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Brandie M. Oliver
Butler University, bmoliver@butler.edu

Nick R. Abel
Butler University, nabel@butler.edu

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Hints for Hiring School Counselors: Using Your New School Counselor Effectively

by Dr. Brandie Oliver and Dr. Nick Abel, Butler University School Counseling Program

Now that you have hired a new school counselor, you may want to examine how your school has traditionally used the counselor, and whether assigned roles/tasks have been the most effective means for improving student outcomes. In this column, we will discuss the use of a school counselor's time -- specifically, the recommendation by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) that 80% of a counselor's time be devoted to delivery of a comprehensive school counseling program.

Big news was made in Mississippi prior to the 2014-2015 school year when the state Senate passed SB2423, a portion of which mandated the 80% delivery ratio mentioned above (see <http://bit.ly/1ObFcfY>). Essentially, state lawmakers showed their support of ASCA's belief that trained school counselors should be spending the vast majority of their time on activities that directly contribute to student outcomes in academics, college/career readiness, and social/emotional wellbeing. Interestingly, it was around the same time that the Indiana Chamber of Commerce Foundation released a report on the state of school counseling in Indiana. One finding showed that the percentage of time counselors in our state spent on "non-counseling duties" had risen from 18% in 2010 to almost 40% in 2013. When asked for examples, school counselors listed things such as test coordinator, substitute nurse, and school mascot coordinator (yes, this is true!). While we fully recognize the importance of "fair share" duties in creating a cohesive, cooperative staff, we encourage administrators to take a hard look at how they are utilizing school counselors, and whether their expectations for the school counseling program are aligned with national standards and connected to student outcomes.

So what are the proper uses of a school counselor? And what does 80% of time spent on program delivery actually look like? We're glad you asked! ASCA divides that 80% into two categories: Direct and Indirect services. Direct services include face-to-face interactions with students. In a typical school, these should include a school counseling **core curriculum** (guidance lessons or large-group student meetings/workshops); **individual student planning** (regular meetings for academic, college/career, and social/emotional goals); and **responsive services** (individual or group counseling whenever the need arises). Under the heading of Indirect services, ASCA lists duties such as **consultation** with parents, teachers, and community agencies; **collaboration** and teaming with parents and staff at both the building and district level; and **referral** to helping agencies outside the school. As we have mentioned in previous columns, ASCA also stresses the need for school counselors to prove their effectiveness through the use of data that documents not only the use of their time, but also the outcomes of their interventions. That means another solid chunk of a committed counselor's time should be spent examining **perception data** (changes in student knowledge and skills, frequently gathered via pre-post surveys) and **outcome data** (changes in student behavior measured by grades, attendance, behavior, etc.). Given this daunting list of duties, it is not hard to see how school counselors could -- and should -- spend 80% of their time delivering a quality program that is targeted to student needs and been continuously proven effective by data.

We will close this column with some practical tips for examining (and possibly altering) the structure of your school's counseling program. First and foremost, we recommend that you collaborate with your counseling team. You might start by asking them about their use of time (including "non-counseling duties") or even requesting that they track it for a week or two (ASCA has some tools for this on their website). Should you find that your counselors are not meeting ASCA's 80% program delivery recommendation, you might try brainstorming people in the school or community who could take on less critical roles and responsibilities, thereby freeing up the counseling department to focus on services that directly impact student outcomes. Another possibility is considering ways that your counselors might have greater access to students for direct service delivery. This might mean greater flexibility in allowing counselors to visit classrooms to deliver lessons or pull students out for planning or counseling sessions. A final recommendation is to expect your counselor(s) to provide data that documents effectiveness -- and support them in producing it. Counselors should be encouraged to examine school data for specific needs, and to target their interventions accordingly. They should collect and share data about their interventions, and use this data for continuous improvement. Principals can support counselors in this endeavor by regularly asking for data, reviewing it when it is provided, and giving counselors access to (and training in) student information systems, including the reporting features. By working collaboratively, administrators and school counselors can transform counseling from a disassociated spectrum of services to a coordinated, comprehensive framework that focuses on both inputs and student outcomes.

We hope you have enjoyed these columns throughout the year, including the recent series on hiring. It is our hope that every administrator sees the value in school counseling and feels a passionate need to put the right counselor in place at their building, and increase collaboration and support between administration and the counseling department in an effort to improve student outcomes.