



A School Psychologist in a College Counseling Center: Issues and Reflections

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Susan Swank was a pre-doctoral Intern at University of Central Florida's Counseling Center. The strengths she brought to her intern position because of her school psychologist background were quite evident, so Vivian Yamada, CCAPS Newsletter Co-Chair, invited her to write a reflection piece for this issue.

Given the current pressures on college counseling centers to provide services to more students and the reality that students present with increasingly serious mental health concerns, recruiting and keeping highly qualified mental health professionals for your college counseling center is crucial. Your center may already include clinical and counseling psychologists, mental health counselors, and social workers, but have you ever considered including a school psychologist on your team? While only a small percentage of school psychologists are currently employed in college settings, these professionals could be a promising personnel pool you might want to consider when hiring new staff members.

As a master's level licensed school psychologist with experience working with students from preschool through high school, I have always been most passionate about my work with at-risk adolescents and young adults in traditional or alternative high schools. After deciding to pursue a doctorate in clinical psychology to expand my knowledge, skills, and professional opportunities, I chose to complete my pre-doctoral internship at the University of Central Florida Counseling Center. During my internship experience I had many opportunities to use my skills as a school psychologist as well as build upon my new knowledge and skills in clinical psychology.

A little background about school psychology is in order. Currently specialist-level training including at least 60 semester credit hours of graduate work is the minimum standard for licensure as a school psychologist. Doctoral-level training is increasingly chosen by students entering the profession, with some in the field advocating for establishing doctoral study as the minimum entry level training in the future. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) is the key professional organization for school psychologists and works to define standards for the practice of school psychology. The training of a school psychologist includes graduate coursework, several semesters of supervised practica and a year-long internship. Most school psychologists are employed in public school settings.

Strengths of a School Psychologist for a University Counseling Center

A school psychologist is well trained in a broad range of psychological issues relevant to the university setting including life span development, psychological assessment, psychopathology, behavioral, mental health, and educational consultation and collaboration, crisis intervention, data-based decision-making, school and systems organization, educational policy development, research and program evaluation. In addition, school psychologists are likely to have fairly extensive experience with developmental disorders, such as ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorders, and Asperger's, which have a presence among college students. School psychologists are trained to function as part of a

[What is this?](#)

multidisciplinary team and to work with educators, social workers, speech, physical and occupational therapists, parents, community mental health providers, and social service agencies. This collaborative focus helps the school psychologist conceptualize presenting student concerns within a systems perspective and connect students to needed resources outside of the campus counseling center.

In the past a school psychologist's role tended to focus on identifying learning and emotional disabilities as defined by special education law, as well as developing intervention plans to address how these disabilities are affecting the student's learning and well-being. This role has been considerably expanded in recent years, and today you can expect a school psychologist to be trained in a wide range of psychological assessment instruments and interviewing approaches as well as to have strong intervention skills. The current best practice model for assessing students in public school settings is a "Response to Intervention" model that relies upon a student's response to evidence-based interventions to help determine learning or emotional disabilities and guide the intervention process. As a school psychologist in an alternative high school in recent years, I spend most of my time seeing students for individual crisis or ongoing counseling, conducting a variety of groups, and collaborating and consulting with parents, teachers, and students around mental health issues.

Training in school psychology emphasizes prevention and advocacy for the positive mental health of students. In many public school settings, the school psychologist is both advocate and trainer for other educators about mental health topics and issues. This means that your school psychologist candidate will likely bring strong outreach and psychoeducation skills. If you are seeking a team member who can provide education and prevention programming to the larger campus community, a school psychologist might be a good fit. The well-trained school psychologist is also trained to provide consultation services and should be comfortable consulting with university faculty, staff and parents.

The most critical skill area to explore may be the fit between the candidate's individual and group therapy skills and the expectations of the center's position. All school psychologists are trained in group and individual counseling and many will have practicum and internship experience in this area. Many school psychologists will likely be comfortable working within the brief therapy model used by many college counseling centers due to the public school norm of psychoeducational counseling. Frequently a school psychologist will refer students to community providers for more intensive therapy services. Thus it would be important to consider whether this type of experience would be adequate, if you are considering a school psychologist for a role involving long-term, intensive psychotherapy.

Crisis intervention may be an area of strength for a school psychologist candidate. School psychologists frequently have opportunities to work with students and families in crisis as well as respond to critical events that affect a school, district or community. Some may be trained in a specific crisis response model. State laws vary on whether a school psychologist can make involuntary commitment decisions for a student needing hospitalization, so explore local statutes and practices if you would like your candidate to serve in this capacity.

Areas to Evaluate for Compatibility of a School Psychologist Candidate

Given their backgrounds, school psychologists could be an excellent fit for university counseling center positions, especially those that are specialized (e.g., those involving primarily triage, initial assessments, psychological/educational assessment, crisis intervention, or outreach programming). As mentioned they may be a good fit for positions involving brief therapy, but should be evaluated more closely if long-term, intensive therapy is expected. Furthermore, school psychologists exposure to and experience using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition (DSM-IV) diagnostic criteria may vary considerably since providing services in the public school setting is generally not linked to a DSM diagnosis. This may be an area to consider and explore with a candidate if you use the DSM-IV regularly in your setting.

Another area for consideration is a candidate's experience with and desire to work with adults. One of the most exciting aspects of being a school psychologist for many professionals is the opportunity to work with students from infancy through young adulthood. Throughout my career, I have had the privilege to work with infants and preschoolers with developmental delays, gifted, college-bound high-school students, and students with serious mental illness or substance abuse problems. This diversity in experience can be both an asset and a liability when shifting to a college setting. Had I not had fairly extensive experience with high school students and a preference for working with older adolescents and young adults, my transition to a college counseling center might have been more challenging.

Licensure and supervision are other issues to consider when adding a school psychologist to your team. School psychologists are licensed through state departments of education and/or mental health regulatory agencies for practice within and outside of educational settings. Before hiring a school psychologist, consider relevant licensure issues for your location and how they might affect the school psychologist candidate's supervision needs and their ability to provide supervision to other staff members and trainees.

Conclusion

Creating a team of diverse mental health professionals with a wide range of professional skills can be an effective strategy to meeting the growing needs of your college student population. When you next begin the recruitment and hiring process for new staff members, consider what a school psychologist might bring to your team. I had a wonderful professional and personal experience working in a college counseling center during my pre-doctoral internship and hope to have the opportunity to again work in this setting. Maybe one of your future staff members is a school psychologist ready to transition into work with college students.

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