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# Future School Principals' Views of the Roles of Professional School Counselors

*A clinical simulation technique was used to investigate how future school principals view the roles of professional school counselors, particularly as those responsibilities are represented in the ASCA National Model®. The 244 respondents were principals-in-training (i.e., graduate students) officially enrolled in educational administration programs at member institutions of the University Council for Educational Administration. These principals-in-training were able to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate roles of professional school counselors, and the results generally were independent of their demographic characteristics.*

The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs (American School Counselor Association, 2005a) in effect delineates appropriate roles and functions for professional school counselors (PSCs) through a description of the four components of its recommended delivery system: school guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services, and system support. The importance and potential benefits of PSCs fulfilling these appropriate roles and functions, as well as the resultant ineffectiveness when PSCs perform inappropriate roles and functions, are well documented in the school counseling literature (e.g., ASCA, 2005a, 2005b; Baker & Gerler, 2004; Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Erford, House, & Martin, 2003; Schmidt, 2003). Equally evident is that an effective and collaborative PSC-school principal relationship is essential for PSCs to fulfill these appropriate roles and functions effectively and successfully. For example, Baker and Gerler wrote,

Principals clearly influence the environment in their schools. What they value most will influence their own behavior and what they reinforce positively or negatively in the values and behaviors of their subordinates, in their school rules, and in the assignment of responsibilities in their purview. (p. 353)

Basically, school principals control whether school counselors can perform the roles and functions advocated by ASCA (Ripley, Erford, Dahir, & Eschbach, 2003).

## PRINCIPALS AND PSCs

Principals hold the most powerful position in schools because they typically identify, select, and appoint staff; determine school organizational and functional structure; and dictate the roles and functions of each school staff member (Ribak-Rosenthal, 1994; Taylor, 2002). Unfortunately, some principals use their position to require PSCs to perform inappropriate (i.e., other than ASCA-recommended) tasks (Beale & McCay, 2001; Kaplan & Evans, 1999). Clearly, involvement in inappropriate tasks adds responsibilities to already-overloaded PSCs who are trying to implement the recommendations in the ASCA National Model® (Loesch & Ritchie, in press).

Some research (e.g., Kaplan, 1995; O'Connor, 2002; Ponec & Brock, 2000) shows that the effectiveness of a school counseling program (and therefore of school counselors) is determined to a large degree by the principal's provision of support for the PSC's efforts. This reasoning underlies why ASCA (2005a) recommends that principals and PSCs work as a team toward the common goal of assisting all students in all the ways they need assistance.

Principals apparently continue to hold widely differing views regarding a PSC's role in the school (Burnham & Jackson, 2000). For example, in their study, Hassard and Costar (1997) concluded that differences in perceptions between secondary school principals and PSCs regarding the preferred role of PSCs result from differing views of the basic and essential roles PSCs should fulfill in their day-to-day functioning. Hassard and Costar concluded that it is crucial for principals and PSCs to negotiate, cooperate, and understand their respective roles to maximize the learning processes of all students in their schools.

Recently, Pérusse, Goodnough, Donegan, and

**Basically, school principals control whether school counselors can perform the roles and functions advocated by ASCA.**

Jones (2004) studied the emphasis that PSCs and principals believe PSCs should give to the ASCA National Standards and the ASCA Transforming School Counseling Initiative. They found that more than 80% of the participating principals identified the following activities as appropriate for PSCs even though they are not endorsed as appropriate by ASCA: (a) registration and scheduling of all new students; (b) administering cognitive, aptitude, and achievement tests; and (c) maintaining student records. Perusse et al. concluded that most school principals continue to believe that appropriate tasks for PSCs include many roles and functions not recommended by ASCA, most of which are essentially clerical tasks.

PSCs' views about their own roles and functions generally show dissatisfaction in regard to the manner in which their professional skills and abilities are used by their school principals. For example, Kaplan (1995) and Sutton and Fall (1995) found that most PSCs view themselves as misused by being assigned to, and therefore overly involved in, noncounseling duties such as scheduling, handling disciplinary matters, and performing clerical functions. It is little wonder that many PSCs report job dissatisfaction if they are being called upon to fulfill roles and functions they believe are not professionally appropriate.

It is evident that discrepancies still exist between what the ASCA National Standards (2005b) and the ASCA National Model (2005a) and practicing principals identify as appropriate PSC roles and functions, and this situation obviously needs resolution. Importantly, it also is evident that principals' directives, rather than professional job descriptions, determine the roles and functions that PSCs actually fulfill in schools. And because of their tendency to assign inappropriate roles and functions to PSCs, principals have been identified as a possible challenge or barrier to transforming the PSCs' roles and functions (House & Martin, 1998).

## PURPOSE

Differences in PSC and principal perspectives on the work of PSCs have consistently been found in the professional literature, including findings from research based in diverse theoretical perspectives and involving a wide variety of methodologies. Notably, the vast majority of this research has been focused on and/or involved currently employed principals (e.g., O'Connor, 2002; Ponec & Brock, 2000). An important question that arises from this situation is at what point in their professional careers do principals formulate their perceptions of what they believe are appropriate roles and functions for PSCs? More specifically, the question addressed in this study was how future school principals perceive the work of

PSCs while they are undergoing their formal educational preparation to become school principals.

Unfortunately, minimal research has examined the perspectives on PSC functioning of students in graduate-level educational administration programs who intend to become school principals. Dahir (2000), Fitch, Newby, Ballestero, and Marshall (2001), and Ponec and Brock (2000), among others, have commented that further research on how future principals perceive PSC roles and functions is needed so as to explore when principals begin to formulate their perceptions of PSC functioning. Therefore, the major purpose of this study was to determine whether principals-in-training (i.e., students in education administration academic programs) favor ASCA-recommended (i.e., appropriate) PSC roles and functions over those not endorsed by the school counseling profession (i.e., inappropriate). Historically, studies of principals' perceptions of school counselors' roles and functions have investigated school counselor gender as a major variable (e.g., Hassard & Costar, 1977; Ross & Herrington, 2005), presumably because of the potential for gender bias as well as role bias. Therefore, we also investigated differences in principals-in-training' perceptions based on the gender of the PSC. Finally, to determine whether respondent characteristics were associated with their role perceptions, responses were analyzed in regard to selected respondent demographic variables.

## METHOD

The methodology for this study was a clinical-simulation technique (also known as bogus profile). The use of case vignettes in social and behavioral science research is not new, and it is becoming more popular in both quantitative and qualitative research studies. The vignettes (i.e., scenarios) presented usually are constituted to be approximations of realistic situations and are specifically intended to elicit useful information about respondents' thought processes, particularly those relevant to their professional and educational backgrounds and/or development (Poulou, 2001).

A set of four vignettes (i.e., simulations of school counselor functioning) was developed to gain information about future school principals' perceptions of the appropriate work tasks of PSCs. The academic and professional history of the PSC portrayed was the same in all vignettes. However, two (one male and one female PSC) vignettes were constructed to reflect *appropriate* functioning as delineated in the ASCA National Model. The other two (one male and one female PSC) vignettes described performance of *inappropriate* functioning. These latter vignettes included allusion to appropriate PSC activities, but

**Table 1. Appropriate and Inappropriate PSC Functions in the Vignettes**

Appropriate Function	Inappropriate Function
Individual counseling—10 hours/week	Individual counseling—4 hours/week
Small-group counseling—6 hours/week	Consultation—3.5 hours/week
Large-group guidance—6 hours/week	Testing program—7.5 hours/week
Student appraisal—4 hours/week	Attendance duties—5 hours/week
Peer-helper program—2 hours/week	Bus/lunch duties—4 hours/week
Outreach activities—4 hours/week	Discipline—2 hours/week
Consultation—2 hours/week	Scheduling—5 hours/week
Parent outreach—1 hour/week	Miscellaneous—4 hours/week
Member of local, state, and national school counseling organizations	Member of local education association

the emphasis was on what are generally recognized as inappropriate PSC functions. Table 1 shows a general overview of the respective vignette contents.

Each vignette was a one-page description of equal length. The same gender-neutral name was given to the PSC portrayed in each of the four vignettes. The PSC was portrayed as differing by gender (*vis-a-vis* pronouns) in each of the pairs, thus yielding four combinations: (a) male-appropriate, (b) female-appropriate, (c) male-inappropriate, and (d) female-inappropriate PSC functioning.

Each vignette was followed by six items, allowing the respondents to rate whether the portrayed PSC's activities as a school counselor were (a) appropriate to the position, (b) helpful to students' career development, (c) good use of her or his professional training, (d) helpful to students' academic development, (e) consistent with sound educational practices, and (f) helpful to students' personal/social development. A standard Likert scale, with ratings weighted from *strongly disagree* = 1 to *strongly agree* = 5, was provided to obtain respondents' ratings.

Finally, a demographic questionnaire was used to obtain data in regard to respondents' years of experience as a teacher, age, gender, number of semester credit hours completed in current (educational administration) program, and whether they had had previous work experience as a school counselor.

### Procedures

The University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) is an institutional-member organization for graduate-level professional preparation programs in educational administration, the majority of which have programs for principals-in-training. An e-mail message was sent individually to every other of the 68 educational administration program

chairpersons identified in the UCEA program membership directory. A sufficient number of potential participants was not identified within 4 weeks and therefore the remaining set of 34 chairpersons was then contacted similarly. A brief description of the study was presented and the chairpersons were asked to identify instructors/professors in their respective programs who taught courses specifically for principals-in-training. Subsequently, the nominated instructors/professors were contacted individually by e-mail and requested to assist with the study (i.e., to distribute and collect the vignettes to students in their classes and to return completed evaluations in prepaid envelopes). Faculty members from 19 (28%) of the UCEA program member institutions agreed to assist and a sufficient number of research materials packets were sent to each of them.

Educational administration program students (i.e., principals-in-training) in the respective classes were presented a packet containing an informed consent form, a vignette page, and a page upon which to respond to the items and to provide demographic information. A between-groups design was used in that each respondent responded to only one vignette.

### Participants

The respondents to this study included 244 principals-in-training officially enrolled (i.e., degree seeking) in master's-level educational administration academic programs at UCEA member institutions. The respondent group was 43% male ( $N = 102$ ) and 57% female ( $N = 138$ ), excluding four respondents who did not provide gender information. The mean age was 36.88 years for those reporting age information ( $N = 240$ ). The mean number of years of teaching experience was 9.73 for those providing this information ( $N = 240$ ). For the respondents providing

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**Table 2. Appropriate ( $N = 120$ ) and Inappropriate ( $N = 123$ ) PSC Functioning Item and Composite Means, Standard Deviations, and  $t$  Tests**

	Appropriate	Inappropriate	$t$ Value*	Significance
Item 1				
Mean	3.92	2.91	-7.30	$p < .0001$
SD	0.92	1.19		
Item 2				
Mean	3.21	2.67	-3.81	$p < .0002$
SD	1.01	1.18		
Item 3				
Mean	3.80	2.77	-7.96	$p < .0001$
SD	.090	1.10		
Item 4				
Mean	3.54	3.21	-2.52	$p < .1020$
SD	0.93	1.08		
Item 5				
Mean	3.63	2.85	-6.09	$p < .0001$
SD	.089	1.09		
Item 6				
Mean	3.85	3.13	-5.47	$p < .0001$
SD	0.95	1.09		
Composite				
Mean	21.98	17.54	-6.92	$p < .0001$
SD	4.41	5.51		

\*Independent samples  $t$  tests.

the number of semester credit hours completed in their educational administration program ( $N = 234$ ), the mean was 20.98. Only 5 (2%) of 244 respondents indicated that they had served previously as school counselors.

## ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Respondent data were analyzed at the individual item level and at the item composite level, with the composite being the sum of responses to the six individual item responses. The item and composite response means and standard deviations are shown in Table 2. Initially, seven  $t$  tests were computed for the item and composite means between appropriate and inappropriate portrayed PSC functioning.

Six of the seven  $t$  tests yielded relatively large, statistically significant differences (with the Bonferroni correction applied), indicating that the appropriate and inappropriate vignettes were viewed quite differently by the respective respondent groups, and that there was great likelihood that they represented separate and distinct dependent variables that should be analyzed individually. Therefore, subsequent analyses were performed separately by type of PSC

performance. Note that previous experience as a school counselor was not included as a variable in these analyses because only 5 respondents had had such experience.

### Appropriate Performance

For the appropriate performance item composite data, a linear regression model that included two categorical variables (portrayed counselor's gender and respondent gender) and continuous variables (respondent's age, years of teaching experience, and number of semester hours completed in educational administration program) yielded a statistically significant result [ $F(6, 06) = 2.95, p = .0137, R = .378$ ]. A similar analysis was computed for each item and yielded statistically significant results for item 1 [ $R = .399 [F(6, 106) = 3.35; p = .0045]$ ], item 3 [ $R = .410 [F(6, 106) = 3.58; p = .0028]$ ], and item 5 [ $R = .339 [F(6, 105) = 2.27; p = .042]$ ]. For each of these three items, respondents' age was inversely related to the rating given for PSC activity appropriateness, good use of PSCs' professional training, and PSC facilitation of students' psychosocial development (i.e., younger principals-in-training gave higher ratings). For item 1, male respondents gave lower

mean ratings than did female respondents. For item 5, years of teaching experience was inversely related to the rating for PSC consistency with sound educational practices.

### **Inappropriate Performance**

Linear regression analyses also were computed for the inappropriate PSC performance data. For the composite data, the overall F value was not statistically significant [ $F(6, 89) = 1.308, p = .262$ ]. However, the specific Pearson product-moment correlation between item composite rating and respondent age was statistically significant, and inverse. Individual item statistically significant results were found only for item 3 [ $R = .266 [F(2, 112) = .283; p = .041]$ ], item 4 [ $R = .283 [F(2, 111) = 4.85; p = .009]$ ], and item 5 [ $R = .321 [F(3, 111) = 4.25; p = .0069]$ ]. For items 3 and 5, female respondents gave lower ratings than did male respondents. For item 4, male respondents gave higher ratings than did female respondents.

## **DISCUSSION**

Two of the general results of this study were particularly positive for the school counseling profession. First, the most important general result was that principals-in-training were able to differentiate appropriate and inappropriate PSC performance as related to role and function recommendations in the ASCA National Model. Specifically, PSC activities consistent with the ASCA National Model were evaluated as being more appropriate (and presumably more favorable) than PSC activities that are generally considered inappropriate in the school counseling profession. Implicit in this result is principals-in-training' endorsement of the ASCA National Model activities; if they did not endorse them, there would not have been significant differences in the performance ratings.

The second general result that is very positive for the school counseling profession is that these principals-in-training differentiated PSC performance appropriateness regardless of the gender of the PSC portrayed and of most of their own personal characteristics and experiences. Therefore, there is reason to hope that in the future PSCs will be evaluated by principals on the basis of the actual performance of their roles and functions and not on the basis of factors presumably irrelevant to their performance as PSCs. To the extent that that hope becomes manifest, PSCs' implementation of the ASCA National Model as advocated (ASCA, 2005b) is likely to be met with favorable evaluations from principals, which would in turn further promote the school counseling profession.

While principals-in-training as a group were able

to differentiate PSC performance, this differentiation competence was inconsistent among these principals-in-training. There was substantial variability in the ratings provided by the respondents for both the appropriate and inappropriate PSC performance portrayed. This response diversity likely reflects the lack of consensus about PSCs' roles and functions in schools that is so evident in the professional literature (e.g., Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Snyder, 2000). Thus, while the majority, perhaps a large majority, of principals-in-training are able to differentiate PSC performance effectively (and appropriately from the school counseling profession perspective), obviously there remain some who do not agree with current school counseling profession recommendations for effective PSC functioning.

Although there was not a strong pattern among the other results from the various analyses, some nonetheless warrant further consideration. For example, female respondents generally rated portrayed appropriate PSC performance substantially higher and inappropriate PSC performance substantially lower than their male counterparts. Therefore, it appears that female principals-in-training hold stronger opinions about PSC functioning than do male principals-in-training. Doud and Keller (1998) documented a strong trend of increase in the number of female school principals and also in females entering the principalship at younger ages, and they suggested that those trends are likely to continue. It may be that younger, more recently educated female principals-in-training are being exposed to more current information about appropriate PSC functioning. In any event, if those trends continue and if female principals continue to favor appropriate PSC functioning as proposed by ASCA, then PSCs performing effectively in accord with ASCA's recommendations are likely to enjoy better relationships with their principals in the future. Obviously this would be a very good thing for the school counseling profession, PSCs, and ultimately students in schools.

Age was inversely related to ratings given for PSC appropriate performance (i.e., younger respondents gave higher ratings) for three of the individual items, and also was in general inversely related for inappropriate performance (i.e., younger respondents gave lower ratings). These results suggest that age also may be an important consideration in principals-in-training' evaluations of PSC functioning, with younger respondents more favorable toward ASCA-recommended PSC functioning. This suggestion also bodes well for PSCs and the school counseling profession as the respondents and their peers move from being principals-in-training to being actual school principals.

Within the ASCA National Model, school counselors are encouraged to help students in three

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**Continued and  
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realms of students' lives: academic, career, and personal/social development (ASCA, 2005a). Although not a specific focus of this study, the respondents' pattern of rating means for the items (i.e., 2, 4, and 6) relating to these three realms of PSC functioning is interesting. For the total respondent group, the greatest difference between appropriate and inappropriate performance item rating means was for career development (.88), followed by personal/social development (.72) and academic development (.33). This pattern of differences suggests that principals-in-training have clearer and/or stronger opinions of PSCs' role in fostering students' career and personal/social development than they do of PSCs' role in fostering students' academic development. Although enhancing students' academic development is clearly emphasized in the ASCA National Model (as well as the ASCA National Standards), apparently that emphasis is not being communicated to principals-in-training as effectively as it could be.

Two of the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) school counseling program accreditation standards are particularly germane to the results of this study. Standard A.3 stipulates that school counselors should have knowledge of the "role, function, and professional identity of the school counselor in relation to the roles of other professional and support personnel in the school," and standard B.5 stipulates that school counselors should be competent in "methods of planning for and presenting school counseling-related educational programs to administrators, teachers, parents, and the community" (CACREP, 2005). The results of this study suggest how PSCs are likely to be viewed by school principals in the near future. However, although school counselors may expect principals in general to have favorable views of their roles and functions, they must be cognizant that there is considerable diversity among those opinions, and therefore they must consider each principal's perspectives on an individual basis.

The results of this study also suggest what school counselors might emphasize in their communications about their roles and functions to school principals. For example, it likely is important for school counselors to emphasize their work in regard to promoting students' academic development. Further, it may be particularly important for school counselors to both emphasize and differentiate clearly among the academic, career, and psychosocial development domains of their work.

This study generates many possibilities for future research. For example, on what basis were the respondents in this study able to differentiate appropriate from inappropriate PSC performance? That is,

were their differentiated ratings based on specific knowledge of school counseling, personal experiences, generally informed intuition about good educational practices likely to benefit schoolchildren in multiple ways, or some combination of these or other factors? Research into how principals and/or principals-in-training make such determinations would help to clarify their understandings of the school counseling profession, and with such information PSCs could establish even better working relationships with their principals.

Only a few of the demographic factors investigated in this study were associated with the evaluations of principals-in-training of portrayed PSCs' functioning. Are principal-in-training situational factors such as type of educational institution attended, school level, school urban or rural setting, school outcome data or characteristics such as race/ethnicity, level of academic performance, or theoretical leadership orientation associated with their perceptions of PSC performance? Knowledge of those factors also would be beneficial to both the school counseling and educational administration professions, particularly in regard to providing appropriate professional education for both school counselors and principals.

There were no significant differences in performance ratings based on the gender of the PSC portrayed. But are there other personal or professional characteristics of PSCs that might be associated with principals-in-training' evaluations? For example, there are many different types of academic programs and professional credentials for school counselors, even allowing that all must have at least a master's degree. Would PSCs presented as having differing professional preparations and/or professional credentials be evaluated differentially by principals-in-training? The school counseling profession (as well as the National Board for Certified Counselors and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards) recognizes hierarchical differentiation among school counselor professional credentials. For example, Glathar (2005) wrote that "[national] certification is yet another way to continue growing as a professional—and showing administrators, parents, and other stakeholders that you are a highly skilled professional committed to providing the best possible services for the students in your school" (p. 31). But do principals-in-training differentiate such professional accomplishments in the same ways that professionals within the school counseling profession do?

The transition from principal-in-training to practicing school principal carries with it a multitude of possibilities for changes in viewpoint, opinions, and perspectives. Therefore, an important question is whether actual (i.e., employed) school principals

would evaluate PSC performance in the same ways as principals-in-training. Clearly there is a point at which academic knowledge and theorizing give way to actual responsibilities for principals just as it does for other educational professionals. Put simply, do the realities of being an actual school principal result in changed perceptions of the work of PSCs? Again, knowledge of such changes, if they exist, would be beneficial to both the school counseling and educational administration professions.

## CONCLUSION

School principals' perceptions of the school counseling profession, PSCs, and PSC work performance have been researched and discussed in the school counseling profession at some length. While some researchers have found that school principals do understand appropriate school counselor functioning as recommended by ASCA, most research suggests that they do not. It logically follows that principals-in-training also would not be able to differentiate school counselor performance. However, the results of this study contradict that generalization. Although perhaps a surprise given the existing school counselor literature, the results of this study are nonetheless good news for the school counseling profession because they imply that PSC promotional efforts have been successful at least to some extent. Thus, continued and future promotion of the school counseling profession to educational administrators in schools and/or in training also is likely to be successful, and therefore it should be continued. ■

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