

Guidance Counselors or School Counselors: How the Name of the Profession Influences Perceptions of Competence

Released May 13, 2019

Results from a study with school counselors at a state conference in Ohio suggested school counselors who saw the term “guidance counselor” were statistically significantly less likely to believe school counselors were able to perform the 25 tasks on the survey. Each of the items on the survey was created using content from the 2018 ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies Draft (ASCA, 2018a) and/or the 2016 CACREP Standards (CACREP, 2016), specifically the Section 5 Entry Level Specialty Area related to School Counseling standards. In other words, participants perceived those with the title “guidance counselor” as less competent to do the job described in the survey.

School counselors perceive their own competence differently based on the title they use to describe their professional role. When school counselors use “guidance counselor” to describe the work that they do, it significantly influences their own perception of the competence of members of their profession in a negative way. School counselors who see the term “guidance counselor” are less likely to believe members of their own profession have the appropriate mindset, skills, foundational knowledge, ability to understand the context within which they work and ability to practice the complex job required of the school counselor than their colleagues who saw the same survey with the term “school counselor.” After decades of discussion and debate, there is now clear evidence that the title used to refer to school counselors matters.

Researchers

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Research Question

Is there a significant difference in perceived competence of school counselors between practicing school counselors who receive a survey that uses the term “guidance counselor” versus those who receive a survey that uses the term “school counselor”?

Methodology

A sample of 276 school counselors was recruited for participation at a 2018 state counseling association conference in Ohio. Surveys were distributed to participants as they moved between sessions or sat at tables in conference center hallways. Participants received a single measure. The single scale was composed of 25 items. Each of the items was created using content from the 2018 ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies Draft (ASCA, 2018a) and/or the 2016 CACREP Standards (CACREP, 2016), specifically the Section 5 Entry Level Specialty Area related to School Counseling standards. Reliability of the scale was measured with a Cronbach's alpha of the entire scale to determine the internal consistency of the scale items ($\alpha = .957$). To determine whether changing the language on the scale affected the internal consistency, a Cronbach's alpha was run on each version on the scale, (version A, $\alpha = .944$; version B, $\alpha = .963$), demonstrating that the changes in terminology did not affect overall reliability.

The goal of this study was to determine if there were significant differences on a measure of perceived competence of counselors between school counselors who received a survey with either the label "school counselor" or the label "guidance counselor." One half of the sample randomly received the survey that used the term "school counselor" throughout the entire survey (version A). The other half received the survey with the term "guidance counselor" throughout the entire survey (version B). There were no other differences on the survey. Minimal demographic information was collected to ensure basic equivalence between the two halves of the sample (Version A: female = 82%; Caucasian = 73%; African American = 11%; Hispanic = 1%; Mixed Race/Other = 14%; Version B: female = 80%; Caucasian = 79%; African American = 9%; Hispanic = 1%; Mixed Race/Other = 11%). Results of Chi-Square analyses demonstrated that there was no significant differences between the two halves of the sample on the demographic variables of age ($\chi^2(3) = 2.52, p = .47$) or experience ($\chi^2(3) = 2.45, p = .49$). (All IRB guidelines for conducting research with human subjects were followed.)

Summary of Findings

Overall scores on the scale ranged from 36-125 (overall $M = 112.04, SD = 13.62$, range = 36 – 125). There was a statistically significant difference between counselors who received the two versions of the scale. School counselors who received the survey using the term "guidance counselor" were statistically significantly more likely to score lower on the survey ($M = 109.27, SD = 15.56$, vs. $M = 114.54, SD = 11.07$), than their peers who received the version with the term "school counselor" ($t = -3.26, p = .001, d = .39, power = .90$). In other words, those who saw the term "guidance counselor" were statistically significantly less likely to believe school counselors were able to perform the 25 tasks on the survey. A frequency table revealed that all five of the lowest scores on the scale were obtained by individuals who received the version that read "guidance counselor." A frequency table also revealed that twice as many individuals who received the version that read "guidance counselor" scored lower than 100, compared with those who received the version that read "school counselor" (20% vs. 10%). In contrast, individuals who received the "school counselor" version were much more likely to score higher than 120 compared with those who received the version that read "guidance counselor" (42% vs. 25%).

To determine whether years of experience affected these results, a factorial ANOVA was run with years of experience and version of the survey as independent variables. There were no interaction effects $F(3, 268) = .528, p = .663, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .006, \text{power} = .158$. Counselors with every level of experience were equally affected by the terminology on the survey.

Implications of the Research

The label “school counselor” or “guidance counselor” had a significant effect on participants’ perceptions of competence. Participants’ (school counselors) who completed the survey with the term “Guidance Counselor” recorded lower scores on the survey regardless of years of experience of the study participant. The difference in perceived counselor competence was statistically significant across all four ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies and across all three CACREP entry-level specialty area standards for school counseling, with a large effect size that is more than a third of a standard deviation (.39). It appears participants perceived that guidance counselors are less competent to complete the job roles and tasks described within the ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies and CACREP standards.

Titles impact public perception of the profession (Caldwell, 2002; Hoque & Noon, 2001, Osipow, 1962; Pinto, Patanakul, & Pinto, 2016; Smith, Hornsby, Benson, & Wesolowski, 1989). As the current study clearly demonstrates, the terms “guidance counselor” and “school counselor” have different perceptions. Because titles are used to describe the nature of the work of the profession, **when the terms “guidance counselor” and “school counselor” are used interchangeably when in fact they are not interchangeable, this results in confusion around the nature of the work completed by school counselors** (Thupayagle & Dithole, 2005). The profession faces a lack of credibility when its own members cannot agree on the title representing the profession.

The title of the profession reflects the theory and practice that is the science of that profession (Brante, 2011). School counselors who follow the ASCA National Model can still be undermined in their professional role by the title of “guidance counselor.” If the title and work do not align, the resulting misperception of school counselor capabilities (Pérusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004) and inappropriate roles and tasks (Burnham & Jackson, 2000) can lead to identity threat (Morales & Lambert, 2013), emotional exhaustion (Haines & Saba, 2012), role ambiguity (McCarthy, Van Horn Kerne, Calfa, Lambert, & Guzman, 2010; Sears & Navin, 2001), frustration, high stress and occupational burnout (Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Soloman, 2005; McCarthy, et al., 2010).

The results of this study reflect that how school counselors refer to themselves matters and that the term “school counselor” needs to be used when school counselors use their title as a form of social capital to define their legitimacy (Borthwick, Boyce, & Nancarrow, 2015). Thus, a vital implication for practice is that school counselors adopt the title “school counselor” instead of “guidance counselor” and that this title is used by all practitioners and school counselor educators across the profession, on any placements where such a term would be used. This would include, but not limited to, business cards; door plaques; and digital communication including email signatures, social media and websites. It is also vital that all counselor educators use the term “school counselor” within training and preparation programs.