School Counselors' Perceptions of Competency in Career Counseling

Leann Wyrick Morgan
Mary Ellen Greenwaldt
Kevin P. Gosselin

The National Office for School Counselor Advocacy stated that secondary students need better support from professional school counselors when making decisions regarding their postsecondary education and career. The present qualitative study explored school counselors' perceptions of competence in the area of career counseling, and resulted in the following themes: challenges to delivery, opportunity, self-doubt, reliance on colleagues, and the use of technology. Recommendations for college and career readiness best practice were incorporated with the findings from the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy report.

Keywords: **school counselor, career counseling, competence, postsecondary education, qualitative study**

> No step in life, unless it may be the choice of a husband or wife, is more important than the choice of a vocation. . . . These vital problems should be solved in a careful, scientific way, with due regard to each person's aptitudes, abilities, ambitions, resources, and limitations, and the relations of these elements to the conditions of success in different industries. (Parsons, 1909, p. 3)

Young people exploring career decisions are often left to their own searches to find direction in this complex process. Ninety-five percent of high school seniors expect to attain some form of college education, yet more and more are delaying entry after high school, frequently changing colleges or majors when they do enter, or taking time off throughout their programs (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2011). According to The College Board National Office for School Counselor Advocacy (NOSCA), professional school counselors need to better support students during the decision-making process in order to streamline their progress toward postsecondary education and career readiness (Barker & Satcher, 2000; Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014). School counselors must balance this heady task with accountability in other areas, such as academic achievement, social and emotional development, and related administrative duties.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model for School Counseling (ASCA Model) was developed and recently updated by the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP), which supports school counselors and counselor educators by standardizing and enhancing the practices of these professionals (ASCA, 2012). With the release of NOSCA's survey results, a new movement in school counselor reform emerged, which calls for standardization of practices involving college access for all students. According to The College

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Leann Wyrick Morgan is an assistant professor at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Mary Ellen Greenwaldt is a family case worker for Licking County Job and Family Services, Children Services Division, in Newark, OH. Kevin P. Gosselin is an associate professor and assistant dean of research at Texas A&M Health Sciences Center. Correspondence can be addressed to Leann Wyrick Morgan, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, College of Education, 1420 Austin Bluffs Parkway, Colorado Springs, CO 80918, lmorgan7@uccs.edu.

Board (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014), this reform is necessary to highlight the lack of support students receive in their pursuit of higher educational goal attainment.

School counselors have historically lacked a clear identity in role and function (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014; Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009; Dodson, 2009; Johnson, Rochkind, & Ott, 2010; Reiner, Colbert, & Pérusse, 2009), and in response, many states have adopted the use of some form of the ASCA Model as a guide for practicing school counselors (Martin & Carey, 2012; Martin, Carey, & DeCoster, 2009). Not all states provide such guidance for their school counselors and, as a result, some school counselors are left with little continuity among schools, even within the same school district. Some counselor educators have called for more support and supervision for school counselors (Brott, 2006; DeVoss & Andrews, 2006; Somody, Henderson, Cook, & Zambrano, 2008); however, a gap between education and professional responsibility, and consequently liability, has remained apparent (Foster, Young, & Hermann, 2005; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005). It is important to note that the aforementioned reform is linked directly to the roles and functions of school counselors (Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005). According to NOSCA, 71% of school counselors surveyed stated that they believed academic planning related to college and career readiness was important, but only 31% believed their school was successful in fulfilling students' needs in that area (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014). The gap between what they believe to be important and how they deliver information and assist students in using the information is critical.

To successfully bridge the gap and provide students with a consistent avenue for college and career readiness, more attention must be directed toward training school counselors and clearly defining the roles and functions of school counselors to other school professionals (Dodson, 2009; Mason & McMahon, 2009; McMahon, Mason, & Paisley, 2009; Reiner, Colbert, & Pérusse, 2009). Further inquiry is necessary to determine the possible impact of revised training and practice on the profession as well as on school counselors' relationships with students, parents and the school community stakeholders. Counselor educators are not solely responsible for the role development of the school counselors they train; however, they have an increased personal responsibility as well (Paisley & Milsom, 2007; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005). Consistent dialogue between counselor educators and school counselors-in-training regarding role competence in career development may provide an avenue to overall effectiveness.

Currently, professional school counselors are expected to offer comprehensive, well-balanced, developmental, evidence-based school counseling programs that target social and emotional supportive services, educational and academic planning, and vocational education for all students (ASCA, 2003; Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Dugger & Boshoven, 2010; Foster et al., 2005; Martin & Carey, 2012; Martin et al., 2009; Pérusse & Goodnough, 2005). However, high school counselors continue to be scrutinized in light of the poor marks they receive from high school students and graduates regarding the counselors' involvement in their respective postsecondary planning processes (Gibbons, Borders, Wiles, Stephan, & Davis, 2006; Johnson et al., 2010).

School counselors serve in multiple—and often demanding—educational and counseling roles. In addition, school counselors are asked to further the academic and educational missions of the school, seek teacher and administrator buy-in to an integrated comprehensive guidance program, and act in a proactive manner that will enhance collaboration among all facets of the school and community (Brown, 2006; Dodson, 2009; Green & Keys, 2001; Walsh, Barrett, & DePaul, 2007). Keeping these functions in mind, one can see how critical it is for school counselors to develop particular skills in order to provide services, to promote a strong professional identity, and to obtain regular supervision and consultation (McMahon et al., 2009).

In many cases, school counselors develop competencies in their roles while performing the duties assigned by their administrators or counseling supervisors; however, the basic educational training that occurs preservice

can vary dramatically. In the field of counselor education, many issues impact the curriculum and philosophy of school counselor training programs including (a) the accreditation of the program by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and (b) the degree to which programs offer training in how to utilize the ASCA Model (ASCA, 2003). The CACREP training standards have gained popularity among state certification and licensure boards (such as those in Louisiana and New Jersey), and some boards now require all candidates seeking certification or licensure to have completed CACREP-accredited counseling programs in order to be eligible for professional certification or licensure. Certainly, not all counselor training programs are CACREP-accredited, and those that are CACREP-accredited likely vary in how they address the standards. Yet, many school counselor trainees will encounter similar standards presented in the newly revised ASCA Model as they pursue state certification or become involved in ASCA as a student or professional member (ASCA, 2012).

The ASCA Model provides a tool for school counselors to design, coordinate, implement, manage and evaluate school counseling programs, but the specifics on how school counselors address each area varies (ASCA, 2012). School counselors are expected to demonstrate competency in the areas of academic achievement, social and emotional development, and career counseling. However, career counseling competency is often minimized in relation to other areas because the accountability measures are not fully developed. Also, the results cannot be determined until years after students leave high school (Belasco, 2013; McDonough, 2005), and due to so many commitments falling upon school counselors, their time to provide specific career interventions can be limited (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010).

The leaders of ASCA (2012) have encouraged secondary school counselors to spend at least 40% of their day conducting career assessment, engaging in development and planning postsecondary activities with students (e.g., individual student responsive services, group guidance activities, college and career indirect services); yet, according to Clinedinst, Hurley, and Hawkins (2011), high school counselors devote only 23% of their time to this cause. School counselor education programs minimally address this disparity (Foster et al., 2005). Most programs offer one course in general career development theory, assessment and counseling, which would translate to roughly 6% of students' training within a 48-hour program, and only 5% for programs requiring 60 credit hours of graduate work. Although CACREP (2009) has called for counselor educators to infuse career development throughout the program curricula, school counselors have reported they did not feel competent in the delivery of career programs (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014).

Given the convergence of an increased number of school counselor education programs seeking accreditation (Urofsky, personal communication, March 28, 2014), increased calls for accountability in school counseling programs (Wilkerson, Pérusse, & Hughes, 2013), and the growing influence of the ASCA Model (Martin et al., 2009), it seems imperative that school counselors be prepared to address the vocational and transitional needs of the secondary student. A gap exists between what is expected and suggested by the national standards for a comprehensive guidance program and what is actually being taught in school counselor preparation programs, specifically in the area of college and career readiness (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014; Clinedinst et al., 2011; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; McDonough, 2005). School counselors must have an appropriate cache of career counseling techniques in order to be effective leaders, not just possess a basic understanding of career development theories (Zunker, 2012). Osborn and Baggerly (2004) suggested the following:

> High school is a crucial time for students to make career and/or postsecondary training decisions. If there were any group of school counselors who needed to have a large proportion of their time devoted to career counseling, it would be high school counselors. (p. 55)

Bridgeland and Bruce (2014) stated in the NOSCA report that "counselors are also largely enthusiastic about supporting college and career readiness initiatives, but here again, do not think they have the support and resources to successfully promote their students' postsecondary achievement" (p. 12).

Hines & Lemons (2011) proposed refocusing university training programs for school counselors to emphasize educational access, opportunity and equity in college, and career readiness, with an increased focus on interns utilizing college and career readiness curricula with students in their schools. They also recommended the revision of school counselor job descriptions to focus on postsecondary planning, the use of performance evaluations connected to student academic outcomes and college and career readiness standards, and the need for persistent professional development in order to cultivate effective college and career readiness counseling programs.

By continuing to examine school counselor training and consequent job competency standards, it may be possible to determine gaps in training and how counselors compensate for their lack of knowledge in serving their students. Career counseling theory and application play a role in how school counselors work with students in postsecondary planning, and where a lack of knowledge exists, a lack of services exists as well (Perrone, Perrone, Chan, & Thomas, 2000). The rising costs of higher education, paired with students' lack of concise college and career planning, make the school counselor's role more important than in past decades.

School Counseling

Borders and Drury (1992) determined that "school counseling interventions have a substantial impact on students' educational and personal development. Individual and small-group counseling, classroom guidance, and consultation activities seem to contribute directly to students' success in the classroom and beyond" (p. 495). School counselors have shared responsibility for students acquiring knowledge necessary for successful mastery of essential developmental skills at the secondary level (Myrick, 1987; Sears, 1999). The need for appropriate and relevant training of secondary school counselors is critical to ensure that the students they serve receive challenging academic paths that will impact their quality of life long after they leave high school (Erford, 2010).

The CACREP standards for counselor training serve as a guide for counselor education programs to include when determining elements and experiences essential for training competent school counselors. However, the standards were not established to provide any support or structure for the postgraduate professional working in the schools (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Pérusse, Goodnough, & Noel, 2001). ASCA provides professional school counselors with support through the National Model to administer appropriate programming to students at the secondary level, including career planning. The question remains whether counselors-in-training receive access to the appropriate coursework and relevant experiences to adequately prepare them to fulfill their role in the schools, as suggested by historical perspectives (e.g., the vocational needs of students) and the current national standards for the profession.

The area of career development and postsecondary planning is one in which counselors-in-training may not receive adequate instruction or supervision (Barker & Satcher, 2000; Foster et al., 2005). With the acceptance of the 2016 CACREP standards revisions, counselor education programs would be required to demonstrate how they assess students' competencies using data "gathered at multiple points and using multiple measures" (CACREP, 2014, p. 6). Counselor educators must determine how to measure competency in career development throughout their programs. Some programs offer one course in career counseling, development or assessment, while other programs may choose to meet the standards in other ways. While students may gain

training experience in career counseling through internship hours at the master's level, career development is not a required part of the internship experience. Through the use of standardized tests that measure students' knowledge of career counseling theory (e.g., Counselor Preparation Comprehensive Examination, National Counselor Examination), counselor education programs would be partially meeting the requirements for CACREP accreditation under the new standards. Testing graduate students on their knowledge of career counseling theory, however, does not provide an indicator of the students' ability to provide comprehensive career counseling programs upon graduation. Using multiple measures of competency throughout the program may be a more effective way to accurately measure professional skill and readiness to provide career services to students.

A recent review of the counseling and education literature yielded several articles confirming the deficiencies in school counselor training and the increased need for additional competence among school counselors to provide college and career readiness programming to students, including information on financial literacy and the cost of higher education (Belasco, 2013; Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Some educators may argue that the standards have been infused throughout their school counselor training program curriculum, yet there is no evidence within the professional literature of a consistent standard of practice. As a result, the question remains: Can counselor educators provide the necessary curriculum and expect that counselors-in-training will retain enough information to be able to provide services competently to students?

The educational recommendations versus the professional expectations imposed upon the school counselor may seem unrealistic, and at times, inappropriate (Brott, 2006; Clinedinst et al., 2011; Foster et al., 2005). An inconsistency between the amount of preparation and the expectations of school counselors' work roles is apparent (Dodson, 2009; Reiner, Colbert, & Pérusse, 2009) and is highlighted in the NOSCA report (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014). One might wonder how and where school counselors obtain adequate preparation for their professional roles. The authors in this study attempted to explore and document this information within the context of the schools in which the participants worked. Once again, the need to reform school counselor education programs is evident, and the voices of these counselors may help identify the specific areas in which to begin.

Method

The research questions proposed in this study were addressed using a qualitative research design. A phenomenological research inquiry (Creswell, 2013) was used to assess participants' experiences, preparedness and perceptions of competency related to career counseling with high school students. The goals of using this approach stem from the core ideals of phenomenological research (Colaizzi, 1978; Osborne, 1990; Wertz, 2005), which seeks to understand "how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning" (Patton, 1990, p. 104). Based on the premise that human beings by nature strive for a sense of self in the world of work and the knowledge that they have to use in their work (Crotty, 1998), it was imperative to develop an awareness of the relationship between the data and the participants within the context of the study (McCroskey, 1997; Merriam, 1998). With this goal in mind, participant responses were assessed using the methodological processes of grounded theory, and shared meanings grounded in the data were further derived (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Participants

Participants were chosen using a purposeful and convenience criteria sampling method (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2007), and identified from the first author's community network of school counselor colleagues located in two Midwestern states. These counselors referred other secondary school counselors in

their communities to the current authors for potential participation in the study. To select the participants, the authors previewed a convenience sample of 18 secondary school counselors from urban, suburban and rural public schools. They chose specific participants based on differences in age, ethnicity, gender, number of years of experience as a high school counselor, and those who hold master's degrees from both CACREP and non-CACREP programs. In an effort to diversify the sample, the authors did not select participants with similar characteristics. The authors directly contacted the identified school counselors, and the nine participants agreed to participate in the study (see Table 1 for identifying characteristics). Each participant and school name was changed to protect identity.

Table 1

School Counselor Participant Information and School Information

Participant Name	Participant Description	Graduate Program	Years of Experience	School Description
Jane	White female in her late 20s	CACREP	1	Shermer High School: urban; public; 2000 students; 45% F/R lunch*; 41% White, 31.8% Asian, 18.8% Hispanic, 7.4% Black, .8% American Indian; 6 other counselors
Diane	White female in her mid-40s	CACREP	9	Shermer High School: urban; public; 2000 students; 45% F/R lunch*; 41% White, 31.8% Asian, 18.8% Hispanic, 7.4% Black, .8% American Indian; 6 other counselors
Alan	White male in his late 50s	NON-CACREP	20	High Bridge High School: suburban; public; 2301 students; 18.4% F/R lunch*; 65.7% White, 16.3% Hispanic, 10.3% Asian, 5.7% Black, 1.8% Multiracial, .1% American Indian, .1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; 11 other counselors
Christine	White female in her early 50s	NON-CACREP	20	High Bridge High School: suburban; public; 2301 students; 18.4% F/R lunch*; 65.7% White, 16.3% Hispanic, 10.3% Asian, 5.7% Black, 1.8% Multiracial, .1% American Indian, .1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; 11 other counselors
Noah	White male in his early 30s	NON-CACREP	6	High Bridge High School: suburban; public; 2301 students; 18.4% F/R lunch*; 65.7% White, 16.3% Hispanic, 10.3% Asian, 5.7% Black, 1.8% Multiracial, .1% American Indian, .1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; 11 other counselors
Tom	White male in his early 60s	NON-CACREP	40	Mayfield High School: urban; public; 2058 students; 27% F/R lunch*; 45% White, 39% Black, 12% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 2% American Indian; 5 other counselors
Kimberly	Hispanic female in her late 30s	CACREP	4	Ridgemont Jr./Sr. High School: rural; public; 222 students; 54% F/R lunch*; 65% Hispanic, 31% White, 3% Asian, 1% American Indian, 0% Black; no other school counselors in building
Vivian	White female in her early 30s	CACREP	6	Bedford High school: rural; public; 645 students; 10% F/R lunch*, 85% White, 12% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 1% American Indian, 0% Black; one other counselor
Vanessa	Hispanic female in her early 30s	CACREP	1	Hill Valley High School: rural; public; 401 students; 52% Hispanic, 45% White, 2% American Indian, 1% Black, 0% Asian/Pacific Islander; no other counselor in building

Note. All participant and school information has been changed to protect identities.
*Students receive free or reduced-fee lunch based on household income.

Procedures and Data Collection

As part of the data collection process, a personal audit trail (Merriam, 1998) was utilized to minimize and account for specific feelings or opinions formed by the primary investigator. As a former school counselor, the first author had areas of training, and professional and personal experiences that were similar to, or different from those of the research participants. The journal served as an appropriate place for the primary investigator to document feelings regarding these issues and issues of counselor training.

Merriam (1998) suggested that researchers share a common language with the participants of the study; to that end, in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews lasting 45–55 minutes were completed. The following nine research questions were asked:

1. Tell me about your overall experience in your counselor training program.
2. Tell me about your experiences in that program with regard to instruction you received in career development delivery models with high school students.
3. How has the training you received in career development prepared you for your work with students?
4. What type of continuing education training have you received in the area of career development since finishing your degree program?
5. Describe your level of confidence in your ability to provide students with career development information and guidance.
6. In what areas, if any, do you feel unsure (or less sure) of the information you are providing?
7. What would have aided you in attaining competency in career development and postsecondary planning?
8. How much career counseling did you do during your internship?
9. How did you see your preparedness in career development in relation to your colleagues' preparedness?

The first author for the study recorded the interviews electronically and then transcribed or typed the interviews using a traditional word processing program. The information obtained from the transcripts was compiled into one data set, which represents the voices of all nine participants. This author also obtained official transcripts from the participants' master's degree programs in school counseling to track the number of courses they took in career counseling and development. The participants provided information regarding the accreditation status of their training program as CACREP or non-CACREP at the time they obtained their degrees. At the conclusion of each interview, the first author immediately moved to another location in order to write initial thoughts (i.e., field notes) regarding any physical or nonverbal responses of the participants. The first author wrote notes in a research journal regarding any personal researcher biases that emerged (Creswell, 2013). The field notes, transcript and program accreditation status served as additional data that were shared with the research team for triangulation purposes, specifically to enrich the data collected during each interview.

Analysis

Interview data were subjected to a rigorous *phenomenological reduction*. Also known as *bracketing* (Husserl, 1977), this is the process of extracting significant statements from the actual, transcribed interviews with the participants. The authors utilized Denzin's (1989) suggestions to extract statements, including (a) locating the key phrases and statements that speak directly to the phenomenon in question; (b) interpreting the meanings of these phrases as an informed reader; (c) obtaining the subjects' interpretations of these phrases; (d) inspecting the meanings for what they reveal about the essential, recurring features of the phenomenon being studied; and (e) offering a tentative statement, or definition, of the phenomenon in terms of the essential recurring features (see Figure 1 for steps in analysis process).

A total of 543 significant statements were analyzed and coded for inclusion in the theme-building process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Curry & Bickmore, 2012). The nine counselors' statements were then grouped into categories as similarities emerged among them. This process gave each statement equal weight in contributing to the final analysis, regardless of which participant made the statement (Patton, 1990). New categories were formed until each statement had been grouped, totaling 17 in all. At the conclusion, the sample was determined rich enough to reach *saturation*. According to Creswell (2013), saturation occurs when pieces of information are put into categories and the researcher begins to see repetition among the data being categorized.
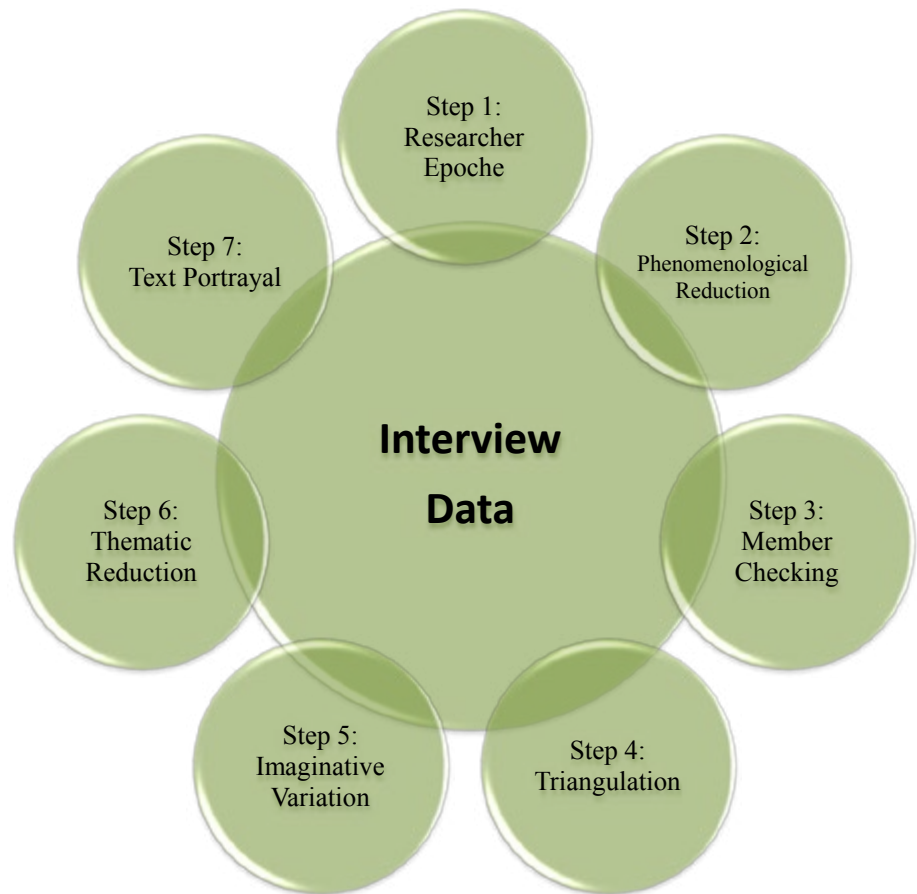
Step 1: Researcher Epoche

Step 2: Phenomenological Reduction

Step 3: Member Checking

Step 4: Triangulation

Step 5: Imaginative Variation

Step 6: Thematic Reduction

Step 7: Text Portrayal

Interview Data

Figure 1. Interview data steps

Trustworthiness

Once saturation was reached, the first author's epoche (journal) was utilized to control for bias, and *member checking* was used to confirm the trustworthiness of the data. The act of member checking includes obtaining confirmation from the participants that the extracted statements from the interviews were accurate and inclusive (Creswell, 2013). Each of the nine participants reviewed their statements via e-mail and confirmed the accuracy and true representation of their thoughts and feelings. Triangulation of the data (i.e., comparing the researcher's journal to the participants' verified statements) further confirmed the results. At that point, imaginative variation and thematic reduction were employed to provide an organized, rich description of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Imaginative variation. The process of imaginative variation (Denzin, 1989) asks the researcher to *horizontalize* the data, or place the extracted significant statements of each participant side by side to compare, group and organize the statements into comprehensive ideas. The first author collected overall themes by physically cutting the statements out and dividing them into groups of similar statements. This process gave "each statement equal weight" in contributing to the final analysis, regardless of which participant made a particular statement (Patton, 1990). The deconstructed data set made the meanings of the participants' stories clearer.

Thematic reduction: School counselor themes. The meanings derived from the counselors' statements were grouped into common themes. The authors read and examined the counselors' statements until words or phrases surfaced that represented patterns of feelings or thoughts that were repeated consistently throughout. These common words or phrases were grouped into major thematic areas that represented the collective voice of the participants.

Findings

Four themes emerged that indicated school counselors experienced feelings of under-preparedness in helping students plan for postsecondary pursuits, including (a) awareness (subtheme: feelings of incompetence), (b) theory versus reality (subtheme: disconnect of formal education), (c) acquiring competence (subthemes: colleague networks and technology), and (d) training needs (counselor education programs).

Awareness: Incompetence versus competence. Positive or desirable characteristics of a competent school counselor, particularly in the area of career development, were compiled to create a *textural portrayal* that illustrated the picture of a highly competent school counselor. Collectively, the participants indicated that a competent school counselor would have the following characteristics: (a) the ability to secure accurate information and provide it to students quickly, (b) active membership in state or national school counseling organizations, (c) use of professional networks for professional development, (d) well-maintained connections with students in spite of large caseloads, (e) outreach to marginalized student populations, and (f) personal respect and reflection of the role of a professional school counselor.

When the more specific themes were examined, the counselors described characteristics of the competency levels they possessed; however, they believed they were not living up to self-imposed standards. Most of the counselors' statements referred to their perceived lack of competency in performing their roles in the schools, as opposed to positive feelings of competency. One of the participants, Vivian, stated, "A kid would come in and I would think, please, let's talk about suicide or something because I am not so hot in this [career counseling] area." This counselor considered herself more prepared to assess a student's risk for self-harm than to help guide him or her toward a career path. Vivian believed that her training had inadequately prepared her, and did not remember what she was supposed to do to help students look beyond high school. She expressed frustration and the need for more tailored training, specifically on how to deliver comprehensive career and postsecondary planning curricula. Another participant, Noah, stated, "I am sure those kids know way more what their plans are going to be and what their options are than I do, and that is not the way it is supposed to work. It is something that I should know." This counselor had become aware that he lacked the skills necessary to work with students, and his perceived helplessness prevented him from being engaged in the process. This school counselor needed resources to fill the gap and help him reach his students.

Theory versus reality. Throughout the dialogue with the participants, one common thread was that the formal instruction and implementation suggestions from their graduate training were inadequate. One participant, Noah, strongly voiced his concern with these training deficiencies by stating, "I don't feel like I had enough [career training], it goes back to . . . well, they gave us theories. I did not get any specifics on how to use them." Another counselor, Alan, stated, "We had a very good understanding of the theoretical [career counseling] model. It was very lacking in how to convey it to the kids or how you work with kids. This is where I think it came up short." The voices of all the participants reflected this type of statement. Some of the participants believed that they had been introduced to career counseling theory and some assessment tools; however, they noted that they had not received sufficient instruction on how to apply these concepts when working with students. In addition, none of the participants were able to recall a particular standard for career assessment or planning for secondary school counseling that they might use as a guide when working in the schools.

Colleague networks. In order to combat the noted deficiencies, participants reported forming both formal and informal networks with other colleagues to gain competence in the area of career development. Noah stated, "Luckily I had a friend or two . . . who were good counselors and . . . I learned a lot from them." The idea of learning how to create and implement career development programming on the job resonated throughout the

participants. Diane stated, "I still know that at any time I can call somebody who will know something," and Vivian said, "Thank God for other counselors because I wouldn't know where to start." The importance of colleague networks to the perceived competency of each counselor was made apparent by all the participants, not just the ones represented here. They seemed to rely on one another most often to supplement the gaps in information, more so than consulting other resources available to them.

Utilizing technology. The school counselors made numerous statements regarding the use of technology at their jobs. They mentioned the use of specific programs, and the consensus seemed to reflect that everyone used computer technology in some capacity. Some counselors believed that particular programs purchased by their districts were not useful to them, while others pointed to the use of computers as a resource for gaining competency in providing career development counseling to their students. Vivian stated, "We finally decided to go with the . . . [career development online program], which now has been probably the most used resource by our kids, by our staff, and by the counseling office simply because it is so easily accessible." Alan also noted the following:

> We got it [the online career development program] not only for the kids . . . but for the parents, the community, PR, and making ourselves a viable part of their development. . . . This has been a big plus for us because it forces contact with every kid in an easy, very positive type conference.

A third participant, Kimberly, recalled, "I can point them in the right direction now. The computer is so much easier and the students respond to it."

The technology-based career development programs appeared to be used more readily by the counselors than any other counseling tool. Some of the benefits of technology-based programs include the following: Students can access information independently (autonomy), students can access career information from any computer at the school or from their homes (accessibility), and counselors can provide answers to students' questions quickly (time-sensitivity). The computer-based, Internet programs gave confidence to the counselors that the information was up-to-date and accurate. They used the computer and Internet-based programs to work more efficiently and provide students with consistent, research-based career development programming. This resource provided school counselors with confidence where they lacked it prior to using these tools.

Training needs. Participants were forthcoming about what they needed; for example, they would have benefited from specialized training prior to starting their roles as professional school counselors. Throughout the interviews, the counselors interjected their dissatisfaction with their preparedness upon completing their master's degree programs, to varying degrees. Interestingly, the statements grouped into the training needs category were not gathered in response to a particular question, but rather as they naturally occurred throughout the interviews. Even the participants who stated they were satisfied with their training overall offered suggestions for improving school counselor training programs based on their unique experiences in the field.

Vanessa stated the following:

> I think as school counselors, the counseling part one-on-one we see once [in] awhile, but it is geared more towards career and preparing the kids. . . . I think one thing that would have helped me a lot was maybe having college recruiters or admission counselors come into the class and talk about what they look for on an application or in essay questions. I think that would have helped me help my seniors this year.

Similarly, Diane said that it would have been helpful to know "just the day-to-day what does a career counseling program look like or what does a career counseling program in a high school look like?" Other participants did not identify specific training areas that would have helped them; but they acknowledged that continuing education was necessary based on what was provided in their graduate programs. Kimberly reflected, "I would say that out of the 75 kids that we have [grades] 9–12, I would say maybe 20% have a skill that they can use if they were to drop out of school. It is one area that I am really not comfortable in right now." School counselors carry the responsibility to prepare students for post-graduation, but how they accomplish this task is left to the specific counselor, school or school district.

Jane's statement reflects her desire for more specific training curricula:

> I think that training programs hopefully will evolve and will begin to become more specialized . . . it [career development] is definitely an area that needs more than one class. Three credit hours when 55 are required? It is probably one of the most important things for school counselors to know.

Few counselors echoed this call for more coursework, but specialized training in and out of the classroom was seen as a necessary part of gaining competency for all participants. While a number of the participants were passionate about the idea of increasing training in career development within counseling training programs, the collective voice of the counselors' statements demonstrated the variety of struggles and frustrations the participants encountered, and still encounter, along the way.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how school counselors view their roles, and how they understand and deliver career counseling curricula to students. Nine counselors made statements consistent with feelings of inadequacy and incompetence in their ability to provide adequate career development programming to their students, as well as unpreparedness upon completion of their counselor education programs. The findings are consistent with the reviewed literature, given that even those counselors who made positive statements regarding their overall experiences in their programs clearly reflected uncertainty regarding their competence level in career development in general (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014; McDonough, 2005), but especially in how to deliver useful career programs to students (Clinedinst et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2010). The particular training programs that these counselors completed to obtain licensure differed. Additionally, the secondary data collected from participants (i.e., CACREP vs. non-CACREP degree programs) indicate that accreditation and the completion of a course in career theory and application appear irrelevant regarding the participants' perceptions of overall competency.

The authors noticed that the agitation in the counselors' voices subsided when they discussed the steps they took to gain competency in this area. For some participants, it was a friendly colleague who showed them the way it had always been done, or the discovery of a new online resource that helped them quickly provide answers to their students' questions. The counselors identified specific strategies that they used to improve their competency, but said that they relied heavily on their professional networks for support.

The three urban counselors reported that they were more prepared than their colleagues were in terms of providing career development programming that utilized technology. The three rural and three suburban counselors believed that they were close to or at the same level of competency as their colleagues. Additionally, all three urban counselors believed that funding or political obstacles within their respective districts prevented their success. Some participants also noted that they relied on technology because it had been purchased by

their schools and was the only resource available. For a number of the participants, the isolation and lack of connection to other counselors furthered their sense of frustration and disconnectedness.

Participants employed professional mentoring and consultation in some cases; however, these counselors reported that they utilized informal, personal networking extensively. They described these relationships as casual, question-and-answer partnerships. These relationships were not formally structured with specific goals as in mentoring relationships, but rather were formed out of necessity for team building and information sharing among colleagues. The counselors valued these contacts more than any other resource they had acquired since completion of their degree programs.

The big picture of what it means to be a competent school counselor resonated loudly through the voices of the participants. They uniformly reported that despite their struggle to achieve competency, there was an overarching sense that their efforts were not enough. The counselors' feelings of incompetence in the area of career development significantly impacted their ability to address the needs of students. The quiet desperation resonating in their statements magnified their perceptions of how they lacked what they needed to help prepare students for life after high school. School counselors have an understanding of who they would like to be in the schools, but oftentimes they believe they fall short (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). Many school counselors lack the confidence or competence to navigate the college counseling process effectively, thus leading to overall perceptions of incompetence in career development (Clinedinst et al., 2011; Engberg & Gilbert 2014).

The lack of competency in career development that these school counselors expressed may imply that a certain degree of insecurity and real or perceived incompetence are expected when one starts out in the field. However, if the degree of preparedness among these participants is at all representative, it may indicate that more focus on career development practice is needed in counselor education programs. According to Hill (2012), it is important to emphasize counselor-initiated strategies for college and career readiness interventions—something this group of school counselors found challenging. Addressing this need is a critical issue for school counselor educators as they design training curricula and experiences. Again, participants stated that they had received valuable information in their programs regarding the specifics of *what* career development is, but not *how* to use it with students. The missing link between knowledge and know-how for these counselors is palpable. School counselor educators and supervisors must take note and develop career counseling curricula that address the needs of their counselors-in-training, as well as the needs of the future students they will serve.

Recommendations

As a result of the information obtained from this study and with the support of the NOSCA report and other studies published in recent years, a need clearly exists for career development training standards to be integrated into graduate programs for school counselors (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014; Clinedinst et al., 2011; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014). Specifically, counselor educators may adequately identify deficiencies in the overall training model by isolating the differences between anticipated transitions, role adoption and professional development. Participants in the present study believe that they and future school counselors would benefit from a more applied, community-based experience, much like the professional development schools model suggested by Clark and Horton-Parker (2002), and a standard of practice to better serve their students.

The plan outlined by NOSCA includes implementing a process by which all secondary school counselors follow a set of standards while working with students on college readiness from academic, social and career perspectives (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014). Ideally, these standards would be consistent among school counselors across the country to ensure all students access to adequate college preparation and postsecondary planning.

Graduate-level courses offered in the form of additional electives, such as counseling the college-bound student or career and technical education, would provide opportunities for growth in areas not currently available in most graduate counseling programs. In response to the growing need for high school counselor competency in postsecondary planning, some states are now offering an additional licensure endorsement for school counselors; for example, in Colorado, school counselors complete two graduate-level courses already offered within CACREP programs (i.e., individual counseling, career development) and one additional two-credit course in career and technical education, offered through the Colorado Community College System. Upon completion of the three courses, school counselors may then apply for the additional endorsement in career and technical education (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). This effort supports the Common Core Curriculum implementation in Colorado and many other states where school counselors are now expected to provide academic advising to directly reflect their students' career cluster interests.

With the recent passing of the Langevin-Thompson Amendment to the Success and Opportunity through Quality Charter Schools Act (H.R. 10, 2014), school counselors working in charter schools will now be asked to provide documentation of their comprehensive career counseling programs in order for schools to obtain priority status when applying for federal funding. This movement, which currently applies only to charter schools, may begin to find its way into all public school funding requests, thus making career counseling curriculum development and implementation a priority for all school counselors. With the support of ASCA, the Association for Career and Technical Education, the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, this movement will continue to grow, and the need for well-trained school counselors who are able to provide comprehensive career counseling programs will increase.

Limitations

In this study, the authors used several measures in order to preserve the internal validity of the study, such as researcher epoche, triangulation and member checking. In keeping with the tradition of qualitative research, the participants were not studied in isolation but in environments in which the studied phenomenon continues to occur. It is safe to assume that the participants' statements were not without bias, because few inquiries involving human interactions and perceptions are without bias. The authors selected nine participants from a convenience sample of high school counselors from rural, suburban and urban areas within two Midwestern states in the United States. The relationship of the counselors to the first author, although limited, may have reflected a need to please or demonstrate competency where little may have existed. Despite the limitations of the study, the findings contribute to the literature regarding school counselors' perceptions of their abilities to effectively deliver career counseling programs. Also, the findings further emphasize the need to reform the training methods through which school counselors provide college and career readiness services to students.

Implications

Given the results of this study, it would be negligent to ignore the possibility that school counselors may be placed in positions with less than adequate training in career development. Counselor education programs have an obligation to prepare school counselors in more role-specific areas (e.g., college and career readiness), given that the national average ratio of students to school counselor is 471:1, which is well above ASCA's recommended ratio of 250:1 (http://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/home/ratios10-11.pdf). Doing more with less has always been a challenge for school leaders, and preparing school counselors more effectively to meet the needs of their students may empower a new generation of counselors to lead students into the 21st century workforce.

The authors acknowledge that this particular study includes only the voices of nine school counselors; however, their voices loudly echo NOSCA's findings and support the need for school counselor standardization of practice in promoting, teaching and facilitating career and postsecondary planning for all students (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2014). Currently, most school counselor education programs do not highlight this area, yet this area represents the very heart of school counseling services at the secondary level. ASCA (2012) has deemed this area important enough to provide school counselors with standards with which to guide their daily activities, but training programs offer limited exposure to actual planning and implementation of career services. This study exposes a disconnection between training and practice standards in school counselor education, which has led to feelings of incompetence and discouragement in these nine school counselors. Regardless of how the counselors compensate for this lack of training, this phenomenon exists. Whether they graduated from CACREP or non-CACREP programs, all of the participants in this study believed that they were equally incompetent in providing career development programming to students. Therefore, future CACREP standards and ASCA Model revisions, as well as state credentialing boards, must include guidelines by which school counselors are trained, specifically reflecting their appropriate job duties and responsibilities in college and career readiness programming. Future school counselors may be better equipped to address the needs of their students, parents and communities if this area of training is expanded and integrated as an essential component of counselor education programs.

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