A Personal Look at a Counselor's Influence Beyond Academics*

Mina Hakimi, a UCLA undergraduate working at our Center in 2024, had a personal interest in focusing on school counselors. She reviewed the literature to learn more about the matter. The following is an edited version of what she learned (with an added Center perspective). It is offered as an information resource for interested stakeholders.

Mr. Bell was my high school counselor; he changed the entire course of my life. When anxiety overwhelmed me, his office became a place of solace. He listened to me without judgement and helped me learn skills to manage my emotions. His impact lasted far beyond class schedules or college advice; he played a crucial role in helping me navigate life as a worried high school senior. His ability to foster a safe space in his office allowed me to finish highschool with not only academic readiness but emotional resilience.

My experience with Mr. Bell highlights an often overlooked aspect of school counseling – the deeply personal and individualized support counselors provide. His impact on my life stayed with me long after graduation. His work reminded me of the multifaceted roles school counselors play. They are educators, confidants, and advocates that sometimes step into roles that surpass their official description. In today's data-driven landscape, the role of school counselors is increasingly shaped by administrative priorities, data, and group results. Administrative functions often seem to overshadow meeting student needs.

In this brief presentation, my aim is to explore the evolving role of counselors and how trust and collaboration between school administrators and counselors can be strengthened to ensure counselors can effectively support students' academic, emotional, and social needs.

The Evolving Role of School Counselors

The role of school counselors has undergone significant transformation within the last century. From my perspective, it is imperative that a counselor be granted a generous level of autonomy to tend to student needs. State Education Codes underscore the importance of flexibility in counseling roles (e.g., California Legislative Information, 1976). Such flexibility, coupled with targeted professional development, allows counselors to address (a) diverse student needs and (b) systemic challenges, including inequalities.

Addressing the Spectra of Students

All students require some counseling attention. Counselors can provide safe and supportive environments for students to express otherwise hidden concerns. By offering targeted guidance, counselors can help students navigate their unique circumstances to ensure their needs are addressed in a holistic manner.

Many students face unique challenges that require nuanced approaches. Counselors especially are essential in addressing the needs of students who often go unnoticed (e.g., those not struggling enough to receive intensive intervention but not excelling enough to draw attention). For example:

>Maria is a sophomore in high school who is scoring just above average in her classes. Though she is not failing, Maria feels invisible in the classroom. Without targeted encouragement, she risks disengagement, and may suffer academically.

>Roxy, a shy middle school student and frequently appears distracted during lessons. Her teachers attribute this to laziness, but Roxy confided to her counselor intense anxieties related to her home situation.

To enhance student outcomes, strengthen counselor-student relationships, and reduce burnout for counselors, the American School counselor association (ASCA) advocates a balanced time allocation that prioritizes direct services. Specifically, they suggest that 80% of time should be dedicated to direct student services, with 20% left for indirect support activities, and they layout the following:

Appropriate and Inappropriate Activities for School Counselors

Appropriate Activities for School Counselors	Inappropriate Activities for School Counselors
▪ advisement and appraisal for academic planning	▪ building the master schedule
▪ orientation, coordination and academic advising for new students	▪ coordinating paperwork and data entry of all new students
▪ interpreting cognitive, aptitude and achievement tests	▪ coordinating cognitive, aptitude and achievement testing programs
▪ providing counseling to students who are tardy or absent	▪ signing excuses for students who are tardy or absent
▪ providing counseling to students who have disciplinary problems	▪ performing disciplinary actions or assigning discipline consequences
▪ providing short-term individual and small-group counseling services to students	▪ providing long-term counseling in schools to address psychological disorders
▪ consulting with teachers to schedule and present school counseling curriculum lessons based on developmental needs and needs identified through data	▪ covering classes when teachers are absent or to create teacher planning time
▪ interpreting student records	▪ maintaining student records
▪ analyzing grade-point averages in relationship to achievement	▪ computing grade-point averages
▪ consulting with teachers about building classroom connections, effective classroom management and the role of noncognitive factors in student success	▪ supervising classrooms or common areas
▪ protecting student records and information per state and federal regulations	▪ keeping clerical records
▪ consulting with the school principal to identify and resolve student issues, needs and problems	▪ assisting with duties in the principal's office
▪ advocating for students at individual education plan meetings and 504 meetings, student study teams and school attendance review boards, as necessary	▪ coordinating schoolwide individual education plans, student study teams, response to intervention plans, MTSS and school attendance review boards
▪ analyzing disaggregated schoolwide and school counseling program data	▪ serving as a data entry clerk

From: https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/bd376246-0b4f-413f-b3e0-1b9938f36e68/ANM-executive-summary-4th-ed.pdf#page=2&zoom=auto,-14,26

Counselors often share their frustration:

I spend more time doing data entry than actually talking to students.

My principal sees counseling as a luxury, not a necessity.

Administrators also are frustrated:

My limited budget restricts hiring additional staff.

Pressure from District overstresses meeting academic standards.

The **Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports** has suggested **new directions** for schools counselors and advocated for them to play a major role in building on MTSS initiatives to establish **a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports at schools.** Such as system

- expands the MTSS continuum framework into a consolidated set of interconnected subsystems weaving together school and community resources and

- organizes the supports needed each day at schools into a delimited set of domains that cross over the continuum to establish a framework for developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports over several years.

About Enhancing the Administrator-Counselor Relationship

Research suggests that the relationship between administrators and counselors is pivotal in determining the effectiveness of counseling programs. Trust and collaboration form the foundation of this dynamic. When trust exists, counselors are empowered to make decisions that benefit students. Several factors can significantly impact the strength of the relationship, including

- **Resource Allocation**: Providing counselors with sufficient time, tools, and staff to focus on their primary responsibilities ensures they can address students' needs effectively.
- **Role Clarity**: Clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of counselors helps minimize conflicts and misalignment. This clarity empowers counselors to focus on their specialized work without interference.
- **Open Communication**: Establishing consistent, transparent dialogue between administrators and counselors fosters mutual understanding and ensures that both parties align on school priorities and goals.

Common challenges to the administrator-counselor relationship that arise include:

- **Mismatch in Priorities**: Administrators may emphasize measurable outcomes, such as academic performance or standardized test scores, while counselors may prioritize the emotional and social well-being of students.
- **Understaffing**: Resource constraints frequently result in counselors being assigned non-counseling tasks, diluting their ability to focus on their core responsibilities.
- **Lack of Training**: Administrators may not fully understand the scope and importance of the counseling role, leading to unrealistic expectations or undervaluation of the counselor' contributions.

From: Windham, H. D. (2022)**.** *Perceptions of school counselors and administrators on the role of school counseling.* Auburn University.

Key findings:
- **Counselor Autonomy:** Schools with higher levels of counselor decision making saw a 20% improvement in student engagement scores
- **Aligned Priorities:** Schools where administrators and counselors shared goals showed significant gains in student self-reported satisfaction and emotional well being
- **Role Overlap:** When counselors were tasked with administrative duties, student outcomes declined by 15%

It seems essential to focus on ways to create cohesive partnerships between school counselors and administrators. Below is a synthesis of recommendations for accomplishing this.

>**Strengthening open, honest, and regular Communication**

- Scheduled meetings designed to create opportunities for counselors and administrators to align goals and expectations
- Feedback loops that enable both parties to evaluate progress, adapt strategies, and ensure accountability
- Regular interchanges that improve transparency and ensure that both parties stay informed about ongoing initiatives

>**Professional development that enhances understanding of each other' roles**

- Shared training for recognizing signs of student distress and to clarify nature and scope of counseling work (e.g., the roles, responsibilities, and boundaries of school counselors)

> **Emphasis on whole student development**

- School policies that prioritize the holistic well-being of students
- Flexible scheduling that allow counselors to dedicate more time to direct student support
- Holistic assessments (i.e., using metrics that go beyond academic test scores and attendance to include student engagement, social-emotional learning, and mental health)

Concluding Comment

My experience with Mr. Bell taught me the transformative power of counseling. My deep dive into the literature expanded my understanding of what needs to be done to enable schools to use counselors more effectively.

And from the perspective of the work of the UCLA Center, we certainly must move forward in transforming the work not only of counselors but of all student/learning supports' personnel. It is the key to ensuring that more students have access to essential supports that enhance equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond.

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