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ASCA National Model Implementation and Appropriate School Counselor Ratios Promote More Informed College Decision-Making

In a study partially funded by an ASCA Research Grant, researchers found that graduating 12th-graders attending schools with lower student-to-school-counselor ratios and more complete implementation of the ASCA National Model were more engaged in higher-quality college counseling learning activities. These activities helped students make more informed college decisions.

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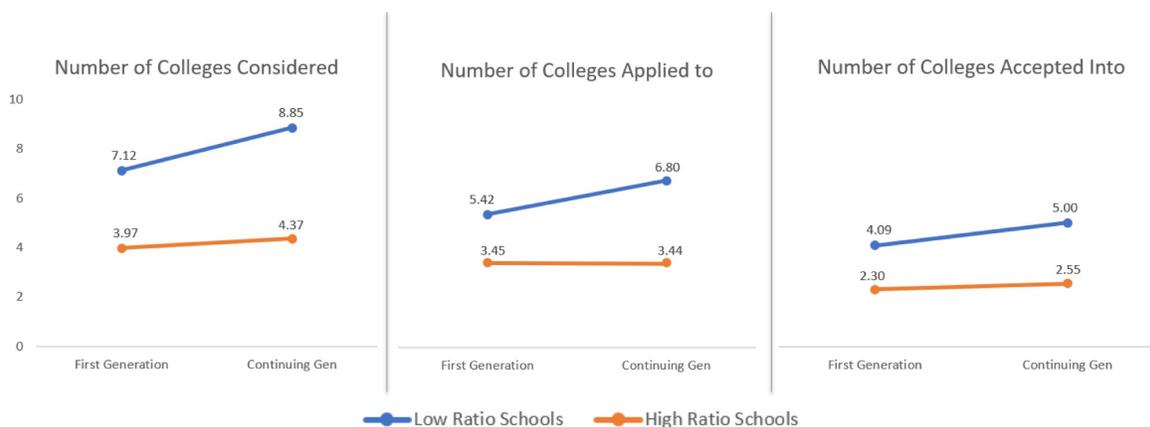
Research Questions

1. Do graduating 12th-graders attending schools with lower student-to-school-counselor ratios engage in a wider and more in-depth range of college counseling learning activities?
2. Do graduating 12th-graders attending schools that have more fully implemented the ASCA National Model engage in a wider and more in-depth range of college counseling learning activities?
3. Do graduating 12th-graders attending schools with lower student-to-school-counselor ratios make more informed college decisions?
4. Do graduating 12th-graders attending schools that have more fully implemented the ASCA National Model make more informed college decisions?

Summary of Findings

The short answer to each of the four research questions is “yes.” Graduating 12th-graders attending schools with lower student-to-school-counselor ratios and more complete implementation of the ASCA National Model were more engaged in higher-quality college counseling learning activities. These activities helped students make more informed college decisions. Further, schools with lower ratios were more likely to be more fully implementing the ASCA National Model. More than 300 12th-graders, attending 10 different high schools across the United States, participated in this online research study. The sample was highly diverse in terms of minority status (nearly half of the students are minority students), socioeconomic status and parent education level, first-generation college students, gender, region of the country where the high school is located and type of high school attended. All participating students were at least 18 years of age, on track and within one to two months of graduating from high school, had been accepted into either a two- or four-year college and were planning to attend that college for the upcoming fall semester 2018. All student data were collected after the 2018 National College Decision Day (May 1), except for one high school where data were collected in late April. All college-going students participating in this study had already made their college decisions before providing any data to researchers.

Helping or Hurting College Admissions for All Students: Ratios Matter



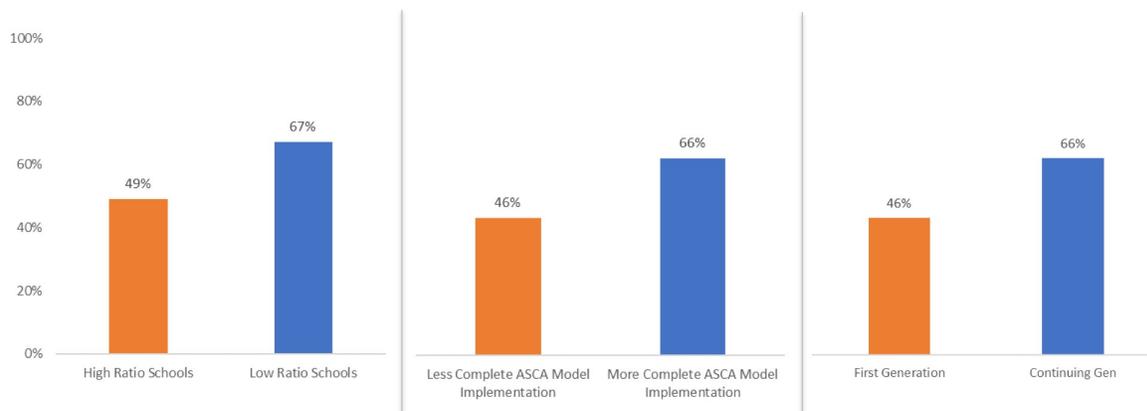
Continuing-generation students (defined as students who have at least one parent with a two-year college degree or higher) attending low-ratio schools (278 students or fewer per school counselor) considered, applied to and were accepted into more colleges than continuing-generation students attending high-ratio schools (300 or more students per school counselor). Further, first-generation college students attending low-ratio schools considered, applied to and were accepted into more colleges than continuing-generation students attending high-ratio schools.

Students attending low-ratio schools (both first- and continuing-generation students) considered, applied to and were accepted into approximately the optimal numbers of colleges recommended

for high school seniors by The College Board.

Closing the College Knowledge Gap for First-Generation Students: Lower Ratios and More Complete ASCA National Model Implementation Helps

Percent Correct of the 11 College Knowledge Items



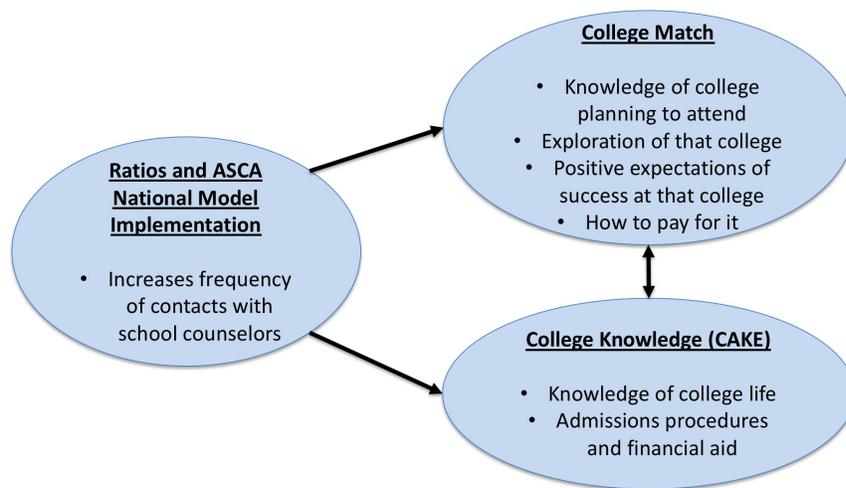
Results are statistically significant

Taking a subset of items on the College Admissions Knowledge Evaluation Test (Poynton et al., in press), first-generation students on average scored significantly lower than continuing-generation students. First-generation students averaged 46 percent correct compared with 66 percent correct for continuing-generation students. However, students attending low-ratio schools had 67 percent correct compared with 49 percent correct for students in high-ratio schools. Also, students attending schools that had more fully implemented the ASCA National Model had 66 percent correct compared with 46 percent correct for students attending schools that had less-complete implementation of the ASCA National Model. Multiple regression analyses supported the very influential role low ratios and higher ASCA National Model implementation play in helping first-generation students learn comparable levels of knowledge about colleges almost equal to what continuing-generation students know.

Lower student-to-school-counselor ratios and higher ASCA National Model implementation promoted more frequent meetings and more personalized relationships between students and their school counselors. Students in low-ratio schools with high levels of ASCA National Model implementation met more often with their school counselors for college and career counseling activities (e.g., completing their FAFSA and developing a plan for how they will pay for college) and felt that their school counselors knew them on a more personal, individualized level. They were not just another face in the crowd (Public Agenda, 2010). **85 percent** of students in low-ratio schools reported their school counselors made an effort to really get to know them and treat them as an individual (compared with **67 percent** of students in high-ratio schools and **49 percent** of the young adults in Public Agenda's 2010 national study).

The Centers for Disease Control (2009) has identified school connectedness – the belief by students that adults or peers in their school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals – to be the No. 1 protective factor facilitating both in-school and out-of-school success. Prior research found ASCA National Model implementation promotes the building of more personalized relationships between students and school counselors, thus strengthening school connectedness (Lapan, et al., 2013). Further, in this and other studies, students with these relationship advantages demonstrated they had more college knowledge, aspired to achieve higher levels of postsecondary education and were making a stronger personal commitment to graduate from the college they have chosen to attend in the upcoming fall semester. These relationships, school counseling activities and developmental accomplishments have been identified in many prior studies as significant predictors of college success (e.g., avoiding “summer melt” and enrolling in the fall, college retention and persistence toward college graduation).

Making More Informed College Decisions



Students attending low-ratio schools with high ASCA National Model implementation met significantly more often with their school counselors to work on the college decision-making process. These meetings led to knowledge acquisition and exploratory actions that improved the match between students and the specific colleges they had decided to enroll in for fall semester 2018. These students were more likely to learn more specific information about the college they had chosen to attend. For example, these students were more likely to report that while choosing which college to attend they had learned about their college’s retention and graduation rates and what majors would fit them. Further, these students were more likely to have made an on-campus visit to their college and considered how their interests and abilities would match up if they enrolled in this college. These students were more likely to have positive self-efficacy expectations that they would be satisfied and successful at this college. These students also had a better idea of how they were going to pay for this college. As well, students attending low-ratio schools with more complete ASCA National Model implementation demonstrated greater knowledge about colleges in general, e.g., knowledge about college life, admissions procedures and financial aid.

Informed college decision-making has at least two major components: a planful exploratory part and an emotional subjective part of decision-making. The present study also examined the extent to which the emotional subjective part of college decision-making is influenced by the kinds of judgment heuristics discovered through the Nobel-Award-winning research of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. Preliminary results suggest 12th-graders may indeed use judgment heuristics (e.g., representativeness, anchoring and availability) when making their college decisions. For example, how information is framed to students about a particular college may be enough to turn them from risk avoiders to risk takers. Encouragingly, results support the idea that students may be able to use objective data (e.g., retention and graduation rates) to offset emotionally charged information that capitalizes on judgment heuristics likely to bias college decisions (e.g., how attractive a school looks to them in a brochure or how engaging the college representative was on their college tour).

Implications of the Research

This study has notable implications for theory, research and practice. Results support the underlying hypothesis that a more complete implementation of the ASCA National Model, with its call for student-to-school-counselor ratios of 250-to-1, leads to measurable benefits for students. One of these benefits is that graduating high school seniors are helped to make more informed college decisions. Schools fortunate enough to have taken seriously the job of implementing the ASCA National Model, with recommended lower ratios, enable school counselors to act as critical protective factors for students. College and career readiness is enhanced through the establishment of more personalized relationships that promote success both while students are in high school and in the succeeding years as these young adults pursue their college degrees and postsecondary career training.

The limitations of this study need to be fully considered. The results presented here are from a single study of 307 graduating high school seniors. Even with the fact that the sample is highly diverse in many respects, caution should be used when interpreting findings. Future research is needed to replicate and extend findings. However, results presented in this research summary are strengthened when interpreted in the context of prior studies that have supported and been critical of school counseling services provided in schools. It is also important to note that none of the results discussed in this summary are confounded by demographic differences between schools. Schools varied in terms of size, percent of students receiving free and reduced lunch, language diversity spoken at home and parents' educational backgrounds. These school-level differences did not explain or diminish the relationships between ratios, ASCA National Model implementation and informed college decision-making.

Results found in the present study provide ample evidence supporting future truly national studies. Some of the compelling research questions needing to be answered include the following:

1. How do ratios and ASCA National Model implementation work best together to improve informed college decision-making? For whom does it work best, under what conditions, and what are the best evidence-supported strategies school counselors should use to meet the needs of all students?

2. To what extent can ratios and ASCA National Model implementation close the college knowledge gap for first-generation students?
3. How can ratios and ASCA National Model implementation help students not to fall victim to emotional, and subjective, judgment heuristics that may bias their college decisions?
4. How can ratios and ASCA National Model implementation support young people to explore and pursue STEM college majors and careers?

ASCA-recommended student-to-school-counselor ratios and more complete ASCA National Model implementation have the potential to move schools toward providing a higher standard of care for all students. At the turn of this century, researchers began to seriously ask the question of whether or not comprehensive school counseling programs actually made a difference. Back then, I summarized the findings by suggesting that good people plus a more fully implemented program would lead to measurable results and benefits for young people and their families. By 2010, the focus had changed. The new call was to close the implementation gap. Research had detailed how effective ASCA National Model programs were in some schools for some students, but not in all schools for all students. As we near 2020, it is clear that the time has come to set comprehensive school counseling benchmarks to be reached nationally in all of our schools. The program delivery outcome should guarantee that there is no deviation in any school from our highest standards of professional school counseling excellence. Our children deserve nothing less.

About the ASCA Research Grants

The American School Counselor Association awards research grants for projects examining the effectiveness of comprehensive school counseling programs, particularly the ASCA National Model, in improving student outcomes; projects investigating the optimal student-to-school-counselor ratio(s); and other projects advancing school counseling practice. ACT has provided funding support for the grants. Learn more about ASCA at www.schoolcounselor.org.