor’s role within the school system and justifies their costs from limited finances.

Accountability justifies taking students out of valuable class time. The profession gains status as a key element in student success, important to the mission of all schools, and leaders of systematic change (Hatch, 2007; Dahir & Stone, 2003).

Student Advocacy

Providing accountability for comprehensive programs ensures program delivery is effective for every student. It improves learning, fosters normal human development, and promotes the emotional well-being of every student (Hatch, 2007). Barriers to these facets are eliminated. Accountability measures also indicate which students are in need of additional response services and give every student a voice. Through these processes, student needs are advocated for.
School climate warms as all educators and stakeholders commit themselves to student success (Dahir & Stone, 2003). A community of respect and dedication to learning help create an equitable education experience (Dahir & Stone, 2003; Hatch, 2007). Ensuring every student receives the necessary services helps eliminate the gap between high and low achievement.

Conclusions

School counselors across the nation face the new and ambitious challenge of proving their worth in relation to student achievement. Counselors in Iowa face the mutual challenge of fulfilling their new responsibilities associated with reinstatement in the Iowa Code. Providing accountability for their comprehensive programs can help ensure professional responsibilities are accomplished. While the ASCA National Model provides an outline on how this broad mission can be accomplished, counselors must do the real work. The time has come for counselors to become research savvy, competent in data collection and analysis. The time has come for counselors to find their voices as leaders of change and forge partnerships with the greater education community. Counselors must professionally unite as student advocates through the use of data.
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