

# Competing Professional Identity Models in School Counseling: A Historical Perspective and Commentary



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**Recent research has focused on the discrepancy between school counselors' preferred roles and their actual functions. Reasons for this discrepancy range from administrators' misperceptions of the role of the school counselor to the slow adoption of comprehensive school counseling approaches such as the American School Counselor Association's National Model. A look at counseling history reveals that competing professional identity models within the profession have inhibited the standardization of school counseling practice and supervision. School counselors are counseling professionals working within an educational setting, and therefore they receive messages about their role as both counselor and educator. The present article includes a discussion of the consequences of these competing and often conflicting messages, as well as a description of three strategies to combat the role stress associated with this ongoing debate.**

**Keywords:** school counseling, counseling history, professional identity, supervision, educational setting

The profession of school counseling has existed for more than 100 years, and throughout that time, competing professional identity constructs have impacted the roles, responsibilities and supervision of school counselors. Since the inception of school counseling, when it was known as *vocational guidance*, confusion has existed on how best to use and manage the resource that is the school counselor (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006; Pope, 2009). Although the focus of the profession has changed from vocational guidance to the current concept of comprehensive school counseling, problems surrounding the use and supervision of school counselors persist. Today, although the profession has identified a National Model (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012) that provides an example of a comprehensive programmatic approach, many practicing school counselors and administrators continue to work with outdated service models and reactive approaches (Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008; Lambie & Williamson, 2004). A look at the historical roots of school counseling provides insight into the lasting problems for school counselor utilization and supervision.

## Historical Context of School Counselor Practice

At the outset of the school counseling profession, the role of vocational guidance slowly became recognized as an integral ingredient in effective vocational placement and training. With the creation of the National Vocational Guidance Association in 1913, and the proliferation of vocational guidance programs in cities such as Boston and New York, the profession rapidly expanded (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006). Concerns over the lack of standardized duties, centralized supervision and evaluation of services soon followed. As Myers (1924) pointed out in a historic article titled "A Critical Review of Present Developments in Vocational Guidance with Special Reference to Future Prospects," vocational guidance was quickly being recognized as "a *specialized*

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educational function requiring special natural qualifications and special training” (p. 139, emphasis in original). However, vocational guidance was mostly being performed by teachers in addition to their other duties, with very few schools hiring specialized personnel. Although Myers (1924) and others expressed concerns over the lack of training and supervision, educators and administrators were slow to recognize the consequences of asking teachers to perform such vital duties in addition to their teaching responsibilities without proper training and extra compensation. Additionally, districts in which specific individuals were hired as vocational guidance professionals soon overloaded these professionals with administrative and clerical duties, which inhibited their effectiveness. Myers (1924) highlighted the situation as follows:

Another tendency dangerous to the cause of vocational guidance is the tendency to load the vocational counselor with so many duties foreign to the office that little real counseling can be done. . . . If well chosen he [or she] has administrative ability. It is perfectly natural, therefore, for the principal to assign one administrative duty after another to the counselor until he [or she] becomes practically assistant principal, with little time for the real work of a counselor. In order to prevent this tendency from crippling seriously the vocational guidance program it is important that the counselor shall be well trained, that the principal shall understand more clearly what counseling involves, and that there shall be efficient supervision from a central office. (p. 141)

In 1913, Jesse B. Davis introduced a vocational guidance curriculum to be infused into English classes in middle and high schools, an idea which he presented at the first national conference on vocational guidance in Grand Rapids, Michigan (Pope, 2009). It was summarily rejected by his colleagues, who would not embrace the idea of a guidance curriculum within the classroom. Slowly, however, as the profession grew and Davis and others gained respect and notoriety throughout the country, his “Grand Rapids Plan” gained support. Though Davis did not expect it, his model sparked debate between those who envisioned the expansion of counselor responsibilities and those who wished to maintain counselors’ primary duty as vocational guidance professionals (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006). Ultimately, the heart of this debate was the role of vocational guidance as a supplemental service to the learning in the classroom or a distinctive set of services with a different goal than simply educating students. Although no definitive answer was agreed upon at the time, the realization that academic factors influence career choice and vice versa has helped to move the profession from a systemic approach of strictly vocational guidance to a comprehensive approach in which career, academic and personal/social development are all addressed (ASCA, 2003). The disagreement over Davis’s Grand Rapids Plan launched a debate between competing professional identity models that continues in the profession to this day.

### **Competing Professional Identity Models: Educator or Counselor?**

Even during the time of vocational guidance in which the counseling profession’s singular purpose was to prepare students for the world of work, disagreement over the best way to perform this duty existed. As the profession began to define itself during the 1930s and '40s, school administrators heavily determined the professional responsibilities of the school counselor (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006). When the profession expanded to include *personal adjustment counseling* as a reaction to the growing popularity of psychology, administrators reacted by expanding vocational guidance to include a more educational focus. During the 1950s, school counselors were placed under the umbrella term *pupil personnel services* along with the school psychologist, social worker, nurse or health officer, and attendance officer. Although the primary role of the school counselor throughout the '60s and '70s was to provide counseling services, concerns over the perception of the profession existed. As a result of the lack of defined school counselor roles and responsibilities, the position was still seen as an ancillary support service to teachers and administrators. It was therefore extremely

easy for administrators to continue to add to the counselor's responsibilities as they saw fit (Lambie & Williamson, 2004), aligning school counselor duties with their own identity as educators.

The 1970s brought about the beginning of school counseling as a comprehensive, developmental program. Some within the profession attempted to create comprehensive approaches, which included goals and objectives, activities or interventions to address them, planning and implementation strategies, and evaluative measures. It was the first time that school counseling was defined in terms of developmentally appropriate, measurable student outcomes (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006). However, environmental and economic factors slowed the adoption of this new concept. The 1970s were a decade of decreasing student enrollment and budgetary reductions, which led to cutbacks in counselor positions (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). As a result, counselors began to take on more administrative duties either out of necessity or a desire to become more visible and increase the perception of the school counselor position as necessary. During this time, many of the counseling duties of the position were lost among other responsibilities more aligned with those of an educator.

In 1983, the National Commission of Excellence in Education published "A Nation at Risk," a report examining the quality of education in the United States (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Among its initiatives, the report jump-started the testing and accountability movement in education. Standardized testing coordination duties were almost immediately assigned to the counselor. In fact, over the course of the past century in the profession of school counseling, the list of counselor duties and responsibilities has steadily grown to include administrative duties such as scheduling, record keeping and test coordination. With the ever-growing and expanding role of the counselor, and in an attempt to articulate the appropriate responsibilities of the counselor, the concept of comprehensive school counseling programming, which was established in the late 1970s, grew in popularity during the '80s and '90s (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006; Mitchell & Gysbers, 1978). As time passed, programs became increasingly articulated and workable, and an emphasis on accountability and evaluation of practice emerged (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001).

### **Comprehensive School Counseling Programs**

What separates comprehensive school counseling from traditional guidance models is a focus on the program and not the position (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006). The pupil personnel services models of the '60s and '70s listed the types of services offered but lacked an articulated, systemic approach, and therefore allowed for the constant assignment of other duties to school counselors. The concept of comprehensive programming was created in response to this problem (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006).

As early as 1990, Gysbers offered five foundational premises on which comprehensive school counseling is based. First, school counseling is a program and includes characteristics of other programs in education, including standards, activities and interventions that help students reach these standards; professionally certificated personnel; management of materials and resources; and accountability measures. Second, school counseling programs are developmental and comprehensive. They are developmental in that the activities and interventions are designed to facilitate student growth in the three areas of student development: academic, personal/social and career development (ASCA, 2003). They are comprehensive in that they provide a wide range of services to meet the needs of all students, not just those with the most need. The third premise is that school counseling programs utilize a team approach. Although professional school counselors are the heart of a comprehensive program, Mitchell and Gysbers (1978) established that the entire school staff must be committed and involved in order for the program to successfully take root. The fourth premise is that school counseling programs are developed through a process of systematic planning, designing, implementing and evaluating (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006). This process has been described in different ways but often using the same or similar terminology (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2008). Lastly, the fifth premise offered by Gysbers and

Henderson (2006) is that comprehensive school counseling programs have established leadership. A growing message in the school counseling literature is the need for school counselors to provide leadership and advocacy for systemic change (Curry & DeVoss, 2009; McMahan, Mason, & Paisley, 2009; Sink, 2009). Without the knowledge and expertise of school counseling leaders, comprehensive programs will not take hold.

## The ASCA National Model

Only within the past decade has the school counseling profession as a whole embraced the concept of comprehensive programs (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2008), a movement which was spurred by ASCA's creation of a National Model (ASCA, 2003). In 2001, ASCA created the first iteration of its National Model; intended as a change agent, it is a framework for states, districts and counseling departments toward the creation of comprehensive developmental school counseling programs. The ASCA National Model contains four elements, or quadrants, for creating and maintaining effective comprehensive programs (ASCA, 2012). The quadrants are the tools school counselors utilize to address the academic, personal/social and career needs of their students. The first, Foundation, is the philosophy and mission upon which the program is built. The second, Delivery System, consists of the proactive and responsive services included in the program. These services can be focused individually, in small groups or school-wide, and are delivered from—or are at least influenced by—the program's Foundation and mission statement. The third quadrant, Management, is organization and utilization of resources. Because a comprehensive program uses data to drive its Delivery System, the fourth quadrant is Accountability, which incorporates results-based data and intervention outcomes to create short- and long-term goals for the program (ASCA, 2012; Dollarhide & Saginak, 2008).

The National Model is the most widely accepted conceptualization of a comprehensive school counseling program (Burnham, Dahir, Stone, & Hooper, 2008). It resulted from a movement toward comprehensive programs born out of school counselors' need to clarify their roles and responsibilities. Beginning with the Education Trust's (2009) Transforming School Counseling Initiative and continuing with the creation of National Standards for Student Academic, Career and Personal/Social Development, the National Model has been built upon the concepts of social advocacy, leadership, collaboration and systemic change, which are slowly but profoundly shaping the profession (Burnham et al., 2008; Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Dollarhide & Saginak, 2008). Since the release of the National Model, however, the movement toward comprehensive school counseling programs has remained slow (Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008). Such slow growth inhibits school counselors from standardizing or *professionalizing* their roles and responsibilities (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2008).

## Consequences of Competing Professional Identity Models

Lambie and Williamson (2004) stated that “based on this historical narrative, school counseling roles have been vast and ever-changing, making it understandable that many school counselors struggle with role ambiguity and incongruence while feeling overwhelmed” (p. 127). While the addition of many responsibilities has been a result of the natural expansion of the profession from vocational guidance to guidance and counseling to comprehensive school counseling, the influence of administrators has directly led to the assignment of inappropriate duties. From the outset of the profession, an essential question has involved these two competing identity models: Should school counselors be acting as educators or counselors?

The historically relevant and often opposing sets of expectations for school counselors come from both counselor educators during training and school administrators (such as principals) upon entering the profession. There is evidence to suggest that school counselors are not practicing as the profession indicates, both in terms of the ASCA National Model and the Education Trust's Transforming School Counseling Initiative (Clemens,

Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009; Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). Therefore, a common source of role conflict and role ambiguity is the school administrators' perceptions of the school counselor function, a concern that Myers (1924) established and Lambie and Williamson (2004) reiterated. The concern that school counselors are being used as quasi-administrators instead of counseling professionals continues to persist.

According to ASCA (2012), school counselors are responsible for activities that foster the academic, career and personal/social development of students. The primary role of the school counselor, therefore, is direct service and contact with students. Among the activities ASCA (2012) listed as appropriate for school counselors are individual student academic planning, direct counseling for students with personal/social issues impacting success, interpreting data and student records, collaborating with teachers and administrators, and advocating for students when necessary. Among the activities listed as inappropriate are the following: registration and scheduling; coordinating and administering standardized tests; performing disciplinary actions; covering classes, hallways, and cafeterias; clerical record keeping; and data entry. In terms of role conflict, when faced with a task, school counselors often wish to respond in a manner that is congruent with their counselor identity, but are told to apply another professional identity—namely that of educator. For example, when a school counselor is asked to provide services to a student who has bullied, while also informing the student that he or she has been suspended from school for that behavior, the counselor may experience role conflict. Role ambiguity occurs when some of the duties listed as inappropriate are included as part of the counselor's responsibilities. For example, if a school counselor is asked to coordinate and proctor state standardized aptitude tests, the counselor experiences role ambiguity, as this duty is noncounseling-related, yet requires a significant time commitment (Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005; Olk & Friedlander, 1992). These examples are but two of many possible scenarios in which the conflicting messages from competing professional identity orientations contribute to role stress for practicing school counselors.

## **Strategies for Addressing Competing Models**

Within the recent literature on school counseling, many articles highlight the differences between school counselors' preferred practice models and actual functioning (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Culbreth et al., 2005; Lieberman, 2004; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008), as well as between administrators' view of the role of the school counselor and models of best practice within the profession (Clemens et al., 2009; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). However, these discrepancies were identified virtually from the outset of the profession (Ginn, 1924; Myers, 1924) and can be attributed in large part to the different orientations encountered by counseling professionals working in educational settings. Despite the concept of comprehensive school counseling and the creation of a National Model delineating appropriate roles and responsibilities, the reality is that school counselors utilize different service models depending on the region, state, district and even school in which they work. From a historical perspective, it is clear that administrators often impose their identity as educators on school counselors through the assignment of noncounseling duties. However, it is also clear that school counselors themselves have been unsuccessful in advocating for the use of current best practices. Ironically, strategies to prevent counselors from becoming quasi-administrators were identified as early as 1924.

Myers (1924) not only identified the risk for counselors to be overloaded with administrative duties, but also listed three strategies that could be used to combat this possibility. First, he suggested that "counselor[s] shall be well trained" (p. 141). This suggestion is especially important for counselor educators, who are responsible for training future counselors and acting as gatekeepers to the profession. In addition to relevant theories, techniques and practices in individual and group counseling and assessment, it is clear that school counselors-



in-training also need enhanced knowledge and skill in advocacy. In order to achieve these goals, critical thought is necessary regarding school counselors' handling of the role stress created by competing professional identity models. Emphasizing the importance of maintaining a strong relationship with administrators also is critical, as history has suggested. Furthermore, comfort and enthusiasm in gathering and using data to provide evidence of effectiveness are essential skills. In short, in addition to preparing knowledgeable and skilled counselors, counselor educators are charged with preparing leaders and advocates; they should approach their work with school counselors-in-training with this intention.

Myers' (1924) next suggestion was that "principal[s] shall understand more clearly what counseling involves" (p. 141). As the literature suggests, school counselors and administrators share responsibility because of the inherent difference in their orientations. For administrators and others who supervise school counselors, it is important to understand that the training and professional identity of a school counselor is different from that of an educator, and that counselors are trained to address not only academic issues, but career and personal/social issues as well. Without this understanding, it is easy to impose inappropriate models of supervision and noncounseling-related activities on the counselor. It is necessary for practicing counselors to develop a strong sense of professional identity beginning in their training program. For some counselors, it is difficult to differentiate appropriate from inappropriate roles and responsibilities. This process is complicated for the many counselors who are former teachers and have been trained as both educators and counselors. However, it is essential to be able to articulate to administrators and other stakeholders the role of the counselor in maximizing student success. Practicing school counselors should portray themselves as counseling experts with the ability to create and maintain a developmentally appropriate and comprehensive program of services as defined by Gysbers and Henderson (2006). Knowledge of the ASCA National Model and other relevant state models aids in the practicing counselors' ability to position themselves as counseling professionals and to articulate their appropriate roles as such.

Myers' (1924) final suggestion was that "there shall be efficient supervision from a central office" (p. 141). Supervision can be provided by building administrators, district directors of school counseling or even experienced colleagues. Practicing school counselors can receive three distinct types of supervision: administrative, program and clinical. Administrative supervision is likely to occur, as it is provided by an assigned individual—usually a principal, vice principal or other administrator (Lambie & Sias, 2009). Program supervision, because it is related to comprehensive school counseling, is often present only if the district, school or counseling department adopts a comprehensive, programmatic approach (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2008). Clinical supervision is perhaps the rarest of the three (Somody, Henderson, Cook, & Zambrano, 2008), and the most necessary, because it impacts counseling knowledge and skills, and decreases the risk of unethical practice (Bernard & Goodyear, 2009; Lambie & Sias, 2009).

As Dollarhide and Saginak (2008) described, school counselors are likely encountering evaluation of practice, but rarely participating in what could be considered clinical supervision. Evidence as to why school counselors do not receive as much clinical supervision as they do administrative supervision mostly surrounds the perceptions of principals, vice principals and district-level administrators that school counselors' roles are primarily focused on academic advising, scheduling and other noncounseling activities (Herlihy, Gray, & McCollum, 2002; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005). However, research indicates that a significant number of practicing counselors feel as though they have no need for clinical supervision. In a national survey, Page, Pietrzak, and Sutton (2001) found that 57% of school counselors wanted to receive supervision in the future and 10% wanted to continue receiving clinical supervision; however, 33% of school counselors believed that they had "no need for supervision" (p. 146).

One reason that school counselors may not desire or see a need for supervision is the memory of previously dissatisfying experiences. Most school counselors receive a majority of their supervision from noncounseling staff such as principals (Lambie & Sias, 2009), and yet the majority of school counselors consistently point to a desire for more clinical supervision to enhance their skills and assist them with taking appropriate action with students (Page et al., 2001; Roberts & Borders, 1994; Sutton & Page, 1994). Additionally, the majority of school counselors in Page et al.'s (2001) study preferred counselor-trained supervisors, a fact that corroborated the findings of earlier studies (Roberts & Borders, 1994). When one couples this information with the idea that many principals are attempting to use existing models of teacher supervision to supervise school counselors (Lambie & Williamson, 2004), it is clear that many school counselors may be receiving inappropriate and generally dissatisfying supervision from administrators.

## Conclusion

Practicing school counselors are faced with the challenge of identifying and maintaining a professional identity while receiving conflicting messages from counselor educators, administrators and other stakeholders. Counselor educators are not only responsible for addressing future counselors' knowledge, skills and personal awareness; they are also responsible for developing counselor trainees' professional identities. School counselors-in-training should be aware of the possible ambiguous messages and responsibilities that await them upon entering the profession. An important skill often forgotten is advocacy; counselor educators can assist future professionals in developing skills that will assist them in educating their colleagues and administrative supervisors. One example of an important change for which current and future professionals should advocate is more clinical supervision addressing counseling skills and ethical practice. A counselor-trained supervisor, such as a director of school counseling services or an experienced colleague, can provide more appropriate and satisfying supervision because of his or her knowledge of the unique demands of the work counselors do.

A look back at the history of the counseling profession reveals that the struggle over a clear professional identity has inhibited the profession almost since its inception. Perhaps a solution to this problem can be gleaned from the words of those researchers present at the beginning of the debate. Myers (1924) provided three suggestions for combating the role stress brought on by competing professional identities within the profession. Counseling professionals should begin there when considering the essential question at the heart of this debate: Are school counselors acting as counselors or educators?

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