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Vassar Students' and High School Counselors' Perceptions on the Role of the School Counselor:  
A Study on the Similarities and Differences

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11 May 2021

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## Abstract

This study was conducted to distinguish between the perspectives of current Vassar College students and high school counselors on the functions and expectations of school counselors. Based on previous literature, I predicted that students would not fully understand the scope of the role of the school counselor, and thus, fail to view counselors as essential school entities. Additionally, I predicted that school counselors would define their role very differently from students in terms of areas of expertise. My methodology was based on both qualitative and quantitative survey data with Vassar students and current high school counselors working in the United States. After all participants responded to the survey, I analyzed all the data and created 16 codes that arose from participant responses - availability, bias/favorites, communication, develop relationships, future planning, genuineness, individualized case by case basis, lack of counselors, listening skills, mental health, negative feedback, positive feedback, qualifications, role confusion, well-roundedness and trust. After analysis, it was determined that a significant difference existed in the perceived breadth of the counselor role between students and counselors. Additionally, quantitative data showed that there was a significant difference in the level of belief between Vassar students and counselors that the role of a counselor should encompass individual student academic planning, counseling students with disciplinary problems, assisting with duties in the principal's office, teaching classes when teachers are absent, hall, restroom and lunch duty, bus duty, educational future counseling, vocational future counseling, sex and marriage counseling, and personal psychological counseling. Future research has been proposed to determine how best students and counselors can take action to better the name of school counseling.

### Acknowledgements

To my advisor, Christopher Bjork, thank you for always being there to offer guidance and encouragement. You never doubted my ability to embark on this demanding endeavor.

To my second reader, Carolyn Palmer, thank you for being such an insightful and impactful professor. You helped shape my love for psychology!

To the Education Department faculty and students, thank you being so friendly and willing to share advice and knowledge. I have loved being in class with each of you.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

Throughout my K-12 schooling experience, I did not take advantage of the many resources that my school counselors had to offer. Especially during high school, when I struggled the most with mental health issues, I was unaware that my counselor could be a resource. Looking back, I believe I was aware that the role of a school counselor encompassed many areas of guidance, including personal issues; however, because my counselor was mainly helping students with schedules and the college process, as well as performing administrative duties, I did not think that she had time for me. My reasoning behind this thesis is centered around my curiosity about the perspectives that other students hold about their school counselors since, as a student, I viewed guidance counselors as informative resources rather than as compassionate role models. Considering my inadequate experiences with my own school counselors, it may be surprising that school counseling is the career path I plan on taking. I am interested in how school counselors can be viewed in a different light and how their image can be reformed. I aim to be a counselor who can be a role model. While I know that the state gives very little power to teachers, does this apply to school counselors as well? What is their actual, versus ideal, role?

Before conducting my study, I predicted that students, of all grade levels, look at school counselors through a small, blurry lens. As a nation, we value success in school as it leads to acceptance into an accredited college, and subsequently, a credible job. Additionally, due to cultural and historical views, mental health is a taboo subject matter. As a result of these societal norms, school counselors seem to neglect the part of their role where mental health and personal relations come in, and instead, they focus on getting their students ahead. A possible solution to this problem is to create awareness of the roles that school counselors are meant to play in an

effort to combat student perspectives on their function. However, school counselors themselves are beginning to question their role due to the way that school administrators regard them and, as a result, many have differing views about their role (Burnham and Jackson, 2000). Therefore, in this study I compare and contrast the ways in which college-aged students and counselors view the school counselor role, and I offer suggestions as to how counseling can be viewed in a positive light.

There is a lot of literature that claims that school counselors are required to perform many responsibilities outside their realm of expertise (Benigno, 2017). The way in which school counselors spend their time is concerning; there seems to be a significant difference in the way that counselors are actually spending their time and how they would like to spend their time (Dahlem, 1971; Hardesty & Dillard, 1994; Hutchinson, Barrick & Groves, 1986; Morse & Russell, 1988). Many counselors spend their days performing administrative duties, similar to those typical of a school secretary.

Other studies show that school counselors are willing to spend one on one time with students about issues not related to academics; but many times, students themselves are not aware of this eagerness (Bigelow & Humphreys, 1967; Muro & Revello, 1970, Rowe, 1989). DeKruyf, Auger & Trice-Black (2013) are some of the few researchers who propose possible solutions (training and professional development) to alter the way in which school counselors are perceived. I will go into more details and offer additional literature in Chapter 2.

In my thesis, I expand on these solutions by listening to advice that high school graduates (Vassar Students) may have to offer on how to alter the views of something that has been engrained and perceived in a certain way for so long. I also address the thoughts that school

counselors themselves have in bettering the system and advocating for their role as not only a consultant, but as a counselor.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Summary and Integration***

The reviewed literature examines the ways in which school counselors and students perceive the roles/functions of the school counselor. Due to the seemingly significant discrepancy between actual functions, expectations and perceptions of school counselors, literature outlining the responsibilities of a counselor is included in this review.

#### ***Definition of School Counselor***

Due to role ambiguity in the school counseling profession, a clear, established definition of the job is important to analyze perceptions. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) lays clear guidelines outlining the tasks of a school counselor: counseling, consultation, and coordination. ASCA believes that the primary goal of the school counselor is to enhance student achievement and accomplishment through embodying the role of a student leader and advocate (Burnham & Jackson, 2000). School counselors are meant to support student development, maintain confidentiality, assist students with academic, career and social/emotional plans, provide appropriate referrals, manage boundaries and ensure that the rights of their counselees are protected (Association, 1992). It is important to note that the title guidance counselor is now taboo, and counselors are simply referred to as a “school counselor.”

#### ***School Counselor Perceptions***

The perceptions that school counselors hold on their job performance, satisfaction, expectations, and responsibilities can drastically affect their influence on students. Muro and Revello (1970) cite many studies where counselors report dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their job, or with confusion over expectations. In my study, I was interested to see if counselors

are performing in the way that they would label “ideal.” ASCA does provide guidelines, a job description, and a mission statement for counselors; but in reality, are counselors able to fulfil their responsibilities?

### ***Incongruous “Extra” Tasks***

In order to become a school counselor, individuals must undergo extensive training where they learn about social, emotional, and developmental issues that secondary school students often face. Many counselors are not performing the job that they learned how to during many years of training and schooling. Common trends in the literature show that school counselors believe they are assigned with duties that do not align with the goals and values of ASCA (Benigno, 2017; Blake, 2020; Dahlem, 1971; Hutchinson et al., 1986). In Benigno's (2017) study, the author found that many school counselors were concerned about the fact that they were also acting as lunchroom aides or hallway monitors. School counselors do not seem to be fully mobilized in the way that they should to address immediate concerns of students. While extra assignments may seem trivial, small tasks accumulate, and counselors are left with little time to dedicate towards their students. School counselors often feel as though they need to choose between the best interests of their students or the best interests of their school (Blake, 2020). Thus, many are aware of their role, but they are not given the time or resources to carry out their responsibilities.

Hutchinson et al. (1986) provide a different view on the number of extra tasks that school counselors are given. From their study, the counselors ranked individual personal counseling as their number one activity for both the ideal counselor function and actual counselor function. Given this data, the extra tasks of school counselors do not conflict with their main responsibility of personal, direct counseling. However, it is important to recognize that this study is over 30

years old and may be out of date. Counseling, and the way counseling is viewed, is evolving from a career focused specialty, to more balanced and comprehensive position (Paisley and McMahon, 2001). Even still, the counselors in Hutchinson et al.'s (1986) study note that they did spend too much time on scheduling, testing, record keeping, and other non-counseling activities.

In my study, I hope to provide an up-to-date version that represents the daily activities of school counselors.

### *Expectations*

Expectations for all counselors should be for the most part the same, but it is difficult for counselors to clearly understand what is expected of them when school administrators ask them to perform duties outside of the many areas of expertise they were trained in (i.e. career counseling, college counseling, mental health counseling, etc.). However, counselors do have a specific role, and that is to be available for students who may need support in any area of their lives, be it academic or personal. Benigno (2017) emphasizes the importance of a school counselor being approachable, which is difficult to achieve when they seem to be occupied by tasks not directly relating to students. School counselors need to be viewed as essential entities to a school's success; they are not there as personal assistants to principals or teachers, or as a dumping ground for extra tasks (Benigno, 2017).

Blake (2020) adds that high school counselors have mental health training and they can help both socially and academically; however, their roles are very ambiguous, leading to their perceived ineffectiveness. Blake explains how school counselors feel as though they are not given a clear job description and expectations are unclear. It is not the job of a school counselor to research or to determine their own job description; it should be fully explained and evaluated

by administration. Role ambiguity may be an important factor in students' reasonings for possibly finding their school counselors unhelpful.

Another important aspect of expectations is care versus guidance. There is not a clear answer as to the percentage of time counselors should devote to guidance (i.e. career counseling, academic advising, scheduling) and care (i.e. social, emotional counseling). While there is a difference between a counselor and an educator, school counselors need to be able to intertwine both of these roles (Blake, 2020). Overall, it is important for counselors to portray a "conjoint professional identity" (being both a mental health professional and an educational leader). It is important that counselors undergo both entry-level training, clinical supervision training and counseling-focused professional development in order to broaden the scope of guidance (DeKruyf et al., 2013).

### ***Opportunities for Professional Growth***

Benigno (2017) reports that many counselors are not happy with the professional development opportunities they are given. While it is often required to enroll in rigorous training sessions and courses prior to landing a counseling position, counselors feel as though they are not updated with new procedures, informed of modifications of old procedures, or given refreshers of old material. The lack of opportunities in professional growth makes it difficult to counsel students with specific IEPs or concerns (Benigno, 2017).

Counselors also feel as though they are not given a sufficient amount of time to conduct research. With research, counselors' professional roles are diversified and thus, students can be serviced in a broader context. While conducting research takes away time from being with students, the proposed research directly benefits students. For example, many counselors wish they could direct research studies to evaluate guidance services, conduct follow-up studies of

graduates, conduct research on teaching methods, conduct interviews with drop-out students, etc. (Dahlem, 1971).

### *Suggestions*

Dahlem (1971) investigates the differences in the actual versus ideal role of the school counselor. School counselors suggest that they should be given the opportunity to discuss their role, as they see it, in staff meetings involving teachers and administrators. The more school personnel who understand the job of a school counselor, the more support the field will get. Teachers, who spend many hours with their students, and thus become very well acquainted with them, can extend an invitation to a school counselor if they see that a student is struggling in something that falls under their trade. Awareness is key (Dahlem, 1971; Remley & Albright, 1988). School counselors also recommend that they self-advocate and make a direct effort in publicizing their role to students. For example, it is important to clear up the common misconception that secondary school counselors are just there for assistance regarding college placements and testing (Muro & Revello, 1970).

School counselors believe that it is also their job to be able to consult with instructors of after-school activities. Due to confidentiality, counselors are not able to reach out to individuals regarding a student unless they pose as a threat to themselves or others. So, while this suggestion does portray an ideal version of counseling, it is not very likely to happen, even though it could be helpful to know how a student is doing outside of a school setting in effort to get to know them on a deeper level.

Counselors believe that it is their job to create programming and special activities for new students. However, they are rarely given the time or even the budget to do so (Dahlem, 1971).

Another suggestion, given by the counselors in (Hutchinson et al., 1986) study, is the incorporation of more group counseling sessions. Group counseling can be an important tool for students to understand that they are not the only ones experiencing a certain feeling, emotion, or situation. Oftentimes peers are able to obtain valuable insight from other individuals going through similar situations than from counselors who may have studied a certain topic but have not experienced it themselves.

### ***Summary***

Based on the aforementioned literature, it is supposed that school counselors feel that they play a role in both the academic and personal lives of students. It is oftentimes administrative duties and misconceptions about job functions that hinder their ability to interact with their students on a wide range of topics. In the next section, literature on how students perceive their school counselors is reviewed. It is important to note if their perspectives are similar to or different from those of counselors.

### ***Student Perceptions***

From my own experience in secondary school, school counselors were viewed as unapproachable school employees. They oftentimes were unable to enroll students in the classes they wanted to take and unable to supply students with adequate information regarding colleges. It was almost unheard of to go visit the school counselor for personal reasons. The following studies will review the way in which students used their counselors and how effective their visits were.

### ***Reasons for Visit***

In a study conducted by (Bigelow & Humphreys, 1967), the *Mooney Problems Check List* was as an important tool for understanding how students coped, or who they turned to, when faced with certain problems. Areas involved in the study are as follows:

Health and Physical Development (HDP), Social and Recreational Activities (SRA), Social Psychological Relations (SPR), Personal-Psychological Relations (PPR), Courtship, Sex, and Marriage (CSM), Home and Family (HF), Morals and Religion (MR), Adjustment to Schoolwork (ASW), Future: Vocational and Educational (FVE), and Curriculum and Teaching Procedure (CTP) (Bigelow & Humphreys, 1967, p. 158).

While school counselors should be prepared to respond to any of the above areas, it is unlikely that students will use their counselors for assistance with all of these aspects of life. For the most part, students believe that their school counselors are mainly concerned with their vocational and educational future, school curriculum, and schoolwork problems (Muro & Revello, 1970).

School-age students oftentimes have a lack of understanding of the role of their school counselor. Rowe (1989) was interested in discovering if college-aged students still had this lack of understanding. While Rowe's participants are the same age as the participants in the current study, he was only interested in seeing how helpful counselors were in post-graduate plans. The students in Rowe's study mostly talked with their counselors about college plans, high school work, and jobs, and they did not talk as frequently about personal problems. Even though students did utilize their counselors for future planning, it is important to recognize that they claimed to talk more to their parents, siblings and teachers about their post-high school plans. The gap in this study has to do with reminiscing on other aspects of life as well, not just career paths.

### ***Satisfaction***

In a study conducted by Gallant and Zhao (2011), 59% of students surveyed were somewhat satisfied, or satisfied, with the academic services provided by the school counselor, 80% of students were satisfied with college preparation services, 68% of students were satisfied with career counseling, and 73% of students were satisfied with personal, social, or emotional services. The results of this study differ from other studies where students are found to barely, if ever, use their school counselors for personal reasons due to a lack of knowledge about the availability of the service, or feeling as though it is inappropriate to do so (Benigno, 2017; Bigelow & Humphreys, 1967; Rowe, 1989).

Some students are unsatisfied with their school counselors due to a lack of trust. In Remley and Albright's (1988) study, a student reported that he would never talk to his counselor in fear that "they would tell" (p. 292). Based on this information, it seems as though students are unaware of confidentiality practices. While parents do have a legal right to know what is being discussed in their child's counseling session, a good school counselor will inform their client ahead of time of what is going to be discussed and they will receive feedback from their client (Association, 1992). Students suggest that counselors always inform them of their plans to reveal anything to their parents (Remley & Albright, 1988).

Overall, while some students do develop positive relationships with their school counselors, it is due to negative perceptions of school counselors that inhibits more students from taking full advantage of a resource readily available in their school.

### ***Underrepresented Students***

While the reviewed literature suggests that if students do meet with their school counselors, it is most likely vocational in manner, it is important to recognize the fact that this



may not be representative of all students. There are many groups of students that are underrepresented. Social capital plays a vital role in how a student perceives their school counselor, or if they even have a school counselor. Access to resources about postsecondary education may not be targeted towards all students (Remley & Albright, 1988).

African American and female students are the most likely students to reach out to their school counselors on the basis of college information (Bryan et al., 2009; Cholewa et al., 2015). On the other hand, students in poverty, students attending large schools, and students whose schools are not adequately resourced with counselors are the least likely to see their counselors for future planning (Bryan et al., 2009).

### ***Summary***

Based on the above literature, students seem to hold varying opinions in regard to their school counselors. It may be due to role confusion that students altogether avoid using their school counselors. It is important to create clear guidelines in the school environment for students to understand the resources they have at hand. The common misconception that school counselors are only helpful for guidance in areas of career and college planning is one that can be cleared up.

### ***Study***

The current study has two aims: 1). To examine the way in which school counselors self-identify and 2). To examine the way in which high school graduates (Vassar Students) regard their past counselors. My study asks both counselors and past students to reminisce or reflect on their experiences in the realm of guidance, specifically in regard to the role's purpose and effectiveness. The objective of the study is to highlight the potential differences between the

perspectives of school counselors and students, and to offer solutions on how to better school counseling programs.

The synthesized research shows that students and counselors generally have a different idea as to what the role of a school counselor should be. Thus, the present study builds upon existing literature. However, the proposed study is unique in the way that I survey high school graduates (college students). In the present study, students will be far from the environment where their guidance programs were housed, and they will be able to reflect on whether their guidance experiences helped them land their current position/lifestyle.

Based on support from the above research, I hypothesized that school counselors define their role very differently from students in regard to areas of expertise. I also hypothesized that school counselors, more so than students, will have solutions for the betterment of the school guidance program at hand due to their previous studies in graduate school and during training sessions.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Methodology**

#### ***Introduction***

This chapter serves to 1). Describe the research design of the present study, 2). Rationalize the means of data/sample collection 3). Discuss the reasons for employment of the method and 4). Explore analysis strategies.

#### ***Research Design***

The purpose of my research is to understand the role of high school counselors through the lens of college students and counselors themselves. Both groups of participants were asked to reflect on their perception of the position's potential value, responsibility and function. The main objective is to determine whether counselors and students have significantly different views on the role of the school counselor. With this information, ways to improve school counseling programs and the overall reputation of the department are proposed.

#### ***Sample Selection***

Participants consist of students from Vassar College, a small, private liberal arts school in the Northeast, as well as school counselors from an assortment of backgrounds. Being a Vassar student myself, student participants are recruited solely from Vassar College due to logistics and ease. It is important to note that the school is diverse across the factors of race, geography, age and gender. Students from all class years were invited to participate in this study through an email generated by the registrar and through social media announcements.

I chose to focus on college students, rather than students still in high school, due to the fact that counselors are potentially effective influences on high school students and many times, one's influence is not recognized during the present moment (Rowe, 1989). On the other hand,

college students have had time to reflect on how their counselors may have influenced their current life and to appreciate these possible impacts. Thus, recruiting students who are still in high school would not allot for the growth and discovery that comes after graduation.

School counselors were recruited through social media; more specifically through the means of a private Facebook group called “School Counselors Connect.” This group has nearly 15,000 members who actively engage with each other through exchanging ideas, receiving/providing support for other counselors and asking/responding to questions. While I am not a school counselor, I was given permission to join this group to recruit participants for my study. Additionally, I searched the web using the term “high schools in the United States” and sent out emails to a total of 51 guidance departments asking for help. I chose to email the departments that had an email address readily available and that had recently (within the year) updated their website. Since Vassar students come from all around the world, it was important that the counselors included in my study were also from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, which is why I did not reach out to just the schools that I am familiar with.

### ***Participants***

Of the 172 individuals who participated in my study, 120 were Vassar students and 52 were school counselors. The average age of the Vassar students was 20.1 ( $SD=1.19$ ) while the average age of the counselors was 42 ( $SD=8.89$ ). Participants represented 32 different states and seven different countries by either attending high school at, or by working as a school counselor. It is important to note that while 88 Vassar students and 43 school counselors self-identified as female, only 21 Vassar students and nine counselors identified as male, and 11 Vassar students identified as non-binary. It was not surprising to me that the majority of participants were female, as females are the most common gender of individuals in the field of school counseling

(*Counselors / Data USA*, n.d.) Additionally, of the 172 total participants, 128 (74.4%) of them were white, 84 Vassar students and 44 counselors.

### ***Methods***

I chose to develop two surveys (one for Vassar students and one for counselors) in order to determine how students and counselors view/interact with the field of guidance. A survey is well-suited to inform my research question as it is not only economical and efficient, but it displays descriptive, inferential and explanatory information that will help me discover a possible relationship between the perceived role of the counselor and the identity of the perceiver (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 206).

Surveys are accessible instruments that reach a wide range of audiences. During a national pandemic, Covid-19, the ease of distributing a survey over the internet is an attribute that helped inform my choice of method. Participants have the freedom to take the survey on their own time, in a location of their choice. For this study, my survey was administered electronically through Google Forms.

While both surveys are mainly quantitative in style, and thus utilize multiple choice and Likert scale questions, there are two qualitative, open-ended questions:

“What suggestions, if any, do you have for counselors? Can they be more helpful?” and “Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with your high school guidance department?”

This question was asked to both school counselors and students, but they were phrased slightly differently. I intentionally only included two open-ended question as closed questions are more to the point and quicker to code than open-ended questions. Still though, I wanted to give my participants the opportunity to avoid the limitation of pre-set responses.

As stated, the majority of survey questions are closed. These types of questions are useful to generate frequencies of responses that in turn help with comparisons across groups (Oppenheim, 1992). Some example questions are as follows:

- 1). Were you aware that your high school provided school counseling services?
- 2). If you have visited the school counselor, how would you rate your satisfaction with the services?
- 3). How appropriate is individual student academic planning in the role of a school guidance counselor?

Refer to Appendix A for the full survey (minus demographic and open-ended questions).

While the first example question is dichotomous and nominal in nature, the second and third example questions are rating scale questions that elicit ordinal data. The third question is asked many times with a different activity that one may think is typical of a school counselor. These activities were generated through the work of researchers who have conducted similar studies in the past (Bigelow & Humphreys, 1967; Burnham & Jackson, 2000; O'Connor, 2018).

All ordinal data in the present study is ranked on a 5-point Likert scale. The categories on the scale are discrete and exhaust the range of possible responses that a participant would want to give. Thus, the rating scale questions included in this study allow for flexible responses while still allowing for the calculation of frequencies and correlations (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 327).

All survey responses were anonymous in nature. While participants were able to edit their responses while taking the survey, they could not go back and revise the survey after submission.

### *Analysis*

For the closed-ended, scalar questions in both surveys, the coding scheme was incorporated directly into the questionnaire. Each ranked answer was assigned a number on a 5-

point Likert scale, for example: (1) not at all appropriate, (2) somewhat inappropriate, (3) neither appropriate or inappropriate, (4) somewhat appropriate, (5) very appropriate. Through a specialized analytic program, Jamovi, labels were assigned directly to the codes. In Jamovi, descriptive statistics were run on all closed-ended questions.

Frequency tables outlined 1). The number of students aware that school counselors provide academic, college preparation, career, and personal, social and emotional services 2). The number of times students visited their school counselor for the above reasons, and 3). The number of students who were dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, somewhat satisfied, or satisfied with their high school counselor.

To evaluate whether school counselors and students have different perceptions on what the role of a counselor is, I calculated counselor and student means for each activity (e.g. bus duty, course scheduling, vocational planning) and ran independent samples *t*-tests to determine if the means were significantly different from each other.

To evaluate whether school counselors and students have differing beliefs on the breadth of the role, I rescaled each activity scale into 0-not appropriate or 1-appropriate and summed across each activity to calculate a score representing the total number of functions endorsed, ranging from zero to (insert # of activities here) activities endorsed. Then I ran an independent sample *t*-test to determine if there were differences in the number of activities students and counselors believe they are responsible for. I hypothesized that school counselors would express agreement with a larger number of roles as compared to students.

For the two open ended questions, I utilized Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software, to openly code the data. I used open coding to allow for patterns to emerge from the data rather than relying on an a priori coding scheme. To discover these patterns, I closely

examined the textual raw data to find relations, similarities and dissimilarities. The patterns that emerged helped to guide my research question of the function of school counselors.



## CHAPTER 4

### Results

#### *Quantitative Findings*

I conducted Chi Square tests of independence to examine the relation between Vassar students and counselors and whether or not they agreed that counselors provide academic, college preparation, career, and personal, social and emotional services. The relations between personal, social and emotional services between Vassar students and counselors was significant,  $\chi^2(1, N=172) = 15.0, p < .001$ . Counselors agreed that school counselors should/do provide these services significantly more than students. There was also a significant relation in the scores for career services between Vassar students and counselors  $\chi^2(1, N=172) = 26.1, p < .001$ .

Counselors agreed that they should/do provide career services significantly more than students. There was not a significant relation in the scores between students and counselors in regard to academic services and college preparation services. The frequency and percentage frequency for the four focuses of counseling are outlined in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**  
*Frequency of Awareness/Application of Counseling Areas*

	Number of Vassar Students	Percentage of Vassar Students	Number of High School Counselors	Percentage of School Counselors
Personal, Social and Emotional Services	87	72.5%	51	98.0%
Academic Services	106	88.3%	49	94.2%
College Preparation Services	114	95.0%	52	100%
Career Services	59	49.2%	47	90.4%

Vassar students reported that the majority of their visits to their high school counselor were for college preparation services, secondly for academic services, thirdly for personal, social and emotional services, and lastly, for career services. The mean number of visits to the counselor for each reason is outlined below in Table 2. As these were college students responding to the survey, reported number of visits may not be perfectly accurate due to a prolonged period of time and memory lapse.

**Table 2**

*Mean and Standard Deviation of Estimated Visits Sorted by Reason to Counselor*

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Personal, Social and Emotional Services	2.70	7.91
Academic Services	4.16	8.06
College Preparation Services	7.47	11.3

Another aspect of my study has to do with the satisfaction of Vassar College students with their high school counseling department, as well as the satisfaction of current high school counselors with their job. In Table 3, satisfaction levels are recorded.

**Table 3**

*Satisfaction with High School Counseling Experience/Job*

	Number of Vassar Students	Percentage of Vassar Students	Number of Counselors	Percentage of Counselors
Satisfied	39	32.5%	40	77.0%
Somewhat Satisfied	37	30.1%	10	19.2%
Somewhat dissatisfied	27	22.5%	1	2.0%
Dissatisfied	13	10.8%	1	2.0%
Never Visited	4	.03%		N/A

Vassar students and high school counselors were asked to rank the importance of a school counselor on a scale from 1(not at all important) to 5(very important). I conducted an independent sample *t*-test to compare how students and counselors perceive the importance of the role of a high school counselor. There was a significant difference in the perceived levels of importance between Vassar students ( $M=4.03$ ,  $SD=1.12$ ) and counselors ( $M=4.83$ ,  $SD=.38$ )  $t(170)=-4.97$ ,  $p<.001$ . Table 4 outlines the number of students and counselors for each level of importance.

**Table 4**  
*Frequency of Importance Levels of School Counselors*

	Number of Vassar Students	Percentage of Vassar Students	Number of Counselors	Percentage of Counselors
Not at all Important	5	4.2%	0	0%
Somewhat Unimportant	9	7.5%	0	0%
Neither important or unimportant	16	13.3%	0	0%
Somewhat important	37	30.8%	9	17.3%
Very Important	53	44.2%	43	82.7%

To evaluate whether guidance counselors and students have different perceptions on what the role of a counselor is I conducted independent sample *t*-tests for each of the 15 activities that the role may include. There was a significant difference in the level of belief between Vassar students and counselors that the role of a counselor should encompass individual student academic planning  $t(170)=-4.14$ ,  $p<.001$ , counseling students with disciplinary problems  $t(170)=3.92$   $p<.001$ , assisting with duties in the principal's office  $t(170)=5.12$ ,  $p<.001$ , teaching classes when teachers are absent  $t(170)=3.58$ ,  $p<.001$ , hall, restroom and lunch duty  $t(170)=3.98$ ,  $p<.001$ , bus duty  $t(170)=4.47$ ,  $p<.001$ , educational future counseling  $t(170)=-3.70$ ,  $p<.001$ ,

vocational future counseling  $t(170)=-3.51, p<.001$ , sex and marriage counseling  $t(170)=4.29, p<.001$ , and personal psychological counseling  $t(170)=3.58, p<.001$ . There was no significant difference between counselors' and students' thoughts pertaining to whether or not counselors should collaborate with teachers to present core lessons, short-term and long-term mental health counseling, course scheduling, and home and family life counseling.

**Table 5**  
*Mean and Standard Deviation of Role Agreement*

	Vassar Student Mean	Vassar Student Standard Deviation	Counselor Mean	Counselor Standard Deviation
Individual student academic planning *	4.38	.899	4.90	.298
Counseling students with disciplinary problems *	3.97	.987	3.29	1.16
Collaborating with teachers to present core curriculum lessons	2.96	1.191	2.33	1.20
Assisting with duties in the principal's office *	2.52	.987	1.69	.961
Teaching classes when teachers are absent *	1.59	.761	1.17	.550
Short Term Mental Health	4.10	.982	4.40	.955
Long Term Mental Health	2.85	1.32	2.38	1.27
Course Scheduling	4.25	1.02	4.37	1.09
Hall, restroom or lunch duty *	2.28	1.16	1.56	.94
Bus Duty *	2.08	1.10	1.33	.81
Educational Future Counseling*	4.63	.69	4.98	.14
Vocational future counseling*	4.46	.85	4.88	.32
Sex and marriage counseling*	2.55	1.32	1.65	1.12
Home and family life counseling	3.33	.10	3.79	.17
Personal Psychological counseling *	3.24	.12	2.50	.20

\*=statistically significant

Lastly, I conducted an independent sample t-test to determine if there was a significant difference in the perceived breadth of the counselor role between students and counselors. Of the 15 roles, students endorsed more roles ( $M=7.22$ ,  $SD=2.09$ ) than counselors did ( $M=6.58$ ,  $SD=1.61$ ). However, there was not a significant difference between total roles endorsed  $t(170)=1.97$ ,  $p=.051$ .

### ***Qualitative Findings***

I asked Vassar student participants two open-ended questions: 1). What suggestions, if any, do you have for school counselors? Can they be more helpful? And 2). Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with your high school guidance department? These questions were slightly rephrased when presented to high school counselors: 1). What suggestions, if any, do you have for the field of school counseling? (if you could change anything, what would you change? And 2). Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a high school guidance counselor?

From these questions, I created 16 codes - availability, bias/favorites, communication, develop relationships, future planning, genuineness, individualized case by case basis, lack of counselors, listening skills, mental health, negative feedback, positive feedback, qualifications, role confusion, well-roundedness and trust. These 16 variables are defined more specifically in the table below:

**Table 6**  
*Definition of Codes*

	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Availability</b>	References to counselors being occupied vs. free or visible
<b>Bias/Favorites</b>	References to unfair treatment based upon student achievement, race, gender, economic status, family life, etc.
<b>Communication</b>	References to how well students and counselors are able to exchange information
<b>Develop Relationships</b>	References to the importance of a strong relationship between counselor and student
<b>Future Planning</b>	References to any talk of life after high school
<b>Genuineness</b>	References to the level of sincerity/authenticity of communication between counselor and student
<b>Individualized Case by Case Basis</b>	References to being seen as an individual or treated in a personal manner
<b>Lack of Counselors</b>	References to there not being enough counselors per student population
<b>Listening Skills</b>	References to how well counselors hear their students out
<b>Mental Health</b>	References to student well-being and the way in which it is addressed
<b>Negative Feedback</b>	References to shortcomings of school counselors
<b>Positive Feedback</b>	References to helpful student/counselor experiences
<b>Qualifications</b>	References to how competent counselors are to fulfil their job duties
<b>Role Confusion</b>	References to confusion over the duties of counselors and to inappropriate tasks
<b>Well-Roundedness</b>	References to the importance of counselors being well-versed in many different elements
<b>Trust</b>	References to the extent to which students feel comfortable/able to communicate with their counselors

Rather than accounting for the scores of each individual code for each of the short-answer questions, Table 7 displays the percentage of code occurrence. For each of the four short-answer questions, the codes that constitute the top three are highlighted. It is important to note that counselor availability and lack of counselors appeared in the top three for all questions except for the one pertaining to Vassar student suggestions. Additionally, role confusion made the top three in the two questions directed at the school counselors. Communication, developing a

relationship, and treating students on an individual case by case basis were in the top three under Vassar student suggestions only. Lastly, negative feedback was only a top three code for Vassar students who wished to share anything else. These findings will be discussed in more detail in the discussion section of this paper.

**Table 7**  
*Percentage of Code Occurrence of Short-Answer Questions*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Vassar Suggestions</b>	<b>Counselor Suggestions</b>	<b>Vassar Share Anything Else</b>	<b>Counselor Share Anything Else</b>
<b>Availability</b>	4.1%	28.6%	13.0%	25%
<b>Bias/Favorites</b>	6.6%	0%	6.5%	0%
<b>Communication</b>	12.3%	2.0%	3.2%	0%
<b>Relationship</b>	12.3%	4.1%	10.8%	6.3%
<b>Future Planning</b>	4.1%	2.0%	6.5%	0%
<b>Genuineness</b>	4.9%	0%	4.3%	0%
<b>Individual Basis</b>	9.8%	6.1%	0%	6.3%
<b>Lack of Counselors</b>	7.3%	22.4%	11.8%	25%
<b>Listening Skills</b>	9.0%	0%	1.1%	0%
<b>Mental Health</b>	4.9%	2.0%	4.3%	0%
<b>Negative Feedback</b>	8.2%	0%	16.1%	0%
<b>Positive Feedback</b>	0%	2.0%	9.7%	0%
<b>Qualifications</b>	1.6%	8.2%	3.2%	6.3%
<b>Role Confusion</b>	4.9%	22.4%	5.4%	25%
<b>Well-Roundedness</b>	0.0%	0%	2.2%	6.3%
<b>Trust</b>	.8%	0%	2.2%	0%

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Discussion**

#### ***Introduction to the Discussion***

Originally, the goal of this study was to examine the roles and functions of school counselors through the perspective of two subsets of individuals: current Vassar College students and current school counselors. This goal remained the central focus of my study throughout its entirety. When I created both surveys, one for Vassar College students and the other for school counselors, I knew that I was interested in the perceived job duties of counselors and counselor's overall effectiveness; however, it was not until the results came in that I was able to create 16 different codes that related to the participants' experiences with, or being, a school counselor. As a reminder, the codes employed in this study are the following: availability, bias/favorites, communication, relationships, future planning, genuineness, treating students on an individualized case by case basis, the lack of counselors, listening skills, mental health, negative feedback, positive feedback, qualifications, role confusion, well-roundedness and trust (refer to Table 6 for definitions of codes). The results outlined in the chapter above will help me compare and contrast the ways in which school counselors are regarded.

#### ***Codes***

Below, I will discuss the codes that seemed the most significant and relevant in regard to my research question. These codes are counselor availability, lack of counselors, and role confusion. This is not to say that the other codes are unimportant, but for the purposes of this paper, I am focusing on the codes with the highest percentages of code reoccurrence.



### *Counselor Availability*

Previous literature has suggested that many school counselors are tasked with inappropriate assignments occupying precious time that otherwise could be spent counseling students (Benigno, 2017; Blake, 2020; Dahlem, 1971; Hutchinson et al., 1986). In my study, I also found that many school counselors struggle with balancing their time, and more importantly, having enough time to serve their high caseloads. I would like to share some excerpts from the open-ended questions included in my survey that show the frustration of the lack of counselor availability. The raw, unedited responses below show that counselors need more open, “office hours” time and less administrative duties in order to be fully mobilized and address immediate concerns of students:

- “I wish there was less 'required' school/state paper work and more focus on working with kids” (NJ Public School Counselor).
- “I would like to spend more time with students. Sometimes we get so wrapped up in spreadsheets, meetings, paperwork that we don't get to spend as much time with students as we would like. I would like to have more time to counsel, run groups and just be with students making those important connections” (NY Public School Counselor).
- “It is not possible to see all of my students more than once a year” (CA Public School Counselor).

Due to frustration over inadequate time available during the school day to meet with students, I am surprised that 96.2% of counselors surveyed reported either being satisfied, or somewhat satisfied, with their job. Personally, I would think that as a school counselor I would not feel fulfilled, or even satisfied, if I were not able to connect with and help all students, who seek the support or not.

Vassar students also commented on the lack of availability their high school counselors had:

- “[Counselors] were stretched very thin and therefore couldn’t give a lot of individual attention” (NJ Public School Vassar Student).
- “I wish there were more counselors for students so that I could have seen one more” (CA Public School Vassar Student).
- [The counseling department] was honestly pretty bad, as a public high school, our counselors were always very busy” (CA Public School Vassar Student).

Including these quotes in my thesis are not biased as there was not one Vassar student who wrote about the widespread availability of counselors in a positive light. It is very concerning that counselors do not have enough time to perform their job well. Many Vassar students and counselors suggested that districts hire more counselors so that their case loads are smaller. This suggestion ties in with the second code that I will discuss: the lack of counselors. Besides hiring more counselors, there has to be something that we can do to lessen the workload of school counselors in terms of their workload that does not involve face-to-face meetings with students. As written in my literature review, Hutchinson et al. (1986) suggest adding in more group counseling sessions. Group counseling sessions can be beneficial for many social-emotional reasons; however, they also allow for a greater number of students to be seen. While individual counseling may be ideal, group counseling is a great alternative. Personally, I believe it is better to see your school counselor in a group than not at all.

### ***The Lack of Counselors***

For whatever reason, most likely monetary, many schools are not equipped with a sufficient amount of school counselors in order to serve their entire population. As mentioned, the lack of counselors and counselor availability do relate to each other, but they are not the same

thing. The lack of counselors refers to the few counselors working in each school, versus the availability of counselors, which refers to how counselors spend their time. Below I will present some written responses from the counselors in my study that speak to the reasons behind the reason so many of them are upset about the lack of counselors.

- “Smaller caseloads so that we can provide meaningful depth and breadth of services to our students. We are asked to do too much and kids fall through the cracks” (CA Public School Counselor).
- “There just need to be more counselors in a school so we can get to all of the students and provide them with the support they need. Our caseloads are way too high” (MA Public School Counselor).
- “There need to be more counselors so we are not overseeing 500+ students. It is not possible to see all of my students more than once a year” (CA Public School Counselor).

Responses like these explain why many counselors in my study recorded in the survey that they meet with students on an “as needed” basis. There was a small number of counselors who required meetings; however, these counselors mostly come from schools that are not public, and therefore, smaller. Again, 100% of the counselors reported that their job is either somewhat important or very important. It is disheartening that they can be so helpful and influential in students’ lives but due to the small amount of hires, they can not make a big impact on all. It is imperative to spread awareness about the importance of school counselors so that parents and students can vouch for a part of their school’s budget to be spent on adding more counselors to the team.

One particular Vassar student's response really stood out to me when they chose to share anything about their experience. They said, "At the end of the day the counselors at my school could have been excellent at their jobs and they may have had huge positive impact in certain students' lives but because it was one counselor for 300-400 students there is literally no way all those students could receive support from them in any of these crucial areas of academics, future planning, social/emotional/psychological, etc." (WA Public School Vassar Student). Comments like these need to be heard. This particular student is correct in saying that academics, future planning, social/emotional health, and the other areas that school counselors deal with are crucially important to a student's high school career. It is unfair that some students are able to get this support, and others are not. I have a feeling that the students who do see their counselors (in schools that are run like the student's school mentioned above) are students who are in the majority ethnically, economically, and socially. This prediction aligns with Bryan et al.'s (2009) study where they discovered that students in poverty are the least likely to see their counselors.

### ***Role Confusion***

In my literature review, I included studies that highlight the fact that many students, and even counselors, do not understand the exact role of a school counselor (Blake, 2020; Muro & Revello, 1970); (Rowe, 1989). Since role confusion was one of the highest mentioned flaw of school counseling, it is safe to say that my findings align with the literature. Many Vassar students in my study showed a lack of understanding regarding why they should have visited their counselor in high school other than for the occasional college planning meeting. I have learned that school counselors wear many hats, and they are in fact equipped to work with students in many areas of their lives, from poor academic performance, to social skills, to personal concerns.

Originally, when I first began my study, I thought that the school counselors would be unlike the school counselors in the literature in the way that they would have a solid sense of identity. I was wrong. While many of my counselors commented on confusion about the basics of their job, there was not one counselor who stated confidence in their role. A counselor from a public school in New York wrote: "I enjoy [counseling] so much, but I feel that each stakeholder believes my role should be something else. This pulls you in so many directions and makes it hard to feel like you are doing any one thing very well." It is so important to have a universal job description for school counselors in order to avoid the self-doubt that they may experience.

Another counselor from a public school in Alabama mentioned: "Counselors can only be as effective as administrators allow based on how much they understand about our role." Going off of this statement, awareness seems to be the key to securing a stable definition of a school guidance counselor. The more people who take the time to actually know what school counselors go to school for, and are trained in, the less confusion and guilt counselors will feel for not performing the job they thought they signed up for. For the people who are aware of the appropriate role of counselors, it is important for them to respect it and not require counselors to fulfill other roles.

Role confusion is related to the first code I discussed: counselor availability. From the responses I received, it seems as though many counselors are confused about who they are and the role that they play in a school's culture due to the non-guidance related tasks imposed upon them. While some individuals may view this as role diffusion since many counselors perform non-conventional duties that take time away from their core functions, I decided to focus on role confusion, which is a direct consequence of role diffusion. When counselors are asked to perform duties, such as lunch or hall monitoring, they have less time in the day to perform the

role they thought they were meant to fulfill. As one Vassar student from a public school in Massachusetts clearly sums it up, “Ensure that they're not overburdened!”

### *Limitations*

This research is subject to several limitations. For example, the sample of students used in this study does not accurately reflect the general population. Since Vassar is a highly selective liberal arts college, a particular kind of student is typically enrolled. This hardworking, well-rounded student does not reflect the many different kinds of students there are in academia. Being an undergraduate, conducting research is difficult in the way that I do not have the ability to gain access to a broader type of student participants (college students from an assortment of schools). As a result of selection bias, the Vassar students who responded to my survey can not be considered a completely random sample.

A second limitation of the study is that the data is self-reported. As college students, some individuals may have a selective memory of their high school counseling experiences. Additionally, as school counselors, some participants may be careful in the way that they answer questions pertaining to their own field.

Regardless, the survey questions, alongside with their methods of analysis, provide readers with a framework on how school counselors are viewed and the role that they are thought to play in the school community. These findings can be used as a part of a larger research project.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **Conclusion**

Future research should continue to address how to take-action. While I offer some suggestions as to how the field of counseling can acquire a better name for itself, I am interested to see what other researchers can discover who do not have the same time constraints that an undergraduate student has. It would be best for future researchers to sample college students from a variety of different schools across the country, both public and private. As mentioned earlier, my sample of Vassar students is not representative of college students as a whole.

The findings from my study are very important. The field of counseling seems to have so much potential to be a positive force in the school system. Due to this potential, my ambition to become a school counselor is still present. I am currently in the process of researching Master programs in school counseling. When I do become a counselor one day I feel obligated to stand up for both myself and for importance of the role of a school counselor. I am excited to make a meaningful difference and to be a positive influence in the lives of students.

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## Appendix A

### Survey Questions

How would you rate your satisfaction with your job as a high school counselor? \*

- Dissatisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Satisfied

How important is a HS Counselor? \*

1            2            3            4            5

How appropriate are the following activities for high school guidance counselors?

Individual student academic planning: \*

1            2            3            4            5

Not at all appropriate                        Extremely appropriate

Counseling students with disciplinary problems: \*

1            2            3            4            5

Not at all appropriate                        Extremely appropriate

Collaborating with teachers to present core curriculum lessons: \*

1            2            3            4            5

Not at all appropriate                        Extremely appropriate

Assisting with duties in the principal's office:

\*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely appropriate

Teaching classes when teachers are absent:

\*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely appropriate

Short Term mental health counseling:

\*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely appropriate

Long Term mental health counseling:

\*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely appropriate

Course scheduling:

\*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely appropriate

Hall, restroom or lunch duty:

\*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely appropriate

Bus Duty: \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely appropriate

Educational future counseling (i.e. college): \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely appropriate

Vocational future counseling: \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely appropriate

Sex and marriage counseling: \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely appropriate

Home and family life counseling: \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely appropriate

Personal psychological counseling (think therapy): \*

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all appropriate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely appropriate

\*Note: The phrasing of the first question pertaining to satisfaction was rephrased for Vassar Students.