UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT: A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS EXPERIENCES WITH THEIR SCHOOL COUNSELING PROGRAM

by

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(Under the Direction of Pamela O. Paisley)

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study is the report of an investigation of high school students’ experiences with their school counseling program. It is a report of what ten high school students identified as being particularly helpful about their interactions with their high school counseling program, which was designed in accordance with the Transforming School Counseling Initiative. Data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews. Data was analyzed through the use of the constant-comparative method. Three themes emerged from the data: 1) Students report that the counselors created a nurturing environment, 2) students reported that the school counselors developed meaningful relationships with their students, and 3) students reported that the school counselors delivered a set of important educational and developmental services. Implications for school counselor preparation, school counseling practice, and suggestions for future research are presented.

INDEX WORDS: School counseling, Counselor education, High school students, Qualitative research, Transforming school counseling, School counseling reform,
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2004
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DEDICATION

For Kristin, whose love, support, and encouragement sustained me for the past two years

and

for Julia and Jack, who remind me how important it is to provide a safe and

nurturing educational environment for all children.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation may have only one official author, but any work like this is never done by one person alone. I would like to use this opportunity to thank a number of people who prepared me for my journey, those whose assistance was vital in the dissertation’s completion, and those who supported and tolerated me along the way.

First of all, I’d like to thank my incredible family for all they have given me. Thank you to my mother and father, who always showed the caring and willingness to help, and for the modeling for a successful relationship. And for Laura, my sister and first reading teacher—you led all of us into the field of education.

Kristin, your courage and patience and understanding through this process has meant more to me than I can tell you. I could not have done this without you.

I also want to thank my two mentors: Rosey, who provided an excellent model of a school counselor and demonstrated the importance of the student-school counselor relationship; and Pam, who had undying faith in me and kept me believing in myself through some difficult times. Rosy, you are the model for the type of school counselor I tried to be, and Pam, you are the model for the type of school counselor educator I hope to be. And you are both models for the type of people I am still striving to become.

Special thanks to the faculty of SRG, who also served on my dissertation committee. I have learned so much from all of you about what it means to be a professor. Yvette Getch, thank you for your feedback and for finding so many opportunities for me to speak to your classes. Deryl Bailey, thank you for remembering me from my master’s
program and leading the way for this “young professional”. Richard Hayes, thank you for creating so many wonderful professional development opportunities for me outside of the classroom. As much as I’ve learned in the doctoral program, nothing in the classroom can compare to those “Park City” moments. Thank you for creating those for me. Also, thanks to Trisha Reeves, for adding me to her too-long list of qualitative students and giving me her “crash course” on qualitative data analysis. This dissertation is so much better because of the work you have done with me. Thank you so much.

To my cohort—Stacie, Kristin, MDR, Zane, Paul, Tres, and my Jenny Bravo—thank you for three years of learning and laughing together. You helped keep me sane.

Thanks also to the doctoral students involved with the School Research Group for all your help with this project. Special thanks to Marc, my lab partner and my +1 man.

To the school counseling master’s students I’ve worked with over the past three years, thank you for your patience while I learned the ropes during my on-the-job training. You helped me feel that I’ve chosen the right career path. I hope that I have the opportunity to work with a group of students as capable, inspiring, and fun as you.

To the faculty I’ve encountered in my three years of classes, thank you for being there to share your experience, knowledge, and time with us. I have learned a great deal from all of you, about psychology and about life.

Finally, to my middle and lower school students from Trinity in New Orleans, thank you for reminding me what students need from a school counselor. You gave me four of the most rewarding years of my life, and I carried the lessons you taught me with me through my doctoral program and they will continue to inform the work I do preparing the next generation of school counselors.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The mission of public education is changing from focusing on what services are provided by schools to focusing on how those services help public school students succeed academically (Hart & Jacobi, 1992; Paisley & Hayes, 2002). No longer can educators justify their professional existence simply by recounting all that they do for students; rather, they must be able to demonstrate the impact their activities have on students (Education Trust, 2003a; Hart & Jacobi, 1992; Paisley & Hayes, 2002; Paisley & McMahon, 2000). This shift in the mission of public schools from “teaching” to “learning” (Paisley & Hayes, 2002) goes hand in hand with the notion of professional accountability, defined by Baker (2000) as “demonstrating that something worthwhile is happening” (p. 31).

The educational reform movement of the 1990s was born out of a sense that our public schools were graduating too many individuals who did not have the skills or the knowledge to be productive members of the workforce or contributing members of our democratic society (Hart & Jacobi, 1992). Educators (Hayes, Nelson, Tabin, Pearson, & Worthy, 2002) cite high dropout rates among college freshmen as evidence that many high school graduates are unprepared to succeed in college (Education Trust, 2003b; Hart & Jacobi, 1992). In addition, educators view a wide--and widening--gap in achievement between poor students and students of color and their more affluent and white counterparts (House & Hayes, 2002) as evidence that the system is not meeting the academic and developmental needs of all American students.

Even more disturbing is the evidence suggesting that students who are struggling are often denied access to the educational opportunities needed to succeed by the very system whose job it is to teach them (Hart & Jacobi, 1992). Although small discrepancies in achievement are
apparent in early grades, data show that underachieving students fall further behind as they “progress” through school (Hart & Jacobi, 1992). With the commonplace practice of tracking and other systemic policies, our public schools are providing help to students who are already achieving while providing little assistance to the students who need it most. Even as schools lock students into tracks and guide them to take certain classes without informing students of the implications of such decisions, the system often turns around and blames these same students and their families for their lower performance (Hart & Jacobi, 1992). Haycock and Navarro (1988) sum up the problems:

> Into the education of poor children, we put less of everything we believe makes a difference. Less experience and well-trained teachers. Less instructional time. Less rich and well-balanced curricula. Less well-equipped facilities. And less of what may be most important of all: a belief that these youngsters can really learn. (p. 3-4)

In response to these concerns about the education of public school students in the United States, recent educational reform movements were developed that included such strategies as increasing local authority for decision making, restructuring schedules to be more flexible and responsive to individual student’s needs, increasing the focus on affective domains, and providing an accelerated learning program for students who fall behind to facilitate their return to grade level (Hart & Jacobi, 1992). Although these attempts at educational reform have taken a variety of appearances and different foci, accountability is an emphasis evident in each of the most effective reform movements (Hart & Jacobi, 1992). However, many of the early education reform movements also shared what Hart and Jacobi describe as a “glaring, gaping hole” (p. 1): These movements did not involve school counselors.
Although school counselors were not initially included in the reform process, they are in a strategic position to help public schools meet the goals of the educational reform movement (Hart & Jacobi, 1992; House & Hayes, 2002). With the impact school counselors have on important choices that students make, from class selection to college admission to career preparation, school counselors can play an important role in student achievement (Paisley & Hayes, 2002). Furthermore, because school counselors often play the “gatekeeper” role by deciding who should apply to college--and, by default, who shouldn’t--they are placed in a strategic position to advocate for underserved students while helping to eliminate the systemic barriers that impede the academic success of many poor students and/or students of color (Hart & Jacobi, 1992).

There have been several important initiatives that have come from different perspectives within the professional specialty of school counseling in the 1990s and into the early 21st century. These initiatives have influenced each other as they have influenced the professional specialty of school counseling. In addition to establishing school counselors as key players in educational reform, Paisley and Hayes (2002) identified other qualities these initiatives share, including:

1. Each is an effort to acknowledge the unique characteristics of the practice of counseling within an educational setting.
2. These initiatives all are grounded in principles of social justice.
3. The initiatives represent interest in tying school counseling program development to the central premises and purposes of schooling. (p. 4)

One of the influential events within the field of school counseling was the development of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Standards (Campbell &
Dahir, 1997). In congruence with the concept of accountability and learner-focused education, the National Standards established a framework for school counseling program foci and set benchmarks for what students should know and be able to do as a result of their interaction with school counseling programs (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). In 2001, ASCA also adopted the National Model for School Counseling Programs (Hatch & Bowers, 2002). The model, developed to provide school counselors with an extensive framework for building, implementing, and evaluating their school counseling programs, also provided a common foundation of guiding beliefs and principles about the role school counselors and their programs play in the education of all students. In addition, the model set forth guidelines for managing the school counseling program, delivering school counseling services to stakeholders, and evaluating the program through stakeholder feedback as well as data demonstrating that the students are different after participating in school counseling program activities. Also in 2001, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) adopted new standards for the preservice preparation of school counselors. These standards reflect the vision of other school counseling reform movements in both language and content (Paisley & Hayes, 2002).

One school counseling reform movement that is having considerable impact on the new direction for school counselor preparation and practice is the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund’s National Initiative for Transforming School Counseling (The Education Trust, 2003a). The Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI) was developed out of a belief that, to radically change the practice of school counselors so that they can have a more positive impact on students’ lives, change must start within school counselor preparation programs (House & Martin, 1998). Working with The Education Trust, the TSCI began to identify systematically
what knowledge and skills school counselors need in order to help students succeed (Paisley & Hayes, 2002). Based on these findings, six school counseling preparation programs, in partnerships with local school districts, reorganized their programs to develop educational leaders with collaboration and advocacy skills in addition to more traditional counseling skills. These models were not identical, but three themes appeared to be consistent across programs: 1) school counselors must be knowledgeable about education and educational systems; 2) school counselors must have the skills to help students meet their academic and personal goals; and 3) school counselors must be proactive advocates for the students, working to remove barriers to student success on a system level, particularly for poor and minority students (Paisley & Hayes, 2002).

The development of TSCI, along with the other school counseling reform efforts, has prompted ongoing professional conversations about appropriate school counselor roles, the emphasis on accountability, and other areas of focus for school counselors in their role to help all students succeed. These conversations, currently taking place in the professional literature, conference presentations, and through collaborative projects, will play an important role in the continued evolution of the professional specialty of school counseling (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). As the TSCI completes its third phase, the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) is collecting data that will be used to examine the transformation of school counselor preparation programs and inform those programs in their efforts to prepare their graduates to play an active role in the academic achievement of all students (CAREI, 2002). This data, collected from school counselor educators, school counseling students and recent graduates from TSCI institutions, will soon be included in the professional conversation, shaping the future of TSCI and school counselor practice. With all the data being collected and analyzed,
however, it seems ironic that the primary stakeholders in these reform efforts—the public school students themselves—have yet to be invited to join this important conversation.

Throughout its short history, the TSCI has collected feedback from stakeholders and used that information to help inform programmatic decisions at each phase of implementation (The Education Trust, 2003a; Paisley & Hayes, 2002). Educational researchers, counselor educators, practicing school counselors, school counseling students, and partnership school administrators have provided important input and feedback about their experiences. The feedback has been vital in the development and continuous evaluation of the initiative. To date, however, there has been no systematic, deliberate investigation of the students’ perceptions of school counseling programs that fit this new model. If the question school counseling programs must ask themselves as they evaluate their programs has changed from “What are school counselors doing?” to “How are students different because of what school counselors do?” (Wong, 2002, p. 2), then it is imperative to gather data directly from the students and to discover how, if at all, these students are different because of their involvement with their school counseling programs.

In a small town in the Southeast USA, there is a unique opportunity to study the perceptions of students because a local high school’s counseling department is comprised entirely of recent graduates from one of the six DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Transforming School Counseling Initiative’s school counseling programs. Although the counselors themselves believe that they are in the middle of the transformation process, and describe their school counseling program as “transforming” rather than “transformed” (McMahon, 2002), they have made significant programmatic changes from a more traditional school counseling program to one that operates under principles consistent with TSCI. The older students and recent graduates of this high school may be among the first in the country to experience the new model of a
school counseling program. These students, therefore, have a unique perspective that is valuable to all of those involved in the continued development of TSCI. Hearing students’ stories and understanding their experiences with the school counseling program can provide vital information about what is most meaningful to them regarding interactions they had with their school counseling program. In particular, it will be helpful to hear from students who were helped by the actions of the school counseling program. If the goal of the recent school counseling reforms is to help students succeed, a logical first step would be to ask those students who can best answer the question “What is helpful?” The answers may then be used to inform school counselor educators, school counselors, and others involved in educational reform as the mission to help all students succeed continues.

Statement of the Problem

Throughout its history, school counseling has been a professional specialty that has evolved in response to societal, educational, political, and economic trends (Paisley & Borders, 1995). As recent educational reform movements have changed the educational paradigm to one of professional accountability for student success, school counseling as a profession is changing by asking itself “How are students different because of what I am doing?” instead of simply “What am I doing?” (Wong, 2002). Reform movements within the field of school counseling have created standards for the preparation of school counselors, national standards for school counseling practice, and developed a model for school counseling program development. Encompassing aspects of each of these, the TSCI seeks to transform school counselor preparation programs to help those programs prepare school counselors who can serve as educational leaders and advocates for students while facilitating the development of every student’s personal, social, and career skills (The Education Trust, 2003a). Currently,
professionals involved with the TSCI are in the process of collecting data from counselor educators, preservice school counseling students, and practicing school counselors associated with the initiative (CAREI, 2002). Despite of the fact that all of these school counseling reform efforts are aimed at having a positive impact on public school students, studies have yet to assess the students’ perceptions of how students may be different due to their involvement with transformed school counseling programs.

Purpose Statement

A dialogue is ongoing through professional literature and conference programming regarding the transformation of school counseling preparation and practice so that k-12 public school counseling programs may be in a better position to help all students succeed. To this point, however, the public school students themselves have not been included in this conversation. This study represents a first step toward adding the voices of the students to that important professional conversation. The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of those students who have been influenced positively by a school counseling program that is in the process of transformation. The following research questions will guide this study:

1. How do students who have been influenced positively by their interactions with the school counseling program describe their experiences?
2. What experiences with the school counseling programs do high school students view as important in their academic, career, personal, or social development?
3. How do students believe that they are different as a result of their interactions with the school counseling program?
4. How do the experiences and activities that the students identify as most helpful fit with the foundations of the TSCI and the ASCA National Standards?
Significance of the Study

Research is worthwhile to the degree that it explores and/or explains a part of the research cycle that is lacking (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). This study’s worth, then, is in its potential to uncover the experiences of a crucial but previously silent constituency in the movement to transform school counseling. By understanding the students’ experiences with their school counseling program, we can begin to understand how, if at all, they see themselves as different because of their interactions with their school counseling program. Furthermore, we can begin to explore how they believe the interactions with their school counseling program have made a difference in their personal and academic lives. By speaking directly with students who have been influenced positively by their school counseling programs and attempting to understand their experiences, we can begin to generate ideas about what school counselors do that is particularly helpful from the perspectives of the students. With this new understanding, we can reenter the professional dialogue regarding the best methods of preparation and practice for school counselors, armed with the perspectives of the students who have been positively influenced by their programs. With this new data, we will be able to ensure that those aspects of the program that are seen as most helpful are given the attention they deserve in the continuing development of the TSCI model.

Definitions

School Counseling, as defined by The Education Trust (2003b), is “a profession that focuses on the relations and interactions between students and their school environment with the expressed purpose of reducing the effect of environmental and institutional barriers that impede student academic success” (p.1). Furthermore, The Education Trust identifies that a school counselor “assists students in their academic, social, emotional, and personal development and
helps them to define the best pathways to successfully achieve their dreams” (p. 1) by working as
“a leader as well as an effective team member…with teachers, administrators, and other school
personnel to make sure that each student succeeds” (p.1). The American School Counseling
Association (ASCA, 2003) further identifies that professional school counselors are “skilled in
addressing such issues as drug and alcohol addictions, personal and family problems, suicide and
teenage pregnancy, as well as academic training in areas such as school organization and
classroom management methods” (p.1).

A School Counseling Program is an integral part of the total education program that is
developed and monitored by a school’s counseling department. The program is comprehensive
in scope, preventative in design, and developmental in nature, and presents a system for the
delivery of activities whereby various members of the school faculty, including but not limited to
the school counselors, lead activities designed to promote the academic, career, and
personal/social skills of the student body.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs
(CACREP), formed in 1981 under the guidance of the American Counseling Association, is a
body that grants institutional and specialization accreditation to counseling programs who meet
certain stated criteria, thereby ensuring a standard of quality for counselor preparation. Formed
as a corporate affiliate of ACA, CACREP’s stated mission goal is “to promote the advancement
of quality educational program offerings” within the profession of counseling (www.cacrep.org).

The Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI) is a movement associated with
the Education Trust and funded by Wallace Reader’s Digest Fund and MetLife that focuses on
changing the way universities prepare school counselors.
The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) is the national professional organization for school counselors in the United States and a division of the ACA. ASCA provides professional development and resources to professional school counselors while promoting the goals of the profession, including fostering academic, career, personal, and social development among public school students in the USA.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of those students who have been positively influenced by their school counseling program. Understanding students’ experiences with their school counseling programs can help inform the ongoing reform movement within school counseling specifically and education generally to help ensure that reforms are producing the desired effect of helping all students succeed. The following four research questions guided this study:

1. How do students who have been positively influenced by their interactions with the school counseling program describe their experiences?

2. What experiences with the school counseling programs do high school students view as significant in their academic, career, personal, and/or social development?

3. How do students believe that they are different as a result of their interactions with the school counseling program?

4. How do the experiences and activities that the students identify as most helpful fit with the foundations of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative and the ASCA National Standards?

The following chapter is a review of the professional literature regarding relevant subjects, including a brief history of the evolution of school counseling, an overview of the most recent educational reform movement at the end of the twentieth century, and recent reforms efforts within the specialty of school counseling.
A Brief History of School Counseling

School counseling is a continuously evolving specialty within the profession of counseling (Paisley & Borders, 1995; Paisley & McMahon, 2001) that has a rich history of redefining its goals and responsibilities within the school setting in response to a variety of economic, educational, and social factors (Paisley & Borders, 1995; Herr, 2001; Gysbers 2001; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Although this ability to adapt to meet the demands of an educational system that seems to be in an almost constant state of educational reform (Herr, 2001) is often seen as a strength of school counseling (Galassi & Akos, 2004), the history of reacting to external trends has led to difficulties as well. Rapidly changing goals for the preparation and practice of school counselors has created a community of school counselors whose functions within their schools vary from school counselor to school counselor (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). This role confusion within school counseling is further exacerbated when changes in professional roles or purpose come via directives from administrators or policy makers who may not have experience with or knowledge of school counseling as a professional specialty, and who are usually motivated by eternal pressure (House & Martin, 1998; House & Hayes, 2002). For this reason, the specialty of school counseling has had little autonomy, often being put in the position of reacting to the demands of individuals not in the field of counseling.

Recently, school counselors and school counselor educators have begun to regain autonomy over the direction school counseling is taking in the public school system. Spurred on by a variety of factors and coming out of several movements including educational reform, the development of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Standards, the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI), and most recently the ASCA National
Model, the professional specialty of school counseling has begun to set its own course for the future and started to transform the specialty from the inside-out.

*Beginnings of School Counseling*

The origins of school counseling can be traced back to the turn of the 20th century. The “guidance” movement of the day arose as part of the larger “Progressive Movement,” a movement that addressed deteriorating social conditions connected to the Industrial Revolution (Green & Keys, 2001; Gysbers, 2001). At the time, the primary function of “vocational guidance” was to prepare young people for the world of work (Gysbers, 2001). There were two perspectives regarding the form this preparation should take. One group of vocational guidance counselors wanted to “sort” individuals by interests and capacities and prepare them for a specific occupation, while the other group desired to change the social conditions of the newly industrialized world as well as aid students in making occupational choices (Gysbers, 2001). The controversy over whether to change the individual or change the system is one that would reappear repeatedly in the history of school counseling (e.g., Hart & Jacobi, 1992; House & Martin, 1998; Paisley & Hayes, 2002).

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the position of guidance counselor within a school evolved in response to various educational and psychological trends. The first guidance counselors were teachers who were given additional “guidance” responsibilities without any additional training and often without any relief from primary teaching duties (Gysbers, 2001). As popular movements at the time within the field of psychology filtered their way down to guidance counselors, including mental hygiene, mental measurements, and child development studies, guidance slowly began to develop a wider focus that addressing vocational needs alone (Gysbers, 2001). In the 1930s and 40s, the rise of Pupil Personnel Services provided an
organizational structure for guidance counselors (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001) and personal
counseling became the focal point of the Pupil Personnel Services agenda (Gysbers, 2001).
Interestingly, a field that was borne out of a call for social change became increasingly focused
on helping individuals fit into the current system (Paisley & Hayes, 2003) while vocational
guidance was being relegated to a smaller portion of the overall work of guidance counselors. In
the aftermath of World War II, however, this too would change.

*Guidance and the NDEA*

The Cold War era of the 1950s provided the backdrop for a major change in education in
the United States. After the Russians launched Sputnik, policy makers and the media began
proclaiming that the U.S. would not be able to keep up with Soviet science and technology (Herr,
2001). Policy makers blamed the apparent failure on the lack of a mechanism to identify those
American students who were talented in math and science and steer them towards higher
education (Herr, 2001). The creation of the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (NDEA),
which made funding available to education in general and counselor education specifically,
transformed the purpose of school guidance counselor into identifying students who were
academically skilled in science and math and “counseling” them towards careers in technology
(Gysbers, 2001). As demand grew for this new breed of vocational guidance, the teacher-
counselors of the pre-war era were being replaced by full time guidance counselors who focused
their time and attention on identifying and working with students who were well-suited for
college (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). Over time, however, schools began to see the benefits of
such vocational guidance for all students, and what began as a movement to provide vocational
services to a narrow section of talented students was soon regarded as important for all students
(Herr, 2001). The subsequent increase in the demand for trained guidance counselors led to a boom in the creation of guidance counselor positions (Bates, 2001).

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, guidance counselors provided a wide array of services within the schools. Vocational guidance still played a key role in the guidance counselor’s job, but new social issues including changing family patterns, increased substance use among students, and increased school violence demanded the attention of school counselors as well (Gysbers, 2001; Herr, 2001). The increased need for addressing these social issues in school, along with the rise of the mental health movement, led guidance counselors to begin to take on a decidedly “clinical” feel (Gysbers, 2001). The prevalent assumption among school guidance programs at the time was that their purpose was to provide a set of services for their students based on their students’ needs; therefore, the success of a school counseling program was assessed by the availability of services rather than on their outcome (Herr, 2001). This “service model,” although meant to be flexible and adaptive, led to increased role confusion through the 1970s as school administrators increasingly assigned clerical and/or administrative duties to guidance counselors, perhaps because those duties “were in service to somebody” (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001, 248). Without a strong unified vision for school counseling, role confusion among school counselors and other educators continued to grow. From this confusion came a new call for clarity of vision and purpose for school counselors.

**Comprehensive Developmental Counseling and Guidance Programs**

The increasing demand for school counselors to address a widening range of social, vocational, and educational issues prompted the development of a more organized, systematic approach to school counseling practice and preparation. Starting with Dinkmeyer and Caldwell’s *Developmental Counseling and Guidance: A Comprehensive School Approach in*
170, the concept of comprehensive developmental guidance and counseling programs began to be put into action. A renewed interest in career guidance, a renewed focus on principles of development, and a new focus on prevention helped to give this new movement momentum throughout the 70s and 80s (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Green & Keys, 2001). In 1978, the creation of the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) helped to standardized the preparation for school counselors (Galassi & Akos, 2004), and legislation passed in the 80s, including the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Act of 1984 and the National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee (NOICC) of 1988, affirmed the trend towards developing systematic comprehensive guidance programs in schools (Herr, 2001). With backing from legislation, educational leaders, and the counseling profession, increasingly sophisticated models of comprehensive school counseling programs were being developed, implemented, and studied throughout the United States (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Herr, 2001). Such developmental comprehensive programs were widely accepted among school counselors and school counselor educators as state of the art into the 1990s. However, another education reform movement was gaining momentum, and would soon lead to a call for a transformation in the preparation and practice of school counselors.

Education and School Counseling Reform at the Turn of the Century

As the end of the 20th century was drawing near, calls for educational reform were rising once again. This time, the calls were not in response to the threat of a cold war enemy, but from rising problems within the United States (Hayes, Dagley, & Horne, 1996). Social, economic, and cultural factors including globalism, multiculturalism, and rapid changes in technology created a demand for workers with a different set of knowledge and skills than were being taught in classrooms (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). The educational system as it was did not appear to be
able to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student body and a rapidly changing job market. In the early 1980’s, the publication of A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) set the stage for school reform by highlighting the shortcomings of the educational system and predicting economic doom if the educational system did not take the appropriate steps to help students achieve (Dahir, 2001; Schwallie-Giddis, Maat, & Pak; 2003). A Nation at Risk quickly became the most quoted and read national publication in education (Schwallie-Giddis et al, 2003). Significantly, there is no mention of the role school counselors could play in the needed reforms anywhere in the document. This omission served as a wake-up call to leaders in the field of school counseling (Schwallie-Giddis et all, 2003).

As policy makers rallied around this new call for educational reform, spurned on by the national media, a call for accountability in education began to surface (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). The American public began to demand to see evidence that educators could make a measurable difference in their students’ lives. This call for accountability challenged the notion that providing educational opportunities and services were enough. Teachers and other educators would no longer be judged by what they did, but whether what they did made a difference. This transition from assessment based on “effort” to one based on “evidence” marked an important paradigm shift in American public education, from a system focused on “teaching” to one centered on “learning” (Paisley & Hayes, 2003).

As the educational reform movement of the 1990s gained momentum, the potential contribution that school counselors could make to the movement continued to be ignored by most educational leaders and policy makers (House & Martin, 1998; House & Hayes, 2002). While being left out of the educational reform movement was certainly a blow to the specialty of school counseling, it also provided the opportunity—and the motivation—for school counselor
educators to begin to examine *for themselves* the role school counselors should be playing in the education system (House & Martin, 1998; House & Hayes, 2002). Rather than once again reacting to the external demands of those outside the profession, the specialty of school counseling was in a position to create its own vision of what school counselors should be doing in schools, and how school counselor education programs should prepare future school counseling professionals for their careers. In spite of being left out of the educational reform movement—or perhaps in response to it—the most significant developments within the field of school counseling during the past ten years have been solidly grounded in the context of educational reform and the call for accountability. These new developments have influenced both school counseling practice and preparation (Paisley & Hayes, 2002).

In the mid-1990s, leaders within the counseling profession began to call for a revitalization of school counseling graduate programs (e.g., Hayes et al., 1996). School counselor educators believed that the education reform movement had made a mistake in ignoring school counselors (Hart & Jacobi, 1992; House & Martin, 1998). Instead, they saw school counselors as being in an ideal position to promote student success because of their school-wide perspective and their ability to serve all students (Hart & Jacobi, 1992; House & Hayes, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003). However, with the focus on accountability, simply being in the proper position was not enough to warrant the attention of many educational leaders. In spite of the assertions of members of the school counseling community, few professional organizations within the field of public education (e.g., National Association of Secondary School Principals) identified school counseling as being an integral component of student success (Dahir, 2001). This continued omission of school counseling from the educational movement eventually prompted the school counseling community to action on their own (Dahir,
Leaders of professional organizations within counseling and school counseling began to develop their own initiatives that would begin to transform the specialty of school counseling. Several initiatives occurred simultaneously within the field during the latter part of the 1990s that began to move school counseling in a new direction. Although coming from slightly different perspectives, Paisley and Hayes (2002) identified these areas of commonality among the initiatives of the time:

1. Each is an effort to acknowledge the unique characteristics of the practice of counseling within an educational setting.

2. These initiatives are all grounded in principles of social justice.

3. The initiatives represent interest in tying school counseling program development to the central premises and purposes of schooling. (p. 4)

Of these initiatives, three movements are of particular interest to this study. Coming from different beginnings but influencing the development of each other, the development of the ASCA National Standards, The Transforming School Counseling Initiative, and the ASCA National Model for School Counseling Programs all helped to transform the practice and preparation of school counseling and help school counseling programs align their goals with the mission of public education.

**ASCA National Standards**

The school reform agenda of the 1990s prompted ASCA to develop a plan to demonstrate the integral role school counseling programs could play within the public educational system in the U.S. (Dahir, 2001). One of the major initiatives that came out of this plan was the ASCA National Standards. The National Standards has its roots in 1994, when the ASCA Governing Board committed to developing a set of school counseling standards based on a model of
teaching standards that had become popular in educational reform (Dahir, 2001). These standards would be designed to help school counselors set specific goals for student development, clarify the relationship between school counseling programs and the schools and help school counselors across the nation speak with a united voice and become more accountable for the services they report to provide (Dahir, 2001). ASCA convened a series of “think tanks” composed of leaders in the field of school counseling who identified several school counseling functions that would more clearly establish the role of the school counselor within the school (Dahir, 2001). In late 1994, ASCA developed voluntary national standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). This document articulated neither specific program content nor suggestions for methods of service delivery, but it did begin to more clearly define the mission and goals of school counseling programs (Dahir, 2001). Perhaps more significantly, it also represented an organizing principle for the voice of the specialty of school counseling on a national level (Campbell & Dahir, 1997).

The positive response to this initial document encouraged ASCA to continue the development of National Standards. ASCA set three priorities for the initiative: 1) to assess current perceptions from practicing school counselors; 2) to analyze relevant school counseling and educational reform literature; and 3) to review state school counseling program models (Dahir, 2001). An initial version of the National Standards was created in 1996 with the help of 1,100 survey respondents, hundreds of research studies, countless ideas taken from national and state models, and suggestions from thousands of professional school counselors (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). By the time the document was revised into its final form in 1997, input had been considered from over 2000 school counselor and school counselor educators from all fifty states (Dahir, 2001). Dahir (2001) cited three specific goals of the National Standards:
1) to motivate the school counseling community to identify and implement goals for student development deemed important by the program
2) to clarify the relationship of school counseling to the educational system, and
3) to address the contribution of school counseling to student success in school. (p 320)

To meet these stated goals, the National Standards identified attitudes, knowledge, and skills that students should acquire through a broad range of school counseling programmatic activities (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; Dahir, 2001). Nine specific standards were identified across three domains: academic development, career development, and personal/social development. The National Standards and subsequent supporting publications did several things to advance school counseling reform. First, by deliberately emphasizing the notion of school counseling as program, it reinforced the notion that school counseling was more than simply a set of ancillary services (Herr, 2001). In addition, the Standards offered what Dahir (2001) called “a unifying focus and consistent language” (323) that promoted school counseling programs as being comprehensive, developmentally focused, and for the benefit of all students. Finally, the standards promoted a new definition for school counseling. According to ASCA (1997, as quoted in Dahir, 2001):

School counseling is a process of helping people by assisting them in making decisions and changing behavior. School counselors work with all students, school staff, families, and members of the community as an integral part of the education program. School counseling programs promote school success through a focus on academic achievement, prevention and intervention activities, advocacy, and social-emotional and career development”. (p.321)
This definition reflects several important aspects of the developing “new vision” of school counseling. First, it specifically states that the school counseling program exists to help all students. The definition also promotes the idea that school counselors need to collaborate with multiple stakeholders, and that school counselors do not perform ancillary services but are an “integral part of the educational program”. The definition clearly refers to the National Standards’ domains of academic, career, and personal/social development while also mentioning advocacy and alluding to team-building, concepts that would soon be play a major role in school counseling reform.

*Transforming School Counseling Initiative*

While ASCA and its leaders were developing the National Standards, The Education Trust was developing a new vision for school counseling that would focus on promoting academic achievement for all students. The Education Trust, in collaboration with the DeWitt Wallace Reader’s Digest Fund, developed the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI) to further promote their new vision for school counseling practice and preparation. The initiative was based on a series of beliefs related to the role school counselors could play in student outcomes and sought to transform the practice of school counseling by changing the way school counselors are prepared in graduate schools (House & Hayes, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003). This new vision promoted by TSCI described the school counselor’s primary role as addressing systemic barriers to student success (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). For this goal to be achieved, school counselors needed not only the traditional skills taught in counseling masters programs, but would also need the skills to analyze local and national data to identify underserved populations, help those populations build the skills to successfully navigate the public school system, build successful learning communities among public school stakeholders, and design and
implement programs to support the achievement of all students (House & Hayes, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003).

In the initial stage of their process of transforming school counseling preparation and practice, The Education Trust had begun to investigate the systematic barriers that kept school counselors from playing a more critical role in student success. The Education Trust reported that they believed practicing school counselors were spending too much time working with a few students’ emotional problems at the expense of academic support for the larger body (Guerra, 1998, as quoted in Alexander, Kruczek, Zagelbaum, & Ramirez, 2003). In addition, The Education Trust identified school counseling preparation programs that were inadequately preparing school counselors for the complex educational environment. The report also noted that school counseling preparation programs tended to offer only generic counseling courses that did not address special skills required to be a school counselor (Alexander et al, 2003). In addition, most school counseling graduate programs were staffed by counselor educators without school counseling experience (Alexander et al, 2003).

In response to their preliminary findings, the TSCI identified five key components to their new vision that school counselors would utilize in order to help their students succeed. Those five components include educational leadership, advocacy, team-building and collaboration, counseling and coordination, and use of assessment data (The Education Trust, 2003b). By establishing themselves as educational leaders within the school, school counselors enable themselves to effectively connect the school counseling program with the mission of the school (The Education Trust, 2003b). Acting as advocates for their students, school counselors demonstrate their belief that all students can achieve by working proactively to remove systemic barriers, ensuring students have access to challenging courses, aiding students and their families
as they navigate the bureaucracies within the school system, and teaching students and their families how to help themselves by teaching them important decision-making, coping, and study skills (House & Hayes, 2002). In addition, school counselors must use collaboration and team-building skills to build a sense of community within the school and connect with other important stakeholders to promote student development. Under the new vision, school counselors would continue to address academic, career, and personal/social needs of the students through counseling and program coordination. Finally, school counselors will be expected to use local, regional, and national data to identify barriers that may exist within a school or school system, as well as promote and assess changes in the system until the schools provide equitable educational experiences for all students regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic status (House & Hayes, 2002).

During the second stage of TSCI, 10 school counseling preparation programs, along with their K-12 district partners, were awarded planning grants to develop new models of school counselor preparation that would fit with the new vision of school counseling practice being promoted by The Education Trust and the TSCI (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). In stage three, six of those ten school counseling programs were given grants to implement their new plans. Each of the six sites were assessed throughout the process of transforming their graduate programs, collecting data on admissions processes, curricula, field experiences, collaborative relationships with the school and other stakeholders, and the professional development of the school counseling faculty (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). Although the six sites each developed their programs differently, there were important similarities. Each program was committed to the principles of social justice, and each program focused on graduating school counselors who were knowledgeable about the public educational system, prepared to help students meet their
academic goals, and ready to act as proactive advocates for systemic change (Paisley & Hayes, 2003).

Although the National Standards and the new vision of school counseling being promoted by The Education Trust were being developed by different groups coming from different perspectives, those involved recognized that the two movements were not incongruent with each other (Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004). The commonalities between the two visions allowed leaders from each initiative to support the other and build a collaborative relationship between the two movements, keeping the overall process of change moving forward. In fact, the influence of these two movements is readily apparent in the third initiative, the ASCA National Model.

ASCA National Model

A third important development within school counseling reform, but one that is clearly related to both the ASCA National Standards and the TSCI, was the creation of the National Model. After the National Standards were released, school counselors were faced with the challenge of designing and running a school counseling program that would effectively meet the goals set out in the National Standards (Schwallie-Giddis et al, 2003). At the turn of the century, leaders within ASCA decided that school counselors needed additional practical support in designing school counseling programs that would address both historical concerns and new goals set out by recent school counseling reform initiatives (Hatch & Bowers, 2002). In 2001, the Governing Board of ASCA agreed to hold a National Summit in order to develop this model, and a Task Force of fifteen professional school counselors and school counselor educators were selected to draft an initial framework for the model (Schwallie-Giddis et al, 2003). Drafts of the model were presented to a variety of stakeholder organizations, including the National
Association of Secondary School Principals, the American Counseling Association, and various state conferences (Hatch & Bowers, 2002). Incorporating feedback from such presentations, a final draft of the National Model was officially unveiled at the 2002 ASCA conference in Miami.

The National Model is made up of four interrelated components, including program foundation, delivery systems, management systems, and program accountability (American School Counseling Association, 2003). The program foundation provides the theoretical framework, assumptions, and goals (including the National Standards) for students’ achievement as a result of the school counseling program. The delivery system describes the methods, activities, and interactions which the school counseling program will utilize to help students meet the stated goals. Included in the delivery system are the guidance curriculum, individual student planning, responsive services (such as individual counseling and crisis management), and systems support. The management system describes the organization of the program and a framework for the duties and responsibilities of program maintenance, while the program accountability describes the process for assessing program effectiveness in meeting important school-wide goals. In addition to these four central components, the model identifies leadership skills, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change as skills that are “infused throughout” the model (Hatch & Bowers, 2002).

The effect that the National Standards and the TSCI had upon the development of the National Model is clear. The development of the National Standards highlighted the need for a framework to ensure that the standards were met (Shwallie-Giddis et al, 2003). The National Standards themselves are incorporated into the Foundation of the National Model, providing a clear goal for the Model’s implementation (Hatch & Bowers, 2002; Perusse et al, 2003). In addition, ASCA collaboration with The Education Trust is apparent in the National Model’s
inclusion of several concepts that are central to the Transforming School Counseling Initiative, including educational leadership, advocacy, and collaboration skills (Perusse et al., 2003).

Current Status

Initiatives such as the ASCA National Standards and TSCI, and especially the collaboration between the two movements that is embodied in the National Model, have facilitated school counselors’ reentry into the education reform conversation, and as a result, school counseling is in a process of transformation. The legitimacy of the National Standards’ domains is widely accepted by school counselors and school counselor educators (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). The Education Trust and the TSCI have been identified as “key players” in the future of school counseling (Perusse et al., 2004), and the National Standards were officially published and articles in ASCA’s flagship journal regarding the potential impact of the Model have already appeared (e.g., Schwallie-Giddis et al., 2003).

Recent developments within school counseling and education indicate these initiatives will continue to influence the direction of school counseling reform in the near future. In 2001, CACREP adopted new standards for school counseling preparation that emphasize areas such as educational leadership, advocacy, systemic change, and other themes that play a prominent role in both TSCI and the ASCA National Model (Paisley & Hayes, 2002; Galassi & Akos, 2004). CACREP’s new standards indicates that training models such as those used in the Phase II TSCI institutions, which were seen as “cutting edge” only a few years ago, are now officially viewed as the standard of preparation.

A recent development within TSCI is helping to address the issue of how to bring the TSCI model to school counselors and school counselor educators across the country (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). The MetLife Foundation has funded the development of training modules for
developing TSCI school counseling programs as well as several training of trainers workshops in order to facilitate dissemination of this important information (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). Through the training modules, The Education Trust has offered training to school counselors in 25 states and state education department personnel in 7 states in the past few years (Perusse et al, 2004).

Most recently, again teaming with the MetLife Foundations, The Education Trust established the National Center for Transforming School Counseling (NCTSC) in June of 2003 (The Education Trust, 2003c). The NCTSC, which is described as “a nation-wide network of organizations, state departments of education, school counseling professional organizations, institutions of higher education, and school districts currently involved in transforming school counseling” (The Education Trust, 2003c, p. 1), sets forth as its goal to continue the train school counselors all across the county in the new model so that all groups of students will be able to reach high academic standards. The NCTSC is collecting and analyzing data that will demonstrate whether school counselors are helping their students through this model and getting that information back to school counselors and school counselor educators in the form of publications, trainings, and professional presentations (The Education Trust, 2003c).

Even though there is evidence that this new vision of school counseling is already having an impact on the practice and preparation of school counseling, challenges still remain. In spite of wide endorsements for ASCA leadership, data show that 30% of school counselor educators use the National Standards minimally or not at all in their classes (Perusse, Goodnough, & Noel, 2001). Studies also show that, regardless of the support leaders in the field of school counseling have for the TSCI objectives, school counselors and principals do not yet accept “working with data” or “facilitating systemic change” as central to the mission of school counseling (Perusse et al, 2004). Furthermore, there are still significant differences in opinion between school
counselors and principals about what are appropriate roles and tasks for practicing school counselors (Perusse et al, 2004). This is important because, in spite of support from national organizations, many decisions from licensure requirements for school counselors to specific roles are handled on state, local, or even building levels (Akos & Galassi, 2004). As Paisley and McMahon (2001) note:

School counseling programs are developed and implemented within school systems, which are in turn embedded within communities. Community members often have different expectations for the outcomes of school counseling programs. This means that school counselors often find themselves attempting to meet the demands of multiple stakeholders in an increasingly complex and political environment. (p. 107).

In spite of the challenges that lie ahead, there are also clear signs that the new vision of school counseling is having an impact on both preparation and practice of school counselors. Although a high number of school counselor educators use the National Standards minimally or not at all in their courses, almost 70% of school counselor educators interviewed used the National Standards in their courses as a stand-alone learning tool, in conjunction with appropriate state standards, and/or through field experiences (Perusse et al, 2001). In addition, professional journals, particularly ASCA’s flagship journal Professional School Counseling, are filled with articles dealing with “new vision” themes, including advocacy, collaboration, and facilitating academic achievement (Alexander et al, 2003). There is also evidence that school counselor educators largely agree with the concepts central to the TSCI vision and that those school counselor educators believe those concepts should be included in school counseling preparation programs (Perusse et al, 2001).
Research demonstrating support for the new vision among practicing school counselors and school counselor educators is important to show the degree to which the model is being accepted, but it is also important to remember that opinion is not given the same weight as outcomes in this age of accountability. The ultimate test of the new vision will not be whether school counselor educators like it or even whether school counselors will use it; rather, it will be whether the model changes the lives of students. Towards this end, research on effective schools is just beginning to provide support for important aspects of this new vision of counseling (House & Hayes, 2002). Preliminary findings suggest that when schools with low income and/or high rates of students of color reach high rates of academic achievement, there are usually adults in the school that hold those students to high academic standards, challenge those students to achieve while supporting their efforts throughout the process (House & Hayes, 2002). Of course, school counselors are in an excellent position to be those adults. However, more evidence that shows how school counselors working under this new model can promote student achievement is needed. The Education Trust and the NCTSC are currently calling for such evidence through professional workshops and conferences and are committed to disseminating data that provides the evidence needed to support this new vision (The Education Trust, 2004).

As school counseling programs continue to adopt the new vision, and as such programs assess and evaluate the effect their programs have in their own schools, organizations like ASCA and The Education Trust will add their results to the ongoing conversation regarding school counseling reform. Soon the data will accumulate and show whether school counseling programs in compliance with the ASCA National Standards and National Model and the TSCI have the affect on student achievement levels that its proponents predict. What is striking in its absence from the conversation thus far are the effects this new vision of school counseling has on
the students based on the students’ perspective. Collecting outcome data will help demonstrate whether this new vision of school counseling is having the desired effect on overall student achievement, but it will provide little insight into exactly how the intervention affects the students. Understanding the impact this new vision has on the students from their own perspective can provide valuable insight not only into what works, but how it works. Such feedback could then be used to inform leaders in school counseling reform as they continue the process of developing and assessing school counseling program models that benefit all students.

Although the call for evidence-based research in education is often assumed to mean quantitative data, using different theoretical approaches to investigate school counseling program outcomes would be beneficial as well. In this study, I relied on constructivist theory as a grounding principle for my research as I attempted to understand the impact that a school counseling program that fits with the new vision of school counseling has had on the high school experiences of ten students from the perspective of the students themselves.

Constructivist theory claims that meaning is not discovered; rather, it is constructed by human beings as they interact with their worlds (Crotty, 1998). Constructivists reject the idea that objects or events hold meaning in and of themselves. Instead, objects and events may have potential meaning, but meaning does not exist until consciousness interacts with the objects or events (Crotty, 1998). In this way, it can be said the world contains no meaning without some form of consciousness capable of interpreting the world and its events (Crotty, 1998).

Constructivist thought has several implications for research. First, rather than simply looking at measurable outcomes, the constructivist researcher is attempting to uncover and understand a deeper structure that governs the construction of meaning of an event or interaction (Hayes, 1994). For this reason it is important that the researcher not be confined to looking for
traditional meanings that may be commonly associated with an event, but rather understand the process of meaning making in the subject of the research and the meaning that subject has constructed (Crotty, 1998). This involves asking not only what, when, and where questions, but more importantly attempting to understand the answers to how questions

Constructivist theory would be appropriate for this research for several reasons. First, constructivist theory believes that people are creative, and therefore understanding their belief and interpretation systems is vital to understanding their actions (Jones, 1995). The implication for this study is that, by understanding how the students perceive and make meaning out of their interactions with the school counseling program, we can better understand their subsequent actions. Constructivist thinking is also particularly well suited to understanding social action because constructivists view all meaning making as the result of a social interaction (Crotty, 1998). In this instance, meaning is not something that students will create independently out of interactions, but will be negotiated between students and the school counselors. Simply looking at the effect the school counselors have on students, or vice-versa, discounts the interactional and collaborative meaning-making process that is occurring in school counselor-student interactions.

Just as meaning-making is a social endeavor, so too is it a cultural endeavor. In the process of making meaning of our world, we are first viewing the world through lenses that are products of our cultural perspective (Crotty, 1998). Culture plays an important role in the school reform movement, both in terms of meeting the needs of students from various cultures and negotiating the differences in perspectives from students and the stakeholders in their education. For this reason, incorporating the students’ cultural perspective into our understanding of their experience, rather than ignoring culture as a variable or attempting to control for it, will promote a more holistic, realistic understanding of their experience.
The ability of constructivist research to understand experience in a holistic manner is another benefit to utilizing real world research in schools. As Hayes (1994) states, “Constructivists contend that efforts to decontextualize behavior by trying to control for confounding variables is ineffective at best and invalid at worst when trying to understand individual behavior” (p. 9). Trying to isolate a single component of a complex relationship between student and school counselor is not only impossible, it is likely irrelevant. The students understand their experience with the school counseling program holistically rather than in isolated pieces. If we are to understand the impact those school counseling programs have on their experiences, we must investigate them holistically as well.

Conclusion

School counseling continues to evolve in response to social and economic forces. The most recent school reform efforts, grounded by a call of accountability, focus on promoting academic achievement by removing barriers that hinder student success. As school counseling reform initiatives such as the ASCA National Standards, the TSCI, and the ASCA National Model gain momentum, there has been a call for evidence that this new vision of school counseling is having an effect on student achievement. Although such evidence is usually thought of as quantitative outcome measures, findings from a qualitative, constructivist investigation of the students’ experiences with this new vision of school counseling program would provide important information as well.

This study, which investigates the experiences of ten high school students who have been positively influenced by a school counseling program that was developed under this new model of school counseling, will add to the literature in three ways. First, it will help us to understand how the activities that school counselors perform in their jobs are experienced by the students,
and in particular what is most helpful to those students. Second, it will provide an outline of positive experiences that we can then compare to what we might expect would be helpful given the theory behind the recent reforms. Third, the students’ experiences can provide us with vital information about what is most meaningful to them about the school counseling program. School counselors and school counselor educators can then use that information as they continue the process of transforming school counseling preparation and practice to ensure that the academic, career, and personal/social needs of all students are addressed. The study will also enable us begin to identify when students are being helped in ways that the new model proposes they will be helped, as well as see areas that students experience as important that may be neglected or under-emphasized by the new models. Finally, it will help keep school counseling reform proponents grounded in the experience of those they are trying to help succeed as we continue the struggle to define ourselves and the profession of school counseling.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of those students who have been influenced positively by their school counseling program. This chapter presents the methodology used to explore the experiences of those high school students and to understand the students’ perspectives of the role the school counseling program played in their academic, career, and personal development.

Research Paradigm

The educational reform movement has been consistent in its concern with accountability; that is, that programs must produce measurable results in the students they serve. Many times these results come in the form of measurable changes such as standardized test scores, grades, attendance rates, graduation rates, and the like. This type of evaluation is a necessary component of any education reform movement and will be crucial to the ultimate evaluation of transformed school counseling programs; however, there are other considerations to be made as well while the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI) model is further developed and refined. Although more traditional, quantitative methods of study are used to test hypotheses and investigate causal relationships while holding certain variables constant, the goals of this project are more compatible with a qualitative research paradigm (Creswell, 1994; Guba, 1978). Because we know so little about the students’ experiences with and perceptions of their school counseling programs, it is important that I approach this study with an open mind and be prepared to learn whatever there is to learn from the data. Research projects such as this one that have a focus on “discovery” are better suited for qualitative methods (Guba, 1978). If I had chosen quantitative methods, I would have selected what to measure, asserting my assumptions
about the effects of the school counseling program and potentially eliminating important aspects of the interaction simply because I did not choose to measure them.

Another reason for choosing qualitative methods is so that I may begin to answer “how” questions about the effects of the school counseling programs, rather than just “what” questions (Merriam, 1998). Although looking at quantitative outcome data may show what effects, if any, the school counseling program has had on certain student variables such as attendance rates or test scores, it will provide little insight into how those changes came about and how the students were influenced by their school counselors. In this sense, I am interested in studying the process of the interaction in addition to the end result, and qualitative methodologies are far better suited to understanding process (Creswell, 1994; Guba, 1978). As Guba (1978) suggests, “the best way to study process is to observe it directly rather than infer its nature from the known input and the observed output” (p. 23). Understanding the process of the interaction between students and their school counseling programs may be important in and of itself, but understanding how students are positively influenced by their school counseling programs may help school counselors and school counselor educators make more fully informed decisions as they continue to develop and shape the roles and duties of professional school counselors to best meet the needs of all students.

Wolcott (1994) insists that one of the distinguishing attributes of qualitative researchers is that they be good storytellers. I began this research project because I believe that the students who are currently working with transformed school counselors have unique and important perspectives on the transformation of school counseling programs, and that understanding their experiences will help the professionals working with the initiative to continue to shape and mold
the transformation. My intention is to tell the stories of the students through this research project in a manner that is both richly descriptive and true to the experiences of the students themselves.

Creswell (1994) defines a qualitative study as one “designed as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p.1-2). This definition fits well with the goals of this research process and helps to demonstrate why qualitative methods were chosen to answer the research questions. With this inquiry, I am trying to understand a social situation in a particular context: the students’ experiences of their interactions with their school counseling program. Furthermore, because I see their interactions as socially constructed, complex, and interactive, I wanted to investigate their experiences in a way that would allow me to understand their interactions as such. Finally, I want to present a descriptive account of students’ experiences as they relate them to me, with support from artifacts and observations from a natural setting.

Research Design

The focus of the research project is a specific set of students at one particular high school; therefore, I have chosen a case study as my research design for this project. According to Merriam (1998), qualitative case studies can be differentiated from other qualitative designs in that they are “intensive descriptions and analyses of a single unit or bounded system” (p. 19). It is the bounded system as the unit of study that is the most important defining characteristic of a case study (Merriam, 1998). Because there are a finite number of potential participants that fit the criteria, the students selected fit the definition of a bounded system (Merriam, 1998).

In addition to a focus on a single bounded unit, case studies can further be described by the intent of the study (Merriam, 1998). My proposed study is like an interpretive case study in
that it will contain rich descriptions of the experiences of the participants and in that the data
collected will be broken down into conceptual categories or themes (Merriam, 1998). These
themes will then be compared against a backdrop of conventional theoretical assumptions, in this
case against the principles of the TSCI and the American School Counseling Associations
(ASCA) National Standards.

Site Selection

The site of this research project is a large public high school, which is called County
High in this study, in a medium-sized University town in the Southeast. The site was specifically
chosen because all four professional school counselors are recent graduates of the local
University’s school counseling program, and all were trained under the Transforming School
Counseling Initiative model. Two years prior to the beginning of the study, the Head of the
school counseling department at County High began to transform the more traditional school
counseling program that had existed in the school for many years into a program that was
consistent with the TSCI model and compliant with ASCA standards. An account of the
counselors’ experiences with this transformation process was previously investigated
(McMahon, 2002).

In many ways, the existence of the site generated the study. When the school counselors
took on the task of transforming their school counseling program, it presented a unique
opportunity to study the new model and students’ experiences with the new model in a real-life
setting. Of the four counselors, there are two males and two females, ranging in age from 27 to
51 and ranging in professional school counseling experience from 2 to 4 years. Although it is
ture that the school counselors do not have a great deal of experience working as school
counselors, the reason that they were chosen was because they were educated under the TSCI
model, which is itself a very recent development. One of the male school counselors identifies himself as African-American and the other identifies as White. One of the female school counselors identifies herself as African-American, the other as White/Jewish. The school counselors and the school counseling program are described in more detail in Chapter IV.

**Participant Selection**

Participants were chosen using purposeful sampling techniques in order to ensure that the students included in the research project are those from whom the most can be learned about the research question (Merriam, 1998). In this study, the participants were selected from a pool of potential participants that was generated by the four professional school counselors at the high school. The school counselors generated this initial pool based on a set of inclusion criteria that I had given to them. The criteria included: 1) the students have had, in the opinion of the school counselors, a fairly significant “growth experience” that would fit under one or more of ASCA’s categories (academic, career, or personal/social development); 2) this “growth experience” was associated with, in the opinion of the school counselors, their participation in some aspect of the school counseling program (individual counseling, group counseling, classroom psychoeducational groups, advisory group activities, or other workshops sponsored by the school counseling program; 3) the student is either a junior, senior, or recent graduate (within the past two years) of the high school; and 4) the “growth experience” is not related to an ongoing personal or family issue that may lead to undue discomfort or trauma for the participant if it is revisited during the course of the interview.

The first two criteria were set to ensure that the participants have been positively influenced by the school counseling program, the experience I sought to understand better through the inquiry process. The third criterion was meant to ensure that each student’s positive
experience took place while the school counseling program was operating under the principles of the TSCI model. The fourth criterion was due to ethical considerations and is designed to help prevent any undue discomfort on the part of the participants. Additionally, it served to ensure that the interviews are pleasant experiences for the students and provides an opportunity for them to reflect upon important events in their high school years.

Once the original pool of potential participants was formed, the school counselors contacted each of the students and asked him or her if he or she was willing to participate in a research study investigating high school students’ perceptions of their school counseling program. I should note that the students were not agreeing to be in the study at this point. They were only giving the school counselors permission for me to contact them so that I could provide more details about the study and ask if they would be willing to participate. The names of those students who indicated that they were interested were recorded on a sheet along with their contact information and basic identifying information, including age, grade level, gender, ethnicity, and primary counselor. The school counseling department head then gave the list of 32 prospective students to me, and using the identifying information, I chose from this group of prospective participants 16 students who most accurately represented the makeup of the student body regarding gender and ethnicity. Additionally, I wanted to have approximately the same number of students from each school counselor’s list. These attempts to achieve maximum variation within my purposeful sample helped to ensure that the sample represented a wide range of important characteristics of interest (in this case, ethnicity, gender, primary counselor, etc.) while still fitting the criteria necessary to provide important data regarding the research question (Merriam, 1998).
The final group of students included 8 males and 8 females. Six of the potential participants were white, 5 were African-American, 3 were Hispanic, one was Persian/Middle Eastern and one was listed as having multiple ethnicities. Four of these students were juniors at the time, 6 were seniors, and 6 had graduated from County High in the past two years. The students were evenly divided between the four school counselors’ lists, four from each list. Once this final pool was chosen, I began calling the potential participants to explain the expectations of the research project and to seek permission to participate in the study. At this point, I discovered that the contact information for three students was incorrect. One student’s mother told me she would be unable to participate due to her athletic schedule. Five students did not return my calls.

I was able to get in contact with seven students, and all of them agreed to participate in the study. One by one, I set up a time and place to meet for an interview that was convenient and comfortable for the participants. If the student was younger than 18 years of age, he or she signed a “Minor Assent” form that explained the research study and asked for the participant’s agreement to take part in the study. In addition, the participant was given a Parent/Guardian Consent form. Both forms were signed before the participant was interviewed for the study. If the participant was 18 years or older, s/he was given a Consent form to sign immediately before the interview took place. In either case, I went over the form with the student to fully explain the purpose of the study, the expectations for participation, and issues of confidentiality and the limits thereof. Participants were informed that their participation was purely voluntary, and that they could refuse to answer any questions and could stop the interview at any time with no adverse consequences.

After I had completed the seven interviews with students from the original pool and was unable to contact the others from the original list, I went back to the school counselors and asked
them each for a few more names. Because most of the students whom I had been able to
interview at that time had been graduates, I asked them specifically for current students to help
diversify the participant pool regarding grade level. Three of the four school counselors
responded (Ms. C, Ms. J, and Mr. B) and I contacted one student from each of their lists, going
through the same process as I had with the previous group of participants. Once I had completed
and transcribed the tenth interview, I decided that saturation had been achieved and did not
schedule any further interviews

*Data Collection*

Qualitative studies require the use of multiple sources of data (Creswell, 1998). In this
study, I collected data primarily through individual interviews with the students selected from the
initial pool of potential participants provided by the counselors, although artifacts, documents,
and observations were utilized as well. As the principle researcher, I conducted all of the
interviews, which followed a semi-structured format. This format entailed having specific
questions in the form of an interview guide (Appendix A) that I asked each participant, but it also
provided me with the freedom to pursue any new line of questioning that may have come out of
the interview that seemed important and relevant to the research question. Probes and follow-up
questions were used to allow participants to expand upon an answer. The interviews lasted
approximately forty-five minutes each. Four of the interviews took place in a study room at the
University library and five took place in a study room at the local county library, both easily
accessible but quiet public places. One of the interviews took place in a food court at a local
mall, which was a public space, but not quiet. The interviews took place over a ten-month span
(March through December, 2003).
Along with the benefits of in-depth individual interviews come potential risks. Participants may feel embarrassed or that their privacy has been invaded, and researchers can unknowingly touch on topics that are very sensitive to the participant (Merriam, 1998). To prevent such discomfort and to help make the interview the positive or even valuable experience it often is, I took a few precautions in accordance with those suggested by Merriam. First, I explained confidentiality and the limits thereof on their consent form and discussed the concept with them before beginning the interview. This step was intended to help participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences with me without worrying that their reports will get back to the counselors. At the same time, it helped to make sure that they understand the limits of confidentiality so that they can make an informed decision regarding the information they shared with me. In addition, I explained to each participant that, because my goal for the interview was to understand the experience of the students with their school counseling program, I was not looking for “right answers” or judging them based on their answers. Instead, I was interested in whatever they could tell me that would help me understand their experiences. Finally, because of the potential for these participants to have discussed sensitive issues with their counselors, I let the participants know that they did not need to disclose any information that they considered to be personal. Furthermore, I informed the participants that they were free to choose not to answer any question and were welcome to stop the interview at any time should they become uncomfortable. In addition, as I was responsible for conducting the interview in an ethical manner, I paid attention to the participant’s emotional state throughout the interview. If a participant appeared upset or uncomfortable, I was prepared to stop the interview and ask her/him how s/he was doing.
I transcribed each interview as it was completed. The primary advantage to transcribing the interviews myself was that, because I was present for the interview, I was able to add notes regarding any changes in mood, expression, or other observable behavior on the part of the participants that a professional transcriptionist who was not there for the interview could not add. In addition, the process of listening to the tape and reading the transcript helped to develop a deeper understanding of the material, and informed changes that I made in the interview process. For instance, while listening to the first two interviews I noticed that the participants had difficulty remembering stories from high school until the end of the interview. I altered the interview guide by adding questions about their overall high school experience at the beginning of the interview to help them remember what it was like to be in high school before I asked them about the school counseling program specifically.

In addition to interviews, I collected documents that provided additional information about the school counseling program and provided insight into the research questions. Because the focus of this study was to understand the experiences of the students, and due to the difficulty of collecting artifacts that directly supported individuals’ perceptions, documents were used, but only as a supporting source of data. Documents and artifacts were useful in this study in two important ways. First, they provided information about the organization, activities, and priorities of the school counseling program. Documents used for this purpose included announcements of school counseling programming (such as test prep classes and college nights), records of departmental goals set by the counselors, and notes from departmental meetings. Secondly, documents and artifacts supported or added additional information to the data collected through the participant interviews (e.g., thank you notes written by the students or their parents to the counselors).
Finally, data were collected through personal observations as well. I observed the school counselors in a variety of professional settings over the course of three semesters. Although ethical considerations prevented me from sitting in and observing counseling sessions between the school counselors and their clients, I was able to observe the counselors’ interaction with counselors in informal settings. I sat in the counseling office main room and observed the students’ informal interactions with the school counselors and school counseling staff on three occasions, and I observed the school counselors as they talked with students in the cafeteria during lunch time. I was also able to observe the school counselors as they co-facilitated (with a group of students) a multicultural workshop for juniors and seniors.

In addition to observing their interactions with students, I was able to observe the school counselors on several other occasions as well. I took field notes at six of their weekly staff meetings where they would discuss the ongoing development of their school counseling program and discussed student needs that needed to be addressed, and developed strategies for meeting those needs. Twice I attended and took field notes at meetings they held with the school counseling department from the other county high school in order develop a more unified focus on the county’s high school counseling program. In addition, I attended several of the monthly meetings where all of the county’s school counselors (K-12) would meet with the local university’s school counseling professors and students to foster collaborative relationships and develop collaborative projects that benefit all parties involved.

As with the collection of documents, the field notes from my observations were used only as a secondary source of data collection in this study because the study’s research questions asked about the students’ experience, and the observations did not permit me to understand the students’ experiences. However, important data were collected through these observations
regarding the school counselors’ intentions and priorities, and these data were used to support or provide additional information to data obtained through the participants’ interviews.

*Data Analysis*

Marshall and Rossman (1989) define data analysis in qualitative research as “the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data” (p. 112). Data analysis is a messy, non-linear, confusing, ambiguous, yet fascinating process (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Unlike in quantitative studies, data analysis in qualitative research begins as data are first being collected and intensifies as data collection progresses (Merriam, 1998). The relationship between data collection and analysis is recursive and dynamic (Merriam, 1998). As I listened during an interview, I was analyzing the data constantly so that I was able to ask appropriate follow-up questions. Additionally, as I analyzed data from completed interviews and other sources such as documents or observations, I used that analysis to inform future interviews. Because conveying an intensive and holistic understanding of the case is crucial in an interpretive case study, the process of simultaneously collecting and analyzing the data plays a key role in shaping the final product of the study (Merriam, 1998).

In the more formal data analysis for this study, I used the constant comparative method of analyzing the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), meaning that the data from each interview, document, or observation were analyzed for themes or categories that emerged from the data (Merriam, 1998). The first step in this process was to look within each interview or other sources of data for “units of data,” any meaningful small bit of data that can be interpretable out of the context of the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Comparing these bits of data within a particular data source, I began to construct themes or categories around recurring units of data. As I moved on to the next interview, document, or set of field notes, I followed the
same procedure, making a similar list of bits of data and of themes that seemed to be emerging from the data. As I constructed these tentative themes or categories, I compared the themes across data sources, creating a master list of more comprehensive categories. Eventually, I labeled and defined each of these comprehensive categories. To be effective for data analysis purposes, each category should: 1) reflect the purpose of the study; 2) be exhaustive; 3) be mutually exclusive; 4) be sensitizing; and 5) be conceptually congruent (Merriam, 1998).

Validity and Reliability

In order for the findings to be of practical use, the study must be rigorously conducted and must lead to conclusions that are relevant to the data and reasonable to the readers (Merriam, 1998). Quantitative studies commonly use the terms validity and reliability to describe this sense of confidence we are expected to have in the way that results are obtained, but there is debate over exactly what the terms mean, or even if they should be used, in qualitative studies (Creswell, 1994; Guba, 1978, Merriam, 1998). Although the terms validity and reliability do not mean the same thing as they do in quantitative research, I use them to describe the ways I endeavor to ensure the results are reasonable given the context of the study (Merriam, 1998). Although the techniques used may be different, the focus of validity and reliability in qualitative research is still on well-constructed instrumentation (in this case, the interview questions), rigorous research procedures, appropriate data analysis methods, and reasonable conclusions drawn from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Internal Validity

Internal validity is a measure of the congruence between the research findings and the reality examined (Merriam, 1998). Although qualitative research is not grounded in positivist assumptions, and therefore would not support that there is one true “reality” to be found, it is
nonetheless important that the results of the study accurately represent the reality as experienced by the participants within the context of the study. As a practical application, internal validity is sometimes seen as the degree to which others might come to the same conclusions given the data available to the researcher and the perspective from which the researcher was operating, a concept referred to as “confirmability” (Guba, 1978).

The internal validity of qualitative research has been questioned at times because it is often seen as lacking in objectivity in regard to research findings (Guba, 1978). However, proponents of qualitative research would argue that no data, even in quantitative research, speaks objectively because it is always interpreted by an observer (Ratcliffe, 1983). Furthermore, because the researcher is the research instrument, internal validity can be seen as a strength of qualitative research when reality is viewed as mutually constructed through the interaction between humans (Merriam, 1998). Additionally, as qualitative researchers strive to be aware of and open about their subjectivity to protect against biases and to provide the audience with the researcher’s perspective, the reader of qualitative research is in a position to understand the interpretation through the eyes of the researcher and can thus judge whether the findings reflect reality from the participants’ perspectives.

Qualitative studies use several strategies to help ensure that the instruments are well conceived and constructed and that the conclusions drawn are reasonable (Creswell, 1994; Guba, 1978; Merriam, 1998). In this study, strategies such as peer examination, member checks, and triangulation were used during analysis to safeguard internal validity. In addition, a statement of researcher bias and assumptions was provided to aid the reader in understanding the subjective perspective through which I interpreted the data.
**Peer examination.** Peer examination involves getting feedback from colleagues throughout the research process. By receiving others’ perspectives of the interview questions, the data collected, and of my analysis of the data, I checked any personal biases that have interfered with my collection of or analysis of the data. In this study, a previously formed research group served as my peer examination group. The group, made up of both professors and doctoral students in Counseling Psychology, all share an interest in school reform, and many have experience in qualitative research methodology. The group helped to ensure that I was going about my data collection in a responsible and ethical manner, and helped validate my interpretations.

**Member checks.** I also utilized member checks as a way to help bolster the internal validity of my findings and interpretations. At the end of each interview, I reviewed the themes that I heard in the interviews and provided participants an opportunity to expand on their ideas or correct any ideas I had come away with that did not represent what they wanted to say. Internal validity can be compromised if the interview questions are vague or confusing, if the interviewee mishears or misunderstands the question, or if the researcher mishears or misunderstands the interviewee’s response. By giving the interviewees an opportunity to respond to what I heard in their answers and make any appropriate changes, I minimized this occurrence, thus helping to ensure that the information taken from the interview represented the true experience of the interviewee.

**Triangulation.** A common strategy for protecting the internal validity of a research study is through triangulation. Triangulation is the process whereby the researcher collects information from various sources that validate each other (Guba, 1978). Triangulation has several advantages in qualitative studies. By collecting information from different sources and
different perspectives, the new data can not only support the initial findings but can also validate
the process of data collection (Guba, 1978). In addition, triangulation can minimize researcher
bias (Creswell, 1994) and help the researcher test emerging theories during the data
collection/data analysis process (Merriam, 1998). In this study, data were triangulated through
the use of multiple sources of data. While individual interviews were the primary source of data
collection, documents and field notes from my observations were used to support the conclusions
drawn from the individual interviews or, wherever there were discrepancies between the data
sources, to explore the reason for the differences.

*External Validity*

In addition to internal validity, qualitative studies are also concerned with external
validity, or the extent to which the findings of the study can be generalized to other situations
(Creswell, 1994; Merriam, 1998). As it is traditionally defined, generalizability has sometimes
been cited as a limitation of qualitative studies, while others have argued that it is simply not a
goal of social science qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). However, if the results of a study
are to be used in real-world applications, it important that the reader see a degree of applicability
for the findings. Along this line of thinking, it can be argued that it should be up to the reader,
not the researcher, to decide whether the findings presented in a study are applicable to a specific
context (Guba, 1978). Given the unique setting that is the focus of this inquiry, I can make no
claims of generalizability to any other situation or population. However, I do hope to create a
degree of “user generalizability,” or the ability for the reader to make informed decisions as to
whether the results could be realistically generalized to the specific situation within which s/he
works, so that the results may be of practical use (Merriam, 1998).
Although user generalizability is the responsibility of the reader, Merriam (1998) cites specific things the researcher can do to help the reader make an informed decision about the validity of the results including providing rich, thick description, describing the typicality of the subject to be studied; and using multisite designs. In this study, I included rich description of the participants and school context and used a variation on the multisite design strategy. By describing the participants and the setting in detail, I provide the reader the opportunity to make informed decisions regarding the congruence of his/her situation with the situation being studied, and whether any or all of the results can be transferred to his/her situation. Although I cannot use multisite design with this particular study because the site is unique in its involvement with the Transforming School Counseling Initiative, I deliberately selected a diverse range of participants regarding gender, ethnicity, and grade level. By creating maximum variation of participants within the selection criterion, I hoped to increase the reader’s ability to apply the results to his/her situation.

Reliability

The reliability of a study is commonly seen as the extent to which the research findings could be replicated (Merriam, 1998). Because of the implications inherent in the notion of multiple realities, as well as the complications of replicating a study that occurred in a unique cultural and environmental context, expecting an outsider to replicate a qualitative, naturalistic study and to have the same findings is unrealistic (Creswell, 1994; Guba, 1978). Rather than replicability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose thinking of reliability in qualitative research as “dependability” or “consistency”; that is, that the findings are consistent with the data that were collected (p. 288). In other words, a qualitative study need not be replicated by an outsider to be
seen as reliable, but an outsider should find the conclusions to be reasonable given the data collected and the unique context of the inquiry.

Several authors have proposed techniques to help improve the reliability of a qualitative study, including providing statements of researcher bias (Creswell, 1994; Merriam, 1998), detailed description of participant selection and data collection methods (Creswell, 1994), creating an audit trail (Guba, 1978; Merriam, 1998), triangulation of data (Merriam, 1998), and stepwise replication (Guba, 1978). All of the techniques listed above were utilized to enhance the reliability of this study. My subjectivity statement articulates personal characteristics, personal and professional experiences, and my theoretical position so that the reader may better understand me and my perspective. In addition, I have provided detailed descriptions of the site and participant selection procedures and so that the reader may understand the data in the context that they were gathered. For the purpose of creating an audit trail, I have kept a journal in which I recorded not only procedures, but my thoughts and feelings about each decision I made and reactions to each interview conducted. I collected data from multiple sources to triangulate the data. Finally, I used members of my research group to help identify issues and concerns at various stages of the study, serving as a reliability cross-check.

Subjectivity Statement

The professional specialty of school counseling is very important to my professional identity. I am a former professional school counselor, have supervised school counseling interns, and have served three years as a graduate assistant in a master’s level school counseling program following the TSCI model. My experiences with the profession of school counseling, whether working with young students, preservice school counselors, or conducting research, have led me to certain biases that need to be considered as I prepared to take on this study. As it is natural for
a human observer to focus on certain things while relegating others to the background (Wolcott, 1994), it was important that I considered my perspective and my biases as I proceeded with my research. In addition, I was important that I provide a written record of my relevant history and perspectives so the reader can, to some degree, see the data through my eyes. In this section, I describe my personal and cultural background, my professional framework, and my research assumptions. In addition, I have given an account of a few professional experiences I have had that I believe relate to the research topic.

**Personal and Cultural Background**

My most prominent, perhaps pervasive, cultural identity comes from what I consider a culture of privilege. Having grown up a White male from a well-educated, professional family provided me with numerous opportunities and a degree of freedom that most people do not have. Part of the reason I believe this privilege plays such a prominent role in my perspective on the world is because privilege is, by its very nature, invisible to the privileged. The assumptions that I began to construct about the world and about people were perceived through glasses I was not aware I was wearing. In my professional career I have worked diligently at understanding my own culture and how my cultural perspective influences how I perceive the world. In addition, I began to learn about other cultures, and most importantly, learn how to work with people with very different worldviews. Becoming aware of my culture and my privilege has not meant that they no longer play a part in my worldview; rather, it is the awareness that I do indeed see the world through such a cultural lens that now plays a prominent role as I construct my worldview. I still see the world how I see it, for I can see it no other way, but I now understand that my view, while accurate for me, is quite a limited perspective. While I could talk about specific cultural frameworks, such as my being White, being male, or being from a high socioeconomic status
(SES), I believe the implications of each of these cultural views is absorbed in the overall culture of privilege, and I cannot separate them from each other. Just as an African-American woman may not be able to identify if she is oppressed due to her race or her gender, I cannot tell where my privilege should be attributed, because I am never *not* White, male, or from a high SES.

My personal framework starts with my experiences with my family. I feel fortunate to have taken on several traits that I see in my mother and father. From my mother, I learned the importance of being caring, sensitive, and thoughtful. This interest in people and in their well-being has served me well, and in fact has guided me, to my work with children and adolescents. From my father I learned to value and respect everyone, and to be able to put myself in others’ positions and begin to see the world through their eyes. I think of my father as someone who understands people very well, and while he has bought into larger stereotypes about groups of people, whenever I have seen him interact with others he starts from a position of respect and understanding. My father has always been very supportive and encouraging to me as I was growing up. This was important to me, and has likely contributed to my interest in early development and in creating safe and supportive environments that foster growth. In fact, this passion for helping young people is seen throughout my family, and relates directly to my family’s involvement with schools. My older sister led the way, becoming a first grade teacher and, more recently, a reading specialist. As I went back to school to get my master’s in school counseling, my father quit his job as a lawyer after working for 27 years and began teaching high school psychology and history. My mother began volunteering in the library at the high school where my father worked, and soon she was working full time as a media specialist. This sense of nurturing and the importance of fostering growth and education in others permeate my family’s beliefs and actions.
My professional framework is not very different from my personal framework. I am a counselor, both in past profession and in perspective. For me, being a counselor means encouraging growth in others, fostering healthy development, understanding others from their personal and cultural perspectives, and helping them to develop the insight, build the skills, and find the strength inside of themselves so that they may lead the lives they choose to lead. My specific counseling approach when working with clients is based on Alfred Adler’s Individual Psychology (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Individual Psychology is a phenomenological approach that appreciates each individual’s unique characteristics and perspectives. Adlerians believe that behavior is purposive, that we all set fictive goals for the type of life we want to lead and the person we want to be, and that our behavior represents our best attempts in meeting those goals. Even what is often labeled as “misbehavior” is simply people’s best attempt to get their needs met given their perception of their skills, their perception of the environment and the resources available to them, and the goals they think are realistic for them to achieve.

In addition to utilizing an Adlerian perspective, I also use a constructivist approach to my work with clients. The basic tenet of constructivist thinking is that people create the meaning in their worlds through their interactions with the world (Crotty, 1998). As individuals interact with objects, people, and events their lives, they perceive the events and then interpret the events. They then act in accordance with their interpretations. When working with clients, I use the constructivist perspective to help understand how my client is making sense of the world in order to better understand his or her emotions about or reactions events in their lives.

Adlerian thought and constructivist thought, although coming from different perspectives, compliment each other well. Both reject reductionism, instead viewing individuals
holistically. Both views are teleological and phenomenological, placing significance in understanding and individual’s “personal meaning” rather than an objective view of reality. Most importantly for me, both schools of thought see individuals as creative and complex, rejecting false dichotomies to define individuals (Jones, 1995). When working with clients, I seek to understand individuals from their perspective, believing that no single instrument (other than another human, perhaps) is fine enough to accurately “measure” an aspect of the human being, and no label is comprehensive enough to describe a human being completely. This belief guides the process of both my counseling and my research.

Researcher Assumptions

I mentioned in the paragraph above how I try to understand people, their experiences, and their motivations in my role as a therapist. If that is how I understand people in therapy, and it is complete enough and effective enough for me to help people change their lives, how could I attempt to understand them any other way when conducting research? Because I am a counseling psychologist, my research topic is almost always people, the dynamic interactions between them, and the meanings they construct about the significant events in their lives. Consistent with the Adlerian and constructivist approaches I take when working with someone in therapy, I try to understand the individuals I am studying within their personal and cultural contexts. I attempt to understand their understanding of the world and the role they see themselves playing in it. I want to know not only what sense they make of their existence, but how they make sense of their existence (Hayes, 1994). I want to hear about their significant life experiences, and I want to begin to understand how they have made sense of those experiences, what meaning they have created from those experiences, and what goals they have based on their interpretations of their significant experiences. Although I see this position grounded more in
my practice as a counselor than as a researcher, I believe it is very consistent with the ideas of constructivist and interpretivist research, which “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67).

I believe that knowledge, in this case meaning whatever I am trying to get from a research project, is holistic, dynamic, and socially constructed. The knowledge I seek is holistic in that, in order to truly understand something, you must understand it in its entirety and in its context. I do not agree with a reductionist viewpoint that we can understand something by breaking it down into manageable bits, studying them, and building it back up again, particularly when studying something as complex and dynamic as human interactions. It may be more difficult—and messier—to study something in its entirety, but I believe it is the best way to get as accurate an understanding as we can.

I believe the knowledge I seek is about people and their experience is dynamic in that I see “reality” as an ever-changing process rather than a specific event. The impact that an event may have on someone today may be very different from the impact that same event may have on that same person in the future, because as our lives change and as we change our perspective, we are constantly re-evaluating our experiences and attributing new meanings to the significant events in our life.

Similar to that idea is my belief that reality is socially constructed (Crotty, 1998). The ongoing assessment of the meaning of events that I described in the proceeding paragraph does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it is through our interactions with the world, with the people in our world, and with the standards and values that are present in our culture that we construct and re-con-struct the significance of events. This idea speaks to why it is important to understand life events in context, bringing the discussion full circle. But that is appropriate, because I believe
that our realities being holistic, dynamic, and co-constructed are not separate categories, but constantly interacting facets of the human meaning-making machine.

*Professional Experiences Related to the Research Topic*

As I conducted research for this study and struggled to articulate exactly what it is I wanted to discover through this process, I found that two stories from my professional past continued to come to mind. The first memory took place when I was working in a psychiatric hospital fresh out of college. I received a letter from a former patient, an adolescent girl, who wrote to tell me about what she had been doing since leaving the hospital, and to let me know that she was doing quite well. At the end of the letter, she alluded to a conversation we had that had been meaningful to her, and told me that she wasn't sure she understood what I meant at the time, but she understood now and that those words had stuck with her through tough times and helped her to get through them. The strange part of the story is that I do not remember that conversation; in fact, I don't even remember the patient. I remember being pleased that I could help someone, but being utterly confused that a moment that had been so important to someone else could have escaped my memory entirely. I wanted to write her back and ask her what I said so that I could make sure I said that to everyone, but I was embarrassed to let her know that I didn't remember the conversation (much less her). Besides, there was a part of me that grasped that what helped her may not help everybody.

The second memory took place during my internship as a school counseling master's student. I was working at an alternative high school in Virginia, a school whose student body included students who had been kicked out or failed out of local schools, but also included students who wanted to go to the alternative school because of the smaller student body, the flexible schedule, the longer block periods, or for the philosophy of the school. I was talking
with a student for whom I had a great deal of respect, and wanted to understand what motivated her to go through the trouble of leaving her old high school and enduring the stigma associated with alternative school, so I asked her why she decided to apply and what she was getting out of it, what kept her here. She told me a little bit about the accepting philosophy of the school, but the answer seemed incomplete. About two days later she knocked on my door and asked if I remembered the question about why she was here. "The fact that you asked that question," she said, "is exactly why I'm here. Because people ask me about stuff like that, because they care enough to ask." I understood and appreciated what she was telling me, but looking back, I wish I would have asked her how our asking helped her, what messages she received from that, and how her interaction with the faculty changed her.

This research was, in a way, an attempt to begin to address those questions I had left unanswered. We can interview helping professionals and ask what they are doing to help people, what has worked from their point of view, and even look at outcomes to determine if they are having a measurable impact in their lives. But, as my former patient taught me, sometimes we are not aware of or truly understand the impact that we have on our clients. My looking at her successes might provide evidence that I helped her, but without her input I have no idea what I did to help or how it helped. From my former student, I learned that the act of asking students what they need is an important first step in providing what they need.

Limitations of the Study

The choice of a research design and of research methodology is ultimately related to how well it will answer the research questions; still, all research studies have limitations (Merriam, 1998). The following limitations of this particular research project should be acknowledged.
First, although it is important to have the students describe their experience, it should be noted that the school counseling program may, and in fact should, affect their development in ways that are out of their awareness. This is particularly true of programs following a TSCI model, which places importance on promoting systemic change and removing barriers to success for all students. This work is often done “behind the scenes,” which means that students may not be able to speak to these changes even if they did influence student development. For this reason, students not mentioning the “behind the scenes” work that the counselors do on their behalf should not be an indication that this role is not important. Rather, if done well, we can expect the students not to mention it. This omission should not take away from what the students do identify as important to them.

Secondly, I recognize that individual development is an ongoing process. Therefore, while changes may be seen in the high school years, much of what a school counseling program intends to do is to provide students with skills and knowledge that will help them throughout life. Therefore, students may not yet incorporate all of the knowledge and skills that they received via their interactions with the school counseling program. Therefore, the students may not be able to identify the impact the school counseling program had on their development because of where they are in the development process. For this reason, it would be helpful to hear the voices of a more mature student looking back. However, part of the focus of this research project is to examine the experience of students who have come from a school counseling program that is consistent with a TSCI model, and that more mature population does not yet exist.

A third limitation is that the participants being asked to give us their perceptions were adolescents. From a developmental perspective, we understand that adolescents may lack insight, be more dualistic, have a present focus rather than future or past focus, and have the
tendency to credit their successes to their natural abilities rather than to lessons learned or help from external sources. This may limit the ability for the participants to make connections between their personal growth or academic successes and the events in their lives that helped them to grow or fostered their success.

Fourth, I chose to interview only those students who have been positively influenced by their school counseling program because I was primarily interested in understanding what students identify as being particularly beneficial or meaningful to them and their personal and academic development. I acknowledge that it would also be beneficial to hear from students who were dissatisfied or unaffected by their school counseling program and find out what they believe was missing. Although a worthy research question, understanding what is not working is beyond the scope of this research project. Because this research project represents a first step in understanding high school students’ experiences of their school counseling program, it is important that we understand what students find to be helpful so that school counselors and school counselor educators are able to build on that knowledge.

A fifth limitation to consider is that, as in all qualitative research, the results found in this study cannot be generalized to any other population in the statistical sense. Due to the small sample size and the use of purposeful sampling rather than random sampling, the results found in this study are relevant to these participants in this setting only.

Finally, allowing the school counselors to identify students who were helped by school counseling program may have created a selection bias. This method of selection was chosen in part because of time limitations, but also because I hoped that the school counselors would be in a better position to understand the goal of the study, thereby more efficiently finding students who could provide the most helpful data. However, by letting the school counselors identify
which students had been positively influenced by the school counseling program, the participants
may reflect who the school counselors identify with more than who was helped. In addition,
there may have been students who were helped by the school counseling program in ways that
the school counselors themselves were not aware.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of those students who have been positively influenced by their school counseling program. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do students who have been positively influenced by their interactions with the school counseling program describe their experience?

2. What experiences with the school counseling programs do high school students view as significant in their academic, career, personal, or social development?

3. How do students believe that they are different as a result of their interactions with the school counseling program?

4. How do the experiences and activities that the students identify as most helpful fit with the foundations of the Transforming School Counseling Initiative and the ASCA National Standards?

This chapter has three sections. The first section provides a brief overview of County High School and the school counseling program to provide context. The second section introduces the individual participants. The third section begins with an overview of the themes that emerged from the data, and is followed by narrative support for and explanation of those themes from the perspective of the participants.

County High School and the School Counseling Program

County High is housed in a long, two-story brick building that is tucked away down a short driveway off a road that runs through the heart of a residential neighborhood. Walking into the school, the presence of security guards and signs directing all visitors to sign in at the front
office quickly reminds any visitors that County High faces many of the same realities as any other large high school in the 21st century in spite of its small town, residential setting.

County High is one of two high schools in its county, and serves urban, suburban, and rural populations. It has approximately 1400 students in grades 9-12, and the student body is approximately 50% African-American, 30% White, 10% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 3% Arab-American. The school employs 100 teachers and has an administrative staff consisting of a principal and 3 assistant principals. In addition to the four professional school counselors, the school counseling department consists of one administrative assistant, one half-time mental health counselor who only sees students for specific mental health concerns, and several student aides. In addition, the school counselor program is often working with at least one preservice school counseling student from the local university. Each of the four professional school counselors, identified by the pseudonyms chosen for the purposes of this study, are described in more detail below to depict the diversity of perspectives represented in this group of counselors.

Ms. C is a 51 year-old White Jewish woman. She is a middle child, born and raised in the Midwest. She is married and has two children. She received her B.A. in English, and taught English for five years prior to entering the field of counseling. While earning her master’s degree in school counseling, she served on the editorial staff for a major academic journal. Upon receiving her M.Ed. in school counseling, she immediately took a job as a school counselor with the school where she currently works. In her second year, she was named department head, with three school counselors under her supervision, and she began the process of transforming the program. At the time of this writing, she is completing her fourth year as a professional school counselor, second as department head.
Ms. J is a 27 year-old Catholic, African-American woman. She is currently single and has no children. Ms. J was born in Nigeria, but raised in Charleston, South Carolina. Both of her parents are professors. Her professional background is in mental health counseling, and she has worked for one and a half years in a community mental health center and as a research assistant for a psychologist working with issues such as domestic violence and eating disorders. She received her M.A. in community counseling, but returned to school to obtain an add-on certification in school counseling when she was hired to work at County High in the school counseling department, headed by Ms. C. At the time of this writing, she is completing her third year as a professional school counselor.

Mr. G is a 32 year-old African American man who is single with no children. Mr. G grew up in Southeastern Georgia in what he describes as a “culturally rich environment.” He describes himself as having a “firm Christian orientation,” and says that music was a way of life for him and his family. He received his B.A. in psychology before working in community mental health for four years, three as an in-home crisis counselor for children and adolescents and one working in after-school treatment for adolescents. After earning his master’s degree in school counseling he worked for two years as an elementary school counselor. He is currently in a Ph.D. program in Educational Leadership and is completing his second year as a high school counselor.

Mr. B is a 29 year-old White man who is single with no children. He was raised in a small town in Georgia, where he developed his lifelong interests of soccer, Latino culture, and helping others. Mr. B has a bachelor’s degree in psychology and an associate’s degree in fine arts, and is fluent in Spanish. Before getting his master’s degree in school counseling, he served as a caseworker for child protective services and volunteered teaching English and American
culture to Latino students. In addition to working as a professional school counselor, Mr. B is also a soccer coach for the school. He is completing his second year on the job at the time of this writing.

Finding the counseling office, at least for a first time visitor, is not easy. After signing in and getting a bright yellow visitor’s badge, you must head back down the narrow main hallway past classrooms and lockers, through heavy fire doors, and down stairs on your left. There, literally in the basement of the old building, which it shares with the ROTC office, is the counseling department office. Walking through the glass doors, however, it is easy to forget that you are in a basement. In spite of having only narrow slits high on the walls that serve as windows, it always seems bright in the counseling office. Plants of various sizes stand absolutely still throughout the room, providing a sharp contrast to the constant human activity in the room. Ms. Day, the office secretary, has her desk in the large waiting room, although one of many student aides is just as likely to be sitting at her desk as she is. To the right is a fairly large conference room that was being transformed into a career center at the time of this study. At the left, down a narrow hallway past the copy machine, are the counselors’ individual offices and their group meeting rooms. The doors are often closed, signifying that they are either in their office with a student or not in their office at the time. Their doors do not stay closed for long, however. You can hear doors open and shut so regularly, see students and counselors walk up and down that narrow hallway so often that you notice the stillness more than the activity, because the activity is so constant.

The Participants

The participants in this study included 10 current and former students of County High School. To protect their anonymity, pseudonyms were given to the participants. The
participants were all from the graduating classes of 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004. Five of the students had graduated within two years of their interviews, and five were going to graduate within two years of their interview date. Nine of the ten participants had spent at least two years at County High School with the current school counselors. The group of participants is diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender, SES, and primary counselor, and is roughly in proportion to the County High student population along those variables. There are five females and five males in the group of participants. Four of the students are African-American, four are White, and two are Hispanic. Four of the students identified Ms. C as their primary counselors, three identified Mr. B, two identified Ms. J, and one identified Mr. G. However, every student noted that s/he had some interaction with more than one counselor, and most reported that s/he was familiar with each of the school counselors. The students varied along home environment variables as well, coming from a variety of family structures and representing the continuum of socioeconomic status. Figure 1 provides a summary of information regarding the participants. To promote a richer understanding of the participants, I have included a description of each participant in the following section. Within each section, I have tried to convey background information, relevant history regarding how they became involved with the school counseling program, and a glimpse of what my interaction with them was like during the interview. Although I have changed certain details to protect their anonymity, I attempted to accurately represent the major parts of their stories as they were told to me. Whenever possible, I used their own words to convey each of their unique personalities.

Wayne

Wayne is a 19 year-old white college freshman from a middle class family, and he is currently a pre-business major at the local state university. He is the second of two siblings, with
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Counselor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Mr. B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torrance</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Ms. J</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Mr. B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franny</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Ms. C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faviana</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Ms. J</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sal</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Ms. C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sera</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Mr. B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Mr. G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Ms. C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tino</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Mr. B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 Participants

a sister 5 years his senior who graduated from the same university that Wayne currently attends.

His parents are married. His father has a professional, white-collar job, and he describes his mother as a homemaker. Wayne received a statewide merit scholarship based on his 3.0 high school grade point average, which he will be able to keep as long as his grade point average stays above that mark in college. He enjoys athletic activities such as running and playing golf.

Wayne was quiet and appeared somewhat shy, but very pleasant during the interview.

Even though he does not remember going to the counseling office for the first three years of high school, Wayne smiled when he talked about his experiences with the school counselors. He became acquainted with the school counselors when, in his senior year, he took a position as an office aide in the school counseling office for a mentorship course. Through his work as an aide, he staffed the front desk, answered phones, performed clerical duties, and helped out the counselors and the office administrative assistant with whatever odd jobs he could perform. As
he developed a relationship with the counselors, he asked them for assistance with his college applications. Wayne says that he knows the counselors pretty well after working with them for a year, and says that the relationship that he formed with them was one of the best things that happened to him during his senior year.

_Torrance_

Torrance is a 20-year-old African-American in his sophomore year at the local state university, majoring in Studio Art. Growing up in a middle-class home, he is the only child of his parents, but has several older half-brothers and half-sisters from his parents’ previous marriages. His father is deceased, and his mother is semi-retired. Torrance is very active in a local chapter of a national black fraternity, and has volunteered helping African-American students adjust to the University. In addition, he works at a local convenience store to help with spending money. He also likes athletics, especially basketball, but his real passion is painting. He has completed murals for a children’s playground in his hometown, and his old high school has used his paintings for decorations during athletic events.

Like Wayne, Torrance said that he never went to see his school counselors before his senior year. At that time, however, teachers began to encourage him to apply for college, and suggested he seek assistance from the counseling office. A little hesitant at first, he quickly appeared to realize how much help he needed with the particulars of the college application process. Soon, he noticed that his counselor began to take an interest in his artwork, even hanging one of his original pieces in her office. Torrance began to form a bond with Ms. J, and he began to discuss other issues in his life, such as “family stuff” and relationship questions. He says that he still thinks they have a connection now, two years after he graduated from high school.
Theresa

Theresa is a 19-year-old Latina whose parents moved from their native Peru when she was 5 years old. At the time of the interview, she was a freshman at the local state university, planning on a career in marketing. Her parents are still together, and both work in professional jobs at the University. Theresa has one older brother, 21, who is also at the University and who lives at home. She made plans to get an apartment with a roommate for her sophomore year. Theresa is a member of a business fraternity at her school, and says she used to like sports but doesn’t have much time to play anymore.

Theresa’s first experience with the school counseling program occurred during her senior year when she and her boyfriend broke up. She says she did not even know where the counseling office was, but went to speak to her counselor at her friends’ suggestions. After that initial experience, she returned to her counselor with questions about college searches, help with applications to college, and career questions.

Franny

Franny is an 18-year old recent high school graduate working as a hostess at a local chain restaurant. She graduated from high school one semester early, and is working to save money while she waits to find out if she had been accepted into a local technical school’s cosmetology program. She is the only child of her parents, who are married, but she does share her house with four cats. Franny is saving money so she can get an apartment of her own. She is interested in cutting hair or perhaps makeup, but is also still considering a possible career in nursing. Franny knows that she wants a job that will give her a bit of variety, and a flexible enough work schedule to allow her to travel.
Franny’s first experience with the school counseling department came during her freshman year when she had a very difficult time finalizing her schedule. She remembers thinking that the counselors obviously did not know what they were doing. Her sophomore year, Franny says that she began having trouble getting along with her parents at home, and started talking to her counselor about her frustrations. Her relationship with her counselor continued to grow throughout her sophomore and junior years, and then she was recruited to be an office aide for the school counseling department for the first semester of her senior year because she “was down there all the time anyway.” Although she graduated a semester early, she (perhaps only half-jokingly) offered to continue to work in the counseling office answering phones just so she could stay with her “second family.”

Faviana

I interviewed Faviana, an 18-year-old African-American, during the summer after she graduated from high school. Faviana, whose parents have divorced and both remarried, is the oldest of several siblings and stepsiblings. She says that she feels as though she is spending the majority of her summer driving her brothers and sisters to various camps, lessons, and sports. Faviana herself was preparing to go off to college, choosing a small traditionally Black college about two hours from home. She reported to be excited about the move, although she had never lived outside of her hometown, and she wants to study to be a high school counselor.

Faviana says that she had a very difficult freshman year in high school, but did not talk with her counselor at the time because they did not seem very willing or approachable. During her sophomore year, Ms. J began working as a counselor, and the two of them hit it off well. Ms. J set Faviana up with a mentor from the local university and encouraged her to get more involved in the school. By her junior year, Faviana was a cheerleader, a member of a step team,
and had become involved with teen leadership councils in the community. She credits her experiences with Ms. J and the other school counselors for her goal of one day becoming a professional school counselor.

_Sal_

Sal is a gregarious, outspoken young man who had just turned 20 at the time of the interview. Originally born on an island in the Caribbean, he moved with his family to Detroit when he was 7. When Sal was 13, his older sister—the last sibling still living at home—graduated and moved out, and Sal and his mother moved to their current home. Sal’s mother struggled to find consistent work, so Sal began to work at a grocery store when he was 15, then began parking cars for special events at the university to make money to buy clothes, books, school supplies, and have spending money. Sal says that his high school experience was not typical in that he never went to dances, school trips, or even the prom because he was always working. Nevertheless, he says he was a popular kid, and prided himself on his ability to help people have fun, including teachers.

After a fight with his mother, Sal moved out and got his own apartment at the beginning of his senior year. In order to pay the bills, he worked every night and on weekends. His grades began to suffer, and he did not receive credit for two courses first semester of his senior year. He began to see the counselors for support during his move and to help him figure out how to graduate on time in spite of the setback. With support from the counseling office, Sal held down a schedule of school and night school while working six days a week and managed to graduate on time. He has been working full time for a year and a half, and is saving money and planning to apply for college within the next few years. His long-term goal is to own a small business, such as a barbershop or maybe a dance club.
Sera, a seventeen year-old White girl, is in the middle of her senior year of high school. Born in a small town in the Midwest, she moved to another small town in the Northeast before moving south during her 8th grade year. Her current town is the “biggest city” she’s ever lived in. Sera, who has two younger brothers, describes herself as very sensitive, often playing the role of “everyone’s mother.” This caretaking streak may continue into her career, as she has set a goal of working as a civil rights lawyer. In addition to helping people, she loves music and drama. She says that she has struggled with depression during her adolescence, but reports to be doing well currently. Sera is a thoughtful, soft-spoken and very reflective participant in the interview—the type of student who quickly becomes friends with adults. Her combination of sensitivity and fragility brought out the nurturing side of me of during the interview—I found myself wanting to take care of her as she takes care of others. She is also very observant, remarking at the end of the interview that she knew I was a counselor too because I “talked like a counselor.”

Sera first went to see her counselor after her ex-boyfriend, with whom she recently broke-up, made private correspondences between the two of them very public. She says that she felt very “exposed” and overwhelmed, and simply coming to school became very difficult for her. She says that the counselors helped her and her family identify her problem as depression and provided referrals for the family to receive professional help. Since then, she has remained close to several of the counselors and has gone to them with academic questions as well as for emotional support whenever she begins to feel overwhelmed.
Eric

Eric is an African-American male who, at 18, is in his senior year. He is the middle of three children, all girls except for him, and was raised in a lower-middle class home by his mother. His father lives in a neighboring state, and Eric only sees him on school holidays. Eric plays football for his high school, and that is a large part of his identity. In fact, giving up part of his Sunday—prime professional football watching time—is a strong indicator of his positive feelings about the counselors. After football season ends, when Eric has the time, he works bussing tables at a local restaurant to earn spending money. Eric is a very bright student, and says he enjoys taking things apart and putting them back together. He is interested in studying mechanical engineering in college, and, although it does not appear as though he will have an athletic scholarship, he hopes to try out for his future college’s football team.

Eric says that he has not needed the counselors too much during his high school career, as he has always done well academically and had relatively few personal problems. He got to know the counselors better this year when he worked as an office aide for the school counseling department, and he says that opened his eyes to how valuable they are to the school. He has begun to seek their help more recently as he is in the middle of applying for colleges, and he says they have helped him with deadlines, applications, and getting him set up for entrance exams. In addition, the school counseling program just started a group for African-American males in the school to try to encourage more African-American males to apply for college. He is an inaugural member of that group.

Nina

Nina, a seventeen-year-old senior, met with me at a food court in a local mall near a friends’ house where she is currently living. Nina was born in a small midwestern town, and her
mother left her father shortly after she was born and moved to the south. After another marriage, her mother relocated once again, this time to her present hometown, with Nina and her little half-brother in tow. Her father moved out of the country, and Nina rarely got to see him. Nina reports that she and her mother had gone through several tumultuous periods over the years, and they were in that familiar place when I interviewed her. At the time she had been living with a friend for several weeks, and did not think she would be going back to live with her mother again. She is anxiously awaiting her 18th birthday so she can get her own place. In the meantime, however, she is trying to graduate from high school and looking for a job at the mall to start saving money for when she is on her own. Nina’s passion is drawing, and she says she spends much of her time just sitting and drawing. She hopes to turn her love for art into a career, either as an artist or as a graphic designer, perhaps specializing in video game design. She would like to attend a school of art and design when she graduates from high school.

Nina’s relationship with her counselor began out of necessity during her sophomore year, when she ran away from home. Her counselor assisted her in returning to school, and supported her through a rough transition back to her mother’s home. Since then, she has been a consistent consumer of the counseling office’s services, usually during recurring difficult periods at home. Recently, she had sought the counselors’ assistance her try to find a way to attend a local college of art and design given her limited resources.

Nina showed up for the interview wearing black jeans and a black t-shirt, with a black knit skullcap with a skull and crossbones design on it. Her fingernails were painted black, and she had drawn designs all over her hands in pen. Despite this rather rough-looking exterior, Nina was enthusiastic about helping with the project and full of praise for the counselors. She laughed throughout the interview, often nervously, and smiled whenever she talked about the counselors,
particularly Ms. C. She could be at one moment silly and juvenile, talking about video games, and in the next moment contemplating the series of disruptive events in her life, their effects on her, and how she will overcome them. In this way, she is a stereotype of an adolescent.

Tino

Tino is a 20-year-old Latino student who does not have legal status in the US. Born and raised in Venezuela, he came to the U.S. for his sophomore year in high school on a temporary visa. After returning to Venezuela for his junior year, he decided he wanted to return to the U.S. for his senior year and attend college in the United States. He moved to his current town with his father, while his mother stayed with his two younger sisters in Venezuela. In spite of his outstanding academic record, he was denied a student visa by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) on two separate occasions. Even with such difficulties, he successfully graduated from high school and began to try to find a way to get a college education in the States. Currently, he is in limbo, as he had not received his student visa, and could not afford to attend college as an international student. In the meantime, he is working full time and remains optimistic that he will work something out and attend college soon.

Tino first met his counselor during his sophomore year in high school, when his counselor was completing his school counseling internship at another local high school. When Tino began to think about returning to school, he contacted Mr. B, who was now employed as a high school counselor, and he encouraged him to come. Since then, Mr. B has coordinated the effort to get Tino’s status legalized, and is still helping Tino get into college even though he graduated over a year ago.

Tino is a charming, engaging young man with a warm smile whose face lights up when he begins to talk about his favorite pastime, soccer. He has played his whole life, and hopes to
play in college as well. In addition to soccer, he likes computers, and plans on making a career out of working with them in some capacity. He likes small towns, and is interested in staying in the southeast after he graduates from college.

Categories and Properties

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of those students who have been positively influenced by their school counseling program. Through data-analysis, three categories emerged from the data regarding the students’ experiences with their school counseling program. Students cited three groups of school counselor activities that they felt had an impact on their overall experience. Specifically, students noted the school counselors: a) creating a nurturing environment, b) developing meaningful relationships with their students, and c) delivering important educational and developmental services. The categories of findings and their properties are displayed in Table 1.

Creating a Nurturing Environment

When asked to describe their experiences with the school counseling program, many of the students began by talking about the school counseling office environment and the emotional reactions they felt when they were in the office. It was clear that the school counselors had created an inviting environment that not only attracted students but helped them to feel comfortable enough to participate fully in school counseling activities aimed at fostering positive growth and development. Students cited several subcategories: that the school counselors took to create this nurturing environment, including: a) welcoming students, b) helping students feel safe, and c) responding quickly to student needs.

Welcoming students. Throughout the interviews, students continually referred to the counseling office as a warm and welcoming place. Franny described a “family atmosphere,” and
Table 1. Categories and Properties

Creating a Nurturing Environment

- WELCOMING STUDENTS
- HELPING STUDENTS FEEL SAFE
- RESPONDING QUICKLY TO STUDENT NEEDS

Developing Meaningful Relationships with their Students

- TAKING A PERSONAL INTEREST IN STUDENTS’ LIVES
- TREATING STUDENTS WITH RESPECT
- DEMONSTRATING A GENUINE CARING FOR STUDENTS
- ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO STRIVE TO BE SUCCESSFUL
- SERVING AS POSITIVE ROLE-MODELS AND MENTORS FOR STUDENTS

Delivering Important Educational and Developmental Services

- HELPING STUDENTS UNDERSTAND AND MEET GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS
- PREPARING STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE
- ADVOCATING ON STUDENTS’ BEHALF
- INTERVENING IN CRISIS SITUATIONS
- PROVIDING PERSONAL COUNSELING FOR STUDENTS

reported that “everyone that worked in the counseling office, the counselor aid, the secretary, everyone…was warm and welcoming.” The welcoming atmosphere was in large part a reflection of the personality of the school counselors and their staff. Several students reported how friendly their counselors were. Sal, describing Ms. C, told me “some people, I guess, go on
putting on a front, like ‘Hey-happy-happy’ all the time, but [Ms. C] was always happy, all the time when I was there.” Sentiments like Sal’s, referring to the counselors’ friendliness and warmth, are seen throughout the interviews and throughout the supplementary data collected. One parent, in nominating Ms. C for an award, noted that “there are some people whose smiles make even the most tedious day bearable. Ms. C is one of them.”

The warmth and welcoming attitude that the students spoke of had not always been the case in the counseling office at County High. Older students, who had been at County High before Ms. C had taken over as Director of School Counseling, compared the new atmosphere to the one they remembered from previous years. Wayne told me:

The counseling department changed a lot from how it was when I first arrived there, and it seemed like a lot more students were willing to [go and ask for help]. They did a good job…just that friendly atmosphere; I think that atmosphere they created was just really good.

Wayne believes that the friendlier, more welcoming atmosphere created by Ms. C and the school counselors encouraged more students to drop in and use their services. Faviana’s experience further illustrates Wayne’s point. “My freshman year, there was a different set of counselors at County High, and I never went to the guidance office. The people there didn’t seem that open to me, that willing [to help].” Faviana compared that with her experience of the new counseling department. “When I go in there, I feel welcome. I feel like I’m going into open arms, and people are actually listening to me, and caring about what I think.” Nina, who had left her home and was living with a friend at the time of the interview, alluded to how comfortable she felt there at a time when she had no home to go to. “It’s very welcoming. I wouldn’t mind living there, you know? Just sleep under the desktop.”
In addition to their warm, friendly personalities, the school counselors made students feel welcome by having reminders of their students in plain view throughout the office. A couple of students described Mr. B’s office door as an example of recognizing his students. Wayne said:

Mr. B has on his door, he still does, he puts articles, cut-outs from the newspaper of any of his students or [anyone] that is recognized by the newspaper, and he puts that up there. So…it just makes students feel comfortable, the environment that they’re in.

Other students described seeing students’ artwork hanging throughout the school counseling office, in the individual counselors’ offices as well as in the general waiting room. Torrance said that he first felt a connection with Ms. J when he found out she had asked his art teacher if she could display a painting of his in her office. As Torrance said:

I was like, “where is my picture at?” and [the art teacher] was like “I just gave it to [Ms. J] just to have to hang up”. I didn’t even know she was my counselor or nothing, but…I went into her office one day and was like “Dang, that’s my picture up there!” And she started showing it to all the people and stuff. And everybody came in her office would acknowledge me for that picture, and she’d come back and tell me how people were all impressed with my picture and stuff on the wall…and that’s how we got to be like friends and stuff, on another level. More than just like going in there to sort our classes and stuff.

Other students described the counselors’ offices as being filled with pictures of their students. Faviana explained that “when you go in any of their rooms, you will see their students on their desk. Mr. B, he has [newspaper] clippings…and all that stuff. Mr. G has pictures [of his students] in his room. Ms. J has pictures going all around her border. Ms. C does too. They keep their students in mind. Always.”
Helping students to feel safe. When students discuss their experience of the environment created by the school counselors, a feeling of safety was evident in their stories. Students describe the place as relaxing and comfortable. It was a place where students felt free to say whatever was on their minds without fear of being judged or of having the stories they told spread around the school. Eric told me that the counselors “don’t want anything that’s in that room, they don’t want it to leave. Everything’s confidential.” He went on to say that the counselors “let you know that if you need help, then you know they’re there to help you. And nothing’s too big that you can’t tell them.” Franny, who alluded to the sense of safety created by the counselors when she referred to them as her “guardian angels in school,” remarked on the trust she had in her counselors as well. “They know stuff about me that a lot of people don’t know. But we just have that bond, that ‘I’m not going to go behind you.’ It’s not like that, you know because I know they wouldn’t.” Sera, too, felt safe enough with the school counselors to talk about whatever was on her mind. “I feel like I can talk about anything and that I know that…I’m saying things that are just going to stay there, you know? That they’re not going to get around to other people.”

For several students, the boundaries that the school counselors established through the rules of confidentiality helped foster that sense of safely. For others, the feeling of being free from judgment and critical evaluation created a feeling of safety. Torrance said that he believed many students might be afraid to open up to their school counselors, but he had a positive experience the first time he talked with Ms. J. “She wasn’t intimidating or anything, like ‘They’re gonna try to get in my head.’ Nah, it wasn’t like that.” For Torrance, the school counseling office was a relaxing place where he could be productive and work on academic or personal issues without eternal pressure or fear of criticism. In his words:
It isn’t all like the classroom atmosphere, and like, do work and fill out this worksheet and fill out that worksheet, and like a classroom, read this, read that, do this…you can just kind of get stuff done. But it’s like, you’re more calm…It isn’t like a teacher, like they’re telling you to do this or “Do that or I’m going to give you an F” or something. It’s like “Do this and do that because it’s good for you, for your well-being.”

Creating that feeling of safety helped Torrance to take advantage of the services offered by the school counseling office, and left a lasting effect on him. “I guess my ability to be able to open up, basically. Like, sometimes I just got to talk to people, and I had to realize that, I guess.”

The feeling of safety that students experienced with their school counselors also helped students learn from their mistakes. Nina told me that she was not afraid to make mistakes because she felt confident that the school counselors would be there to help her and make sure she learned from the situation. Unfortunately, this sense of safety was not something she felt at home. Nina said:

If you fall on your face, [parents] are supposed to help you up. My parents, when I fall on my face, I fall down the stairs, they don’t help me back up. With the counselors, if I fall on my face, [Ms. C’s] like, “I told you you’d do it, but let me help you back up. We’ll do it again. We’ll fix it.”

Feeling safe enough to take risks has allowed Nina to learn from mistakes she has made while giving her the confidence to attempt new things. The confidence seems to come from understanding that, even if things don’t work out, she’ll be okay and will be able to learn lessons that she can use in the future. As she put it:
And I think that’s good that you fall on your face while you’re in high school or while you’re still an adolescent/teenager, you know, growing up. Because once you’re an adult, if you fall on your face, nobody else is really gonna help you up. [But with support from the counselors], you think “Oh, its okay, the counselor will be there.” It gives you the feeling [that you can] make a mistake, you can fall on your face, and you’ll know what to do afterwards. It gives you experience so at least when you’re in the real world, you’ll have a little more experience, you’ll know a little bit better what will happen.

**Responding quickly to student needs.** Part of the effectiveness of the nurturing environment that the students identified within the school counseling office was related to the students’ feeling that the school counselors were responsive to their needs. Torrance described the school counselors as “really accessible,” and added, “They’re there, and you can get them probably anytime. That’s what I like.” The students all noted that the school counselors remained busy, but seemed to find time for the students nonetheless. Wayne told me that “You had appointment times that they make, but they’re more than willing, if someone comes in with something that needs to be handled immediately, any of them were more than willing to go ahead and talk to them now, and discuss the situation if something came up. So they were really good about that.” Sera agreed. “They’re always willing to, like, if their schedule is full, any you have something you really need to talk to them about, they’ll find a time. They’ll take their lunch time and talk to you.”

Nina and Torrance also talked about how important it is to feel that they could connect with their counselor when they needed to, even if only for a brief moment. Nina said:

> Whenever I come to the counseling office, you know, even just to make an appointment, [Ms. C] always asks kind of how I’m doing and stuff, and that’s a really positive thing,
because if I’m not doing so hot, I can just say “I’m not doing so hot.” She’ll be like, “All right, well, I’ve got a couple of minutes, come on in here and give me a brief update.”

Torrance held a similar belief that his counselor would respond to him if he needed her. “I can go in there any time, she’s got time for me. She’ll schedule an appointment some other time, or if she was really busy…she’ll try her best to make time [for me]. I can go in there anytime, and if I had a serious problem, she’d be like ‘just talk to me for a little bit’ before she had to run off and do something.” Faviana also talked about how responsive the school counselors were to their students’ needs:

They have a lot of other stuff to do, and the principal keeps them on their toes. They do stop and take time to speak to their students. I don’t care if they have a stack of papers on their desk, if one of their students is down there and they say “I need to speak to my counselor”, they’ll speak to their counselor that day, within the hour, or within those couple of minutes. They’ll speak to them. They’ll stop whatever they’re doing and speak to that student and make sure that student gets squared off.

Faviana went on to talk about why the counselors’ responsiveness is so important to her, and compared it to her experience with other adults:

You can go into some offices, or you can go talk to some people and they’re like, you can be very distraught, you know, you can be bursting into tears and screaming, and they’re telling you “Hold on, I have to deal with this person,” you know, or “I’m on the phone, can you wait?” And that’s…I don’t like when people do that. You’re hurting, you don’t care what else is going on. You need someone to help you; you need someone to be there if only to tell you “It’s okay.” You need something and they do that. They don’t say,
you know, “Can you come back later” or “I’m doing paperwork” or “I just don’t want to see you right now.” You know? They don’t do stuff like that.

The students’ experiences of the school counseling program as responsive involves not only the school counselors’ willingness to drop what they’re doing to help the students, but was also reflected in the flexible, collaborative working style of the counselors. Many students commented that, although they had a primary counselor, they would feel comfortable going to another counselor if they could not get in to see their primary counselor. Sera said “if [your primary counselor] isn’t available, and you need to talk to somebody, then you know you can get in to see somebody else.” Franny noticed the same thing. “And if one counselor didn’t have time to talk to the student who was there, who was that counselor’s student, uh, if they didn’t have time, if they had appointments all day, they’d find another counselor for them to talk to. So it was never like ‘Oh, I’m busy…you’ve got to go back to class.’”

The teamwork went beyond simply being flexible, however. Students also appreciated the diversity of the school counselors. Because the counseling department had both men and women counselors, African-American and White, Christian and Jewish, and a Spanish-speaking counselor, most students had someone in the office who looked like them or spoke their language. Wayne noted that:

The black girls would go and see Ms. J, even if they weren’t [her students], and Mr. B would have the Latin American students because he’s bilingual. Ms. C would have more of the seniors…because they’re more concerned with colleges, and she’s gonna have a greater knowledge than the others [about college prep] because she’s been doing it longer and knows how it works more. And then, with Mr. G, he’d get a lot of parents, but sometimes he’d get the black girls or the black guys.
Even beyond differences of gender, ethnicity, and language, the students’ remarked that the counselors had different strengths, different areas of interest, and different personalities. These individual differences also provided a degree of responsiveness to the students, because most students could find someone they felt had similar interests, understood them, or connected with them on some level. Franny told me “each counselor I’d probably go to for a different thing. I just felt more comfortable with one counselor for one thing, one counselor for another thing, another counselor for…but, I mean, it was never like ‘I’m sorry, you’re not on my case list, you can’t talk to me.’” And although the students saw the counselors as individuals, they also appreciated that they worked so well together. Franny noted “They’re all different. Each one of the counselors has a different personality, but when you put them all together, there’s this amazing energy. It was just awesome.” Wayne also noticed the teamwork. “I see that [they work as a team]. They had meetings weekly, couple of times a week where they’d just sit down and discuss what they were going to do and things like that. It just seemed that they were more prepared, and like, it didn’t seem like they were four separate offices.”

*Developing Meaningful Relationships with their Students*

One of the most striking findings was the impact that the personal relationship students had with their school counselors had on their overall experience. In many ways, the students described their experiences as embedded within the relationships with their school counselors. The students often had a difficult time trying to define the relationship, often comparing their counselors to friends and family members. What was apparent was that the students described the relationship they had with their counselors as a foundation upon which the rest of their experiences with the school counseling program were built. Participants cited several things that the counselors did to foster this meaningful and nurturing relationship, including: a) taking a
Taking a personal interest in students’ lives. One of the ways that school counselors helped to build a relationship with the students was to take an interest in them and their lives. For many of the students, even the simple act of greeting them when they saw them around the campus and asking how they were doing meant a lot. Sera reported:

They’ll go out of their way to get to know you. And then, if they see you in the lunchroom, they’ll say ‘Hi’, you know, and ask you how you’re doing. I just think that’s really nice. You have somebody that’s not just your teacher that knows you…I guess for me that’s helpful to know that there’s somebody that loves you [laughs].

For Sera, who was an honor student, it was nice to have an adult other than her teacher care about how she was doing. Other students also mentioned how much they appreciated their school counselors asking about them, but for many of them, it was something they were not getting from other adults in the school. Theresa told me:

When the counselors would walk down the hallways or whatever and they would see their counselee, they would also make sure and stop and say “How are you doing?” you know? And then they would talk about whatever it was that they had talked about last time…Teachers didn’t necessarily do that as much. Like, they would go down the halls and maybe nod their heads at their students, but they wouldn’t be like “How’s your mom doing?” you know, or “How was soccer practice?” you know? They wouldn’t necessarily do that as much as the counselors… [The counselors] knew about you and
they knew your life, and they would, you know, think of it enough to remember and ask you later.

Many of the students who had a particular skill or interest reported that the school counselors would ask them about their activities. Eric, for instance, played on the football team, and described his experience with the school counselors:

The counselors, they really try to get to know you and they really want to be involved with whatever you do, and they want to help however they can…[After playing football], they would always come in, like after we win the game, they would come in and talk to us, like “how are things going?” and everything, and they talk about how we feel about the game, and you know, try to just talk to us and get our insight on what we think about the game. They were always trying to be involved in whatever we were doing.

Torrance first connected with Ms. J over his artwork, and she began asking him about the pieces he was working on. As their relationship developed, though, he and Ms. J would talk about whatever was most important to him at the time. Torrance’s family did not have much practical knowledge about higher education, so as he began to get ready for college, he would talk with Ms. J about that. In his words:

She would just ask, like, what’s going on in my life, stuff like that. It wouldn’t just be about class and stuff…she would talk to me about her experiences, too, usually like her college experiences and stuff, and I could relate to that. It was more than just a counselor. It’s someone you go and talk to. It’s like a friend also.

Even after Torrance graduated high school, he still felt Ms. J was interested in what he was doing. As he began to get involved with a national Black fraternity, he told her about his experiences. “We still connect right now. Like, I was in this program last week with the
fraternity, and she came by to see it. And I don’t even go to County High anymore. So, we still have, like, connections.”

Nina did not find a lot of support from adults either in school or from home. For a student that could easily become lost in a school of County High’s size, it was important to her to have somebody that knew her. “Even though Ms. C has a lot of other students, it’s kind of nice she remembers my name.” Nina also commented on the implications of having that personal relationship as groundwork for future work with the school counseling program. As she said:

But, you know, [all the counselors] know my name, they know, like, what you’re interested in, they kind of know where you’re going, and they kind of help you figure out which way you want to go and stuff, and how to get there.

Franny tells a story to illustrate Nina’s point:

Mr. B, he was like “Franny, I have something for you.” He had just gotten a fax for a scholarship for children of teachers, and you had to have a certain SAT score which I didn’t have, but he hunted me down to give that to me. I didn’t go to him and say, “Look, I need some scholarships.” He came to me. I mean, they remember who you are, the students they work with, and they remember what you say. So it’s like “Well, I remember how she said that her mom was a teacher, so I got this fax, I better give it to her.” And he’s not even my counselor, you know? And it’s like, wow, you know, that’s really nice.

The interest that Mr. B had shown in her personal life led to an opportunity. And although it did not work out in this instance, Franny was still positively affected by the fact that Mr. B remembered her situation and was thinking of ways to help her.
Treating students with respect. Another way the school counselors helped to build a meaningful relationship with students was to treat them with respect. Students described the school counselors as understanding, empathic, and non-judgmental. This type of respectful treatment was not something many of the students were used to from adults, particularly in school. For this reason, the school counselors seemed to stand apart from other adults in the minds of the students. Wayne perceived the school counselors as treating him as a friend would. He said:

It wasn’t that I was talking to someone that was older than me and it was their job to listen to me, it was more that I was talking to someone that was a friend of mine that I’d be willing to talk to a friend of mine… that I could call anytime.

Wayne also described the counselors as treating him with respect because they didn’t talk to him like it was just part of job; they treated him like a human being. Franny felt the same way:

I just walk in there, and they don’t talk to me like I’m a student. It was like ‘How are you, you know?’ And I’d sit in the office, didn’t matter what counselor it was, they’d talk to me like I was not ten years younger, twenty, however younger I was. It was, I mean, you were treated as an equal.

This wasn’t how Franny always felt, especially in school. “I’d been in situations where it was like ‘You’re only how old?’ It’s like they look down on you. I never have that feeling in the counseling office.”

Nina saw the school counselors as interacting with her differently than most adults did as well. Compared to other adults in Nina’s life, she felt respected and valued by the counselors
because they were willing to get her know her personally, and she felt accepted rather than judged or evaluated. As she put it:

They’re not like other adults, at least not when they’re in the counseling office. They have a little bit more of a clue to what’s going on with you as a person…and the best part is that they don’t judge you, you know?

Sal also felt respected by the counselors, and in particular Ms. C. He, too, experienced a different type of interaction than he was used to with significant adults in his life. In his words:

Well, to be honest, I didn’t have [respect] at home. Because my mom, like I said, whenever I was in trouble or whenever something…she always came after me for some reason. And me and her had ups and downs, a lot of little personal things in a family or whatever, but we disagree on a lot of things. I’m not saying it’s a bad household, she gave me love, but when certain things came down, when I tried to be open, I got tired of “Well, why couldn’t you just do this?” you know? It wasn’t like she was listening, but Ms. C would listen first. She never jumped out and accused me. She would let me know, “Well, Sal, come on now,” but that was different, you know? Somebody listened before they talked…[and] tried to feel where you were coming from, what could cause you to do whatever you did, or say whatever you said.

The respect the school counselors showed the students was evident in many different ways. For Sal and Nina, it was about listening and empathizing with them rather than accusing them. For Franny, she felt respected when the counselors treated her more like an adult and less like “a student.” Wayne felt it when the counselor acted like they wanted to talk with him instead of having to. Regardless, the message received by the students was that the school counselors understood them and valued them as people.
Demonstrating a genuine caring for students. Another way the school counselors fostered meaningful relationships with their students was by showing the students that they cared for them on a personal level. Most students believed their school counselors cared about them, enjoyed working with them and wanted them to succeed. The students identified a variety of actions the school counselors engaged in to send this message of caring. For Sera, it was as simple as how they acted when they were with her. As she put it:

  Everybody has a smile on their face [laughs]. I really feel like they really do care about you and how you feel, not just about how they’re going to look to all the other teachers or to the principal. I really think that they care about their job, and, I mean, they really care about the people at school, and I feel like they’re not just in it for the money…I’m sure they’re not in it for the money! [laughs]. I really think they love what they do.

Sera explains why it was important to her to have someone at school whom she felt cared about her. She went on:

  I don’t know if this sounds cheesy, but I guess ever since you’re really little, you see them for more hours out of the day than you see your parents on school days. I think it’s important to have somebody who cares about you instead of just walking the halls alone. You don’t feel lonely, and then, just having an adult who cares. Sort of like a parent, but not really.

Wayne also believed that he was cared for by the school counseling program. For him, a key moment was when Mr. B offered to stay after school and help him with a college application. Wayne saw this as a clear indication that Mr. B cared about him, and he spoke about how that message affected him:
The willingness, like you just felt comfortable, and …you felt like they cared. You felt like they would give you what they thought was the best advice. They’d tell you what would be in your best [interest]…I guess it’s just [that] he actually does care, and it actually is important to him that I succeed or that I attain my goal, and that gives you a more willingness to go and talk to him about other things if you need to…and it gives you the reassurance that, like I said, that they do care.

Wayne identified how important it was for him to have someone at school that was willing to help him out, but he also was aware that for certain students, their school counselors may be the only adults willing to go out of their way to help them. Wayne said:

Not necessarily my case, but with other students who sometimes feel that they don’t always have someone important at home that…does care, but they see at school that someone does, and someone is willing to go that extra mile, and, in my case, stay that extra thirty minutes, and help with that. Or another counselor that, you know, they’ll see in their case, maybe that they’ll stay another hour and help them talk through a problem, something difficult that’s going on at home. And it just…it helps a lot. Some kids really need it, and it really helps them.

Wayne was also aware that certain students may not have that redundancy, and for them, the support that the school counselors give becomes even more crucial. Nina was one of those students who did not feel supported by her family. In a family where she received many negative messages about herself and her potential, it was very important for her to feel cared for by her school counselors. “No matter what I get from one side, I can always look up to the other side having something better to say.” She went on, “No matter what is spinning around you, you have this person at the center, which is really nice.” Nina experienced the caring Ms. C showed
her to go beyond the boundaries of school. Even when Nina ran away from home and was
technically not Ms. C’s student, Ms. C sent messages to Nina through friends encouraging her to
come back to school and offering to help her. When Nina was caught as a runaway and it looked
as though she would be sent away, Ms. C still offered her help. Nina reported:

    They were going to send me to this isolated school-camp thing, and so [Ms. C] gave me
her phone number so that if I had any problems I could call her up, so…it’s kind of nice
that, even though I wasn’t going to be at the school anymore, she’d still be there, you
know?

As it turned out, Nina was able to go back to County High, but Ms. C’s gesture meant a
great deal to Nina. “I was really happy about that, because, you know, it showed me that, not
only was I not going to be her student anymore and she still cares, but she’s still like my friend,
so…I really liked that a lot.”

Sal was another student who didn’t always feel strong support from home. Like Nina,
the support that he received from the school counseling department was very important to him.
He described Ms. C as “like a mother in school to me,” and said:

    I’ll always show her love, anytime. ‘Cause she had my back, you know what I’m saying?
She took it from school and made it seem like it was real in there, like everything she
said, she meant. She was down to earth.

Like Nina, Sal felt that the care Ms. C gave him went beyond simply fulfilling her
occupational duties. He felt that she cared about him on a personal level, that her concern for
him was “real.” He told me about a time when they thought he might not be able to graduate
because of a lost assignment. Although they eventually worked everything out, Sal remembers
the intensity of Ms. C’s emotional reaction to the scary situation:
Ms. C [was] about to have a nervous breakdown ‘cause [the teacher] told her I didn’t pass her class…Once you make it a part of your personal life…like she was shaking. If it hits you like that, that ain’t no nine to five.

Ms. C’s strong reaction demonstrated that her care for him was genuine, that it was more than a job for her. Sal sees that personal investment as a key part to being a successful school counselor. Sal posed the question:

How you gonna be a counselor if you just have a job mentality? And I believe there’s people out there that probably do that, man. Yeah, if you’re gonna be a counselor, you need to be a counselor. You don’t need to think of it as just a job. Nah, not getting the title of counselor. You can’t be a counselor if you do that. You ain’t counseling. You just doing it to get a check, and doing what people say you should do, then at the end of the day, you don’t care? You’re not counseling at the end of the day.

Tino told a similar story. After being denied his student visa status by INS, he recalls Mr. B’s reaction. “I mean, I saw his face. He was like ‘Oh my God, I can’t believe that has happened.’” Mr. B went to the other counselors for help, and they had similar reactions. In Tino’s words:

They knew about my situation, and they were really mad because all what happened to me. They were like mad because they deny me and all that stuff. And this is really good, because I feel loved. Something like that. You know, they really care about me.

The school counselors’ emotional reactions to difficult situations was one way the students experienced a feeling of being cared about, but the school counselors showed emotion and caring at happy moments as well. Tino remembers the time when his mother came to the
U.S. to visit him, and stopped by the school. Because his mother does not speak English, she was unable to communicate with most of Tino’s teachers. Tino remembers:

Then Mr. B started talking to her, you know, he knows Spanish. So he starts talking to her, he starts talking about me, and all that stuff. And I really liked it because he started saying things about me that, I mean, my Mom started crying and all that stuff. And I was like “Oh my gosh’. Oh, it was wonderful. It was great. I don’t know how to say it. I felt special right there.

That sense of being cared for helped the students to feel good about themselves, like they were important. Sera recalls one of the most important memories of working with the school counseling program was “just feeling that you’re important. They make you feel like every single person is important.” Tino had a similar reaction. “I think everybody can feel really special with that, you know? And you know, I really like it. I really love it. And you know, there’s nothing I can say. I just say thank you for all of that. That’s all I can say.”

*Encouraging students to strive to be successful.* The students also experienced their school counselors as encouraging them to succeed with whatever activities in which they were involved. Although the school counselors encouraged the students to succeed academically, the students experienced their encouragement to cover more than just academics. Eric recalled that the counselors “try to really get to know you and they all, all of them, seem like they want to succeed and try your best at whatever you do.” Eric described what the encouragement that he felt from the school counselors taught him:

To always try to do your best, you know, because you know somebody’s watching you, somebody wants you to succeed. Somebody is looking out for you. Makes you, you know, try hard, and always put forth your full effort to do stuff.
Franny felt that encouragement coming from the school counselors as well, and likened their support to having a second set of parents at school. She told me:

It was like having a whole other set of parents [laughs]. It was like having a new set of parents, and then having new best friends. Because they never, anything I did, it was never, you know, looking down on you, or not encouraging you. It was always, if it was something I believed in, I believed was right, I believed I should do for the better of myself or someone else; they were there to encourage me to do it, even if they didn’t agree with what I was doing. They might, like, kind of sit back and go “Well, maybe this isn’t exactly the right thing, but if that’s what you feel, if that’s what you believe in, do it.”

Franny felt the encouragement from the counselors to make her own decisions about the actions she was taking, and that was very important to her. Even though she was close to her parents, the encouragement Franny received from the school counselors was important to her. For other students, the encouragement they received from their school counselors was even more vital because they were not receiving encouragement from other adults. When she ran away from home, Nina was thinking about dropping out of school until Ms. C intervened and encouraged her to continue with high school in spite of the trouble at home. Nina recalls:

When I ran away, I was like “Okay, well, I’ll just drop out and get my GED,” you know? “I’m not coming back.” And Ms. C kind of coaxed me into coming back. She was like, “Well, you need to finish high school,” you know? And I was like “No, I don’t,” and she was like “Yes, you do.” And so I came back…and that was a really positive thing. I mean, now that I look at it, I’m like “I’m glad she did that. I want to finish school. I’m glad she did that.”
The students I talked with described the encouragement they received from their counselors as helping them to develop an enhanced sense of courage that they need to try to reach their goals in spite of the obstacles in their way. Franny noted “They’ve given me the courage to do the best I can. I mean, my parents have been supportive, but they just gave me that extra little push to do it, that reassurance that ‘yeah, that’s good’.” There were several examples of the students feeling encouraged by their counselors. Nina found the courage to stick with school, and Tino found the courage to keep trying to find a way to get a student visa. Faviana found the courage to get involved in community organizations, and Torrance developed the courage to become an art major in college. Sera, too, felt encouraged by her interactions with the school counselors, who helped her to believe that she had something to contribute to the greater society. Through her work with her counselors, she remembers developing “the feeling of being an important person, like, that you have an impact on the world even though you’re one tiny person out of however many people there are in the world, but you can have an influence on people. I just feel like they’ve made me realize that I matter.”

Serving as positive role models and mentors for students. Through the relationships that they developed with their students, school counselors also served as role models for them. Students remarked about how helpful it was to have a relationship with an older adult who had been through similar experiences to the ones the students were going through. Torrance said it was important to have “someone you look up to,” and Theresa appreciated having “an adult who’s been there and who knows what he’s talking about help me out.” Many of the students made remarks such as those, indicating that they learned from the school counselors simply by observing their behavior and getting to know more about them through their relationship.
One of the ways the school counselors served as role models for the students was through their interactions with people from a variety of backgrounds. Wayne, a White student from a middle class background, said that he learned a great deal about diversity and how to get along with people from a variety of backgrounds by working in the school counseling office and watching the school counselors. Wayne put it this way:

You pick up things like that, the way they deal with other people. You view how they deal with things, and you also get a [better sense of how to] interact with people. You know, parents come in there every day. Some parents aren’t happy when they come in there, you gotta learn how to deal with that, and learn how to deal with students when they aren’t happy when they come in there. Those are all important skills for you too. That’s one thing—you know, you had to write an essay to get into college? I actually wrote mine about being a school counseling office aide, and the main point of mine was the diversity that I’ve [been exposed to]...It’s just, it makes you a better person, being able to...um, what’s the word I want to use...become a more diverse person, accepting diversity better. Gaining an understanding of others that aren’t just like you, you know? How to interact...it makes you a better person. Just by talking with people. And, if you want to relate it back to the counselors, seeing how they related, seeing how they talked to them. You pick up on things, you know, just by talking with them afterwards and things like that.

Students were not only learning from watching how the school counselors interacted with students and parents, but they were learning how to treat each other as well. For Faviana, this even led to a change in her post-college plans. As she said:
They are pretty much the reason why I want to be a school counselor, you know?

Because at first I wanted to be a teacher, but working down there, I like their relationship.

They’re friends outside of the office. They’re not just co-workers, they’re friends.

Although Tino and Sal did not say that they wanted to be school counselors, their interactions with the school counselors have inspired them to find a way to give something back. Sal lived in a neighborhood where he says he saw too many people dropping out of school, so he is trying to pass on what he learned from his counselors. As he described it:

The same thing they do for me, pass it on to people. I’m for real. I’ll tell them like they told me, ‘Well, if you want to graduate, first go talk to your counselor, see if you can work up a plan’…Just passing on knowledge and being there for people who really look like they need it and you got their best interests [in mind].

Although Sal says he always “had a good heart” and looked out for people younger than he, he also had a role-model to demonstrate how to be an effective helper, and he seemed to understand how valuable was. “[Ms. C] led by example, you know? You got people lead by example, say they’re gonna do something and you see them do it, you better stay on their team, man. That was about it. I can’t say she ever let me down.”

Tino has also decided that he wants to give something back. Although he graduated, Tino is donating some time each week to come back to County High and help Mr. B with a support group for Latino and Latina students. He told me that he sees his role as trying to give something to the younger students that he remembers the counselors giving to him. He relayed his goal to me:

Try to help each other, try to talk to everybody, of course knowing what the counselors are saying to their students. You know, “you got to do this, you got to have your credits”,
and all these things. And then, “got your credits, go to college, try to find a way to get a scholarship”, something like that. I try to help them out, try to say that you need to do this, you need to study this, you need to do that for the class. Just try to help them out... And I try to talk to everybody, saying “…you got to work and study well. Just do it. You got to find out a way. Do something. Don’t try to be somebody else. Just try to be [yourself].”

Delivering Important Educational and Developmental Services

In addition to describing the counseling office environment and their relationship with their counselors, participants also described their experiences in terms of the support services they received from the school counselors. The support services identified by the students were part of the overall school counseling program activities and duties, and either helped the students meet their academic and personal goals or removed the barriers that may be impeding the students’ success. Although the students mentioned several roles and responsibilities they saw the school counselors carry out, there were five services which stood out as particularly meaningful to the students. Those five subcategories include: a) helping students understand and meet graduation requirements, b) preparing students for college, c) advocating on students’ behalf, d) intervening in crisis situations, and e) providing personal counseling for students.

Helping students understand and meet graduation requirements. One of the ways students reported their school counselors helped them meet their academic goals was by assisting them in understanding graduation requirements and helping them navigate course selections so that they met those requirements. The most basic form of this type of academic advisement occurred by school counselors simply helping their students with schedule changes. For many of the students I interviewed, academic advisement was how students first got to know their school
counselors. Eric told me “Well, at first, you know, I didn’t really get to talk to them that much, because I never really needed counseling or anything. The biggest thing I probably needed counseling on was like my schedule and stuff like that.” Wayne had a similar experience. “The only reason I went in there at the beginning of my senior year was because I wanted to change my schedule.”

In addition to filling out schedules, a few of the students noted that the school counselors were responsible for helping the transfer students get their schedules figured out and make sure they receive the proper credit for the courses they took. For some transfer students, this was more difficult than others. Tino tells of his early experiences with Mr. B helping him with his transcript from Venezuela:

[Mr. B] started getting interested in all the [transfer] papers that I got, and then he started…like my grades is different here. For example, if you got a hundred here, in Venezuela that’s a 20. That’s the most grade, you know?...So he started looking at all that paper and he started learning all these things about Venezuela…He asked me all about the credits, all about the grades, and he used to translate all the Venezuelan grades—hundreds, eighties, all the things. He used to translate, so he asked me “What’s this mean?”…and you know, “You got a credit for this, you got a half credit for this.” And then he learn, he learn a lot. He learned everything.

Most academic advisement the school counselors performed was more than just changing schedules or helping with transfer credits. Students reported that the counselors educated them regarding graduation requirements for college preparation and technical seals, helped them plan a course of study, and even suggested which classes to take. A few students mentioned that the
counselors came to their classrooms and led classroom guidance sessions to help disseminate information to larger groups and help them plan for graduation. Theresa remembered:

Every person had to take English, so they would go circulate through all the English classes and make sure…kind of advise them in classes, tell them you have to take so and so classes to get a so and so degree.

Other students mentioned appreciating the one-on-one help they received when they began to struggle academically. When Sal was not living at home, he began to have trouble in a few of his classes and, at one point, doubted that he would be able to graduate. He went to Ms. C. for help creating a plan to get his classes taken care of so he could graduate on time. Sal remembers:

I used to get stressed. I’d set up an appointment and tell her “I don’t even know, man, what’s going on.” She’d work out a game plan, write it down. When she saw I wasn’t going to be able to graduate in time, [and] she knew that’s what I wanted to do, she said, “Okay, to graduate on time, you have to go for a technical seal.” And…all the resources at school told me I could still make it to college, [but] it might be easier to transfer from a smaller school like technical school…But with getting that game plan from her, I just ran with it, man. And tried to go with whatever she said and try my best.

Whether assisting students with their schedules, transfer credits, or helping them to make a plan for graduation, the academic advisement provided by the school counselors helped the students stay on track academically and successfully navigate their way through high school.

*Preparing students for college.* Another common school counseling function that the students described as helpful was assisting the students as they prepared for college. This assistance seemed to occur on many levels, from simply providing information about

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*Prepared for publication by: [Name]  Date: [Date]*

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scholarships to walking students through a college search process to helping with college applications. Torrance remembers the counselors coming to the classroom right before his senior year and informing students “what they needed to do to further develop their education, and get into college. What was gonna be asked [on college applications], financial aid, and all that stuff.” This college preparation seminar was particularly helpful to Torrance, who knew little about the college application process. Torrance said:

Like, I didn’t know you had to take the SAT in high school. I knew there were tests and stuff, you know, and I knew there were certain scores that were accepted. I just learned a lot, ‘cause you’re so oblivious to all this stuff at that age, particularly if you come from a background where schools are deprived, not funded as well, information is not getting to [the students].

Because County High served students from a variety of backgrounds, the school counselors wanted to make sure that the information about colleges was available to everybody. Nina recalls that in the counseling office:

They would have scholarships and stuff set out so if you want to look around and stuff while you wait for your appointment, you can start looking into stuff. Basically, almost any time of the day, if you have a break or whatever, you can just come down and get an appointment, get some scholarship information, get Army [information] if you want to join the army, get transcripts for colleges, talk to counselors. You know, you can look into colleges.

Although students recalled the counselors giving out such information, they became more enthusiastic during the interviews when they talked about how the counselors helped them
choose a college to attend. Some people were looking primarily for help finding a school that would meet their needs. Theresa remembers:

I went down there to see Mr. B more and more often because I needed advising to which college I was going to go to and what I wanted to do…we would stay after school and just look at all these scholarships and all these schools and stuff and just see, like, he would help me match up what I wanted with what the school had.

Theresa remembers appreciating not only the time Mr. B spent, but the non-judgmental stance he took while they talked about her options:

It meant a lot, actually, because I couldn’t really…like, my parents were like “You have to go to State,” you know, they weren’t really open minded to what I wanted to do. And my friends were pretty much in the same boat I was, so they really couldn’t help me out that much. I mean, they would listen, but they wouldn’t be like, “Well, let’s meet after school and we’ll look through these together.”

Theresa appreciated that Mr. B would listen to what she had to say as well as provide information and guidance for her. Nina told me about a similar experience with Ms. C that occurred just prior to our interview:

I was looking for a college nearby, you know, something that was not as expensive as State School of Art and Design, because as wonderful as SSAD is, it’s way too expensive, and the state scholarship doesn’t cover it, and I don’t have any money. So [Ms. C] would look up colleges for me, and give me her opinion on them. Like, I would look at some, and I’d be like “What do you think of this one?”

Nina, like Theresa, appreciated the practical help Ms. C gave her, and the caring style with which that help was delivered. In addition to looking at colleges, Ms. C encouraged Nina to
look for scholarships, and taught her where to go to find information that might be helpful. That experience left a lasting impression on Nina. She recalls:

I knew what I wanted to do, but I didn’t know how to get there. And it also helped because she kind of showed me a couple of websites to go to…and so it also helped me kind of [learn to] research a little bit better, so I have a little bit better researching skills, at least scholarship-wise. So just little things like that kind of help improve your outlook or your life in general.

Eric recalled the most valuable thing the counselors were doing for him during his senior was helping with his college choice by “getting you prepared, telling you what to expect and everything.” Eric, who is interested in an engineering program, talked about going to the state Technical University versus a smaller school for the first few years. He remembered a conversation he had with Mrs. C:

She says she knows people from past experiences who stared out going to U.Tech and now they’re struggling, and she was saying that I can go to a school that has the same program that I want, and just go there for two years in an environment where I can learn more, and transfer to U. Tech, where I’d probably be a step or two ahead.

Other students mentioned the aid they received with the college application process as being helpful as well. Eric told me about a time where Mr. G helped him and other members of a group Mr. G had started. The group, designed to promote academic success among African-American students at County High, was scheduled to meet after school so they could work on their applications together. Eric remembers:

We had been planning in the group that we have, to stay after school and have [the counselors] help us fill out applications and stuff like that. So that Wednesday, we did
it…looking up on the internet, trying to download applications. And they were helping
us with applications, telling us what we needed to fill out and how to fill it out and
everything like that.

Wayne also expressed his appreciation to Mr. B, who helped him during his application
process.

Whenever I had any question or whatever about the college process, he was more than
willing to help me out. Like for example, on one of my applications, they have pre-
journalism, per-vet, pre-med, all that stuff, but they didn’t have pre-business, and we
thought you had to go in as unspecified. And he was like, “well, we aren’t sure about that
completely”, so he just went and called the office of admissions for that. And I thought
that was nice that he was willing to do that. Go the extra step for me.

Torrance also talked about a time when counselors went an extra step for him. Torrance
had not seriously considered college until Ms. J talked him into applying to the local university.

Even after initial bad news, Ms. J didn’t give up. Torrance remembers that:

She basically got me into college, because I didn’t get accepted to State the first time.

And she made me [apply again], and she had teachers from State come down and look at
some of the artwork and just see what I could bring, even though I didn’t get accepted the
first time. She had some teachers and staff and some art teacher whose class I will
probably be taking in the future to come look at some of my stuff and get me into the art
program at State.

From the student remarks, it became evident that they appreciated the help that the school
counselors provided. Some, like Wayne, appreciated the “practical help with resumes and details
and making applications as good as you wanted it to be.” Others, including Faviana, appreciated
the way they helped students make their decisions. “They voice their opinion, but they know in
the end that it’s my decision. They accept that, you know? They won’t get mad, or hold a
grudge or anything like that. They’re like ‘Okay, as long as you get an education and go to
school.’” Franny summed up the positives expressed by everyone else.

Colleges, you need information, you need applications, you need scholarships, you need
anything that has to do with furthering your education, they help you with that. They go
out of their way to make sure that you have your stuff done. Make sure you know what
you want to do. And if you don’t, they guide you to, you know, what you think you
might want to do. They never pressure, saying “you need to get into this school, you
need to get the scholarship.” It’s “we know you have the ability to do this.”

**Advocating on students’ behalf.** When discussing experiences with their school
counseling program that stood out to them as particularly helpful, many students mentioned
times when their counselors spoke up for them at times when they could not speak as effectively
for themselves or believed they would not be heard. One example of advocacy occurred when
counselors talked with teachers to explain a student’s situation to help the teachers gain a better
understanding and help the student succeed. Sal told me about a time when he had recently
moved out his house, and was working daily to pay for living alone on top of going to school
during the day and at night. He was failing in one class, and one F would mean he could not
graduate in time. Ms. C went to the teacher on his behalf to explain the situation and to see if
there was any way they could help Sal. Sal remembers it this way:

I was failing with a 63, but Ms. C pleaded with my teacher, like battled for me. Told her
I’m trying to do good. I was on my own at the time, me and my mom split up. I was
going to night school, day school, and working. She was like “Is there any way he can
get the grade up?” She gave me three finals, and I jumped on it. And I passed them. I got a 70.

Students also mentioned how their counselors helped them when they had trouble with the school system. The county established an attendance policy that allowed students six unexcused absences before they would receive a failing grade and have to repeat the course. In order to get an absence excused, students must obtain documentation of their reason for missing signed by a parent or a doctor. At the time, Tino was living with his father, who spoke very little English. Just before he was set to graduate, Tino got sick. He got a call from Mr. B that day. He reports:

I remember one day, it was the end of class and all that, and I was ready to graduate, and that day I got a 7th unexcused absence, so that means I can’t graduate. And then Mr. B called me and said “Tino, did you turn in what I told you about (absence forms signed by his father)?” I said, “Yeah, I send all my excuses and I turned them in. Why, what happened?” He said, “Well, because you got your seventh.” And he hung up, and went and tried to fix it. And thankfully he did, and after that I could graduate that day.

Thankfully.

Tino does not know what happened to his forms, but he wondered if they were misplaced by the front office, or if there was some sort of communication error between the school and his father. Either way, he was very thankful that Mr. B was looking out for him, and was able to intervene on his behalf and allow him to graduate.

The attendance policy led to problems for other students who were no longer living with parents and could not afford to see a doctor for an excuse. Sal told me that during his senior year, he too received seven unexcused absences. This was at the time when he was living on his
own, and working nights after finished with both day and night school. He said some of the absences were from when he got sick, and a few were from when he was just too exhausted to get up for school. Because he had no one to sign his excuse forms for him, when he missed his seventh day he was told that he would not be eligible for graduation. He went to Ms. C for help, and she suggested he appeal the decision to the appeals board. Sal told me:

When I went to my appeals court, Ms. C was there in person to stress and speak with them, like “Well, he is going to school eight to four. He is going to night school four to eight. He is working eight to midnight and on weekends. He is on his own. He is here in school, he is passing most of his classes, and he is working on the classes that he’s not, so he is making an effort.”

When Nina ran away from home, she got in trouble over the attendance policy as well. She told me “I ran away and I was really depressed that semester, and I missed like twenty days of class because I was so depressed that I didn’t even want to get out of bed.” In spite of missing the days, she says her grades were okay in all of her classes. But without a parent or doctor to sign an excuse for the absences, she would not receive credit for the classes. “So Ms. C helped me by appealing to the appeals court, so I actually got my credits back so I didn’t have to take another year of school.”

The counselors’ advocating on behalf on their students helped the students in a variety of ways and on a variety of levels. On the most practical level, the counselors’ actions helped to address the specific problems that the students were facing. Nina and Sal both believed that they would not have received their credits had Ms. C not spoken at her appeals hearing. Nina says that if that had happened, she probably would have dropped out. Sal says he may have continued
in night school, but he certainly would have quit day school and would not have graduated on time, a goal that he set for himself.

In addition to the practical help advocacy offers, Sal believes that Ms. C’s talking to other significant adults in his life helped them to understand his situation better and alter their expectations of him accordingly. “She knows what I’m going through, and I know at times she probably stood up for me and told my mom ‘Hey, Sal’s going through a lot, and I can see why he did that.’ I know for a fact she has.” Sal goes on to explain how her talking to teachers helped him when he was experiencing rough times outside of the classroom:

That crap do hurt, and it do transfer over into your day, you know? And if a teacher says “Why ain’t you talking?” and you just say “I don’t feel like talking”, then they quickly think “oh, he’s just being rude!” and write you up. But your counselor knows what you’re going through, and they’ll let them know.

Beyond the more practical aid advocacy provided, the students reported that it really helped to feel like they had someone on their side, and it was especially important to students like Sal and Nina because they did not feel like they had many adults who would provide that support when they needed it like Ms. C did. As Sal said, “Some counselors [would say], ‘He thinks he grown, he on his own? Let him fend for himself!’ But Ms. C said ‘Let me know when you have that [appeals court], I’m gonna be there!’”

While Ms. C was advocating for Sal and Nina within the school system, Tino was experiencing problems with an even larger system. He had already come back to the U.S. from Venezuela and was attending classes when he first found out his student visa had not been accepted. He remembers Mr. B helping him out.
I tried to get all my papers together and stuff and send it to INS, you know, to get my student visa. And he was like “let’s do this, let’s do that,” he is getting on the phone talking to everybody [INS officials], he is going on the internet, you know, getting all the stuff that he can, everything. Everything that I need.

Tino went on to mention letters that Mr. B wrote to the INS on his behalf, explaining his situation and describing what a good student and young man Tino was in hopes of convincing them to approve his student visa application. “I saw the letter that [Mr. B] wrote, and it was awesome. That letter was really, really great. I mean, he says everything he know about me, everything that he did [for the application], and he put it in that letter.”

Even after Tino was denied a student visa for a second time, Mr. B did not give up. He began calling local colleges to ask for information about how immigration status would affect admissions decisions, and looked for ways Tino could start attending college classes until his student visa status cleared up. “He was like, he start talking to me and he was like “Don’t worry, we’re going to find out a way.” And, you know, he just keep trying and trying to find a way that I can go to college.”

Although Tino was not yet enrolled in college at the time of the interview, he said that Mr. B’s actions were important to him. He remembered:

He was pissed off because all the things that happened [when I got denied]… I mean, I saw his face, he was like ‘Oh my God, I can’t believe that has happened!’ And this is really good, because I feel loved. You know, they really care about me.

*Intervening in crisis situations.* Many of the students told me about times when school counselors helped them by addressing immediate concerns that were impeding their progress towards academic or personal goals. In many of these instances, the students recall the
counselors’ interventions as being active and directive crisis management, rather than a more passive, process-oriented intervention. At times like this, students were not looking to build their insight or change overall behavior patterns. They were in crisis, and they wanted to know how to handle the situation.

Sera recalled a time from her freshman year when a difficult social situation snowballed into a crisis for her. After an ex-boyfriend became jealous of a friend of his who had asked her out, he expressed his feelings about the situation in a very public manner. She recalled:

He wrote this poem about me—it didn’t have my name in it—but he wrote this poem...and then he made copies of the poem and posted them all over the school. And I was just devastated because I felt like I was just posted everywhere.

Eventually the stress of being at the center of a high school drama was too much for Sera, a very shy freshman at the time. As she put it:

I went crazy, I guess. I was talking to my parents…my parents are very open that they want all of us kids to talk to them about anything we feel like we need to talk to them about, so I was talking to them and crying that I didn’t feel like I needed to live anymore, you know? I was on the point where I was just like “It’s not worth it anymore,” and I was close to suicide I guess, which is bad. So my Mom was really worried about me, so she went up to the counseling office. And my counselor actually wasn’t there, but Ms. J was. And so I actually fixed it with her, and she wasn’t even my counselor, but she took that case on.

Of course not all of the crises were as potentially devastating as suicide, but many situations that students found themselves in could have resulted in serious consequences without the school counselors’ interventions. Sal described an experience he had during his senior year
just before he was set to graduate where he had gotten into an argument with a fellow student over some damaged property. When Sal demanded that he be compensated, the other student threatened him. Sal wanted to save face, so he didn’t feel he could back down. Knowing that if the situation escalated into a physical fight it could mean Sal would not be able to graduate on time, Ms. C called Sal into her office to intervene. Sal remembers the events this way:

She said “Well, Sal, you don’t need that,” know what I’m saying? “You’re trying to graduate and this jerk…who is this jerk to get you all heated? And you so close!” And she reminded me of many things. “You’re so close to graduating,” those words caught my attention. It’s like, why you want to mess this up now? Graduation is always out there, ‘cause that was important, man.

Nina did not just have one crisis, but a series of crises. Between her father’s living with his second family in another country and a history of bitter between fights between herself and her mother, Nina went to her counselors whenever she was in crisis. Nina said:

It’s mostly guidance for my personal life. I mean, school, you know, they helped me with that, but that’s not really as helpful as it was for my personal life, because, you know, as much as I like to pretend that I’m all grown up, I’m not. And if I’m having problems with my mom, I don’t really know what to do. You know, like the last time I ran away, I ran away to a different county where one of my friends used to live. And I talked to [Ms. C], and she talked to my boyfriend on the phone and was like “get her an appointment to come in here.” Because I didn’t know what to do. I wasn’t in school, which wasn’t a good thing. I was hiding out, and even after I’m eighteen, if they find me, they can still charge me as a runaway. And I didn’t know that, but with stuff like that, I
didn’t know what to do, and it was really nice to be able to have somebody that could [help].

Whenever Nina ran into trouble at home, she felt safe in going to Ms. C for advice. Nina appreciated the information and the wisdom Ms. C could provide, but she also appreciated how Ms. C communicated that advice to her. In her words:

She was really calm about it. And when she’s calm, I kind of, I don’t know, it makes you calm down a bit. Like it’s not such a big deal. She’s right, Mom does this all the time, there’s the detention home I can go to, I don’t have to go home no matter what Mom says, as long as an adult signs me in, I’m okay. So, you know, it was really calming. And I think that’s what I need most in my life, because my life is hectic. I need somebody calm. And she’s like the opposite, you know, like the yin and yang, she’s the calm side. So if I’m all hectic, and my hair’s pointing in different directions, she’s all calm and stable and I’m able to draw off that.

*Providing personal counseling for students.* In addition to helping students manage their immediate concerns, there were also times when school counselors worked with students to address ongoing issues in the students’ lives and to help develop insight, build skills, alter behavior patterns, and promote healthy development. Like crisis intervention, counseling has specific goals; however, the difference is that counseling functions are ongoing processes rather than a specific instance where aid is given and a problem is solved.

Throughout the interviews, students referred to talking with the counselors for “personal” things. This label meant very different things for different people, and the help they received took on a variety of forms. Sometimes, this counseling help was delivered in small groups. Franny and Wayne both discussed “group sessions” where the counselors would get together
with students who had common problems to talk the problems through and try to help each other. Nina talked about a group she participated in which she referred to as a “girls growing up group,” where she would meet with five other girls and Ms. J and have a “positive group…you know, chat about whatever, just talking about getting through stuff.” Tino also discussed a group for Hispanic students which Mr. B developed to help them make connections, develop social skills, and enhance their feeling of belonging and connectedness within the high school.

More often, however, students reported that they received their counseling help via individual meetings with a school counselor. Students received counseling on a variety of issues, from dealing with difficult family situations to handling relationship difficulties to coping with stress. Franny described the school counseling office as being open to help no matter what is needed:

If you had something going on personally, they’d help you with that. If you needed to go to group session, they’d fit you in with that. I mean, anything that goes on—school, personal, you just want to talk to somebody—that’s what they’re there for.

Franny first sought counseling to help with family issues she was struggling with. “I started having some issues at my house, with parents and all that stuff. And, you know, I just started talking to them.” She said that working with the counselors not only helped her to manage her family situation better, but it helped her to grow as a person. “I’ve actually opened up a lot as far as, like expressing my views on things. Because I was a relatively shy person, but I’ve gotten away from that a lot.”

Theresa reported a fairly typical incident where she met with her counselor, Mr. B, right after she had broken up with her boyfriend:
And I couldn’t go to class, because I was crying, and so one of the teachers was just like “Go down to your counselor and talk to him.” I had never gone down to the counseling office, so I was like “Well, where is it?” So I just kind of sat there, and I…was sobbing my brains out, and was kind of like [pause] “Hi,” you know, and so I ended up telling him everything. He was really cool, you know, and he advised me in getting over him and whatever. And then, so we got that connection that way.

Although Theresa had never been to the counseling office before, she said that Mr. B helped put her at ease right away. “It was just like a random rough day…crying, so it was kind of awkward. But he made it so that it didn’t feel awkward, like, almost immediately.” Theresa and Mr. B met a couple of times about the breakup, and she said that he helped her by allowing her to express herself, by understanding her, and eventually by helping her to put the difficult situation in perspective. “When I saw it separately, I was able to see that it was just my ex-boyfriend, that’s just a period of my life, it’s not really that big. Whereas, you know, going to college, getting scholarships, that’s more of an important thing because that’s gonna affect my future in general.” Although Mr. B helped her gain perspective, for Theresa it was also important that he understand her. As she put it:

I thought that was really important, and the fact that as an adult he knows that it’s not really…you know, that it’s not really that important, he kind of made it…I don’t know how to put it in words, but like, he knew it was really important to me. And most adults would be like “It’s just a high school relationship. It’s not much.” But he kind of made it as big of a deal as I did.

Once they had this connection, Theresa says she went back to Mr. B about other, smaller issues. She believes she grew from their counseling sessions. In her words:
I think I went to talk to him several times…and he just kinda opened my eyes about the world in general. I guess I’ve matured more, [working with] him, and I’ve been able to prioritize things in my life.

Sera’s first experience with the school counseling program was counseling oriented as well, and her situation involved a variety of issues. As mentioned previously, Ms. J intervened when she was caught between two friends and a poem about her was posted around school. After the crisis was averted, Sera continued meeting with the counselors to help her with her depression and build her self-confidence again. While working on those issues, she received bad news about her father. She recalls the experience:

And then my dad was diagnosed with cancer, and that was tough. It was hard for me, because I’m sort of a daddy’s girl, and our family is very, very close. And so, I just had to talk to somebody about it. And so I went to Mr. B and talked about that.

Sera says the personal counseling she received from Ms. J and Mr. B helped her deal with the immediate issues, but also helped her change her patterns. Sera told me:

It definitely helped me! I mean, emotionally, just being unsure of how I even felt. I just felt overwhelmed or something, and just felt like I needed to talk to somebody. And they just helped me figure out how I’m feeling, and that it’s normal—because I guess I freak out over lots of things. I’m an emotional person [laughs]. But they’ve helped me with everything. I mean, everything I’ve come to them with has had a positive outcome and has turned out well.

Sera says that the counseling has helped her to mature in a variety of ways, including becoming more self-confident and understanding and accepting herself better. As she said,
I’m a lot more self-confident. I used to be very shy and stuff, and now I’ve been in drama plays and stood up on stage in front of a bunch of people. I’m a lot more comfortable with myself. I guess they’ve helped me just to know that I’m not the only one that gets angry and overwhelmed. And that when I feel shy, that’s normal, and when I’m angry, it’s normal.

Nina also talked about her experiences receiving personal counseling from the school counseling department. For Nina, it was important just to have somewhere to go and talk when she needed to. “It kind of makes you go ‘Okay, well, you’re life sucks, you know, there’s somebody else to at least listen to my complaints’, you know?” Nina felt it was important to have an outlet to help her express her emotions, whatever they were at the time.

I’ve told them everything. You know, I need people to tell that to because I can’t…I tried when I was younger to keep stuff inside, and it doesn’t work. I don’t know how people do it. I don’t know how people can actually keep it all inside. I can’t do that. So it’s really nice to be able to have somebody that’s just, you know, if you have all this whatever inside you, whatever emotions, if you’re really really happy you can explode, if you’re really really mad you can explode. It’s just really nice.

Counseling provided Nina with someone to listen to her situation and an opportunity to express herself no matter what she was feeling, and that helped her cope with her difficult life situation. Over time, Nina began to learn more about herself and how she operates, and was able to put what she had learned through counseling into practice in her everyday life. She told me:

I also think I’ve drawn off a lot of her, like I said, a lot of her calmness. And I think that sometimes if I can’t find anybody, I’ll be like “Okay, calm down,” you know? Not exactly what Ms. C would say, but like “It’s not too bad. You’ll be able to handle it.”
Write it down,” you know? “And if you don’t need to write it down because it’s such a
big thing, just keep it in mind, and then when you go back to school the next day, you can
just kind of walk in the counseling office and give a little brief to Ms. C or whatever, and
then you’ll work it out a bit better.” So it’s kind of like, I’ve become a little more stable,
you know? Even in an unstable environment, I’ve been a little more stable about things.
Having a safe place to go to express herself and to learn how to cope with difficult
situations had a profound effect on Nina’s life. As she put it:

I knew they were there, and I didn’t have to worry about waiting so long, or I didn’t have
to be nervous about it or I didn’t have to go to one of my friends who has no idea what to
do. I think as a whole it meant a lot, because if it wasn’t there, I don’t think I would be
alive. I’m being serious. In all seriousness, I don’t think I’d be alive right now. So…and
if I was, I don’t think I’d be in a positive environment or situation. And so I think it’s
meant my life.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of those students who were
positively influenced by their school counseling programs. It was clear from the content of the
interviews that this goal was accomplished. The students had very positive things to say about
the school counseling program, the professional school counselors themselves, their experiences,
and the effects those experiences had on them as high school students.

In addition to validating that the students’ experiences were positive, the findings suggest
important characteristics about the students’ experiences with the school counseling program.
The students who were positively influenced by the school counseling program experienced that
school counseling program within a welcoming, safe, and responsive environment. In addition,
they experienced the school counseling program through important and meaningful personal relationships that they developed with the individual school counselors. Finally, these students experienced the school counseling program as a set of services that the school counselors provided, including counseling, academic advising, and advocacy, that were relevant to the students’ academic, collegiate, and personal success.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the study was to understand the experiences of those students who have been positively influenced by their school counseling program from the perspectives of those students. Ten students who were identified as having positive experiences with their school counseling program were interviewed to discern what they felt was most meaningful about their interactions with their school counseling program. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do students who have been positively influenced by their interactions with the school counseling program describe their experience?
2. What experiences with the school counseling programs do high school students view as significant in their academic, career, personal, or social development?
3. How do students believe that they are different as a result of their interactions with the school counseling programs?
4. How do the experiences and activities that the students identify as most helpful fit with the foundations of the ASCA National Standards, the Transforming School Counseling Initiative, and the ASCA National Model?

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, and three themes emerged from the data that addressed what students found to be most helpful about their experiences with their school counseling program. Students reported that the counselors created a nurturing environment, developed meaningful relationships with their students, and delivered a set of important educational and developmental services. The following chapter presents conclusions
drawn from the findings, implications for school counseling practice and school counseling preparation, and recommendations for future research.

Conclusions and Discussion

Three conclusions were drawn from the findings of this study: a) students’ experiences are consistent with the “new vision” of school counseling models, b) students’ relationships with their school counselors influenced their overall experiences with the school counseling program, and c) the school counseling office environment influenced the students’ overall experience.

Students Experiences are Consistent with the “New Vision” of School Counseling Models

The findings derived from the student interviews regarding what the students found to be particularly helpful about their school counseling program are largely consistent with, although not identical to, areas of school counseling practice emphasized in the new vision of school counseling. The following section will present a brief discussion comparing the findings from the students’ interviews to the key elements of this new vision identified in Chapter II, the Transforming School Counseling Initiative, the ASCA National Standards, and the ASCA National Model.

The students’ experiences provide support for the model of school counseling that is being promoted through the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI). The TSCI sees the school counselor’s primary role as promoting academic success for all students through addressing barriers to learning (Paisley & Hayes, 2003). The students described the school counselors working for their academic achievement by removing barriers throughout the interviews. Sal talked about “getting stressed” and going to see Ms. C, who would “work out a game plan” for him to graduate on time. Nina talked about Ms. C advising her to stay in school, then helping her plan for college and teaching her how to search for scholarships. Torrance
credits Ms. J for first giving him the idea of attending college, and Wayne reports that Mr. B helped him get his college application in good shape. All of these are examples of school counselors promoting academic success for their students.

One of the ways the TSCI model proposes that school counselors facilitate academic achievement among their students is through demonstrating “a fundamental belief in the capacity of all students to achieve at high levels” (Paisley & Hayes, 2003, 199). The students readily identified feeling that their school counselors believed in them, and discussed how that belief encouraged them to succeed. Nina remembers the counselors constantly reminding her that she could succeed in spite of her family situations, motivating her when she began to fall behind. As she put it, “If you’re slacking off, you’ve got somebody to kind of poke you and say ‘Hey! Go go go!’”. Franny remembered her counselors being supportive of her as well, even when she did not do well. She said:

If I got a 20 on a test, they would never look down on me or say ‘You could have done so much better,’ because they know I could have. They’d be like ‘what did you do this time that you didn’t do when you got 90s?’.

Franny and Nina both interpreted their school counselors’ support as confidence in their ability, which helped them remain confident. The school counselors were clear about their expectations for students, and their high expectations helped students maintain high expectations for themselves.

The TSCI identifies five components that are crucial to school counselors effectively doing their jobs under this new vision (The Education Trust, 2003b): School counselors should serve as educational leaders; advocate for their students; build collaborative relationships with educational partners; provide counseling and consultation to remove barriers to success; and use
local, regional, and national data to identify underserved populations and addressed those systemic failures. The findings from this study demonstrate that the students identified three of these concepts (advocating for students, building collaborative relationships, and providing counseling and consultation) as aspects of the school counseling program that they believed help them have a positive experience. Each is discussed briefly below.

Students cited the benefits of the school counselors counseling them in crisis situations as well as with ongoing personal counseling to help identify and manage barriers that were impeding their success. Through these counseling activities, school counselors helped the participants in this study develop insight into ongoing issues, change behavior patterns, and take more responsibility for the choices they made. Ms. C intervened when Sal was on the verge of a physical fight that might have caused him to miss graduation. By helping him to calm down and reminding him of the importance of his goals, he was able to cope with the situation in a way that enabled him to graduate on time. The counselors helped Nina deal with several family situations that put her academics in jeopardy. Not only were they able to help keep her on track, but she learned important coping strategies that she now uses to manage such situations better. Theresa, Franny, and Sera all described personal situations that were affecting their ability to focus on their academics. By working through issues with them, the school counselors helped them resolve personal issues and helped them return their focus to academics. In each of these instances, counseling helped the students identify sources of stress in their lives and build the problem-solving or coping skills needed to better manage the difficult situations. This allowed them to continue pursuing their academic and personal goals.

Students also highlighted advocacy as a service that was particularly helpful to their academic success. Nina and Sal remembered the school counselors speaking to attendance
boards on their behalf, helping them to stay in school. Sal talked about the counselors talking to teachers in efforts to help them understand Sal’s position and encouraging the teachers to work with Sal to help him meet his academic goals. Tino discussed Mr. B’s efforts to work with INS and local colleges to help him attend college classes as soon as possible. All of these are examples of the ways students believed their school counselors advocated for them.

It should be mentioned that the advocacy the students spoke of is not exactly like the advocacy which is proposed by the TSCI, however. The TSCI’s view of advocacy is “advocating for policies and practices that promote academic success for all students” (The Education Trust, 2003b). Inherent in this idea or “promoting academic success” is not only removing barriers, but helping students to develop the personal accountability and skills necessary to navigate their own way successfully. When the students talked about school counselors advocating for them, however, they were not thinking proactive, systemic advocacy or developing a sense of accountability. Rather, the students were referring to times when the school counselors stood up for them (“Got my back” as Sal put it) with teachers, parents, or the larger school system. This type of advocacy is consistent with the goals of advocacy according to the TSCI, provided its goal is removing a barrier to the students’ success and not simply “rescuing” the students from natural or logical consequences of their actions. Although the students’ perspective of advocacy is rather limited compared to the systemic advocacy described by the TSCI, it is the advocacy that they are most aware of because it is relevant to their immediate experiences.

Another important component of the TSCI that students identified as beneficial was the school counselors’ teaming and collaboration skills. Many students pointed out how well the school counselors worked together and how they collaborated and consulted with each other and
with their students’ teachers. This idea of teaming and collaboration is one of the basic principles of the TSCI. In the initiative, it is proposed as a way to effectively promote change within the school system. Although the students in this study did not articulate their perception of such systematic changes, the students certainly noticed the school counselors’ collaborative style and that style did have a direct effect on them. Many of the students made comments similar to Wayne’s assertion that the school counselors “seemed like they were like one office, not four offices.” This sense of teamwork helped the school counselors present a unified idea of roles and responsibilities of the school counseling program, and helped students to understand how to use their school counselors.

The students also noted how well the school counselors seemed to work together. This spirit of collaboration was visible to the students when they needed to talk with someone but their counselor was not available. Students noticed that the counselors “had each other’s back” and would gladly step in and talk to any student who needed help no matter who that student’s counselor was. The implication here is not only that the counselors were willing to step in and cover for each other, but they were also open to having other school counselors talk with their students without feeling that their professional boundaries were being crossed. The school counseling department’s team approach allowed them to see each student as the program’s student, rather than one counselor’s student. This collaborative style translated into more responsive service for the students.

The school counselors were collaborative in a more systemic manner as well. Through field observations, I was able to witness the school counselors in a variety of collaborative activities on several different levels. The counselors would regularly give each other updates whenever they worked with another counselor’s students, something Nina identified and
appreciated. During weekly meetings, they discussed collaborating with teachers and academic advisors to make the scheduling and advisement process more efficient and more effective. They met with student groups about those groups’ concerns and planned collaborative activities with them, such as multicultural awareness workshops. On an even larger scale, the school counselors met with the other county high school’s school counseling department to discuss their successes and struggles and to begin the process of unifying the high school counseling program goals within the county. In addition, the school counselors regularly attended County Counselor’s Collaborative meetings, where local school counselors (K-12) met with school counselor educators and school counseling graduate students to unify the goals and objectives of school counseling programs throughout the county and throughout the grade levels, as well as to promote real-world research that would be of practical use to the school counselors. This type of systemic collaboration is more in keeping with the TSCI vision, but because much of this work is not in the direct experience of the students, they were not in a position to identify it as being particularly helpful. However, the effects of that collaborative style seem to carry over into the school counselors’ work with the students and with each other in ways that are visible, and beneficial, to their students.

There were two components central to TSCI that were not identified by the students as playing an important part in their positive experience. Students rarely talked about the school counselors as educational leaders and did not mention their use of data to evaluate their school counseling program. This should not be seen as a challenge to the import of those roles, however. There is evidence, obtained from observations and field notes, that the school counselors served as educational leaders. They participated in a collaborative project with other school counselors through which they advocated for a lead counselor position, educated the
school board on the crucial role school counselors can play in the mission of the schools, and brought attention to the accomplishments of local school counselors at a celebration breakfast. In addition, observations of the school counseling department team meetings revealed the school counselors using data to determine underserved populations and develop strategies to reach those students. It may be that these experiences were missing from the findings not because they lacked importance for the school counseling department, but because they happened outside of the participants’ awareness. The school counselors’ educational leadership and use of data likely affected the students indirectly, but without direct knowledge, the students were not able to make the connection.

In addition to the five central components of a TSCI program, students also mentioned the importance of having diverse and culturally competent counselors, which are foundations of the TSCI model. Students appreciated the differences that each of the counselors brought to the department and the school, and they recognized that certain students might rather see a counselor who was more like them. The school counselors’ differences from each other, as well as their collaborative, flexible style, provided the students with a choice of whom they could speak with.

It is interesting to note that the students interviewed seem to define “diversity” quite broadly. Students mentioned global, more apparent characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, language, and age as factors in how comfortable students feel going to certain school counselors. They also described many variables that are not obvious upon first encounter, such as professional and personal interests, areas of expertise, or personal style. These factors all seemed to play an important role in whom students chose to speak with and the strength of the connections they made with their counselors. Certain students appeared to find a school counselor who was most like them on an important variable, such as Tino developing a bond
with Mr. B, the only Spanish-speaking counselor. Others seemed to pick school counselors who were a good fit for their issue, like Torrance did when he began to develop a bond with Ms. J while struggling with male-female relationships. Sometimes, however, the match did not appear to be based on any obvious characteristic. Sal, an African-American male from a lower income family who was struggling to graduate, became very close with Ms. C, a White/Jewish woman who was identified by other students as being the counselor who specialized in helping students get to college. Although this relationship was not built around any obvious cultural or situational characteristic, the relationship was strong and became a critical component in Sal’s reaching his goal of graduating on time.

Although students mentioned that having counselors of different ages, ethnicities, and interests was important, it was also important to the students that their counselors be skilled at cross-cultural interventions. In a sense, all counseling is cross-cultural counseling because even when the school counselors and their students share some similarities, they will also have significant differences (Lee, 2001). Tino worked with Mr. B largely because Mr. B spoke Spanish, but Mr. B is also a White male from a small rural town. If he were not able to understand Tino’s culture and work with him within his cultural context, the language alone would not be enough to solidify that bond.

Working cross-culturally also provided opportunities for students to have experiences beyond their own culture and develop significant relationships with someone who is different from them. For certain students, this cross-cultural experience provided a transformative experience. Sal talked about how Ms. C’s advocacy on his behalf not only helped him in a practical sense, but the fact that it was coming from a White woman in a leadership position confirmed his belief that “White people do care about Black people and Black people do care
about White people.” So while the diversity enabled some students to find a school counselor who they perceived as being like them to promote emotional safety, their diversity—paired with their cross-cultural competence—also provided students with important cross-cultural experiences that had an impact on how they viewed people from different cultures. In both of these cases, the findings in this study support the demand for increased diversity and cross-cultural competence among school counselors as is being promoted by the TSCI.

The students’ experiences provide support for the ASCA National Standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) as well. When participants discussed the ways in which they believe they have benefited from their interactions with the school counseling program, they often cite specific areas in which they have grown, knowledge they have attained, and skills they have developed. In most cases, these areas of development were consistent with academic standards and/or the personal/social standards as prescribed by the ASCA Standards.

The ASCA Standards identify three standards for academic development, including acquiring attitudes, knowledge and skills that contribute to effective learning in the school and across the life span; completing school with academic preparation essential to choose from a wide range of substantial postsecondary options, including college; and understanding the relationship of academics to the world of work, and to life at home and in the community (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). Many of the students interviewed described personal changes that fit with the standards for academic development. Students described how their attitudes toward school had changed and how they liked the feeling of being productive they had when they were working with their counselors. Students like Sal and Nina reported that the school counselors helped them graduate, while other students like Torrance credit his counselor for being admitted into college. Wayne talked about how the skills he learned through the school counseling
program will help him in the world of work, and Sal and Tino described how their experiences with the school counseling program has led them to want to give something back to the community. All of these are examples of students meeting ASCA Standards for academic development through their school counseling program.

The ASCA Standards also identify three standards for personal/social development, which include acquiring the attitudes, knowledge, and interpersonal skills to help students understand and respect self and others; making decisions, setting goals, and taking necessary action to achieve goals; and understanding safety and survival skills. The interviews include numerous references to changes the participants have made in their lives that are congruent with the personal/social standards (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). Through the personal relationship they developed with the school counselors and because of the modeling of those counselors, many students talked about how they have “grown” in important ways. Sera said she understood herself better, and became more self-confident as a result. Wayne describes himself as having more respect for people from different backgrounds. Nina has learned important coping skills, has set specific goals for her future, and is actively taking steps towards meeting those goals.

Although the student interviews included several references to academic and personal/social development, the students did not identify personal changes consistent with the career development standards to the same degree. Even though there were examples of career development, including Theresa saying she is clearer about her career goals than she was and Wayne noting specific skills he learned that would help him in the world of work, in general students were not as likely to identify these types of changes as having a great impact on their lives. There are a few ways we can make sense of this finding. One possible explanation is that Mr. G, who was identified by the County High school counseling program as being the “career
expert” (McMahon, 2002), did not have as many of his nominees appear in the final sample as the other counselors did. Although I attempted to create a sample that was evenly distributed among the four counselors, Mr. G did not provide as many names, and I was unable to reach some of the students he suggested for the study. Perhaps if more of Mr. G’s nominees had been available for interviews, the data would have demonstrated a stronger emphasis on career development.

The lower incidence of career development as a critical factor in the students’ experiences may also be a result of a selection bias. The school counselors nominated those students whom they felt had benefited from the school counseling program and perhaps the counselors were more likely to think of students who grew in ways that were important to the school counselors, but not necessarily the students. There may be several students at County High who would have self-identified as being helped by the school counseling program in their career development, but these students were not chosen by the school counselors. Perhaps career development did not seem to be as dramatic or profound to the school counselors as situations in which the school counselors helped students graduate or assisted students through rough home situations.

It may also be that career development is simply a relatively weak area of County High’s program. As was mentioned, the County High school counselors themselves stated that the program was not yet where they want it to be, and cited their career services as one area that they were still working on (McMahon, 2002). Field notes taken during school counseling department meetings reveal that the school counselors have been paying more attention to strengthening their career services; however, many of the participants may not have had as many opportunities to work on career issues as they have had to address academic and personal/social issues due to
the status of that part of the program. One factor that seems to dispute this explanation, however, is that the older students were more likely to describe their career development than were the younger students. If career development were a weakness of the program but was improving, we would expect the younger students would have a better experience with career services.

The fact that older students were more likely to mention career development is an indication that there may be a developmental explanation for the under-representation of career services. Because the participants were either high school students or recent graduates, many of those now in college, they had met or were meeting important academic goals (good grades, graduation, etc.) already. It may have been easy for them to make the connection between the help they received from school counselors and their academic success. Similarly, many of the students had ongoing personal or social issues that had been resolved or were being managed, and perhaps the connection between the school counseling services and personal/social growth was easy for them to grasp as well. The participants’ careers, on the other hand, are still ahead of them. Because they have not yet realized their career goals, they may not yet understand the role that the school counseling program will play in helping them reach those goals. Further investigation of the students’ perceptions of career development activities would help address these questions.

The findings from this study also show that many of the school counseling services that the participants identified as beneficial were consistent with school counselor duties identified in the ASCA National Model. The delivery system of the National Model, which describes the methods and activities used by the school counseling program to promote student achievement and meet goals for student development, include student planning, responsive services, and the guidance curriculum (ASCA, 2003). The findings in this study demonstrate the students’
acknowledgement of the important of both student planning and responsive services. The findings did not indicate, however, that the students perceive their experiences with the guidance curriculum to be an important part of their overall positive experience with the school counseling program.

Several students described the academic advising and college preparation support, which are consistent with what the ASCA model describes as “individual student planning”, as being particularly helpful. It is important to remember that “student planning” refers to more than simply changing a student’s schedule. Although many participants mentioned the school counselors making scheduling changes as part of their experiences, such clerical duties were not identified as important or meaningful to the students. However, the students did see their counselors creating comprehensive academic plans based on their personal knowledge of students’ interests and skills as being very helpful. This is important because in County High and nationwide, professional school counselors are trying to limit their non-essential duties, and scheduling is one of those duties that school counselors are trying to eliminate. The data from this study indicate that students, too, see schedule changes as non-essential duties but see comprehensive individual student planning as an important school counseling function.

In addition to student planning, the other school counseling services identified by participants as being particularly helpful—crisis intervention and personal counseling—are also consistent with the ASCA National Model. Both crisis management and personal counseling are included in the National Model, listed under responsive services (ASCA, 2003). These counseling services, described earlier in this chapter, covered a variety of topics from relationship issues to family issues to managing depression. In each instance, the counselors
helped students identify stressors and learn skills to manage those stressors so that they could maintain focus on academics.

It was interesting to note that although the same school counseling services were identified as helpful in most interviews, the degree to which each service was regarded as beneficial varied from participant to participant. This finding may simply reflect that different students may have different needs, and the school counseling programming meets a variety of student needs. What is striking about the wide range of needs identified as important is that there seems to be a common interpretation or meaning that the students assign to whatever service a given student cited as particularly important. Often, the meaning they ascribed to their experience was “the school counselors care”. This refrain is repeated throughout the interviews, and serves as a summation for the students’ interpretations of a variety of actions, from saying “hello” in the halls to advocating for a student to providing scholarship information. From this finding, it appears as though the actual interaction or service itself is not as important as the meaning which the students ascribed to the interaction. The students identified many activities and services the school counselors provided as helpful, but the actions that the students describe as having the greatest impact were the ones which the students interpreted as expressions of the school counselors’ care for the students.

One of the National Model’s delivery system components that was not mentioned as often by the students was the planned guidance curriculum. Although students did acknowledge participating in classroom activities, they rarely mentioned it as having a great impact. There are a few possible explanations for this finding. First, according to the County High school counselors themselves, the guidance curriculum was “under construction” at the time many of the participants were students (McMahon, 2002). Through field notes gathered at counseling
department meetings, I was able to learn that the school counselors saw the guidance curriculum as one the final pieces of their comprehensive program, and were actively working on its implementation while I was conducting interviews. At that time, however, half of the sample had already graduated.

Another possible explanation for the students’ not mentioning more about the guidance curriculum is that it was being delivered largely through faculty advisors. It is possible; therefore, that those students who did participate in guidance curriculum activities did not associate them with the school counseling program because the activities were not delivered by school counselors. In addition, because the guidance curriculum tends to be more preventative in nature, the outcomes of such activities may not be as obvious to the participants and therefore may not have had the impact that an intervention in a crisis situation, for example, might. One final explanation may be that, because the guidance curriculum is often delivered in larger group settings such as classrooms, it may be perceived by the students as more impersonal than the other interventions mentioned. Therefore, the school counselor-student relationship that plays such an important role in the students’ interpretation of the other services may not be as apparent in guidance curriculum activities. Students may experience the guidance curriculum activities as more like “school” rather than seeing them as personally relevant as the other services.

From a constructivist viewpoint, the students may be interpreting the guidance curriculum differently as well. If the guidance programming is perceived as more impersonal by the students, perhaps the students do not see the same expression of caring in the guidance activities as in other services. Even if the information presented through the guidance curriculum is important to the students, the students may not recognize it as having a great impact because they did not experience it within the context of a personal connection. Further
investigation into the students’ experiences with the guidance curriculum would help to answer these questions.

*The Students’ Relationship with their School Counselors Influenced their Overall Experience with the School Counseling Program*

The data provided strong evidence that the relationship between the student and the school counselor plays a crucial role in the students’ overall positive experiences. It could be argued that the students did not conceptualize a school counseling *program* per se, but understood the program in terms of the relationships they developed with their school counselors. This phenomenon of understanding the program in terms of their relationship may be explained developmentally. Elkind’s (1967) theory of adolescent egocentrism states that, although many adolescents are able to see other people’s perspectives, they are not always able to see the objects of others’ perspectives. Because of their more egocentric viewpoint, it makes sense that adolescents would be more likely to see the school counselors as *their* school counselors, and believe that the school counselors care about them. Although their understanding of the school counseling program may be tainted by their rather egocentric perspective, it should not be interpreted as entirely wrong. The school counselors do seem to care about each of the students interviewed, so each of their beliefs (i.e., my school counselor cares about me) is correct, if somewhat limited.

In certain cases, the relationship that the students developed with their school counselors appeared to be the “instrument of change” itself. For example, Franny said that the relationship with her counselors helped her see herself from others’ point of view, and Wayne stated that he learned a great deal about dealing with people through his relationship with the counselors. Most often, however, the relationship played an important role as the vehicle through which many
services were delivered. In this way, the relationship acted as a catalyst, helping to make the changes happen more quickly and more efficiently. Theresa noted that she never went to see the counselor before she broke up with her boyfriend, and Franny said she first approached the counselors about family issues. In both of these cases, the students said that once they established a relationship with their counselor, their view of the counselors and the counseling office changed, and they began going for help more often. Because the students saw their relationship with the school counselors as being personal and genuine, and they felt that the school counselors cared about their best interests, they were more willing to trust their school counselors.

From a constructivist perspective, the relationship may have appeared to serve as a catalyst for change because of the meaning the students ascribed to their relationships with their school counselors. The participants in this study believed that the relationships they had built with their school counselors were characterized by the school counselors’ respecting, caring about, and taking a genuine interest in their students. They believed their school counselors wanted them to succeed and believed they could succeed. The students’ interpretation of the relationship being based on genuine caring and high expectations may have changed the way the students saw themselves as well as the school counseling program. Seeing themselves through the eyes of their counselors, they saw themselves as students who could achieve. They saw their interactions with the school counseling program as a support system to help them achieve. This type of relationship is consistent with House and Hayes’ (2002) assertion that school counselors must create “an effective working relationship among students, professional and support staff, parents, and community members [based on] mutual understanding and an appreciation of the contributions others can make in the educating of all students” (p.254). Although the authors are
talking about the need to build collaborative relationships with multiple stakeholders in this quotation, the participants in this study appear to validate their point at least as far as building collaborative relationships with students is concerned. The relationship to which the students refer was built on mutual understanding and an appreciation for the students’ ability to achieve, and that relationship was indeed a critical factor in the students’ success.

It is clear that the relationship played a vital role in the experience of the students. What is not clear is whether the relationship plays such a crucial role in most students who are positively influenced by their school counselors, or whether this particular sample is unusual in that respect. It is possible that a selection bias could explain the prominence of the relationship as a variable in this particular sample. Because the school counselors generated the initial list of students for this study, it is possible that the school counselors thought of these students because they developed a relationship with them. More research on this topic in which students self-select as being aided by their school counseling program may lead to a better understanding of the role of the relationship in students who are helped by their school counselors.

It is curious that throughout counseling and psychology literature, the therapeutic relationship is clearly established as a vital component of the change and developmental process (e.g., Lambert & Bergin, 1994; Seligman, 1995; Smith & Glass, 1977), yet it is given little attention in recent school counseling reform literature. Instead, school counseling literature is focusing on school counselor roles and responsibilities and discussing the mental health versus educational emphasis (Alexander et al, 2003). The central role that redefining school counseling roles is playing within the school counseling reform movement may be a reflection of the history of role confusion within the profession of school counseling, and a response to the recent call for clarification of duties and responsibilities (Paisley & McMahon, 2001). It is also possible that
the type of relationship a school counselor should have with her or his students is assumed to be well established so that it doesn’t need attention in professional journals. Although defining the services that school counselors provide is certainly important, the students in this sample are telling us that, without a meaningful relationship, those services would lose a great deal of the influence they have on the students’ lives. Students ascribe special meaning to their school counselors’ advice because the advice was given within a trusting relationship by someone whom the students felt knew them. Without that relationship, the services simply would not have had the impact on the students that they did.

*The School Counseling Office Environment Influenced the Students’ Overall Experiences*

Students received messages about the school counselors and the school counseling program from their perceptions of the school counseling office environment, and these messages also influenced their experiences with the school counseling program. The degree to which students talked about the importance the environment played in their experiences with the school counseling program was surprising. The interview guide used for the study did not even include questions that specifically asked about the environment, either physical or psychological. At first I wondered whether there was a developmental explanation for the prominent role the environment played in the students answers; for instance, I wondered if when I asked about the school counseling department, they were thinking more concretely about the physical location of the program. This degree of concrete thinking on the part of the participants may play certain part in the students’ answers, but the pervasiveness of the environment as a theme in their answers leads me to believe something else is going on as well. The students appear to connect the school counseling department with a specific feeling, and they connect that feeling with being in the physical space of the office.
The environment seemed to play a few crucial roles in the students’ overall experiences. Perhaps most importantly, the welcoming environment helped to get students in the front door. Students talked about feeling “welcomed” and seeing adults with smiles on their faces. The students genuinely liked going in the school counseling office; they felt acknowledged and important when they were there. The students’ first impression of the school counseling department not only helped them to seek services, but it set the tone for how they would receive those services. The friendliness of the school counselors and their staff helped students to feel more comfortable. In addition, the presence of newspaper clippings about the students and student art within the physical environment of the office helped set the tone for counseling. By putting up student artwork, newspapers clippings, and by having student pictures in plain view, the counselors sent a message about where (or in this case, who) the school counselors’ priorities were, and the students received that message. Once the students developed the mindset that the school counselors were “there for their students,” the students began to perceive the school counselors and their services differently. In this way, the students’ perceptions of the school counseling office—and the meaning those students ascribed to those perceptions—influenced the students’ understanding of the school counseling program. When the students felt comfortable, they were more likely to open up to the school counselors, which made it easier for the counselors to help those students.

The comfortable and safe environment that the students experienced also encouraged the students to return to the counseling office. The feeling of safety and trust that the students identified made it more likely that the students would seek services when they were stressed, because the school counseling office became a “safe place” for them to go when they needed support. Many of the participants described the school counseling office as a place they returned
to so often it began to feel like home and the school counselors like family. This not only helped foster a stronger relationship between the students and the school counselors, but the proximity enabled the school counselors to “check in” with their students more often, keeping them up to date on what was going on in their students’ lives.

The environment of the school counseling office as a factor in students’ overall experiences with their school counseling program is largely absent from the professional literature, and not addressed in either the ASCA or the TSCI school counseling reform models. For the County High school counseling program, however, creating a more welcoming environment was a priority during their transformation process. In a previous study that examined the process this school counseling department went through as they began to transform a more traditional school program into a program that was in line with ASCA and TSCI, the school counselors discussed the importance of creating an environment in which students would feel comfortable (McMahon, 2002). Ms. C referred to the offices before the change as “sterile” and “like a doctor’s office” (p. 21)—not exactly the warm, accepting environment the school counselors were looking for. After bringing in plants and decorating the walls with student art work, the counselors were able to make the space “a place that kids would want to come” (p. 21). The school counselors were deliberately trying to send a message. As Mr. B stated, “we wanted to be open to teachers, to parents, to students. We wanted them to feel like they can come in here and…know what we’re about” (p. 21).

The findings from this study validate the efforts of the school counselors in creating a welcoming and nurturing environment, and show that the environment did indeed play an important role in the students’ positive experiences. The critical lesson is that the environment that the students perceived as safe, which facilitated the process of establishing relationships with
the school counselors, was not a coincidence. These students did not have positive experiences because they just happened to find a counselor with whom they felt comfortable. The school counselors were intentional about fostering the students’ feeling of comfort and safety within the walls of the office, and they took specific measures to help ensure that the students feel welcome and safe. The students clearly interpreted the school counseling office as a safe and student-friendly place, where the focus was on them and on their development; a place where they could learn and grow at their own pace without fear of being judged. This interpretation then set the tone for how those students would make sense of their subsequent interactions with the school counselors and the school counseling department.

Implications for Professional School Counseling

The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of those students who were helped by their school counseling program. Because the study was qualitative in design, the findings presented have not been “proven” in any statistical sense (Merriam, 1998). Instead, the findings of this study provide insight into the helping process that occurred between the school counselors at a particular high school and a specific group of their students. As was discussed in Chapter 3, the degree to which any information presented in the study can be “generalized” to a specific is largely up to the reader. As an aid in the generalization process, a discussion of the findings of this study in terms of potential implications for school counseling practice, school counseling preparation, and suggestions for further research, is presented in the following section.

Implications for School Counseling Practice

The results of the study have several implications for school counseling practice. First, the students’ positive experiences provide support for many of the principles of the recent school
counseling reform efforts, including the ASCA National Standards, the ASCA National Model, and the TSCI. The findings support school counselors moving away from clerical duties such as scheduling and towards spending more time working with students in academic advisement and counseling as well as advocating for students’ best interests. In this respect, the data from this study support the basic foundations of the TSCI as well as the school counselor functions outlined within the delivery system of the ASCA National Model.

The findings also reflect themes that are critical in both TSCI and the ASCA Model, particularly the use of collaboration and teaming skills and the importance of diversity and cultural competence. School counselors need to be able to use their teaming skills within the department so that they can present a united front to the students, appearing, as Wayne pointed out, as one office instead of four. Additionally, the students’ experiences support the importance of diversity and cultural competence among a school counseling staff. The combination of a heterogeneous group of school counselors who are also cross-culturally competent will provide students the option of working with someone who is like them on certain important issues while also providing the opportunity to have meaningful cross-cultural experiences.

The importance that the students in this study placed on the relationship they developed with their school counselors has implications for school counseling practice as well. The findings of this study suggest that school counselors renew their focus on the student-counselor relationship as an important variable in the overall experience with the school counseling department. Although high student-counselors ratios and increasing demands for accountability may appear to create barriers to school counselors being able to focus on relationship building, the findings from this study suggest that time school counselors spend building relationships with their students may be very well spent. School counseling services are more meaningful to
students—and thus have a greater impact—when those students perceive a relationship with the school counselors. Assuming that the greater impact of school counseling would translate into changes in student outcome measures, then building relationships with their students may be an important first step as school counselors demonstrate their worth in this new age of accountability.

The findings also provide school counselors with concrete ideas about what they can do to help foster such meaningful relationships. It should be noted that the relationship that the students describe includes more than simply being nice to students. The relationships that the students cited as being particularly meaningful were based on their experiences in which their school counselors demonstrated a genuine interest in and caring for the students in a variety of ways. By getting out of the office, being visible around the school, acknowledging their students by name, taking an interest in the students’ lives, and being willing to go “above and beyond” the call of duty to help their students, the school counselors demonstrated that they were there for the students. The students clearly received this message.

The important role that the school counseling office environment played in the overall experiences of the participants provides a rationale for practicing school counselors to reconsider their own office environment as well. From the experiences of the students in this study, creating an environment that is welcoming and safe is an important first step in getting students involved in school counseling programming. School counselors may want to analyze their own offices to see if they are welcoming and safe for all of their students. The students in this study received messages about the school counselors simply from what they put on their walls. Practicing school counselors may want to look at their own work spaces and ask what kind of messages they are sending. Is it a place where students of different cultures and orientations can
feel accepted? What does the office environment say about the school counselors’ expectations for their students? Do the students who come to the office feel welcomed and acknowledged? Questions such as these may help school counselors look at their own offices from the perspectives of the students and may provide clues as to how to help create the warm and welcoming atmosphere that the students in this study found to be so important.

Implications for School Counseling Preparation

The findings of this study lend support to the school counseling preparation model currently being promoted by the TSCI. The TSCI model includes training that goes beyond basic counseling training to include aspects that are unique to school counseling and the educational environment (The Education Trust, 2003a). Specifically, the findings of this study suggest that school counseling preparation programs not only need to develop solid counseling and crisis management skills in their graduate students, but they need to help them understand the educational environment as well so that they can help students with academic advising and college preparation as well as advocate for their students on a systemic level. In addition, school counseling preparation programs need to ensure that students have begun the process of becoming culturally competent, and encourage them to continue this process after graduation, so that they can work effectively with a diverse group of students and educators alike. Such cultural awareness would also enable school counselors to understand the cultural context of their students and the school, and would therefore help school counselors to advocate for their students on a systemic level more effectively.

The evidence from this study supports the goals of the ASCA National Standards and the framework presented in the ASCA National Model. This means that the National Standards and the National Model can serve as good tools for a school counseling preparation program to use to
help future school counselors develop and implement school counseling programs that meet the needs of their K-12 students. The services that the students identified as being helpful to them are included in the delivery system of the model, as is a focus on collaboration and cultural competence. The students’ experiences also provide support for the importance of both academic and personal/social support services as identified by the National Standards. Although the students did not identify career development as playing as large a role in their overall positive experiences, this should be interpreted with caution. Career programming is a self-identified weakness of County High’s school counseling program. Also, because participants interviewed had not yet reached their career goals, those services may not be in their immediate experiences.

The students’ positive experiences with the school counselors from County High were not solely due to those school counselors’ training, however. A great deal of what the school counselors brought to the job had to do with who they are as individuals. It takes a special person to be so friendly and welcoming, to have the charisma and enthusiasm it takes to make a difference, to be willing and able to get to know so many students on a personal level, and be willing to go above and beyond the call of duty to help students. A large part of being an effective school counselor comes from the preparation, no doubt, but finding those individuals who will make effective school counselors is, in a sense, a crucial first step in the preparation process. Having important characteristics such as charisma, a positive attitude, the ability to make interpersonal connections quickly, and the ability to work well in groups should be given at least as much weight as GRE scores by school counseling programs during the admissions process. Taking it a step further, it would behoove school counselor educators to find people with those traits and actively recruit them to enter school counseling programs. Certainly, it is important to provide the right education, but finding the right people will only make that
education process easier and it will help ensure that the future school counselors will have the personal traits along with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will help them to make a difference in their students’ lives.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was a preliminary step in understanding the students’ experiences with school counseling programs that are consistent with the new vision of school counseling being promoted by ASCA and The Education Trust. As a preliminary step, it provides important information but also produced several questions to be explored in further research. One such question is how typical are the results found in this study? Replicating this study in other schools would provide more information about the experiences of high school students with their school counseling program. Finding similar themes in different settings would add to the knowledge base of student experiences, while discovering different themes could help to create a more complete picture of the student experience. Either way, further qualitative studies would provide important information.

In addition to collecting more data, it would be important to replicate this study using different populations. This study focused on a small sample from a university town in the south. How would their experiences compare with a more urban population, or a northern city? What cultural variables might we see if we were to compare the findings of students from different areas and different ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds?

In addition to looking at students from different populations, it would also be important to broaden the investigation to include students other than those who were helped by their school counseling programs. What are the experiences of students who have had a negative experience with their school counseling programs? What are the experiences of students who are relatively
indifferent? How do their experiences differ from those who believe they were helped by their school counseling program? What information can we take from such comparisons to help make sure that more students have a positive experience? These are all important questions that could be examined through further qualitative research.

Another possibility for further research would be to create an instrument based on the themes presented in this study. Such an instrument could be developed to measure students’ experiences in terms of how they perceive the school counseling office environment, how they perceive their relationship with their school counselors, and which services they perceived as particularly important. In addition, instruments could be developed to discover the students’ perceptions of the school counselors across important variables such as collaborative skills, advocacy skills, diversity, and cross-cultural competence. Once developed, such an instrument could be used to help discover the effect each of the variables has on the students’ overall experiences. In addition, correlations between those variables and important student outcomes such as graduation rates, grades, and discipline referrals could be investigated.

This study could also be used as a first step to developing a school counseling program evaluation tool. It is important to remember that the students see only a part of the school counseling program, and thus the students’ perspectives should not be the only perspectives considered when evaluating a program. Nevertheless, such information could supplement outcome data that measures whether or to what degree a program is successful by providing insight into why the programming does or does not work.

Concluding Thoughts

My mentor uses the metaphor of trying to understand what a house looks like by looking in the windows. No one view will tell you everything you need to know about the house and
some views will be quite different than others. Yet if you look in enough windows, you can begin to sketch a fairly accurate representation of what it is like to be inside that house. The data from the students’ interviews created a window into the world of a particular group of students at County High. The interviews were designed to help me understand—from the perspectives of the students who were helped—what the school counselors did, how those actions were interpreted by the students, and what effects those actions (and their interpretations) had on the students’ lives. The data provided rich insight into all of those questions. It is understood that the students do not see the school counseling program in its entirety, nor should they. So much of what school counselors are asked to do, particularly under the new models proposed by ASCA and the TSCI, is done “behind the scenes.” For this reason, it is unrealistic to expect that the students see the complete picture. Rather, the student perspective provides one perspective, albeit an important perspective, of the impact a school counseling program can have on the education of its students. Part of the job of school counselor educators and researchers is to compile these different perspectives and begin to create a composite of what we understand to be helpful—and not so helpful—to different stakeholders. My hope was for this study was to provide a solid first step towards developing that understanding from the perspectives of the students who were positively influenced.

Many people have put in countless hours of research, meeting, collaborating, writing, and presenting in order to make school counseling reform a reality. There is a strong push for quantitative data that provides evidence that school counselors make a measurable differences in the lives of children. Although the process has only started, such evidence is being collected and disseminated. I fully support this process. At the same time, I believe we can learn so much from the students themselves, if we ask the right questions, and can use that information as we
continue to refine the goals and mission of school counseling in the new millennium. Qualitative and quantitative need not be kept separate. In keeping with the spirit of the new vision, researchers from each camp can work collaboratively, with each strand of research informing the other.

Although this study represents only a very first step in understanding the students’ experiences with the new vision of school counseling, the findings have generated interesting conclusions and intriguing questions. The students in this study noted several aspects of their positive experience that are consistent with the new vision. Students had positive experiences with academic advising, college advising, crisis intervention, and personal counseling. They appreciated the school counselors’ collaborative style, diversity, and cross-cultural competence. They also informed us that environment mattered to them, and that they were more likely to seek services when they felt welcomed and safe. Perhaps most importantly, the students in this study reminded us that, from their perspective, school counseling programming is delivered through a relationship. Within a relationship that was respectful, supportive, and based on genuine caring, these 10 participants came to understand that the school counselors believed in them. They began to see the school counseling program as a critical component of their ultimate success, providing them with skill, knowledge, and encouragement they needed. The students became more invested in their own futures, and they found a way to meet their goals. How typical are these students’ experiences? We do not yet know, but we must continue asking the questions.

Epilogue

Flying home after a meeting with my dissertation committee, I found myself sitting next to two high school students returning from their spring break. Rather than the traditional beach spring break like the ones I went on when I was in high school, these students were part of a
group who went on a service trip to Cuba, delivering medical supplies and toys to patients in a children’s hospital. After talking about their experiences on their trip, I asked them what they thought about their school counselors. Niels, who was a junior, just shrugged his shoulders. “My school counselor doesn’t even know me. I talk to him like once a year. He has to look at my folder to know who I am. He just tells me what classes to take, and I leave.” Athena, who was also a junior but at another school, told me she felt like her counselor didn’t have time for her. “Whenever I’m in there, I just get the feeling she wants me to answer her questions and get out of her way so she can move on to the next student.” Both Niels and Athena agreed that their counselors did not know nor care much about them personally. Because of this, they said they do not rely on their school counselors for help. As Niels said, “they tell me stuff, like with my grades and classes, but I don’t really listen. How does he know what’s good for me? He doesn’t even know me!”

It was hardly a scientific investigation, but the contrast in the stories that I heard from the participants in the study and my new friends on the airplane illustrated an important point. Debate about what school counselors should and should not be doing in schools will continue, and it is a worthy discussion. But the students I talked with, both in the study and on the airplane, remind us that the question is not simply what to do, but how to do it. All the services school counselors provide, all the programming they coordinate, all the academic advisement they give are perceived and interpreted by the students the school counselors hope to help achieve. If the students do not believe the school counselors are truly working to help them succeed, to help all of them succeed, much of the work the school counselors do will be wasted.

This story also highlights the importance of simply asking questions. I just happened upon these students, and our conversation lasted no more than 20 minutes. Yet through that brief
conversation—which started with one simple question—I established a relationship with those students that they did not feel they had with their own school counselors. As the high school student I worked with during my school counseling internship taught me, establishing a working relationship does not have to take a great deal of time, just a genuine interest and a willingness to ask questions. This lesson has been reinforced by my professors and again by the young students I just met--asking questions is more than a way to gather data; it is an intervention in and of itself.
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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide
1. First, could you tell me a little bit about yourself—anything that you think will help me get to know you better? (interests, age, family, ethnicity, culture, etc.)

2. What was high school like for you? (Take them back to the time & place—what was it like walking the halls, in the classrooms, good memories, frustrations, etc…)

3. First impression of the program/counselors?

4. What services do they provide?

5. What has your interaction with them been like?

6. What experiences with the school counseling program were particularly important or meaningful to you?

7. In what ways, if any, did those experiences affect you? What was it about those experiences that affected you?

8. Are there other things that you wish the program would've provided? What would have been helpful for you?

9. Looking back over time since you started high school, in what ways, if any, do you think you are different as a result of your interactions with the school counseling program?

10. What would you tell an incoming freshman about the S.C. program? Any advice for them?

11. (If a CCHS graduate) Can you tell me what you've been doing since you've graduated? (school? jobs? personal/other?)

12. In 10 years, when you are looking back on your experiences in high school, what do you think you will still remember about the high school counseling program?

13. Thinking back about what we talked about, is there anything that stands out to you as particularly important? Is there anything that you want to emphasize?

14. Is there anything that I didn't ask that you would like to tell me about the school counseling program?