

Article 18

Creative Partnering: Meeting the Counseling Needs of a Rural School

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Abstract

In the southern region of the United States, a creative partnership was forged between a small regional university and a rural public school system lacking the financial resources to employ school counselors in K-8 schools. The partnership placed school counseling interns in as many schools as possible to ensure that the social-emotional, academic, and career needs of students were met. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the program and describes the roles of those that were involved in making the program a success.

Several years ago the counselor education program at a small regional university partnered with a rural public school system to provide counseling services to students in grades K-8. As is so often the case in rural schools (Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006; Morrisette, 2000), a lack of state funding prohibited the system from hiring permanent school counselors. Therefore, school officials turned to the school counseling program at a local university for help. The university responded by initially placing two school counseling internship students in the school system. These two interns traveled to several schools each week meeting with students who had been referred by teachers and administrators. These referrals typically involved students with behavioral problems in the classroom. Thus, the beginning of a successful partnership between the university and the school system was born.

Years have passed since those first two interns paved the way for so many more. The structure of the program evolved significantly over the years, with interns no longer traveling to several schools just to meet with discipline referrals. The partnership eventually witnessed interns facilitating comprehensive school counseling programs (American School Counselor Association, 2005) in assigned schools. And, as an added bonus, the interns were awarded generous stipends by the school system for their service. Because we live in a time of unprecedented cuts to educational funding, this article provides a practical, detailed description of the mechanics of the program in hopes that

such a model may benefit others. This low-cost, low-maintenance program was very successful and could be of benefit to other economically hard-hit school districts in their efforts to continue to provide comprehensive counseling services to students.

Description of the Program

A small team of professionals collaborated on a regular basis to facilitate the successful operation of the program. The university liaison was a full-time faculty member in the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited counselor education program who also coordinated the school counseling program track. This faculty member worked closely with the school system's counseling supervisor, who also acted as the school system's liaison to the university, and an administrative director. Together, they scheduled program orientation dates and locations, arranged for student notification, and prepared materials to be distributed at orientation meetings. They also meet at the end of each academic year to evaluate the program, assess future needs, and plan for any program changes.

Several years ago, in an effort to recruit more interns into the program, the administrative director for the school system successfully lobbied her school board to dedicate funds that would award stipends to the interns at the rate of substitute teacher pay. This monetary incentive helped to grow the program, with the majority of school counseling interns choosing to utilize the program for their internship experience. However, it should be noted that the program was thriving before the existence of stipends.

The Selection Process

Students in the university's school counseling program are required to complete their 240 hour internship over two semesters, preferably beginning in the fall to coincide with the regular school year. Interns were required to apply to the partnership program the semester prior to beginning their internship. Once the deadline for program application passed, the university liaison contacted the school system to communicate the number of prospective interns for the coming semester. The school system liaison then scheduled an extensive orientation program with the applicants, which included an overview of the schools and grade levels available for placement.

The school system liaison, along with the administrative director, conducted individual interviews with the interns to determine their appropriateness for the program. Only students with a high degree of autonomy who were self-starters and extremely motivated made good candidates for this program. Students who required a high level of structure and continuous oversight were counseled to consider other placement options for completing the internship. Interns were also evaluated to determine which schools and grade levels would best fit their needs and interests. The university supervisor would often consult other faculty members about the strengths and challenges of program applicants to help guarantee the most successful placement. The school system liaison and administrative director were ultimately responsible for making all placement decisions and for notifying each intern of those decisions.

The Counseling Process

Because the need for counseling services was so great in the K-8 schools, a formal referral procedure and parental permission policy was instituted for individual and small group counseling interventions. School teachers and administrators were required to complete referral forms for students they judged to be in need of counseling services. These forms required parental signatures as well. Of course, students in crisis were always served regardless of the status of permission forms. This was the policy of the school district.

In the beginning, it was thought that the referral and parental permission policy might hinder the interns' ability to help the students who needed them most. However, time proved just the opposite. Parents or guardians who may have otherwise never been involved in the counseling process or made aware of their role in the students' problems came to school when called and, for the most part, seemed eager to assist. Involving the family in the counseling process only served to strengthen the work of the interns. This is not to say that it was a perfect system. Interns did work with students whose parents or guardians refused to participate in the process. This was not the majority, however. To avoid any legal ramifications, a form was sent home in the beginning of the school year announcing the existence of the partnership program and requesting that permission slips be signed and returned in the event that their child should need assistance during the year. The majority of the permission slips were always signed and returned.

Because the schools within this rural system were physically constructed with the intention of funding at least one school counseling position, all interns had access to a private office, telephone, and secretarial assistance. This helped insure the confidentiality of the families they served, as well as the opportunity to create a personal space that was conducive to the counseling process (Lonborg & Bowen, 2004). The office also afforded the necessary privacy for consultation activities, parent-teacher-counselor conferences, and on-site supervision.

Since interns were required to facilitate comprehensive, developmental school counseling programs, classroom guidance opportunities were not only provided, but mandated. A major initiative of the partnership program was the facilitation of the school system's anti-bullying campaign. For several years it was the partnership program that presented the bullying program to all schools within the system. Interns were also actively involved in facilitating Red Ribbon Week activities, which, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration (n.d.), is the nation's largest drug prevention program. And it was the partnership program that worked with students during the weeks preceding the administration of high stakes exams. The partnership program's leadership in conducting these initiatives, plus many more, exemplifies the critical role that interns came to play in the life of area schools.

The Supervision Process

Interns participating in the partnership program received a tremendous amount of supervision, as mandated by CACREP (2009). In addition to the weekly hour of on-site supervision and 1.5 hours of university group supervision, all partnership program participants were required to attend weekly group supervision sessions facilitated by the school system's counseling supervisor. This intense, 2-4 hour periods of sharing provided students with a unique opportunity to come together and garner support for the very

difficult and often tragic situations they were encountering daily in this very rural and very poor area. The supervision time not only afforded a window for extended professional development, but, because of the nature of the rural setting, challenged many students to work outside of their comfort zone. It provided an opportunity for personal growth and development as well. Over the years, many of the counseling program graduates have reported this supervision experience to be the most beneficial component of their academic program.

The Evaluation Process

Survey research methods were used to informally evaluate the effectiveness of the partnership program. At the end of the semester, questionnaires addressing the many aspects of the program were distributed to the internship students, site supervisors, and university supervisors. Using a Likert Scale that ranged from 1-5, program participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of the program on 20 different measures. The assessment also allowed participants to make additional comments not directly addressed by the questionnaire. Results were then summarized by the School Counseling Program Coordinator and discussed with the school system liaison. Program adjustments were then addressed based upon the outcome measures of the questionnaire. The school system liaison also informally interviewed many of the principals of the participating schools. This feedback was also used in making program modifications.

Changing the Culture

The presence of counseling interns in the K-8 schools was initially a culture shock for school personnel, parents, and students, as well as the interns. Never before had on-site counseling services been made available to the children in these K-8 schools. University supervisors, counseling interns, and the school system employees had to educate the population about the role and function of professional school counselors (PSC). Faculty meetings, parent-teacher conferences, newsletters, and one-on-one discussions were seized as opportunities to provide information about the many services that would be offered by the counseling interns. It did not take long for school personnel, parents, and students to realize the advantages of having a counseling intern on site, and slowly the idea of the partnership program began to take root; schools scattered throughout the system that were not assigned counseling interns began to request them.

Going Above and Beyond

To address the more intense supervision needs of beginning practicum students (Roberts & Morotti, 2001), the school system made the decision to convert several adjoining offices at one of its K-6 schools into a counseling laboratory and observation facility. Two-way mirrors, video equipment, and a sound system were installed. In a matter of a few months, the school system had managed to build a highly functional counseling laboratory at one of its schools. The university now had an on-site, school based facility to monitor the progress of the less experienced practicum students.

Summary and Conclusions

The counselor education program at this university is geographically situated in the middle of a very rural area with limited financial and human resources. However, what could be seen as a negative served as an amazing opportunity for two schools to come together and meet the needs of area children. Collaborative efforts paved the way for an internship program to provide on-site counselors-in-training to schools that would have otherwise gone without. Thousands of K-8 students have been helped over the years since the partnership program's inception, and the community is stronger because professionals reached out to each other to find solutions. This model should serve as an example for other struggling school districts and university school counseling programs looking to make a difference. Since the program's inception, the school system has hired a number of full-time school counselors with various sources of grant funding. We would like to think that the presence of the counseling interns over the years played a role in the school system's efforts to hire as many full-time school counselors as possible. This partnership highlighted the commitment of the university and the school system, in the absence of funding, to sustain school counseling programs designed to meet the personal-social, academic, and career needs of its K-8 students.

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