

**University of North Florida Focus Group Write-up**  
**Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI)**  
**Early Outcomes 2004 Substudy**

Two focus groups were conducted with a total of 13 practicing school counselors (8 elementary and 5 middle/high). The groups were as follows:

June 2, 2004

Faculty Conducted Interviews with 8 Alumni currently practicing as Elementary Counselors

June 4, 2004

Faculty Conducted Interviews with 5 Alumni currently practicing as Middle/High Counselors

The following is a summary of the University of North Florida's (UNF) focus group study on the Early Outcomes Substudy on the effects of the transformed graduate program on the practice of school counseling.

**Reflecting back, what were some of the reasons you chose to begin a graduate program in school counseling?**

**Impact Students**

Most of the respondents felt that they could have a greater impact on a larger group of students through school counseling. For many of the respondents from an educational background, the school counseling role is an ideal fit in their desire to work with children.

**How did your graduate school training help prepare you for what it is actually like to be a school counselor?** (Themes are roughly ordered by how many times the subject was mentioned or stressed, e.g., the theme of feeling prepared was cited most often).

**Collaboration and Consultation**

Respondents stressed the importance of teamwork, bringing people together, and utilization of outside community resources in service to students. The basis for collaboration and consultation rests on a healthy realization of the school counselor's time limitations and the desire to reach the most students possible.

**Classroom Guidance, Group Counseling, Presentation and Leadership Skills**

Respondents reiterated the acquisition of skills and competencies received through the program that has greatly assisted their work as school counselors. By means of various field experiences and classroom presentations, respondents developed greater confidence in these areas that resulted in greater credibility among school personnel.

**Data Driven Aspects**

Respondents voiced appreciation for the program emphasis on data driven outcomes in school counseling programs as essential in terms of advocacy for students and possible systemic change within school environments.

Emphasis on High Expectations and Academic Success

Respondents enumerated various aspects of the program that assisted them in terms of challenging students to higher expectations and supporting those special needs students through school counseling programs.

Legal and Ethical Issues

Respondents spoke about the sensitivity they now possess with regard to legal and ethical issues related to school counseling through program exploration of various issues and concerns related to children.

**How do you believe students benefit from having school counselors in their schools?**

Impacting Students

The notion of unconditional positive regard surfaced among many of the respondents as they strive to provide nonjudgmental safe havens for children in their role as school counseling professionals. This approach allows school counselors to be of greater support to children than other educational staff.

Systematic Change Agents

Respondents mentioned that their role as school counselors allows them to impact the entire school environment in collaboration with school administration and teachers. Through the acceptance of leadership positions (IEP Coordinator, Department Chair, Testing Coordinator, School Improvement Team Leader) counselors are able to impact instructional programs and impact student's opportunities for success.

Assist Instructional Staff

Respondents voiced the importance of establishing credibility and professionalism within school counseling programs to assist the instructional staff in raising student aspirations and supporting classroom and behavior management with a view to increased student success.

**Think about the last week at work? Tell me something or describe some things that you did.**

Following is a listing of activities and are roughly rank ordered from the most frequently mentioned.

1. Paperwork and meetings- Child Study Team, Special Education placements, and Educational Plans
2. Closing out Program- computer and data entry, saying goodbye to children, answering phone calls
3. Consultation with administrators, teachers, parents, and students
4. Scheduling, counseling, and academic advising
5. Home visits

**Write down 3 strategies you used in doing what you just described.**

1. Consultation and collaboration with administrators, teachers, parents and students
2. Organizational, interpersonal, communication, and time management skills

3. Flexibility and planning for extenuating circumstances
4. Creation of guidance lessons related to need

**What do you see as helping you do your job as a counselor?**

Team Work

A recurring theme among respondents is that it is important to involve others in your endeavors as a school counselor. This comes from the realization that one cannot rely on themselves alone and the necessity of teamwork in setting goals with others. The use of technology was stressed as a component of collaboration.

Marketing Self and Program

Respondents acknowledged that school counselors must constantly inform and demonstrate to others the role of the school counselor. Concretely this means saying no to extraneous noncounseling responsibilities, being a bridge builder, and personal ethical integrity.

Principal Support

A recurrent theme with regard to school counseling efforts within the school environment. Several expressed that even among supportive principals there exists uncertainty with regard to the school counselor's role.

Funding and Resources

Respondents cite the need for greater financial resources to employ additional school counselors and support staff for counseling programs. The student to counselor ratio is too high.

SOAR Program

Respondents reiterated that the quality of the SOAR Program gives individuals the confidence and competencies needed to provide quality school counseling programs. Graduates of the SOAR Program enjoy a well-respected reputation among school administrators because of their knowledge of the academic rigor of the program or personal experiences with SOAR counselors.

**Think of your job in an ideal way. What needs to change for you to do that?**

Excessive Paperwork and Extraneous Responsibilities

Respondents expressed repeatedly their frustration with the inordinate amount of paperwork that needs to be completed and the amount of time expended on this activity. Extraneous duties in addition to the school counselor's responsibilities also occupy the time of school counselors in some schools.

Principal Support

Supportive principal and other administrators are needed, especially administrators who understand the role of the SOAR counselors. Respondents expressed that although many

principals are supportive in a general way of school counseling programs, ambiguity exists as to the specific role of the school counselor.

#### FCAT Testing

Respondents mentioned that systemic changes need to be made with regard to assessing student achievement and progress. The FCAT cloud hangs over administrators, teachers, and students that do not positively contribute to student success.

#### Additional Resources

Respondents believe strongly that more funding is need for additional school counselors and counseling department support staff to effectively meet the ever-growing diverse student needs.

#### **Without change – what do you do?**

##### Keep At It

Respondents stressed the importance of not becoming pessimistic, being adaptable, seeking means to renew and rejuvenate oneself, and being realistic in an imperfect environment. School counselors must take what they have and make it better.

##### Being Proactive

Respondents felt that school counselors must continue to educate others, appreciate the growth that occurs without changes, and to actively watch for opportunities to advocate for institutional change. Several respondents surfaced the struggle that exists on a personal level in not becoming part of the system that they want to change.

#### **What in your background (race, gender, family history, etc.) has influenced your work as a school counselor?**

##### Child of Divorced Parents

One respondent recalled that she was a child of divorced parents at the age of six and spent a lot of time in the counselor's office. This life experience underscores the importance of being there for children on a one-on-one basis for children in crisis and being more understanding of the diverse needs and issues that children experience.

##### Child of Educators

While growing up, recalling listening to her parent's discussion of what happened in an school environment and wanted to be a part of it, one respondent mentioned that this has affected her personal perspective of impacting and advocating for all children. An added sensibility was her understanding of the teacher's perspective and the importance of assistance in their teaching endeavors with the school counseling program.

##### Being a Parent

One respondent stressed the communalities she experiences with other parents in terms of various issues such as homework or behavior as a parent. This communality enables her to understand better the perspective of parents.

High School Dropout

Another respondent shared her experience of not having anyone in high school to help her connect to school which eventually led to her dropping out of high school. As a school counselor this sensibility has instilled in her the importance of making connections for children in terms of academic success.

Adopted and Born in Different Culture

This respondent's experience has assisted her in being sensitive in terms of being accepting of all children and valuing diversity and respect for others within a school environment.

**Here is a list of the standards of the UNF Counseling Program. Which could you implement and what were the barriers to implementing these standards?**

a) Implement:

1. Managers of Resources – agency visits were so helpful in providing community resources in school counseling program when unique student needs arise.
2. Commitment to Achievement and realization of ambitious goals – 5<sup>th</sup> grade Career Development mandatory program through Duval County Public Schools.
3. Becoming Leaders and Stewards of Equity and Excellence- getting involved in different school leadership teams helps being seen as a leader.
4. Use of data to conduct needs assessments and developing classroom guidance lessons to make counseling program more effective.

b) Barriers:

1. Commitment to student achievement and high aspirations- very much student driven and difficult to implement for some students.