

# Characteristics of the Modern School Counselor

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CERTAIN policy statements (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7), reflecting the work of counselors, counselor educators, school administrators, and other groups, have several useful purposes. They have helped: (a) to define in broad terms the counselor's role as conceptualized by his professional association; (b) to provide the counselor with guidelines for implementing his role concept within the school setting; and (c) to suggest uniform standards for the preparation of school counselors which are being adopted for use by state and regional school accrediting agencies and by state certification programs.

While it is obviously impossible to legislate professionalism and competence, the publication of these policy statements represents a "coming of age" of the counseling profession. These statements make it patently clear that the school counselor can no longer plead ignorance concerning how he might best go about his task, nor can he claim to be a professional when his formal preparation and supervised practical experience fall short of the minimum standards agreed upon by his profession.

This article should serve as an aid to educational leaders who hire, supervise, and work as colleagues with counselors. It is designed to acquaint educators with the impact of these developments upon the professional identity and functioning of the school counselor.

The following characteristics should typify the modern counselor who has made a career commitment to assisting in the optimum development of children and youth.

While most of these characteristics have long been considered as desirable attributes of virtually all educational personnel, they have only recently become minimum expectations of the school counselor.

1. *Primary identification as a counselor.* School counselors have traditionally viewed themselves first as teachers and second as counselors. That the modern counselor is coming to identify himself primarily as a counselor and secondarily with the setting in which he works or the groups he has chosen to serve is perhaps an example of increased professionalization occurring throughout the so-called helping professions—teaching, counseling, psychiatry, medicine, social work, and others.

The modern counselor has chosen to concentrate on assisting other human beings to utilize their potential to its maximum through the process of the counseling relationship and other guidance services. He believes that there is a common body of understandings about how persons develop and about how that development can be maximally facilitated which is independent of the setting in which he works and of the particular clientele he serves.

The counselor is certainly knowledgeable about the setting in which he works, and he must naturally specialize in his understanding of the age group he serves; these elements, nevertheless, are not the primary

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bases of his role concept. Because of this change in professional identification, the modern counselor can be expected to differ from his earlier counterpart in several ways. First, he will be younger; second, he will frequently come from a non-educational background; and third, it can be expected that he will have received his preparation through full-time study.

2. *A broad, extensive program of counselor education.* The modern counselor will have a minimum of two years of study in counselor education. The standards for the preparation of elementary and secondary school counselors (5, 7) recommend two years of graduate study as the minimum for effective functioning as an independent professional counselor.

While it is clear that the one-year preparation program will continue to be offered by a great many university counselor education programs and that state certification in guidance will for some time require only one year of graduate work, two years of preparation will become increasingly common. Over half of the members of the American School Counselor Association now have at least two years of work in counseling and guidance, and it can be expected that this trend will continue as state departments of education and higher levels of counselor certification add school accreditation.

The modern counselor will take his graduate work in an institution that offers a high-quality program of counselor education. Master's degrees in counseling are currently being given in universities in which one or two professors teach all of the courses in counseling and guidance.

In 1965 Stripling (8) estimated that there were only 45 institutions in the nation capable of meeting minimum professional standards for the preparation of secondary school counselors. At that time those institutions awarded only one-third of the master's degrees in secondary school counseling, and of these master's degree students, only about 10 percent completed the minimum two-year program for secondary school counselors. Since it is obvious that the demand for coun-

selors will not be met by counselors with two years of preparation within the foreseeable future, many secondary schools will attempt to staff their guidance programs with a proportion of counselors who have two years of work.

The content of the modern counselor's program of counselor education will increasingly include work in foundation disciplines related to education such as anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. Psychology will continue to be an important element of most preparation programs. Supervised practical experience is, and will increasingly become, a major component of the counselor's preparation program.

Two trends which have implication for the school counselor are the emphasis upon supervised practice in the setting in which the counselor will work and the introduction of the full-time internship at the completion of other program requirements. A great many counselor education programs have offered a counseling practicum in an on-campus laboratory setting to which public school students come for counseling and guidance services. Such experiences provided students with excellent opportunities to learn under supervision to relate effectively with students. They could not, however, give students a chance for working within the school setting so that they could develop skills in consulting with teachers, developing the counseling program, and relating to students in non-counseling relationships.

The off-campus or field practicum in which the student is supervised jointly by the school counselor and the university instructor is now becoming a common addition to the on-campus laboratory experience. Less common is the requirement of the full-time internship in the school setting. The supervised internship was first a doctoral-level requirement, but it is now being added to the two-year program of counselor education by some institutions. The field practicum and the full-time internship within the school setting are particularly necessary for those students who enter counselor education from fields other than education and who have had little firsthand experience in schools.

3. *Ability to communicate his role to the entire school.* The modern counselor can be expected to have a clear concept of the ways in which he, as a counselor, can contribute to the maximum development of the students in his school, and he must be capable of clearly communicating this concept to students, faculty, administration, and community. The counselor whose students, colleagues, and administrators do not understand his role in the school has failed at one of the key counselor functions—communication.

A few counselors look to their principals to tell them what to do as guidance workers. Ironically, it is often these same counselors who complain that they are unable to function as they believe they should because their administrators have assigned them to non-guidance duties. The modern counselor can be expected to remain in constant dialogue with his administrators and colleagues about his role as a counselor. If he does not have a plan of action and program organization to suggest, he deserves to be assigned to "non-guidance duties."

4. *Understanding of the operation of the school.* Regardless of the background from which the counselor comes, he can be expected to understand the organization and functions of the school setting in which he operates. This is not to say that he should necessarily accept the conditions he finds, but he must be capable of operating within the school as a special social system.

The modern counselor will understand that his knowledge of the administrative organization and policies, the informal power structure within the faculty, the curriculum organization and objectives, and the social, intellectual, and academic characteristics of the student body is essential to his effective functioning. The modern counselor will not be hampered by the myth that an effective counselor can lead a cloistered existence of exclusive contact with students while remaining blissfully ignorant of school and faculty.

5. *Refusal to function in professional isolation.* The modern counselor is acutely aware that his professional growth beyond

graduate school depends upon his continuing association with other counselors and personnel workers. Wasson and Strowig (9) found that counselors who functioned in isolation from other counselors exhibited attitudes toward counseling that differed significantly from those held by counselors with colleagues in the same school.

To maintain themselves and increase their skills and understandings, it is important that counselors be able to consult with other counselors and related professional persons both in and out of the school. It is to be expected that the counseling staff of a school or district would have at least one meeting per month devoted to increasing their understanding of the counseling and guidance process, better understanding of the student groups with which they work, and in developing better relationships among themselves. It is to be expected that the modern counselor will attend and participate in local, state, and national meetings of counselors and related personnel workers, and that he will be an active member of his professional association.

The counselor who does not manifest this broad involvement cannot be expected to play a leadership role in the development and improvement of guidance services in his school. He can, rather, be expected to defend the status quo and, at best, continue to function in the manner he learned during his graduate study.

6. *An advocate of student growth, independence, and responsibility.* The modern counselor is committed to the concept of assisting students to make choices and decisions, plan their future, and solve problems in such a way that they make sound decisions while acquiring increased capacity to function as independent, responsible members of society. The modern counselor assumes that student independence and responsibility occur as the direct result of experience in being independent and responsible. He will therefore maximize the opportunity students have to think for themselves and make choices from available alternatives.

He will encourage students to define problems, discover alternative solutions, and

evaluate the anticipated outcomes of each. The counselor will refuse to make decisions for students; he will confront them with the necessity for making decisions. The counselor will neither side with nor against the school or teacher, but he will actively help the student, or the teacher, to think through his behavior and decide the course he wishes to pursue. The modern counselor can be expected to maintain confidential relationships with students who seek his help. It is essential that the counselor be able to offer a confidential relationship in which students can discuss problems, make decisions, and express their true feelings without threat.

Rather than in any way undermining the authority of the home or school, the availability of the confidential counseling relationship enables students, perhaps for the first time, to examine without fear their feelings about themselves, their home, school, and future. The counselor's ethical code requires that he maintain such confidences (1, 2), and the Indiana State Legislature recently enacted a statute granting privileged communication to counselors, a precedent which other states can be expected to follow.

There are other attributes of the modern counselor which distinguish him from his traditional counterpart: sophistication regarding the theoretical and philosophical aspects of his work; specialized competencies such as group counseling, psychodrama, life games, and computer applications to the counseling program; involvement of the total school and community in a comprehensive, integrated program of guidance services; and an approach to educational and career guidance which emphasizes the inseparable relationship between the individual's personal and vocational development.

In summary, there will continue to be great variation among applicants for school counseling positions with respect to their experience, preparation, professional identity, and ways of defining their roles within the school setting. This article has been an attempt to characterize the modern counselor in such a way that educational leaders could recognize the individual who is considered

by his profession to possess minimum qualifications for working with students. This discussion has attempted to provide broad guidelines for counselor selection and for identifying possible areas for the in-service development of counselors already working in the schools.

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