



01.07.2023

[A Phenomenological Investigation of Universal Mental Health Screening: Making Meaning for School Counseling](#)

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PURPOSE OF THE STUDY In the U.S., K-12 schools have experienced a double-pandemic of COVID-19 and ongoing systemic racial injustices. Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), including universal mental health screening, can assist students through these pandemics. While research on MTSS for school counselors is ample, school counseling literature about universal mental health screening is limited. This phenomenological investigation studied participants' experiences with universal mental health screening recruiting multidisciplinary, school-based team members, particularly school counselors.

HOW THE RESEARCH ADVANCES THE PROFESSION Two themes emerged from this study.

- Theme 1: Universal mental health screening shifting the school culture, with subthemes (a) prioritizing prevention, (b) increasing collaboration, (c) using data, (d) gaining a holistic perspective and (e) advocating for school counseling.
- Theme two: working through roadblocks, with subthemes (a) liability, (b) screener concerns, (c) resistance, (d) lack of time, and (e) staff wellness.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, youth mental health is in a state of crisis, and the AAP (2021), U.S. Department of Education (2021) and the U.S. Surgeon General (2022) recommended the implementation of MTSS, universal mental health screening, and the use of school-based multidisciplinary teams, including school counselors. Research on UMHS and school counseling is burgeoning; overall, scholars are calling for the expansion of universal mental health screening research pertinent to school counseling (Donohue et al., 2016), and due to the highly collaborative nature of universal mental health screening (e.g., the reliance on school-based, multidisciplinary teams), a natural next step in examining universal mental health screening in a group context (e.g., focus groups), including a range of individuals—school counselors and allied school-based professionals—integral in universal mental health screening implementation. Thus, the present study examined the lived experiences of school counselors and other multidisciplinary team members implementing universal mental health screening—providing novel insight to meet the needs of students, schools and communities.

GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN PRACTICE Practicing school counselors can use universal mental health screening to shift the climate and culture of their school, and to do this work in tandem with other allied, multidisciplinary school-based universal mental health screening team members. As such, school counselors should recognize their role as members of multidisciplinary teams and utilize the team-based approach to work through UMHS barriers, including time, supports post-screening, mental-health stigma, and so forth. In this way, collaborating with colleagues allows school counselors to break out of silos in which they are the staff primarily responsible for social/emotional wellness in their school, but instead share this emphasis with the universal mental health screening team and even

across the school to more comprehensively, efficiently and effectively serve all students through a team-approach. As such, through this universal mental health screening-based collaboration, school counselors are better equipped to overcome the struggles inherent with universal mental health screening and to shift the culture of their school to maximize their efforts in prevention, use of data, gaining a more holistic perspective and advocating for school counseling roles. School counselor education preparation programs can ensure teaching content on universal mental health screening, including types of screeners, ethical and legal considerations, and interventions post-screening (e.g., evidence-based practices), within the context of MTSS. Due to the robust results in this study and previous scholarship related to school counselors as collaborators, preparation programs might include cross-program collaboration related to universal mental health screening. For example, allowing school counselors to learn about universal mental health screening alongside their school social work, psychology, nursing and administrative colleagues would enhance the potential for future collaboration in the field.

EQUITY DIMENSIONS While scholars have advocated for school counselors' MTSS work be culturally sustaining, affirming and antiracist (e.g., Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2020), members of the present sample did not highlight these topics when discussing universal mental health screening. Future researchers could inquire about the relationship between universal mental health screening and culturally sustaining, affirming, antiracist practices in the future. How are students'/family's cultures and voices incorporated and valued during screening? How do concepts of privilege and systemic barriers impact universal mental health screening planning and implementation?