



Training School Counselors in Challenging Times: A Faculty's View on Creative Strategies to Meet Practicum and Internship Requirements

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest mark current times worldwide. This reality poses diverse challenges for school counseling programs, faculty, and school counselors. Likewise, these unparalleled times continue to leave us all with many questions and minimal guidance on how the training of school counselors will be impacted by the public and private school COVID restrictions, particularly for those attempting to complete their practicum and internship requirements. However, school counselors are in demand more than ever to help meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students. Therefore, this paper provides an overview of Barry University Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Masters of School Counseling program. The authors describe the school counseling specialization course requirements with a specific focus on training for students in the practicum and internship course. Additionally, they discuss several challenges and creative strategies that could be utilized in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Recommendations for policymakers, faculty, programs directors, school counseling supervisors, and future development of school counselor training are depicted.

Keywords: school counseling, creative strategies, practicum, internship, policy, recommendations

Introduction

The spread of the COVID-19 virus, often referred to as the coronavirus, forced many schools to implement emergency closures of all in-person courses. The rapid change in course delivery and social distance restrictions marked unprecedented challenges for many colleges and universities (Lederer et al., 2021). In addition, the rapid spread of the virus caused uncertainty for many local and national education accreditation boards who develop and impose standards that many primary schools, universities, and specialization programs adhere to. Consequently, this forced many universities to review and, in some cases, implement emergency shutdown plans to meet the needs of students (American School Counseling Association, 2021). However, many of those plans addressed supporting students' mental, physical, and social health within the primary school or university. For instance, plans and guidelines for working in a virtual or distance learning environment plan were

quickly implemented for school counselors (ASCA, 2021). However, limited attention focused on the continuous training of school counseling students to meet their practicum and internship graduation requirements during these challenging times.

Worldwide, school counselors' education has been facing diverse challenges related to its development as a worthy independent professional practice, its capacity to generate and communicate its body of knowledge across borders and create ongoing development opportunities for its practitioners (Vera & Jimenez, 2015). In addition to these challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new education and training challenges for school counseling programs, faculty, and school counselors-in-training. Likewise, these unparalleled times continue to leave us all with many questions and minimal guidance on how school counselors' preparation in the 21st century will evolve to continue meeting the needs of school counselors-in-training, specifically those attempting to complete their practicum and internship requirements.

School counseling specialization

Child and adolescent counseling in the school setting is an ever-increasing area for counselors. Today, school counselors are in demand more than ever to help meet students' academic, social, and emotional needs (Jones, 2020). Before the pandemic, students were already experiencing substantial mental health concerns, putting both their health and academic success at risk (Lederer et al., 2021). In addition to the substantial mental health concerns students already faced, the global pandemic of COVID-19 has brought about many new changes to countries worldwide, which could have long-term effects on our youth and adolescents (Pincus et al., 2020). Therefore, the school counselor-in-training must be able to deal with students referred by parents or program administrators and make appropriate recommendations.

Moreover, teachers often make referrals or require advice. The counselor must know how to work with the child and enable the teacher to interact with the student effectively. The caretakers in their lives often influence young children's behaviors. The school counselor must know how to help parents and other caretakers manage behavior and enhance development whenever possible. Similarly, the school counselors must know how to deliver effective developmental counseling programs outside of the traditional organizational setting. However, the particular skills necessary to work with children outside of the traditional organizational face-to-face counseling setting are often not explicitly taught as they are needed today. For instance, the need for new teaching delivery modalities of school counselor training includes face-to-face, online synchronous, and asynchronous course delivery. Likewise, there is a need for new teaching strategies and techniques suitable to online school counseling education for practicum and internship students. Therefore, the counseling faculty at Barry University implemented creative strategies to meet the training needs of counseling students.

Barry University Counseling Program, school counseling specialization

Barry University's Counseling Program is accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP). CACREP accreditation recognizes that the content and quality of the counseling programs have been evaluated and meet standards set by the profession (Barry University, n.d.). This notable accreditation means:

- Students meet state license requirements in Florida and allow students to pursue opportunities in other states in the United States.
- Our programs have been evaluated and meet or exceed national standards.
- The focus of our programs is on professional counseling.
- Our graduates have met prerequisites for credentialing and are ready for entry into professional practice.
- Our graduates have a competitive advantage when seeking field placements and professional employment in today's job market.

Furthermore, Barry's school counseling specialization provides students with the knowledge and skills to develop, implement, and evaluate a PK-12 comprehensive developmental counseling program (Barry University, n.d.). Particular attention is given to the multiple roles and responsibilities of a school counselor in a school setting. Nevertheless, like many counseling programs at universities, the COVID-19 pandemic forced all course delivery to virtual synchronous or asynchronous modalities. This shift resulted in a new teaching delivery model for all courses, including practicum and internship.

For the School Counseling Program, we have been developing a FlexHybrid Learning Model to meet the needs of students while adhering to the CACREP Standards. According to this new flex learning model, students select whether to attend in-person or remotely. Some students may participate fully remotely, others may choose to participate entirely in-person, and others may choose some online and some in-person participation. Physical attendance is not required. Flex Learning allows the education experience through dynamic interactive technology. The University Department of Extended Learning drives this model, a Division of Academic Affairs, and the Counseling Department Directors to provide learning momentum, responsive instruction, personal communication, and technical support. It promotes a safe culture for students, faculty and staff while enhancing the student experience and learning.

For school counseling students in the practicum and internship courses, they gain experience both through the on-campus Care Center providing in-person or virtual counseling services using Webex. In addition to maintaining a practicum and internship at a local primary school designing psychoeducational lesson plans, implementing classroom counseling lessons, providing short-term individual counseling services, and consulting with parents and school administrators. From experience over the past year, counseling children and adolescents virtually pose

various challenges for some school counselors-in-training. However, there has been some success and creativity with telehealth school counseling, such as all school counseling students in the practicum and internship courses receiving telehealth training and certification within two weeks of moving to fully online courses during the start of the pandemic. Furthermore, students gained experience conducting virtual counseling sessions with students and clients in the Care Center. Before this school, counselors-in-training practicum and internship experience mostly focused on direct psychoeducation counseling lesson plans, counseling, and consulting in the school setting. With the pandemic, we have learned that school counseling can be done successfully in a virtual learning environment. Research surrounding these differences is needed on the best approach to providing school counseling services to children and adolescents in a virtual class setting.

Recommendations

From the experience presented in the article, the following school counseling training recommendations are provided.

(1) Policymaking

It is essential to facilitate ongoing dialogue among professional counselors, counseling associations, counseling training institutions, and policymakers to design public legislations that support school counseling service creation and counselor practitioner development. Establishing a school counseling public system and supporting policies and financial resources are most needed to guarantee school counseling service to all.

(2) Counseling educators

Based upon current realities, it is necessary to develop continuing education programs that facilitate school counselors' fast adoption of telehealth and psychoeducational counseling modalities for school counseling services. The development and use of new technologies suitable to the school counselor services are urgently encouraged.

(3) School counseling leadership

Program directors, school counselors, supervisors, and public officials should come together to consistently evaluate school counseling program quality and effectiveness, especially within the pandemic and post-pandemic reality, and make decisions about improvement according to the evaluation results.

(4) Training programs

It is imperative to collaborate with state officials and school district officials to develop a counseling curriculum that attends to the development of a counselor's delivery of counseling services virtually. For instance, designing school counseling specialization course curriculum to include the use of virtual software and tools provided by public and private school districts to ensure school counselors are professionally trained and prepared to provide virtual counseling services in an in-person and virtual learning environment.

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