

Higher Education's Role in Preparing School Counselors for College Admissions Counseling

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine school counselors' preparation for college admissions counseling, strategies counselors utilize to stay current on college admissions processes and trends, and professional development needs related to college admissions counseling. Study findings indicated school counselors did not complete coursework in college admissions counseling during their school counseling graduate preparation programs. The study's results also suggested school counselors rely more on the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) and American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) professional associations or college and university outreach initiatives to stay current on college admissions processes and trends, rather than school or district-level professional development opportunities. Participants identified four salient categories of professional development needs: 1) gaining knowledge about college and university admissions requirements; 2) counseling students and families on financial aid and scholarship processes; 3) advising students on standardized college admissions tests; and 4) learning about new college majors and career fields.

School counselors are tasked with not only supporting students in the social and emotional realm of daily life (Gallo, *et al.* 2021; Serres and Nelson 2021) and academic development (ASCA 2019), but they are also tasked with preparing students to pursue their postsecondary goals: work, military, or higher education pursuits (Bryan, Kim, and Liu 2021; Paolini 2019). In fact, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) states:

School counselors play a critical role in preparing all students for life-long learning and success in a global environment. To ensure students have opportunity to reach their full potential, school counselors collaborate with community-based organizations, including college access organizations and college access professionals, within the framework of a school counseling program. (2017, 21)

Because the national workforce requires some form of continued education beyond high school (Jackson, *et al.* 2016; Mei 2019; Neal 2018), the school counselor role is fundamental to the career planning of students.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce (Dubay 2022) reported there were 10.6 million vacant job openings in November of 2021 and less than one available worker for every job opening. This accessibility of workers is dependent upon job skills required to perform the vacant positions. Not only are there fewer qualified persons to fill the jobs, but the COVID-19 pandemic helped create “The Great Resignation” (Woolridge 2022, para 2). The roles of college and career counselors are even more important today because of existing job demands. Students and parents need to understand the job out-

look and education requirements for those positions now more than ever. College tuition is only rising, and the fear is that students will go into debt for college tuition only to graduate unemployable.

Then there’s the question of whether or not school counselors are prepared for effective college and career counseling. Do counselors have the time to appropriately allot to this crucial function? What professional development do counselors receive to keep them timely in this endeavor? Are college preparation programs providing the necessary skill development in this arena? The purpose of this research is to examine school counselors’ preparation for college admissions counseling, strategies counselors utilize to stay current on college admissions processes and trends, and professional development needs related to college admissions counseling. This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- ◆ How are graduate counselor education programs preparing school counselors for college admissions counseling?
- ◆ How do school counselors stay current on college admissions processes and trends?
- ◆ What are school counselors’ college admissions counseling professional development needs?

Glossary of Terms

College Admissions Counseling: College admissions counseling fosters a college-going culture and focuses on supporting students and their families in navigating the complexity of college search, application, selection, funding, and transition processes (ASCA 2017, 47).

College Preparation Counseling: College preparation counseling aids students in exploring postsecondary educational opportunities and “working to ensure all students develop an academic and career plan re-

flecting their interests, abilities and goals and including rigorous, relevant coursework and experiences appropriate for the student” to enhance college readiness (ASCA 2017, 47).

School Counseling Programs: School counseling programs provide both direct and indirect services to students (ASCA 2017, 72). *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs*, specifies school counseling programs must be “delivered to all students systematically, include a developmentally appropriate curriculum focused on the mindsets and behaviors all students need for postsecondary readiness and success, close achievement and opportunity gaps, and result in improved student achievement, attendance and discipline” (ASCA 2017, 72).

Career Counseling: Career counseling is the process of working with students to explore their interests, abilities, and related career fields. “ASCA recognizes career education begins in kindergarten and is exemplified by students who are knowledgeable about options and are prepared to enroll and succeed in any postsecondary experience without the need for remediation (ASCA 2017, 13). Collaborating with students, families, educational staff and the community, school counselors work to ensure all students select a postsecondary path to productive citizenry” (ASCA 2017, 13)

Postsecondary Guidance: Postsecondary guidance focuses on planning for postsecondary education and/or workforce engagement, including “assisting students, families and staff as they assess student strengths and interests and encourage the selection of a rigorous and relevant educational program supporting all students’ college and career goals” (ASCA 2017, 47).

College and Career Readiness Professional Learning: College and career readiness professional learning includes a range of professional development opportunities to gain knowledge, skills, and abilities to enhance the ability to aid students in college and career readiness.

Graduate Counselor Education Programs: There are more than 520 graduate school counselor preparation programs in the United States, including 362 programs conferring Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited masters and doctoral programs degrees in school counseling (ASCA 2022; CACREP 2022). Graduate counselor education programs help

prepare future school counselors with the knowledge and skills necessary to administer a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA 2022).

Literature Review

Career development in P12 schools is aimed at helping youth develop their understanding of the educational and vocational options available to them post-graduation (Kuijpers 2019; Oome 2021; Pulliam and Bartek 2018). School counselors are charged with providing services to support this development. ASCA (2017) states,

School counselors recognize that each student possesses unique interests, abilities and goals, which will lead to various future life and career opportunities. Collaborating with students, families, educational staff and the community, the school counselor works to ensure all students develop an academic and career plan reflecting their interests, abilities and goals and including rigorous, relevant coursework and experiences appropriate for the student (para 1).

Hines, Lemons, and Crews (2011) noted that college preparation counseling is not prioritized in school counseling programs. In fact, school counselors have reported they feel greatly unprepared for this critical task (Brown, *et al.* 2016). The Council of National School Counseling and College Access Organizations (2016) has noted that many colleges state they teach career counseling in their coursework; however, these courses often do not provide in-depth coverage of college admissions counseling competencies.

According to research from the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and The College Board, high school counselors allocate approximately 20 percent of their time to postsecondary guidance (NACAC 2019). However, the most recent College Board National Survey of School Counselors and Administrators found that 32 percent of counselors reported not having any graduate preparation in college admissions processes, and another 33 percent perceived their training to be inadequate (NACAC 2019; The College Board 2012). These survey findings suggest incongruence between school counselor preparation and the professional duties most school counselors find themselves performing on the job (Holcomb-McCoy and Owen 2019).

A study analyzing the curriculum of school counselor preparation programs and programs' emphasis on preparing counselors to support students in their college admissions and college choice processes indicated only a third of programs include distinct college admissions counseling courses (Hornor and Oberman 2022). Programs were 3.5 times more likely to offer substance abuse or addiction counseling and twice as likely to offer marriage and family therapy courses than postsecondary preparation or college admissions counseling coursework (Hornor and Oberman 2022).

With the increase in job demands, stress associated with the job, and the lack of support, school counselors are experiencing burnout at alarming rates (Bardhoshi and Um 2021; Fye, *et al.* 2020; Mullen, *et al.* 2021; Randick Dermer and Michel 2018). One of the factors associated with this issue is the lack of job resources (Bardhoshi and Um 2021). Professional development is certainly construed as a resource and is a vital part of growth (Fischer, *et al.* 2018; Gubbins and Hayden 2021), and school counselors are not immune to this fact.

However, a paucity of research exists regarding college and career counseling professional development for counselors. In fact, the majority of programs that do exist for school counselors are stand-alone programs with a fee. For example, ASCA (2022) offers a college admissions specialist course and recognizes that school counselors are not formally trained in this area. Other higher education institutions offer certificate programs that add an additional year and a half of coursework for a hefty price tag (Tremblay 2014). The importance of college admissions counseling skills is not reflected in the curricula of initial certification programs.

Professional learning does, however, exist in the use of data to inform school counseling services (Anita and Kaffenberger 2018), trauma-informed practices (McIntyre, Baker, and Overstreet 2019), and social justice issues (Crosby, Howell, and Thomas 2018), but professional development for college and career counseling is almost nonexistent. With such a large impact on student success, especially for students from low-income households (Duncheon 2018; Reid and Moore 2008; Stipanovic, Stringfield, and Witherell 2017), one would think that the proper professional learning would be paramount and instrumental in college preparation programs as well as exist as a function of continued learning requirements.

Based on a 2017 report on effective professional development (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner), Bates and Morgan (2018) stated there are seven important elements of effective professional development that demonstrate a link between learning and a change in practice. The seven elements are:

- ◆ A focus on the content is primary with the addition of strategy alignment to convey content. For example, counselors need to work with students aspiring to attend four-year universities as well as students enrolling in community colleges (Stewart 1999). Strategies may differ.
- ◆ Active learning engages the learner with the materials and creates higher incidences of retention and practice (Kovarik, Robinson, and Wenzel 2022). For example, a counselor may review student transcripts and graduation plans to map out a plan for the student.
- ◆ Support for collaboration among counselors weigh heavily as there is influence in learning in social contexts (Bagheri and Yamani douzi sorkhabi 2020).
- ◆ Using models of effective practice means to show not tell, for example, via a demonstration or guided opportunity to use the new skill (Quick, Holtzman, and Chaney 2009).
- ◆ Coaching and support are needed to ensure practice. Coaches act as support in terms of content alignment and strategic alignment with contextual situations (Kho, Saeed, and Mohamed 2019).
- ◆ Feedback and reflection are required to deepen knowledge and comprehension. Counselors need time think about their practice, receive constructive feedback, and make changes in order to affect change (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner 2017).
- ◆ The best professional learning is job-embedded and ongoing or sustained so that counselors have the opportunity to identify issues and solve problems as they work with the changes (Opfer and Pedder 2011).

With these factors in mind, college and career readiness professional learning should be considered and developed.

Methodology

Numerous research designs have been utilized to investigate professional development needs. However, few research studies have focused on school counselors' preparation for college admissions counseling or the strategies counselors use to stay current on college admissions processes and trends. The complexity of the college admissions landscape necessitates a thoughtful construction of the research design (Leavy 2017). For these reasons, this study employs a basic qualitative research design, including qualitative structured interviews to gain in-depth insight about school counselors' preparation for college admissions counseling.

A basic qualitative design was utilized in this research study because the research questions focused on school counselors' preparation for college admissions counseling, strategies counselors leverage to stay current on college admissions processes and trends, and their professional development needs. Levy (2017) asserts a basic qualitative research strategy with structured interviews is particularly powerful in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of participants' perceptions, which was integral to this study. This research strategy enabled individual school counselors' rich personal reflections on their own college admissions counseling experiences to be compared with other participants in the study (Creswell 2018; Strauss and Corbin 2015; Leavy 2017).

The interviews utilized six structured questions that aligned to one of the study's three overarching research questions and utilized an open-ended question structure to encourage research participants to elaborate on their own perceptions of preparation for college admissions counseling. The interview questions focused on three important areas including: the graduate program preparation, strategies for staying current on college admissions processes and trends, and college admissions counseling professional development needs. By purposefully constructing the interview questions to be open-ended, informed by research literature, and aligned with one of the study's overarching research questions, the researchers ensured the interview questions were relevant and appropriate (Strauss and Corbin 2015). Each interview was recorded and transcribed to increase data trustworthiness (Creswell 2018). The research interviews were conducted via video conferencing software spanning a two-week period in 2021.

Research Participants

School counselors in a southeastern state in the United States were invited to share their perspective in individual research interviews. Eleven school counselors agreed to participate in the study. Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) assert that even a research sample that is small may provide great insight and information on the research topic. The research participants shared one critical characteristic that met the inclusion criteria for the research study—employment as a school counselor. The participants in this study were diverse in years of school counseling experience, school counseling grade level, geographic location throughout the state, gender, and race and ethnicity, increasing the likelihood of the representativeness of the sample. Interview participant pseudonyms and demographics are provided in Table 1 (on page 7). Pseudonyms are used throughout the article for the research participants.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2018) stated, "The process of data analysis involves making sense out of text and image data. It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data" (183). Following the conclusion of the first research interview, the researchers employed a thematic, constant-comparison analysis (Merriam and Grenier 2019). Using a thematic analytic strategy, the researchers engaged in multiple stages of coding, clustering, and classifying words to ensure saturation was reached and to gain insight about developing themes, categories, and patterns associated with school counselors' college admissions counseling preparation (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The researchers frequently revisited the participants' interview data utilizing a constant comparison analysis technique. This inductive analysis led to six themes emerging from the data that answered the study's overarching research questions and provided insight into school counselors' experiences. The themes were: lack of curricular coverage in school counseling graduate preparation programs; reliance on professional association professional development versus school district or school-based professional development needs; gaining knowledge about individual college and university admission requirements; counseling students and families on financial aid and scholarship processes; advising stu-

dents on standardized college admissions tests; and learning about new college majors and career fields.

While thematic analysis was a critically important component, the analysis of published research literature was also a key component of the analytic process. Previous research literature on college admissions counseling and professional learning was instrumental in assessing the data collected in the individual interviews and evaluating the research findings. Research literature assisted in better understanding and recognizing emerging themes, categories, and patterns in the study's data and helped in contextualizing the research findings.

Results

School counselors participating in this study answered a variety of interview questions designed to generate insight about the following three overarching research questions:

- ◆ How are graduate counselor education programs preparing school counselors for college admissions counseling?
- ◆ How do school counselors stay current on college admissions processes and trends?
- ◆ What are school counselors' college admissions counseling professional development needs?

Research participant responses were strikingly similar despite differences in years of experience, gender, race, and ethnicity.

School Counseling Graduate Program Preparation

School counselors were asked to describe how their graduate degree program's curriculum provided preparation in college admissions counseling. Each

Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics

Participant ¹	Counseling Experience (Years)	Gender	Race
High School			
Sabrina	28	Female	Caucasian
Emily	22	Female	African American
Amy	20	Female	Caucasian
Wendy	20	Female	Caucasian
Hanna	17	Female	African American
Blake	15	Male	Caucasian
Brenda	10	Female	Caucasian
Scott	2	Male	African American
Sofia	1	Female	African American
Middle School			
Sam	8	Male	Caucasian
Elementary School			
Sally	25	Female	Caucasian

¹ Names shown are participant pseudonyms.

of the study's participants held a graduate degree in counselor education, a requirement in the state for public school counselors. Participants attended eight different higher education institutions for their graduate preparation programs, spanning five different states. All eleven of the research participants reported they did not have a course on college admissions counseling. Sabrina, a veteran high school counselor shared, "I didn't have any college admissions counseling coursework at all." Similarly, an experienced high school counselor elaborated,

I guess we hinted on it or we touched on it, but my graduate program was more of the counseling aspect, helping students in terms of their emotional and social needs. Again, there was some touching on college admission, but most of that came along after I was actually hired as a school counselor. I don't feel like my program itself really prepared me sufficiently on college admission. I don't recall a course on that at all.

Scott, a second-year high school counselor commented:

Rarely did we talk about that portion in my program. We spent a lot of time with theories that I don't think we utilize as much as we thought we were going to [use in practice]. I think that information, if we would've had two or three classes in regards to college transitions, and what you need to do to be prepared, and what you need to do to pay for it, I think that would've been more beneficial in my specific role as a high school counselor. We didn't have one course on college [admissions counseling].

Forty-five percent of the participants mentioned taking a career counseling course that discussed aspects of college admissions. However, each of the participants noted it did not fully address their needs. For example, Amy, an experienced high school counselor shared,

I know I had career counseling. I don't recall that I did, but I remember feeling very unprepared for what you actually are going to be faced with [as a school counselor].

Brenda, a high school counselor, stated,

I think for my master's program, it mainly touched on how we would deal with the individual student versus, more of the counseling aspect to that, versus us preparing them for the college process. I know I did career counseling and I think that touched on kind of some college information.

Most school counselors shared they learned about college admissions counseling on the job once they were working in the field. For example, Sally, an experienced elementary school counselor shared, "more of what I learned was after I got into the job." Similarly, Sam, a middle school counselor, stated,

I'd say just like any other job, we learned more on the fly and on the job itself than we learned in the program.

Likewise, Brenda, a high school counselor commented,

I certainly think the information I've learned has been more in practice as a school counselor versus my master's program.

When asked to rate their graduate school counseling curriculum in preparing them to advise students on college admissions and financial aid processes, using a scale of one to ten, with one being the lowest, participant ratings averaged three out of a possible ten rating. Thirty-six percent of participants rated their graduate curriculum as a one, the lowest possible score. Ratings ranged from one to six, indicating school counselors believe their graduate school counseling programs did not adequately prepare them to assist students with college admissions and financial aid processes.

College Admissions Counseling Professional Development

When asked how they stay up to date on college admissions processes and trends, 100 percent of the study participants referred to organizations outside of their schools or districts, either professional counseling associations or college and university outreach initiatives. Fifty percent of the participants described engagement with professional associations like the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), or their regional or state counseling professional association.

Amy, an experienced high school counselor shared,

ASCA, the American School Counselors Association. So, professional development through associations. There's a network of counselors who we just, we see each other everywhere. So, we keep each other updated, but that's kind of a you're in it or you're not, kind of thing. It's just, if you have the ability to go to professional development or conferences or whatever is, I mean, because not everybody has the ability to do that. Then that's where you get the really intentional and the real deep, the good professional development.

Sam, a middle school counselor stated,

I am attached to a couple of different listerovs in the area that keep me up-to-date. I'm also a member of the state School Counselor Association. So, keeping up with them and what's going on at that level has been very helpful for me to keep as much information and what I would need for college and career admissions.

The other 50 percent of the study participants reported gaining knowledge from attending events sponsored by individual colleges and universities. For example, Brenda, a high school counselor stated,

I try to attend a lot of college information sessions. Especially the colleges that the most of our students are wanting to apply to attend and they have school counselor meetings. We also try to stay up to date with the changes in FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] and that...I wouldn't say there's any set professional development on that. That's kind of just personal...Like my personal wanting to learn more about it so I can help students.

Sabrina, a veteran high school counselor shared,

We used to have college breakfasts, but now we have college meetings on Zoom, but attending those sessions about the changes and the new programs, that's instrumental. I mean, that's hands down the best one. Another one is when a student comes in with something that you don't know, you've got to go to that college and look and see what that is.

Wendy, an experienced high school counselor, confided,

[Higher education institutions] give us the information on what they're expecting, what they need for their applications, what they're looking for, what their student populations are, how they're changing, that kind of stuff. So just word of mouth, a few trainings here and there, but there's nothing specific to just college admissions.

When asked to rate the professional development provided by outside organizations in preparing them to advise students on college admissions and financial aid processes, using a scale of one to ten, with one being the lowest, participant ratings averaged 7.7 out of a possible ten rating. Forty-five percent of participants rated outside organization's professional development as a nine, close to the highest possible score. Ratings ranged from five to nine, indicating school counselors find value in the college admissions counseling professional development provided by professional associations and higher education institutions.

However, when participants were asked to rate the professional development provided by their school or district in preparing them to advise students on college

admissions and financial aid processes, using a scale of one to ten, with one being the lowest, participant ratings averaged a three out of a possible ten rating, far below the ratings afforded to outside organizations' professional development. Forty-five percent of participants rated their school or district's professional development as either a one or two, close to the lowest possible score. Ratings ranged from one to five, suggesting school counselors did not feel that the professional development adequately prepared them to assist students with college admissions and financial aid processes.

Many participants reported their school or district did not provide professional development opportunities related to college admissions counseling. For example, when asked about the professional development opportunities provided by their school or district, Brenda, a high school counselor, stated,

Nothing about college admissions and FAFSA. And so, if your principal doesn't see value in it, it's very hard to get things moving along. Does that make sense? We do have staff development days. We have training on homelessness, we've done a transcript training, attendance, EEDA [Education and Economic Development Act], work-based learning careers, youth apprenticeship programs. We've done power school, quick easy to use power school tricks.

Amy, a high school counselor, shared,

There is built in time for professional development at the school level, but if you only have two or three counselors in your building, the professional development will not pertain to you. And sometimes you're excused from it and sometimes you're not. I think it would kind of fall on the same bucket as like the librarians. I mean, they don't have professional development at their school that's built just for them. So, I think that's where the most need is at school level because that will touch every school counselor.

Top Professional Development Needs

Research participants passionately shared their top professional development needs related to college admissions counseling. Interview participants identified four salient categories of professional development needs: 1) gaining knowledge about individual college

and university admission requirements; 2) counseling students and families on financial aid and scholarship processes; 3) advising students on standardized college admissions tests; 4) and learning about new college majors and career fields. The following sections present the data gained relating to each of the aforementioned areas to provide insight on school counselors' reported professional development needs associated with college admissions counseling.

College Admissions Requirements

Fifty-five percent of the participants rated gaining knowledge about individual college and university admissions requirements as a top professional development need. Counselors shared a strong interest in learning about key admissions criteria to best advise students. For example, when asked about her top professional development needs related to college admissions counseling, Brenda, a high school counselor, stated,

I think identifying coursework in high school. I think for counselors, it's important to have an awareness of college admission guidelines. And then advising students on coursework and importance of GPA in order to apply for some of those college programs.

Wendy, an experienced high school counselor, shared,

What their latest requirements are—it's very hard sometimes to navigate college websites. Popular questions, parents always ask us, they want to know what the minimum GPA is, so I think just the basics of their admissions processes. What are they looking at? What are they looking for?

Counselors also expressed the desire to develop a greater understanding of how colleges make decisions. For example, Blake, a high school counselor, shared,

I want to know what kids are getting in, this is just for me, that don't necessarily meet the GPA, SAT requirement. What percentage of those kids are getting in, and why are they getting in? That way, we can start focusing on those kids to kind of get in. To me it's like, I want to know to game. I want to understand why you're making the decisions you're making.

Financial Aid and Scholarship Processes

The majority (55%) of the participants also rated gaining skills in counseling students and families on financial aid and scholarship processes as a significant professional development need. This is illustrated by Amy, a high school counselor with more than 20 years of experience, who stated, "Financial aid and how to help students pay for college." Similarly, Scott, a second-year high school counselor, commented,

Probably some more help regarding scholarships and information that can help them pay for colleges, because we want to make it affordable. We don't want to be cost-prohibitive for them.

Standardized College Admissions Tests

Forty-five percent of the participants rated advising students on standardized college admissions tests as an area where they needed additional professional development. For example, Emily, an experienced high school counselor, asserted,

SAT, ACT score requirements because a lot of times the parents are very concerned about which test my students should take, which test is the better test? We still have parents with that old mentality for lack of better words, that everybody has to take the SAT. And what I try to tell parents, it's not like it was when I was in high school a hundred years ago and SAT was the only test around. You need to choose a test based on your child's academic history, their academic strengths. And some parents receive that better than others, but test scores, I would say, would be at the top.

New College Majors and Career Fields

Thirty-six percent of the participants rated learning about new college majors and career fields as a major professional development need. For example, Wendy, an experienced high school counselor, suggested,

Specific programs, something unique to the schools, some of the newer trends, like cyber security, things like that. We're usually struggling, trying to find if we have a kid that wants something very specific.

Similarly, Scott, a second-year high school counselor, shared,

American School Counselor Association's College Admissions Specialist Competencies

- Identifying the role of the school counselor in promoting college readiness
- Identifying academic habits that prepare students for postsecondary success
- Articulating how school counseling standards support the development of academic habits and postsecondary readiness
- Identifying ways to incorporate academic habits curriculum into classroom lessons, and small groups that support K-12 learning objectives
- Discussing the importance of collaborating K-12 to improve students' postsecondary success
- Strategizing ways to collaborate with your school counseling, teaching and administrative staff to keep your school focused on the culture of college and career readiness
- Listing factors associated with postsecondary success in early childhood, elementary, middle and high school, and explain how comprehensive school counseling programs can have an impact on these factors
- Discussing the importance of a college-going culture and recognize what fosters a college-going culture
- Analyzing your school's current culture regarding postsecondary readiness
- Discussing best practices for promoting a college-going culture that take into consideration demographic settings and special populations
- Recalling the basics of financial planning for college to help increase awareness around college costs and encourage parents to educate themselves early about the true cost of college
- Recognizing and discuss community college opportunities with students
- Employing best practices for writing letters of recommendation

What's going on in the future. I want to know what programs are you going to add? What can we look forward to? Those are the things that I think are beneficial.

Discussion

Study findings indicated most school counselors believe their graduate school counseling programs did not provide coursework in college admissions counseling or adequately prepare them to assist students with college admissions and financial aid processes. These research findings are consistent with the results from the College Board's most recent National Survey of School Counselors and Administrators, which found that 32 percent of counselors reported not having any graduate preparation in college admissions processes, and another 33 percent perceived their training to be inadequate (The College Board 2012). Interview results from school counselors participating in this study suggest an incongruence between the college admissions counseling curriculum in many school counselor preparation programs and the work responsibilities school counselors find themselves navigating in the school environment (Holcomb-McCoy and Owen 2019).

This presents a significant opportunity for graduate school counseling preparation programs to make important continuous improvements in their curricula

to integrate much needed instruction in the area of college admissions counseling. The few participants in this study who reported some exposure to college admissions counseling content within their graduate programs noted the subject matter was simply addressed as a topic within existing career counseling courses. The landscape of college admissions counseling and strategic enrollment management is becoming increasingly complex, requiring significant counselor knowledge, skills, and abilities. College admissions counseling practice can be greatly enhanced through developing an understanding of strategic enrollment management and insight into how colleges build incoming classes.

In recognition of these increasing expertise requirements as well as the fact that counselors allocate approximately 20 percent of their time to postsecondary guidance, counselor education graduate programs should provide instruction in college admissions counseling. The creation of a distinct course within the curriculum dedicated to ASCA's thirteen key competencies for being a college admissions specialist would meaningfully address the preparation gap being reported by school counselors (*see* the sidebar entitled "American School Counselor Association's College Admissions Specialist Competencies").

The study's results also provide valuable implications for practice for both professional associations and higher education institutions. Interview findings sug-

gest school counselors rely more on ASCA and AACRAO professional associations or college and university outreach initiatives to stay current on college admissions processes and trends due to the absence of school or district-level professional development opportunities. Knowledge of this scarcity of school-based professional development offerings creates a valuable opportunity for professional associations and higher education institutions to fill this gap by expanding professional development and outreach initiatives for college admissions counseling. Collaboration with state departments of education to provide support in delivering meaningful professional development opportunities for school counselors would provide needed college admissions counseling to the large number of school counselors who may not be afforded the work time to travel to professional association or university events.

Conclusion

Findings from this study provide helpful insights on school counselors' desire for college admissions counseling professional development. Participants identified four top professional development needs, including gaining knowledge about college and university admissions requirements, financial aid and scholarship processes, standardized college admissions tests, and learning about new college majors and career fields. Addressing these professional development needs is critically important. Preparing more school counselors to effectively counsel students on college admissions processes can aid in expanding college access and produce a stronger college-going culture (Holcomb-McCoy and Owen 2019).

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