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**Virtual School Counseling**

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**Abstract**

The advent of virtual schools opens doors to opportunity for student services to be delivered via the Internet. Through the use of structured interviews with four practicing Florida virtual school counselors (FLVSCs), and a follow up survey, we examined the experiences and reflections of school counselors who are employed full time in a statewide virtual school. Findings highlight how FLVSCs differ in their activities from traditional school counselors. Implications for practice, training, and future research are suggested.

*Keywords:* virtual school counseling, online school counseling, virtual school counselors

### Virtual School Counseling

Online learning through virtual classes has expanded exponentially as a valid form of education for K12 populations and beyond. With this expansion comes the opportunity for teachers and more recently, school counselors to find employment in the virtual world. While teaching in an online environment has been well documented, the work activities of a virtual school counselor have not. The purpose of this study is to pull back the curtain and explore what virtual school counseling looks like in a virtual school that spans an entire state. We begin with an examination of how job duties differ between traditional and virtual school counselors, followed by an exploration of the effect technology has had on school counseling.

#### **Duties of Traditional and Virtual School Counselors**

Professional school counselors engage in a variety of activities to support student success within academic, career, and personal/social domains. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA; National Model, 2012) specifies that 80% of school counselors' time should be devoted to direct or indirect service delivery, through the school counseling program, individual student planning, responsive services (prevention and intervention), and 20% to system support of the school counseling program. However, often times this prescription by ASCA is not followed in practice. For example, Osborn and Baggerly (2004) found that many do not spend any time on career service delivery, and significantly less time on the career domain as compared to the other domains (Ancil, Smith, Schnck, & Dahir, 2012; Osborn & Baggerly, 2004). Another 2012 ASCA recommendation that is not followed in practice is the recommendation for a 250-to-1 student-counselor ratio, as compared to the 470-1 averaged national ratio. (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012).

Appropriate and inappropriate duties for school counselors are outlined in the ASCA National Model (2012). Some examples of appropriate duties include providing counseling, collaborating with teachers, interpreting various test results, and advocacy, with examples of inappropriate duties as substitute teaching for absent teachers, providing long term therapy, serving as a data entry clerk, and administering discipline. Paperwork, role ambiguity and caseload size also create challenges for school counselors (McCarthy, Van Horn Kerne, Calfa, Lambert, & Guzmán, 2010). School counselors whose time is spent more on inappropriate duties tend to be less satisfied (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Dodson, 2009; Kolodinsky, Draves, Schroder, Lindsey, & Zlatev, 2009; Pyne, 2011). Studies on principals' views of the role of the school counselors (Zalaquett, 2005; Fitch, Newby, Ballestero, & Marshall, 2001) indicate that while principals desire for school counselors to be involved with duties consistent with intended roles, school counselors are often involved with tasks that are unrelated to their training or to appropriate school counseling roles. Administrators' preferences for school counselor roles can differ across elementary, middle and high school levels (Amatea, & Clark, 2005).

To facilitate exploration of virtual school counseling, a composite job description of a traditional Florida school counseling position was compared to a current job description of a school counseling opening with the Florida Virtual School (FLVS, flvs.net; See Table 1). The job description of the traditional school counseling position is a composite synthesis of several different positions that were advertised on district websites across the state. We searched for school counseling position descriptions from various regions across the state, and chose those that had detailed descriptions as opposed to a brief paragraph. On the other hand, the FLVS school counseling opening was posted on the FLVS website. The school counseling program at FLVS is described on its website (FLVS, 2014, ¶ Advisement Center) to potential and current

students as “Your one stop shop for guidance services where career, college, scholarship, financial aid, advisement area, personal growth items, social skill building and other resources can be found!”

Common functions to both positions included academic planning, addressing students’ special needs, comprehensive guidance planning, contributing to school goals or rules, and serving as a liaison between the school and other key parties such as parents, teachers and the community. Activities unique to traditional Florida school counseling (TSC) position included career development, classroom guidance, policies/laws, new student orientation, professional growth, student records, and testing as unique functions, whereas those unique to the FLVS included community outreach, program evaluation, and staff training. The traditional school opening preferred three years of satisfactory teaching, while the FLVS position required three years at the secondary level (middle or high school) in guidance, or two years plus one year as a full time FLVS instructor. Both positions outlined required knowledge, skills and abilities, with similarities for knowledge about laws and policies and technology skills. The TSC position also listed foreign language skills as a possible requirement, whereas the FLVS position listed three additional skills, including high level skill development in interpersonal communication, organizational development and academic problem-solving. Although both positions were for school counselors, clear differences exist between the two.

### **Technology and Counseling**

Counseling continues to be shaped by the introduction and popularity of technological tools. The counseling profession as a whole has been very deliberate about the use of technology in delivering counseling services, especially in providing a traditional counseling session over the Internet (Carlson, Portman, & Bartlett, 2006; Currie, 2010; Horan, 2010; Khasanshina,

Wolfe, Emerson, & Stachura, 2008; Mallen, Vogel, Rochlen, & Day, 2005). In prior literature, counselors explored online counseling as a viable means of providing individual counseling (Barnett, 2005; Haberstroh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, & Gee, 2008), group counseling (Leibert, Smith-Adcock, & Munson, 2008; McAdams III, & Wyatt, 2010), online workshops (Fridici, & Arnold, 2009; Lynch, & Kogan, 2004), counselor education (Hayes, 2008; Tillman, Dinsmore, Chasek, & Hof, 2013; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012), and supervision (Dubi, Raggi, & Reynolds, 2012; Haberstroh & Duffey, 2011; Moorhead, Colburn, Edwards, & Erwin, 2013). Specific technologies for service delivery include: email (Bradley, Hendricks, & Kabell, 2011; Collie, Mitchell, & Murphy, 2001), and social media (DeLambo, Homa, Peters, DeLambo, Chandras, 2011; Froeschle, Crews, & Li, 2013; Lenz, Oliver, & Nelson, 2011). Our sense is that while conceptual and empirical work exploring the infusion of technology into counseling is emerging at a slow but steady rate, studies on the impact of technology for school counselors appear to be slower in coming. However, ethical standards and recommendations are being regularly updated as counselors seek to use technological tools to extend and enhance services. For example, the American Counseling Association (2014) recently approved an updated Code of Ethics, including an entire section (Section H) entitled “Distance Counseling, Technology and Social Media,” which includes the following topics: knowledge and legal considerations, informed consent, client verification, the distance counseling relationship, records and web maintenance, and social media.

### **Technology and the School Counselor**

During the fall, 2010, more than 6.1 million U.S. students took an online course (Going the Distance, 2011). Technology communications have progressed from the use of landlines to cell phones to chatting over the Internet. With these technological advances, distance education

has grown from single courses to entire academic programs being offered for secondary through doctoral programs. In addition to courses, programs offer student services in various online delivery formats, ranging from static information on a website to electronic interchanges using text, video and voice.

According to Wilczenski and Coomey (2006), school counselors use technology to “discuss sensitive, emotionally-charged information during counseling and consultation sessions” (p. 327). TSCs may face ethical dilemmas similar to those that VSCs face, including student confidentiality, dual relationships with faculty, parental rights, and acting on information of student danger to self or others (Bodernhorn, 2006). With respect to comfort and technology in 2006, Carlson, Portman and Bartlett reported that the majority (92%) of school counselors in their sample of 381 were at least somewhat comfortable using technology, although some of the technologies that were being examined would be considered outdated today (e.g., videocassette recorders, audiocassette recorders and projectors). More recently, Kimbel, Jacokes and Stone (2015) found that 28% of the 771 ACA respondents to a survey reported that they used technologies to delivery school counseling curricular activities such as lessons via technology at least occasionally, while 26% stated they provided counseling services through the use of technology. With regard to work-life boundaries, 67% if the participants stated that they answered emails that weren’t emergencies outside of their work hours. They also found that technology training had a positive influence on TSCs’ comfort with using technology – although, those with more training tended to check email outside of work hours more than those with less training, especially for females. Thus, results from that study suggest that many school counselors are utilizing technologies in delivering indirect counseling-related services. The



researchers looked at school counselors in public, private, and independent schools – but what about virtual schools?

### **Virtual Schools**

Online educational programs and virtual schools for K-12 children are growing in number across the United States. According to the Department of Education (DOE), from 2002-03 to 2004-05 there was an estimated increase of 200,000 student enrollments for technology-based distance education courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). A more recent report (National Education Policy Center, 2014) found 338 full-time virtual schools that enrolled about 243,000 students. As the number of schools and student enrollments increase, questions are raised regarding how to provide student services in the virtual learning environment comparable to the traditional classroom environment (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). The DOE (2009) even cautioned against applying findings to K-12 children in a recent meta-analysis and review of online learning due to the small number of studies using participants from this population. To date, no studies have investigated the role and impact of virtual school counselors in schools. However, Currie (2010) argued that traditional services will increasingly be delivered via technology, and that online student services should be the same quality as the services received by face-to-face students. In addition, Currie noted that current research fails to document the existence of effective program designs capable of training and preparing professionals to provide online school counseling services.

Empirical studies examining virtual school counseling are also very limited. In our review of the literature, only two studies (Baker, Parks-Savage and Rehfuss, 2009; Kimbel, Jacokes, & Stone, 2014-15) were found. In the earlier study, the researchers (Baker, Parks-Savage & Rehfuss, 2009) examined how social skills could be taught virtually through a multi-

user virtual environment (MUVE) to elementary students. In this study, the treatment group of eight met face-to-face for six sessions using a format of a brief discussion of a skill, followed by interacting with students in the group via avatars in the MUVE, then having time to move into other areas of the virtual environment and interact with students not in their group, and ending with a face-to-face debriefing in their small group. When compared with a wait control group, the students in the treatment group showed significant positive changes on four outcomes, i.e., problem behaviors, cooperation, responsibility, and self-control, with a moderate effect size ( $r > .40$ ), but not on assertion academic competence, or empathy. This study demonstrated that integrating technology into a traditional school counseling activity (group counseling) can have positive outcomes. In a more recent national study of ASCA members, the researchers (Kimbel, Jacokes, & Stone, 2014-15) found that school counselors' use of technology was limited to indirect student services and their own professional development, not in direct provision of counseling. One place where this may differ is in a virtual school setting that employs virtual school counselors.

**The Florida Virtual School.** The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is an online school founded in 1997 completely dependent on the use of technology to deliver educational and student support services. Similarly, FLVS school counselors are dependent on technology to help them perform the critical tasks and duties of their work. One of the assigned duties of FLVS school counselors includes personal and social counseling when needed. In this regard, the advent of virtual classes and even virtual schools links to the emergence of student support services, such as a virtual counseling center (Horan, 2010).

In his book, *Diffusion of Innovations*, Rogers (1962) categorized how people respond to the assimilation of innovation as (a) innovators, (b) early adopters, (c) early majority, (d) late

majority and (e) laggards. This framework provides an indication of common characteristics of individuals who are at different stages in the implementation of a new technology, namely Florida Virtual School. We speculated at the outset of our study that FLVSCs would be at the early adoption stage. These individuals tend to be progressive, grounded, and they value experimentation and novelty. They are also capable of taking an idea or concept and making it happen in their own way.

### **Study Purpose and Design**

The purpose of this present study was to explore the roles and experiences of early adopters of online education and counseling, i.e., school counselors who work at a state-wide virtual school. The intent was to better understand the day-to-day activities of virtual school counselors, as well as the positive aspects, challenges, unique skills, and ethical issues that these school counselors have experienced. To gain an in-depth understanding the work of these schools, we used a mixed methods, Sequential Exploratory design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Guttman, & Hanson, 2003) that employed a qualitative approach via structured interviews of FLVS school counselors and correlational analyses for the quantitative data obtained. Specifically, we focused on (a) reasons for applying to FLVS; (b) typical work schedule; (c) different knowledge, skills and attitudes for FLVS as compared to traditional school counseling; (d) how students contact FLVS school counselors; (e) common reasons for students' contacting the school counselor; (f) how the program is promoted; (g) most rewarding experience as a virtual school counselor; (h) three biggest challenges they've faced; (i) ethical concerns; (j) evaluating effectiveness; and (k) vision for the future of the FLVS school counseling program.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants included four of seven school counselors employed at the Florida Virtual School, who volunteered to be interviewed for a research project conducted at a large southeastern university. They were informed they would have the opportunity to review transcribed recordings of the interviews for accuracy of content and that they could add or modify their responses. The identity of the participants remained confidential to the graduate student conducting the interviews. The participants, all female, ranged in age from 30-42 years old. Three self-identified as Caucasian and one was Hispanic. They had been employed as a school counselor at FLVS for 1, 3, 3 and 7 years respectively. Participants had 7-18 years working as a traditional school counselor prior to working at FLVS. All were certified Florida school counselors, and two were also certified teachers. All indicated they were members of a professional association at the state or national level, two were members of both state and national associations. One indicated that she worked primarily with high school students, and the rest worked with both middle and high school students.

Participants were asked to identify which career development needs were most important to them at this time, including a write-in option, and they were allowed to select all that applied. The list of needs were based on previous research (Baggerly, 2002; Baggerly & Osborn, 2006) and on responses to the interviews. Out of the six options listed, only five were chosen, with the most commonly chosen item being balancing career and family ( $n = 3$ ), followed by professional development ( $n = 2$ ). The participants indicated they engaged in a variety of professional development activities within a given year, including attending webinars (100%), attending conferences (100%), and reading journals (75%).

### **Setting**

The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is a fully accredited K-12 grade online school program serving students nationally and internationally. FLVS was founded in 1997 as the country's first state-wide Internet based public high school. For the 2012-2013 year, the school had 7 school counselors and served over 410,000 students (Florida Virtual School® (FLVS®) District Enrollment Summary, 2012-2013). The actual number of counties may vary greatly per FLVSC. For example, one FLVSC is responsible for four counties that served 34,075 FLVS students, while another FLVSC serves 26 counties of 22,275 students. The FLVS school counselor to home-school student ratio ranges from 1:3000 to 1:5000, and varies by region based on the total enrollments in each area (C. Conidis, personal communication, September 5, 2012). This is an important distinction, as FLVS school counselors rely on traditional school counselors to provide advising/counseling services to students whose primary enrollment are in private or public school settings.

FLVS is part of the Florida public education system and serves students in all 67 Florida districts, plus the other 49 states, and more than 65 countries (Florida Virtual School® Summary, 2013-2014). FLVS also serves students, schools, and districts around the nation and world through tuition-based instruction, curriculum provision, and training. Data collected via the FLVS website indicates that students are actively engaged in FLVS 24 hours day, 7 days a week, with the lowest traffic (5,656) between five and six am on Sunday mornings, and the highest activity traffic on Tuesdays at 1 p.m. at 467,132 (Florida Virtual School® Summary, 2013-2014). As an online school, FLVS provides a unique platform for delivering counseling-related information through webinars. In 2011-2012, FLVS school counselors hosted 27 webinars with an average of 93 participants each time on topics such as advising, bullying, study skills, career decision-making, suicide prevention and awareness, cyber safety, STEM career fair

and time management. FLVS school counselors also provided 32 live home education information sessions, and 17 office hours to support FLVS instructors with an average attendance of 62 teachers per session (C. Conidis, personal communication, September 5, 2012).

### **Researchers in Context**

As first author, I am a counselor educator with over 17 years specializing in career counseling, with a doctoral degree from an APA-accredited program in Combined Counseling Psychology and School Psychology. I created the first virtual school counseling internship within the state of Florida with FLVS in 2007. I teach a master's degree course on technology and counseling, and teach online and hybrid courses. My colleague serving as the second author is a professor emeritus also from the Combined Counseling Psychology and School Psychology program within the Department of Educational and Psychology Learning Systems, College of Education. He has taught courses in personality assessment, research methods, and practica, and has served as the clinical training director and program coordinator. My assistant, serving as the third author, is a second year graduate assistant pursuing an MS/EdS degree majoring in career counseling.

### **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined four elements of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Several strategies were employed to increase the trustworthiness of our study. First, we considered credibility when designing our study, and employed a mixed methods approach to increase the likelihood that the information we were receiving about virtual school counseling was comprehensive and valid. Specifically, we used a "Sequential Exploratory" design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Guttman, & Hanson, 2003), in which qualitative data are collected first, and then followed by the collection of quantitative data.

Secondly, to achieve transferability, we provided extensive detail in the methods section of this paper so that the readers can determine the degree to which the FLVS virtual school counseling environment is similar to other online counseling environments. Third, to increase dependability, we were explicit and exhaustive in the description of our procedures to enable replication by others (Shenton, 2004). Fourth, to address confirmability, and to achieve triangulation of the investigators while decreasing the opportunity for bias, we first identified our expectations about what the answers to our structured interview questions might be, as a way to identify our biases. In addition, we independently reviewed all answers and created our own themes. We also included a graduate assistant and co-author of this paper as an independent reviewer. That is, we (the first two authors) compared our themes based only on the transcripts of the interviews and merged those themes by consensus. Our third author, who worked directly with the participants and conducted the interviews created her own set of themes, at which point, we then incorporated her themes into our existing thematic structure.

### **Instrumentation**

Based on a review of the literature and using a consensus approach, we brainstormed several open-ended and close-ended questions that would inform the practice of VSCs. The interview questions consisted of eleven items and are represented in Table 2. The initial online survey items were derived from the Florida School Counselors Survey (Baggerly, 2002) with other items added based on responses given in the interviews. In other words, we tailored the Baggerly (2002) survey to match the context of virtual school counselors. For example, we added a multiple answer question about which ethical dilemmas they had experienced because during the interviews, the ethical dilemmas reported were very few. Another question that was added was “How often does an advising issue turn into a counseling issue?” This is common

practice in the Sequential Exploratory design (Creswell et al., 2003) when, based on the findings of qualitative data in Stage 1, a researcher seeks to develop a quantitative instrument (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Examples of other survey questions included a division of time spent on various work duties, length of employment, technology comfort, program needs assessment and evaluation activities, personal career development and professional needs, and demographic questions.

### **Procedures**

Sequential Exploratory design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Guttman, & Hanson, 2003) is comprised of four main steps: qualitative data collection and analysis builds to the quantitative data collection and analysis, resulting in the final interpretation. Stage 1, the qualitative data collection and analysis stage, began with our inviting the FLVS school counselors to participate in telephone interviews with 11 open-ended questions. All seven FLVS school counselors were forwarded an invitational email describing the purpose of the study by the FLVS Instructional Program Manager, who was the supervisor of the school counselors, and along with the lead school counselor, validated our study and gave permission to conduct it. Four volunteered and were given my email address by the program manager who instructed each prospective participant to initiate contact with me. Upon receiving an inquiry, I explained the two-part nature of the study, i.e., participants would engage in a 30 minute interview about their experiences at FLVS, and, following the interviews, respond to an anonymous survey. My graduate assistant then contacted each volunteer FLVS school counselor individually to arrange the interview, which was offered by phone, Skype, or an online chat room which the school counselors regularly used. All participants chose the phone interview.



Following an introduction and confirmation of the participant's name, my graduate assistant used a scripted questionnaire of eleven questions to explore the daily experiences of FLVS school counselors. Sample questions included, "What were the top three reasons you applied for the position of a school counselor with FLVS?"; "What are the three most important challenges you've faced working as an online school counselor, and how have you addressed these challenges?" and "Have you experienced ethical concerns in your role as a virtual school counselor, and if so, can you elaborate?" All interviews lasted between 20-30 minutes and were taped and transcribed by my graduate assistant. At this point, my graduate assistant sent the transcripts back to the participants to allow them to add to the transcript or edit it. Once all the revised transcriptions were collected and reviewed, we moved to Stage 2. This included quantitative data collection and analysis via an online survey of quantitative questions that was sent to the participants. These questions not only included demographic requests about age and ethnicity, but also about the technology training they received, personal career development needs, how they used technology, and types of ethical concerns they had experienced. After we collected these data, we moved to Stage 3, Interpretation.

### **Interpretation and Analysis**

Prior to analyzing the qualitative data, we independently identified the answers we expected to see in the responses, as a way to identify our biases and outcome expectations, and to be in a better position to control them once we began the data analysis. When appropriate, we declared our biases and expectations heretofore in the findings and discussion sections, respectively. This might be seen as a means of bracketing, with a goal to "mitigate the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research and thereby increase the rigor of the project" (Tufford & Newman, 2012, p. 81). My colleague and I read the

transcripts independently, and then worked together to extricate the main points of the statements for each question. Once the analysis was complete, the researchers followed the advice of Seidel and Kelle (1995), who stated that “codes do not serve primarily as denominators of certain phenomena but as heuristic devices for discovery” (p. 58). Thus, we stepped back from the individual questions and responses and attempted to see a larger picture of the life of a virtual school counselor through the collective responses of the participants, with an eye towards parsimony.

### **Findings**

The observed responses obtained during the interviews are summarized and presented in Table 2. The findings from both data sources (i.e., interview and survey response) are integrated within this section.

**Living on the Cutting Edge of an Emerging Form of School Counseling.** We expected FLVS school counselors chose the job to be on the cutting-edge of technology and counseling, or based on a perception that there would be more counseling opportunities than in a traditional setting, as well as having a personality that enjoys risk-taking and new experiences typical of early adopters. We found somewhat more practical reasons in that FLVS school counselors chose the job due to convenience, as well as professional reasons such as being part of something new, and also as a reaction against inappropriate duties that were occurring in their traditional school counseling roles, such as substitute teaching or disciplinary actions. We expected FLVS school counselors to have a very flexible work schedule that would accommodate the availability of students, and for there to be a great deal of overlap between their personal and work lives. Instead, they reported having a set starting time and availability window, and each self-imposed an individualized structure (i.e., how they managed their day). For example, one FLVSC stated,

“And so usually, I try to keep a pretty set schedule of like a 7 to 4, 7 to 5, like a traditional day; but again there are some families I can only get at night so I’ll work my 7 to 4 and then have my family time. But then around 7 or 8 o’clock, I will actually get back on and work for a couple of more hours to return any phone calls that need to be made in the evening or e-mails that I can just get out of the way very quickly.”

**Adapting to the Use of Technology in Communicating With Students, Parents, and Traditional School Counselors.** Regarding performing the tasks of FLVS school counseling, new skills described by the participants included working independently, learning laws and policies relevant to the geographical area and learning to work with a different population, i.e., homeschoolers. Different from the researchers’ expectations of a need for advanced technological skills, the FLVS school counselors did not mention the use of technology as a new knowledge or skill. In fact, in the follow up survey, they all rated their technology skills as “proficient,” with the next highest level being “expert,” and rated their comfort level with technology as being mostly-very comfortable. In addition, three out of four reported seeking technology support on a quarterly basis, and all reported receiving technology training at least four times a year. We expected that students would be the principal initiator of contact with the FLVS school counselors, but found that FLVS school counselors were both active and reactive in interacting with students, reaching out initially but then also taking student and/or parent-initiated calls and emails. In the words of one FLVSC, “I reach out to all of our new students every week and that can range from about 10 kids to about 50 kids in a week to tell you the truth. So I definitely reach to our newest kids by phone and by e-mail, giving them resources about how to get started, just so they get off to a really good start.”

The primary focus of calls and emails initiated by students was on academic advising. Return calls for the school counselor were reported as common. On average, 72% of their time was allocated to home school students, 19% to public school students, five percent to private school students, three percent to charter school students, and one percent to other students. This was reiterated by one FLVSC, “We work with public school students and public school counselors and things like that: but primarily who we’re doing the course advising for and the most work with are homeschool families.” In the follow up survey, on a scale ranging from 1-4 (never too often), all participants indicated that advising sometimes turned into a counseling issue. They ranged in their responses to how often they participated in needs assessments to determine priorities and plan interventions from once a year (n = 1) to quarterly (n = 1) to monthly (n = 2).

**Promoting Services Offered by FLVS Counselors.** We expected that marketing of the FLVS school counseling program would take place via word of mouth, from teachers, webinars, and as part of the general marketing efforts of FLVS. We found the virtual school counselors used a variety of methods to promote their program, which include the website, personal connections, teacher e-blasts to students, social media, and an ambassador program in which the school counselors do community outreach three times a year. An FLVSC explains: “We have our website right off the main FLVS web page, so students can absolutely access it very easily by going to the page that they always do to find college, career advice, study skills and all that good stuff. But then we host webinars based on different things so you know in January and February we’re doing things on Bright Futures and financial aid and college things throughout the year. We also do suicide prevention, study skills, and time management.”

**Rewards Outweigh the Challenges.** Our expectations and the responses of FLVS school counselors were the same with respect to their most rewarding experience at FLVS, i.e., working with students throughout the day. All four alluded that helping students was the most important thing that they do, the reason they wanted to be a school counselor, and that they were achieving this at FLVS. We expected their greatest frustration to be related to the work context, i.e., the isolation and not feeling connected, technological issues and boundary issues due to being online at non-traditional hours. Virtual school counselors did not experience some office challenges of traditional school counseling, such as paperwork, role ambiguity and caseload size (McCarthy, Van Horn Kerne, Calfa, Lambert, & Guzmán, 2010). FLVSCs did not complain about their caseload, which far exceed those prescribed by ASCA. Although, it should be noted that types of cases and their associated time demands by other virtual school counselors may differ from those of TSCs.

The main frustration reported by all FLVS school counselors concerned service goals, particularly one which concerned consultation with parents, students and traditional school counselors regarding course selection and helping students access the courses they want (see Table 1, job description within Academic Planning section). Specifically, all participants identified frustration when students were denied access to courses, that is, when a student is forbidden entry into an online course by their traditional brick and mortar school. Denial occurs when a school counselor in a traditional school setting does not approve a student in the traditional school to take a virtual course with FLVS. The FLVS school counselor is then placed in conflict with an in-school counselor and then the FLVS school counselor must serve as an advocate for the student. One FLVSC explained, “the FLVS counselor’s job is to help fight for that student’s right to take our courses, so that one’s hard because it does kinda put us in the

middle of the student and maybe the public school, if the student wants to take our course. So navigating that and keeping a good open relationship, with maybe a school counselor or a public school that maybe does not want a student to take a course with us is probably the most challenging for me because I'm not so good at confrontation there.”

Other frustrations included lack of socializing with peer counselors and not being able to read between the lines on phone calls. Three of four of the FLVSCs identified as one reason for wanting to work as an online school counselor as not having to engage in inappropriate duties often experienced when they were TSCs. For example, they reported being freed from some inappropriate activities such as bus duty and substitute teaching. This result supports earlier findings that traditional school counselors who engage in inappropriate duties as described by ASCA tend to be less satisfied (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Dodson, 2009; Kolodinsky, Draves, Schroder, Lindsey, & Zlatev, 2009; Pyne, 2011). Thus, regardless of the setting, it appears school counselors are frustrated when asked to engage in duties that are inappropriate for their training and role.

**Clarifying Ethical Standards in FLVS Counseling.** Regarding ethical and performance standards, due to the number of ethical concerns being discussed in the field about online delivery of counseling services, we expected many types of concerns in this realm to be identified, including specific examples from their experience. However, three out of four did not mention any ethical concerns they had experienced as a FLVS school counselor. They did acknowledge there were procedures for handling issues such as abuse, neglect and suicidality. For example, “We have the same type of issues going on as in the traditional school, and we are very cautious we are calling in you know about abuse cases, suicide threats, things like that, so those are sometime tricky; but it's the same process and procedure.” The online nature required

some creativity and provided a unique opportunity to assess the environment. For example, in one interview, a FLVS school counselor spoke of how a student used the webcam to show her that there was no food in the house.

On the follow up survey, all participants endorsed the following ethical situations they had encountered as an FLVS school counselor, some of were similar to those most commonly identified by traditional school counselors in Bodenhorn's (2006) study, i.e., student confidentiality, dual relationships with faculty, parental rights, and acting on information of student danger to self or others.. Unique ethical concerns included difficulties in assessing stress and other variables in an online environment, as well as acting on suspicion of abuse or neglect or suicidal concerns. Although, it was clear from the interviews that they had established protocol for ensuring student safety even when the distance was several hundred miles away. Other ethical concerns included: acting on information of danger to self or others; confidentiality of student records, denied student access to FLVS services (from brick/mortar schools); special needs/accommodations/inclusion; and student confidentiality and/or privacy. Three also endorsed multicultural issues and student identity as being ethical issues they had encountered.

**Ongoing Improvement of Job Performance and Services.** We expected FLVS school counselors to evaluate their program in ways similar to traditional schools, comparing their program to the ASCA model, using ongoing surveys and systematic feedback from students and parents. We found that they evaluated their program and effectiveness with respect to timeliness of responding to ticket requests for help, satisfaction surveys, student/parent feedback and from the tone of individuals on the phone. One FLVSC reflected, "I know my number will be up high this week; but that's how we make sure we are being effective and also just phone calls we get from families or follow-up e-mails. ....It's just those little e-mails that make you feel like

I'm effective. I'm helping lots of people every day so that's kinda how we evaluate ourselves through our tickets and little recognitions we receive." All recognized a need for developing a more comprehensive and systematic evaluation approach.

**A Vision of the Future of FLVS Counseling.** We expected FLVS school counselors to be looking beyond the academic advising function to providing more innovative student support services such as personal adjustment and career counseling, using the venue of online learning to reach new student populations. Most FLVS school counselors indicated that they wanted to keep the program achieving its current goals including quality of service, and also spoke about wanting to achieve the ASCA model. One person talked about increasing webinars and group counseling experiences in the future. We thought this quote from one of the FLVSCs gave insight to that vision: "We wanna have all of those programs, the personal, social, academic, all of those things that will help and support students. So mine (vision) is just to make sure we are doing the best job we can to make sure we are giving students what they need to be successful no matter what their path."

### **Discussion**

In this qualitative study, four professional school counselors, employed full time at the Florida Virtual School, took part in individual phone interviews followed by a survey. In terms of Roger's (1962) taxonomy, these participants would be regarded as early adopters (i.e., just after innovators on the cutting edge) with respect to assimilation of educational innovation. As researchers, we came away from the information they provided impressed with their dedication to their students (all 149,000 of them) and the FLVS school counseling program. Going into the study, we realized that we had very little pre-conceived notions on what virtual school counselors did, but we reasoned that they would have a role similar to traditional school



counselors (TSCs) except in a different environment. As we reflected on the findings, we found their experiences provided a new frame of reference for understanding the unique experiences of VSCs.

FLVS school counselors may be classified as early adopters and pioneers (Rogers, 1962) within the field of school counseling. While many of their activities and goals are similar to the ASCA National model, there are also many differences. For example, instead of managing the ASCA-recommended 250:1 ratio of students to counselor, or the national averaged ratio of 470:1, these school counselors are managing a 3000:1 (i.e., the ratio for homeschool students only; actual number is much higher when the total enrollments for an assigned region are calculated into that amount (C. Conidis, personal communication, September 5, 2012)). The student body they serve is considerably different from those in a traditional school setting. FLVS school counselors appear to spend the majority of their days on the phone with students and parents, whereas many traditional school counselors spend significantly less time on service delivery (Osborn & Baggerly, 2004). They spend the majority of their time with academic advising.. Online school counselors use a variety of means to interact with their students, such as phone, text messaging, and online chatting, whereas traditional school counselors may rely more on face to face and email for communication. The majority of students are home-schooled students without access to a school counselor. Also, these FLVSCs report addressing needs are not equally balanced among academic, career and personal-social; they spend their time mostly on academic concerns. A third new frame of reference is professional identity, and learning where one “fits” within the school. Due to the entire school being online, VSCs might not establish ongoing relationships with teachers and peers as they would in a traditional school setting.

**Implications**

With access to online education increasing, opportunities for virtual school counselors are likely to increase as well. This trend has training implications for counselor education programs. For example, how can counselor education programs prepare students to thrive in a virtual school counseling environment in addition to a traditional school counseling environment? One option might be to include a practicum in an online counseling environment or a course specific to the use of technology in counseling. Additionally, given the integration of technology into most people's lives, counselor education training programs could intentionally infuse technological issues into all courses comprising the curriculum. For example, ethical concerns with technology should be addressed in an ethics course, the issue of access to technology should be included in ethics as well as a multicultural course. Career development courses should include online information sources, and assignments could be designed to include technological elements, such as creating digital narratives, conducting role plays online using a voice chat, or making interactive presentations. Another focus might be on helping VSCs advocate for more balance in their roles to move beyond academic advising into other areas outlined by the ASCA model. Finally, ways of communicating empathically in an online environment would be useful.

**Limitations**

This study was an exploratory investigation into the emerging practice of online school counseling. Online school counseling may be regarded as in the stages of experimentation and early adoption. Limitations of this study are noted with respect to internal and external validity of the study. With respect to internal validity, the use of structured interviews with a set of given questions might have limited the amount of useful and relevant information that participants

might have shared had a non-structured interview or multiple interviews been used. Sampling bias is also a concern, as only four of seven virtual school counselors volunteered to participate. For external validity, with a sample of four school counselors in one online school, a major limitation of our study could be a lack of generalizability of findings to school counseling in other virtual school environments. However, given the consistent growth of online education in Florida, as well as the consistency of responses across our sample, we believe that the findings will be of use to other states considering the adoption of providing virtual school counselors to assist students. Another limitation was in applying sequential exploratory design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Guttman, & Hanson, 2003), an approach designed for a larger sample, to our small sample of four out of seven volunteers. While a larger sample would have been more appropriate for this design, it was not a luxury that we had with such a small population. Nevertheless, we believe we obtained reliable and valuable information about the practice of virtual school counseling from these four participants.

### **Future Research**

The findings of our study raised important questions for future research. What is the role of school counselors employed by a virtual school as seen by students, teachers, administrators, and parents? How do virtual school counselors sustain performance and manage stress? What is the relationship between VSCs' job performance, career satisfaction, and future career decisions? One of the VSCs was very interested in delivering varied counseling services (e.g., individual counseling, group counseling, large group webinar) online. Outcome studies examining the impact of these interventions on client issues (e.g., stress management, career decidedness, depression) have yet to be explored thoroughly. Finally, to increase generalizability, a national

study of virtual school counselors will help us better understand how we can enhance and expand the school counselor's impact through the use of today's technologies.

### **Conclusion**

We embarked on this line of inquiry with four virtual school counselors to gain insights into the practice of virtual school counseling. Our impression is that offering comprehensive school counseling programming in this environment is as challenging as it is demanding, and differs, in some ways greatly, from a traditional school counseling model. The job of the virtual school counselor is not regulated to time and place, and requires self-discipline to do it well. We were impressed that as innovators, these VSCs were not content to maintain the status quo in their current job duties, but were looking for creative ways to use their unique environment to meet the needs of the whole student. They were also very aware of the ASCA model and had a vision to integrate more of the values and standards espoused in that model into their practice of virtual school counseling. Therefore, we leave with the distinct impression they are very effective in their respective placements and are greatly appreciated by their primary clients - students and their parents. As practicing school counselors, counselors in training, counselor educators, supervisors, and district directors of school counselors, learning more about the nature of the job as well as individuals who adapt well to such an environment is both exciting and informative as we continue to consider professional development implications for current and future professional school counselors.

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