Virtual Schools, Real Counselors: A Qualitative Examination of the Role and Practice of the Virtual School Counselor

Dissertation

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Abstract

Although virtual schools have become a rising force in public education, very little is known about how professional school counselors operate within this educational context or the specific challenges and role tensions they might encounter. Since the opening of the Florida Virtual School in 1997 (Barbour & Reeves, 2007), the phenomenon of virtual schooling in the United States has expanded rapidly to serve almost two million American students (Queen & Lewis, 2011). Despite this growth, there is little research in the field of counselor education about the role and practice of the school counselor within the virtual school environment. To address this issue, fourteen educators at virtual schools (e.g., school counselors and administrators) at were interviewed, and grounded theory analyses were conducted on how school counselors understand and practice their role within the virtual school environment. Analyses revealed that the primary means of role transmission for virtual school counselors came from their peers and the optional existence of a counseling trained supervisor within the school, while out-of-school resources and support were scarce. To this end, a model explaining the factors that aid the acquisition and practice of school counselors' role in a virtual school was developed and explained. Implications and recommendations for school counseling practitioners, professional associations, and counselor education programs are discussed.
In Dedication

To

L. M. Baughman Jr.
Acknowledgments

Without the support, encouragement, and endless patience of my friends, family, and dissertation committee, this document would never have been finished. Particular thanks go to Dr. James L. Moore III for his insight and guidance, Dr. Colette Dollarhide for her inspiration to follow this path as well as the support to see it through, Christopher and Jennifer Pipinou for the preservation of my sanity, and my beloved father who has always believed in me more than I believed in myself.
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Fields of Study

Major Field: Education
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

Although virtual schools have become a rising force in public education, very little is known about how professional school counselors operate within this school context or the specific challenges and role tensions they might encounter. Since the opening of the Florida Virtual School in 1997 (Barbour & Reeves, 2007), the phenomenon of virtual schooling in the United States has accelerated to serve almost two million American students (Queen & Lewis, 2011). The term "virtual schooling" may have many different educational meanings. For example, it may mean a conventional student taking a single, online course to a student in a blended curriculum of online and physical site courses. It may also refer to a student taking all of his or her courses virtually. The latter institutions constitute full-time virtual schools - a student attending these schools takes all of his or her classes online, does not have a brick-and-mortar "home institution" and typically does not report to a central building for any classes, although some activities, such as field trips or tests, may take place at a communal, physical location.

Similar to the following study, the researcher extrapolated from the definition offered by Barbour and Reeves (2009) for "virtual schools" and "virtual schooling." More specifically, they defined virtual schools as elementary or secondary schools that are accredited or approved by an official body and deliver some or all of their educational
content through Internet-based delivery. Because of the researcher's specific interest in certain issues of delivery and culture, she narrows this definition further. When "virtual schools" and "virtual schooling" are referred to, they should be understood as K-12 schools which have been accredited or approved by an official body, and at which learning takes place overwhelmingly online, and students do not have day-to-day, physical contact with faculty or staff.

Full-time virtual schools include many of the personnel found in brick-and-mortar schools, such as teachers, administrators, support staff, and school counselors. However, although the research indicates that school counselors can be an effective and vital part of a school system (House & Hayes, 2002), there is little published research on school counselors working in virtual school environments (Currie, 2010). When the researcher refers to these counselors as "virtual school counselors," the term is defined to mean appropriately licensed or credentialed professional school counselors who are working primarily within a virtual school environment, and for whom most of their student/parent contact is through technological mediation such as phone, teleconference, e-mail, online bulletin boards, or social media.

While it could be argued that "counseling is counseling," regardless of whether a professional school counselor is in a physical or virtual school, extant research suggests that the use of technology as a mediating factor in school counseling may have a significant impact on the manner and efficacy of how school counselors discharge their duties. According to ASCA, school counselors are trained and expected to act as experts at collaboration, consultation, and direct student interventions (Role Statement, 2009),
but much of the research about the use of technology by school counselors focuses on their use of computers for administrative, clerical, and consultation tasks (Carlson, Portman, & Bartlett, 2006; Gerler, 1995; Holcomb-McCoy, 2005; Horan, 2010; Hsiung, 1997; Wilczenski & Coomey, 2006). There is a dearth of publications examining how school counselors use technology to directly intervene with students and fulfill their duties as facilitators of a positive school culture, as advocates for diversity, and as school leaders (Currie, 2010).

There is, in short, a significant gap in research literature that examines the practice of how virtual school counselors negotiate this emerging environment. Presuming that the trend of K-12 enrollments in virtual schools continues, while it may never exceed or replace the brick-and-mortar experience for a majority of students, the virtual school experience may eventually become the experience for millions of students across the country. Such students are likely to need school counselors who are well-trained and confident in virtual settings similar to school counselors in brick-and-mortar settings, which necessitates more research on "virtual schools and school counseling." As one of the first steps in this line of research, this study examined the virtual school counselor's role from the perspectives of both school counselors and administrators.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Over 80% of American households have a home computer, and nearly 75% are connected to the Internet (File & Ryan, 2014). With increasing global consumption of social media and other emerging technologies, there is a major shift in how society approaches commerce, business, education, and personal growth. Today, over two
millions of students are enrolled in some form of online education (Queen & Lewis, 2011), and a growing number of these individuals are opting for other online mediums that used to be taboo, such as mental health counseling (Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005; Owen, Bantum, & Golant, 2009). As society advances, the profession of counseling is likely to adapt to meet and accommodate the needs of clients. Evidence suggests that virtual counseling is expected to grow in size and influence (Layne & Hohenshil, 2005). However, there are concerns within the counseling profession about the quality of training and practice for counselors working in virtual settings. Although specialized training for virtual counselors has existed since 2000 (Goss & Anthony, 2009), only 1 in 5 virtual counselors have some kind of formal training (e.g., a workshop or training program) on how to counsel in a virtual environment (Finn & Barak, 2010). The rates for ethical noncompliance for virtual counseling web pages range between 23% and 100% (Haberstroh, et al, 2008). Early studies have been limited to the experiences and practices of virtual clinical counselors (Currie, 2010). Generally speaking, literature on virtual school counselors is even more scant.

1.3 Conceptual Framework and Significance

Counseling, at its core, is about the therapeutic alliance between the counselor and client (Overholser, 2007). Through this alliance, it is believed that the counselor is more able to effect change in the client's life (Rogers, 1961a; Rogers, 1961b; Rogers, 1965). The therapeutic alliance is constructed of the attitudes of the counselor (Rogers, 1961b), the ability of the counselor to experience the inner life of the client (Rogers, 1965), and the genuineness of the counselor in meeting and traveling alongside the client throughout
the counseling process (Rogers, 1961a). Common factors that often impact the ability of
the counselor to establish a relationship may have an overall effect on the quality and
conception of the counseling relationship.

A virtual environment potentially may affect the counseling process (Shaw &
Shaw, 2006). It may require counselors to revise or change their therapeutic approach.
Further, in the absence of effective education and support, counselors may struggle with
adapting to virtual mediums to deliver counseling. They may develop uncertainty and
distrust for the medium, especially when they are unable to facilitate the counseling
process and relationship (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). Generally speaking, counseling tends to
trail other professions in the area of technology. School counselors, in particular, have
little precedent for using virtual counseling for anything other than clerical tasks or career
interventions (Holcolm- McCoy, 2005; Currie, 2010). Understanding how school
counselors conceive technology and its place in school counseling is a crucial step in
being able to develop a set of best practices for virtual school counseling.

For the purpose of framing this study, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977)
offered a useful scaffold to attend to the skill acquisitions and understanding of virtual
school counselors' role. Social learning theory posits that learning is facilitated through
observation, modeling, social reinforcement, and direct instruction (Bandura, 1977).
When examining the literature on virtual school counseling, there is a void of information
on the formal training available to school counselors. Using a social learning lens, it is
plausible that future research may focus on those models, reinforcements, and
observations that shape the role of school counselors in virtual contexts. With this in
mind, it is important to note that the practice and role of school counselors is often
difficult to address absent of school administrator perspectives. Extant research suggests
that administrator support may be the most influential factor (Ponec & Brock, 2000) in
determining the practice and role of school counselors (Amatea, & Clark, 2005;
Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004;
Zalaquett, 2005). Thus far, the school counseling literature has not addressed school
administrators' perceptions of school counselors in virtual settings and whether their
perceptions are the same for brick-and-mortar settings. Without this information, virtual
school counselors may not be as effective as brick-and-mortar counselors because
administrators influence school counselors' scope of work.

Considering the lack of research on the experiences of virtual school counselors, a
qualitative research design may offer insights that otherwise are difficult to obtain
through a quantitative research design. This study was designed to foster readers’
understanding of how the role of school counselors is conceived and negotiated in virtual
schools, where there is a void of day-to-day student contact. It also was designed to
develop a greater appreciation of how virtual school counselors execute that role using
the technological interfaces, tools, and systems available to them. To that end, the study
was conducted using the grounded theory approach, to develop a theory of how school
counselors may negotiate and execute school counseling within a virtual school context.

While no literature exists which critically looks at the virtual school counselor's
role, existing literature does consider the role of the school counselor in general,
administrators' impact on that role, and virtual counseling from the clinical perspective.
In the past twenty years the school counselor's role has been undergoing a shift, from a peripheral support service provider to an integrated part of the school system, wherein the counselor is expected to be a leader (Dollarhide, 2003). School counselors, unlike many teachers or administrators, are often alone or with a small cohort of peers within the school, which can lead to them being folded by default into an administrative cohort (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007). Additional barriers to taking on leadership roles can include a lack of specific leadership training, a poor relationship with school administrators which impacts the ability of school counselors to develop and practice leadership roles, and a lingering confusion about their proper role (Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009). Other factors may contribute to the differences between how the school counselor's role is operationalized and the possibility that school counselors may be receiving different definitions of what the role actually is or should be. Many school counselors experience a disconnection between what they learn in their graduate programs and what they are expected to execute by non-counseling colleagues in the field. This implementation gap (DeVoss & Andrews, 2006) may contribute to role stress (Culbreth, et. al., 2005). Additionally, although professional counseling associations and counselor education programs offer one role definition to school counselors, practicing school counselors are also influenced by other perceptions of their role from district personnel and administrators (Fitch & Marshall, 2004).

In light of these factors, school counselors may find it difficult to prioritize or fulfill the socio-emotional aspects of school counseling in a virtual school. Generally speaking, administrators tend to place strong emphasis on the mechanistic activities (e.g.,
registration, grade-checking, academic planning, and scheduling) of school counseling (Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004; Zalaquett, 2005). Because of these demands, these activities, over time, may have become second nature for those school counselors who are uneasy with using technology to facilitate school counseling services. Therefore, more research is needed in this area.

1.4 Problem Statement and Research Questions

This study was designed to address the following research questions, "How do virtual school counselors and administrators understand the role of the counselor?", and "What factors within the virtual school influence the way they conceptualize, negotiate, and implement those roles?" According to the school counseling literature, how school counselors understand and execute their school roles is both complex and multilayered. With the advent of virtual schools, another layer of complication has emerged for school counselors. As such, two major research questions were examined for this study.

First, the study sought to better understand how school counselors come to understand the primary role of school counselors in virtual school context, and what strategies are needed to administer this role to the best of their abilities. Other points of interest include, but are not limited to, identification of needed school counseling training, insight on how and what to practice in virtual school contexts, and perception of specific experiences and strategies developed to handle the challenges of virtual school contexts. Second, the study sought to examine the school counselor's role from the perspective of the administrator. Stated differently, how do virtual school administrators
conceive the role of school counselors in a virtual school context?, and how do administrators communicate that understanding of that role to school counselors?

1.5 Methodology and Limitations

To explore the aforementioned research questions, the researcher conducted a qualitative investigation rooted in grounded theory. Participants were solicited from school counselors and administrators in accredited virtual K-12 schools in Ohio, using both the theoretical sampling technique and the snowball sampling technique to ensure a robust pool of interviewees. Data collection was primarily through semi-structured interviews, lasting 45 minutes to 60 minutes in length. Data were analyzed using open and axial coding techniques to discover themes within the responses. Triangulation was sought through cross-referencing counselor and administrator responses, as well as through physical and electronic artifacts such as counseling web pages, documents, and other materials as discovered. As this was a qualitative study, limitations exist as to the generalizability of the data: ultimately, subjects were participating on a voluntary basis, which may have led to a predisposition towards certain attitudes or views based on counseling. Another limitation for the researcher was a lack of field experience in the virtual school; this was addressed by approaching the study with an openness and willingness to learn from the experts in the field, rather than having pre-created hypotheses. Another potential limitation was the domination of a few large virtual schools within the sample; it is possible that the culture and philosophy of these schools dominated the discourse. Intentional sampling was used to offset this risk, with deliberate
attempts to reach out to interviewees who serve smaller schools, as was analyzing data with an awareness of demographic factors of school size, and number of counselors.

1.6 Definition of Terms

**Virtual School:** An elementary or secondary school which is accredited or approved by an official body and which delivers all of its primary educational content in a virtual context.

**Virtual School Counselor:** An appropriately licensed or credentialed professional school counselor who is working primarily within a virtual school environment, and for whom most of his or her student/parent contact is through technological mediation such as phone, teleconference, e-mail, online bulletin boards, or social media.

**Role:** A set of expectations for an individual in a particular position, as defined by both the individual and the system in which they operate (Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005).

Virtual counseling interventions: Efforts made by professional counselors and other mental health professionals to deliver the activities required by their role, within a virtual environment. These may come in a multitude of distinct forms, but can be considered to fall under four categories as defined by Barak, Klein, and Proudfoot (2009):

**Web-based Interventions:** Primarily self-directed programs which the client can interact with at will, usually in order to gain a psychoeducational benefit. Examples of web-based interventions in the
school environment could include: a student mood assessment, a virtual career fair, or a web presentation on how to recognize bullying and how to seek help.

*Online Counseling and Therapy:* Any therapeutic contact which happens between a counselor and client over a mediating technology. For the purposes of this study, this could also include telephone contact between counselor and student, as well as e-mail, chat, text, and web conferencing.

*Internet-operated Therapeutic Software:* An autonomous software construct which attempts to act as a counselor, with or without a human counselor as support. This type of virtual counseling is little known in the schools at present but could in the future include such things as "virtual advisors" which would ask and answer questions in a naturalistic manner, as well as tracking students' grades and schedules, and suggesting courses for the future without input from a human counselor.

*Other Online Activities:* All functions which do not fall within the first three, but could still be plausibly called virtual counseling.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Historical Perspective on the Role of the School Counselor

The role of the school counselor in history may be comparatively recent, but in that time, it has undergone considerable changes, and offered unprecedented opportunities to students of all backgrounds. "The most characteristic child of the progressive movement" (Cremin, 1965), school counseling was born in an era which was coming to embrace progressive ideals, particularly in the area of public education (Erford, 2003). While this helped to ensure that the role of the school counselor was one that was rooted in the desire to understand and support children in their development, the often overlapping educational programs and theories that were developed at the same time have contributed to the persistent, historical struggle the field has had in defining and executing a coherent role within the school system. As the profession has matured, it has sought to more clearly define the role of school counselors, but role confusion and role stress still affect the efficacy and well-being of the school counselor (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). In addition, owing to the systemic nature of the school system, school counselors are not entirely at liberty to define their own role, and must negotiate their tasks and priorities with others within the system, most notably administrators.

2.1.1 The Evolution of the School Counselor

The concept of the school counselor was born in the early 1900s, as "guidance." It was pioneered by disparate individuals, working without common communication, who
nevertheless realized that students required more support than conventional, content-only education was providing to them. In 1907, Jesse B. Davis, a secondary school principal in Grand Rapids, Michigan, began to offer weekly guidance classes for his students (Aubrey, 1977, 1982; Erford, 2003). These classes were designed to provide students with what he felt the traditional curriculum was lacking - moral skills, transition planning, and occupational exploration. Although it is likely that other administrators across the country identified these needs and may have attempted to address them, there was no unified concept of what would become school counseling until seminal programs were developed by such pioneers as Frank Parsons, Meyer Bloomfield, Anna Reed, E. W. Weaver, and David Hills (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001).

These programs were, by and large, focused heavily on the occupational side of counseling, such as Frank Parson's Boston Plan, which championed a systematic process for helping people to make a deliberate choice of career path (Pope, 2000). It was a good time, historically speaking, for such a theory; American society was becoming more industrialized, and more enamored of scientific methods in addressing social issues - the rise of psychological testing helped to lend credibility to vocational guidance through the creation and use of career interest inventories and other tests (Aubrey, 1982; Pope, 2000). Parson's (1909) theory, simplified, was supported by five precepts: it is better to choose a vocation than simply to find a job; that a career should be chosen after self-reflection, careful deliberation, honest exploration, and under knowledgeable guidance; that youth should be exposed to a wide variety of professions and opportunities; that undertaking this exploration under the guidance of experienced and knowledgeable counselors is
better than doing so on one's own; and that it is of vital importance to put one's exploration and plan down on paper, rather than simply allowing the plan to fade away with memory. This theory was taught to hundreds of teachers and school administrators, although sadly his best known written work, *Choosing a Vocation* was published after his death. Many of Parson's theoretical assertions continue to inform the school counseling role today, especially in the areas of career awareness and exploration. This persistent influence on the profession was unsurprising, considering that it placed the role of a counselor within the school as one who focuses on careers, who helps expose youth to opportunities for the future, and who does so in a deliberate, systematic, and data-oriented way. At this point in the history of the school counseling profession, there is not much awareness of development as a person, or of a holistic mindset; the counselor is simply there to help the student-client understand and reflect on their career-based development, often through the use of inventories, instruments, and written plans.

As the theory developed, so too did legal support and protection for vocational counselors within schools. As social support for the concept of counseling and other progressive movements rose, laws were passed that helped to establish the place of the vocational counselor within schools. Child labor laws helped ensure that more children would be in school longer, and laws such as the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 ensured a place for vocational counseling in secondary schools, strengthened by the later passing of the George-Reed Act of 1929, the George-Ellzey Act of 1934, and the George-Deen Act of 1936 (Pope, 2000). With legal support, counselors within the schools became an intrinsic part of the secondary school experience in many places across the country,
although even into the 1930s, school counselors existed in only about half the schools in the nation (Pope, 2000).

Even in the early 1900s, the fledgling profession was already struggling with some of the role confusion and task overload that plagues school counselors today. In the 1920s, guidance counseling was rarely a separate role filled by a dedicated counselor (Ginn, 1924; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). Instead, teachers and administrators executed the duties of the school counselor and even without additional financial compensation or schedule modifications (Ginn, 1924; Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). Thus, the concept of school counseling was one that had organically developed within a multitude of schools - and even in areas where some attempt at standardized professional education for counselors existed (e.g., Boston, Massachusetts). School counseling was decentralized, without much systemic organization or communication among school counselors (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). An early review of school counseling programs by Myers (1923), found problems that are similar to those in 2013. He cited concerns with school counselors being assigned inappropriate duties that were administrative and clerical in nature. Because of these duties, there was little time remaining to devote to actual scope of work. There are many difficulties that may arise when both administrators and school counselors do not possess a strong grasp of what school counselors should be doing with their work time. Generally speaking, school counselors were often treated as a repository for whatever tasks no one else in the school had time or expertise to do (Myers, 1923). In 1921, the National Vocational Guidance Association published its first version of the
Principles and Practices of Vocational Guidance (Pope, 2000) to provide guidelines and principles for vocational counselors.

2.1.2 Integration of psychological principles

For the first time in the counseling profession's history, vocational guidance was beginning to integrate principles of psychology and develop a trait-and-factor approach to student guidance. It was largely devoted to matching people to work during the challenging times of the Great Depression (Aubrey, 1977). At the forefront of this movement was E. G. Williamson (1939), when he published his influential work, How to Counsel Students. In his book, he identified role confusion in guidance services, pointing out the infancy of counseling and how it comprised many disparate pieces. In its infancy stage, it was difficult to pinpoint what the purpose of guidance was. Unlike many other counseling theorists, he viewed counseling as a state of confusion which would naturally resolve itself as more trained counselors became researchers and emphasized that the confusion would not destroy the profession. During this same time period, the role of school counselors was emerging beyond vocational guidance.

While still framing counseling theory in terms of preparing children for the world of work, counseling theorists in the 1930s, were reaching out for a structure that would include a whole person focus (Jones, Stefflre, & Stewart, 1934). Myers (1935) proposed the new term "pupil personnel work" to describe the framework he advocated, which included concern for student physical health, collaboration with other personnel within the school system, and a focus on helping students obtain "the maximum of the desired development" (p. 804). Gysbers and Henderson (2001) used Myers' work to show a
historical shift in the role of school counselor from a "position" focus, where discrete
tasks were given in addition to what was considered the "real" work of the school to a
"service" focus, where the profession began to coalesce and establish itself as a separate
entity from vocational guidance, with unique opportunities and challenges. Also
championing this position, and advocating for the identification of educational guidance
as a separate entity from vocational guidance in *Education as Guidance* (1932), John
Brewer called for the infusion of educational guidance into every aspect of the school
environment and curriculum. School guidance was beginning to separate from the strict
focus on vocation into three evolving areas of interest, such as: (a) guidance as the
personalization of education; (b) guidance as the integration of education; and (c)
guidance as the coordination of student personnel services (Erford, 2003). In Arthur J.
Jones, Buford Stefflre, and Norman R. Stewart's *Principles of Guidance* (1934), we hear
both echoes of the past and foreshadowing of the future. In this publication, the authors
outlined "methods of guidance" that included classroom, group, and individual
interventions, individualized interaction with students, and a strong understanding of the
need to separate "counseling" duties and roles from all the things that counselors are
typically assigned to do. The three authors stated, "Counselors are now so burdened with
other work as to make it impossible to do counseling well. If we can focus the attention
upon counseling as the center and core of the work, we shall do much to relieve the
situation" (p. 273).

In the mid-and-late 1940s, a force moved onto the scene that would have
profound changes for how all counselors, not just those in schools, viewed their role and
duties. In this case, the force was a single man, Carl Rogers, often named "the father of counseling" as Parsons was considered the father of guidance. Rogers’ client-centered, profoundly personal approach revolutionized the practice of counseling (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). One of the effects on school counseling was an immediate challenge to, and eventual dethroning of, the idea of testing as a prime method for interacting with students (Aubrey, 1977), in favor of a new emphasis on the humanistic techniques that Rogers advocated. Drawing on this work, Robert Mathewson, in 1949, later published *Guidance Policy and Practice*, which advocated for a systematic, process-based school guidance program tied strongly to the student's psychological and emotional development.

2.1.3 Change, expansion, and consolidation

The 1950s were a time of great change and expansion for the profession of school counseling. In 1952, the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) would be founded, and a year after that, the *School Counselor* would become the profession's key research journal (Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Erford, 2003). Furthermore, work with the fledgling Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) helped school counselors have an advocate and a professional venue in which to distinguish themselves from vocational counselors, who were in the process of developing their own, separate professional identities. On the federal level, the Pupil Personnel Services Organization of the Division of State and Local School Systems was created in 1953, and added more weight to the profession's ability to define itself as a unique entity from either vocational or psychotherapeutic work (Erford, 2003). The writings of Piaget, Erikson, and
others expanded counselors' understanding of developmental factors, supporting the earlier work of Rogers, Mathewson and others, and lending evidence and weight to school counselors' desire to define their role as a comprehensive, developmental one (Aubrey, 1982).

At the end of the decade, wider social forces would exert an indirect but profound effect on the profession. In 1957, the Soviet Union successfully launched Sputnik, and stirred fears throughout America about the quality of American public education, particularly in the sciences. This contributed to the creation of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 (Aubrey, 1977; Erford, 2003; Lambie & Williamson, 2004). The NDEA introduced initial funding and mandates for the training of many more secondary school counselors but also attempted to establish its own demands on the profession: school counselors were to be focused on testing students to identify the academically talented, encourage those students to take challenging (science-based) curricula, and support those students in continuing on to higher education (Erford, 2003). Six services of guidance were often identified by states looking to claim the funds: orientation, assessment, information, counseling, placement, and follow-up (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). With the federal funding and support, the number of secondary school counselors increased tremendously, with average student-to-counselor ratios going from 960-to-one in 1958 to 450-to-one in 1966 (Aubrey, 1977). This created demand and support for expanded training and certification for school counselors. In 1959, the National Association of Guidance Supervisors and Counselor Trainers undertook a five-
year project to create standards for the proper education and training of would-be school counselors (Erford, 2003).

In the 1960s, civil rights struggles and the philosophy of the Great Society could not help but impact the field of school counseling. During the time, education was considered one of the foremost battlefields of social restructuring (Erford, 2003). With unemployment the highest since the 1930s, one of John F. Kennedy's first acts as president was to convene a panel of consultants on vocational education (Pope, 2000). The panel's recommendations, which heavily informed the Vocational Education Act of 1963 (Pope, 2000), included the idea that school counselors needed to be experts in the world of work, while having a strong 'background' in pupil services. In 1962, Gilbert Wrenn published *The Counselor in a Changing World*, a report that emphasized the need for counselors to attend to the holistic development of students (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 expanded funds for elementary counseling, and mandated the search for gifted students to be expanded to the earlier grades (Lambie & Williamson, 2004), which gave the position of school counselors in the primary grades a much needed, larger slice of the federal funding pie, and helped to allow them to establish a larger place within those schools. Amendments to the Vocational Education Act in 1968 focused on giving funds to counseling to expand career and transition planning services, opening them to students with disabilities, and more support for disadvantaged students (Erford, 2003; Lambie & Williamson, 2004). The role of the school counselor expanded from being an advocate for the gifted and the college-bound to that of an advocate for all students, including exceptional or
disadvantaged ones, although much of the federal emphasis remained on testing, academic counseling, and career work. At the same time, the profession itself took steps to define issues of the counselor role and counselor accountability. In 1967, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Experimental Designs Committee chided school counselors for taking their importance to the field of education for granted and urged a greater emphasis on system research and accountability (Sabella, 2006).

The expansion of the school counselor's role would increase in the 70s and 80s. As school enrollment numbers dropped due to changing demographics, budgetary concerns in public education and waning federal attention led to administrators' cutting of school counselor positions; as a result, school counselors began looking for ways to be more visible in the school, beginning to look beyond the one-student-at-a-time focus of individual counseling and advisement, and taking on duties to make themselves more visible within the school (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). However, as many of these extra duties were administrative in nature, it only contributed to the ongoing role confusion, especially between how the school counselor's role was conceived in research and training, and how it was played out in the schools. In 1981, the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs was formed as a body that would develop and support a standardized set of preparation standards and accreditation of counselor education programs, with school counseling one of the original specialties included (Schmidt, 1999). Around the same time, the publishing of *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission of Excellence in Education promoted an emphasis
on reform efforts, and the reaction to the report once again turned the emphasis to testing and accountability in schools (Lambie & Williamson, 2004).

2.1.4 National Standards and new models

In the 1990s, federal law once again exerted pressure to shape the school counselor's role. The 1994 School to Work Opportunities Act emphasized and provided funding for school counselors to focus on transition planning and career guidance, while the 1995 Elementary School Counseling Demonstration Act provided funding to schools to expand access to guidance services and reduce the counselor-to-student ratio (Erford, 2003). The counseling profession sought to establish its role and develop more effective strategies for sharing role definitions with administrators, as well as pushing for more concrete role definitions (Murray, 1995). In 1997, when it seemed that school counselors were being left out of the conversation about national education reform (Dahir, 2004), the National Standards for School Counseling (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) were developed to represent what a school counseling program should contain, and to serve help school counselors set priorities for effective and accountable programs. The nine national standards focused on three dimensions: personal/social development, career development, and academic development. This three-lobed divide would become a key framework for building and developing the modern school counselor role and the guidelines for the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) later role statements further refinements. Also in 1997, the Education Trust began the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (TSCI), bringing to the fore concerns about the differences between school counseling as taught in educational programs, and the work that school counselors
had to do on the ground; they also pushed for school counselors to be assertive advocates within the school for the disadvantaged and students of diverse origins (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004). The 1999 tragedy of the Columbine High School shooting, and a growing awareness of school violence also prompted national and personal calls for reflection about the school counselor's role and how they might help prevent such occurrences in the future (Arman, 2000). These initiatives would inform the creation of the ASCA National Model only a few years later.

2.1.5 The Last Ten Years and the School Counselor's Role Today

As the profession has entered the last decade, the school counselor's role has undergone yet more changes to meet the needs of an increasingly accountability-based school system, and the growing awareness of the needs of diverse students (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Dahir & Stone, 2010; Kolodinsky, Draves, Schroder, Lindsey, & Zlatey, 2003). School counselors' role is undergoing a major shift, from a peripheral support service provider to an integrated part of the school system (Dollarhide, 2003). In 2003, the American School Counseling Association published the ASCA National Model, a practical guide for school counselors and other educators. It outlined a four-part delivery system that covered the foundation of programs, delivery systems, management, and accountability in a way that counselors in school could use to evaluate, plan, and transform their own programs. At the same time, ASCA used the Model to unequivocally state what it considered to be non-counseling duties, including being master schedule developers, testing coordinators, covering detention rooms, undertaking student discipline, covering classrooms when teachers were not there, and clerical
responsibilities. Although it was not the first time these and other duties had been called out as inappropriate to the school counselor's role, a standardized document with the implied unity of the entire profession behind it was a powerful statement. More, it was developed in a package that was designed to be easily shared with non-counseling professionals such as administrators, and non-intimidating to counselors who felt overwhelmed by the prospect of overhauling their programs in the field.

An earlier qualitative study by Walsh, Barrett, and Depaul (2007) outlined the change in training and how newly-hired school counselors in urban settings conceived of and performed their role; they found that the frequency of those school counselors' tasks generally aligned with both the new focus of school counseling (e.g., programmatic approaches, collaborative practice, and a focus on prevention and advocacy) and with the four aspects of the Model. Walsh et al. (2007) did not, however, study how much time was spent on each task, merely its frequency of report, nor did they track the frequency of off-role tasks, so its ability to speak to the extent of the change is limited, and it may not paint an accurate picture of the reality of daily practice as opposed to the ideal that new counselors were striving for. Still, the study supports the concept that as counselor education programs changed, so did the way school counselors both understood, and executed their duties.

The most recent version of the ASCA Role Statement (2009) integrated the Model heavily into their defined role of the school counselor. The statement stated specifically that professional school counselors, in addition to having master's level education, appropriate certification, and following the ethical codes of their professional
organizations, should also "...promote the development of the school counseling program based on the following areas of the ASCA National Model: Foundation, delivery, management, and accountability." Foundational concerns speak to the need of counselors to understand their own role, and their goals, for their programs; counselors are encouraged to have mission statements, programmatic goals, and vision of their school system and the counselor's place within it. With student and counselor competencies, the foundation dimension of the Model outlines the counselor's role as intentional and deliberate from the outset, not simply focused on crisis management and reactive services. The delivery dimension encompasses many of the aspects that have traditionally been understood as a part of the school counselor's role: individual, group, and classroom interventions, as well as indirect student services such as referrals, consultations, and collaboration. The management dimension reflects a growing understanding of the counselor as a professional within a system. Under this dimension, it is not enough for a counselor to act on individual desire and impulse; a counselor should always be assessing the needs the program can fill. Counselors should also be studying the use of their own time, collaborating with other stakeholders in the building to develop plans, and deliberately seeking out disadvantaged populations and developing intentional plans to help facilitate their development. Finally, the accountability dimension emphasizes the need for professional school counselors to be data-driven, current on research and best practices, becoming advocates for their own programs and for the profession through the use of thoughtful, effective interventions that can be supported by data.
Other parts of the role statement reflected a changing view of school counselors, with an emphasis on cultural relevance, evidence-based practice, and collaborations with other stakeholders in the educational system. Accountability and collaboration are key aspects of the professional school counselor role, as is a programmatic, prevention-based focus that was often lacking in the decades prior. The repeated phrase of "all students" benefiting from the counseling program also emphasizes the profession's growing concern with counselors being advocates for all students, and a growing expectation in the literature that counselors would uphold social justice ideals within their work (Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahan, 2010; Wilczenski, Cook, & Hayden, 2011), an expectation complicated by the fact that there is no concrete and agreed-upon definition for 'social justice' in the field of education (Wilczenski, Cook, & Hayden). Implied within this is a new focus on the school counselor as a leader within the educational system; an aspect of the school counselor role which has become increasingly important in the last decade (Dollarhide, Gibson, & Saginak, 2008; Fitch & Marshall, 2004; Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009).

But, much like the role of the social justice advocate, the ability of practicing school counselors to embrace this part of their role within the field is an area of continuing challenge. School counselors, unlike many teachers or administrators, are often alone or with a small cohort of peers within the school, which can lead to their being folded by default into an administrative cohort (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007). Additional barriers to taking on leadership roles can include a lack of specific leadership training, a poor relationship with school administrators which impacts the
ability of school counselors to develop and practice leadership roles, and a lingering confusion about their proper role (Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009). A study by Studer, Diambra, Breckner and Heidel (2011) showed that, of all ASCA National Model components, the Management component was the least well incorporated into the practice of their surveyed school counselors at all levels of schooling, with the accountability component only slightly better represented. Studer, et al. (2011) noted that most of their participants were new school counselors and theorized that a lack of experience may also translate into a lack of confidence. The usage and advocacy of data and accountability is one of the major areas where school counselors may demonstrate their leadership ability (Stone & Dahir, 2007), suggesting a significant part of school counselors' role. However, it is not evident. In a qualitative study of first- and second-year school counselors, Dollarhide, Gibson, and Saginak (2008) found that new school counselors shared several themes, and they took responsibility for the desired change, focused and concrete goals, having a clear, counselor-defined knowledge of their role, and support from administration and colleagues, during the process. This suggests that new counselors may be attempting to be leaders within the school, but perhaps are facing challenges due to an inadequate understanding about how to define programmatic goals, understand their areas of efficacy, and develop relationships with administrators and other colleagues within the school.

In summary, modern school counselors are expected to be an integrated part of a school system, someone who collaborates with teachers and staff, parents and other community members, and administrators. Moreover, school counselor should be a leader
within that system, bringing their unique skill set to the forefront of the ongoing efforts to bring the school system in line with an expectation of helping every student achieve his/her full potential, regardless of diversity status, material disadvantages, or disabilities.

It is part of the counselor's role to be an advocate for all students within the school system, addressing issues of inequality wherever possible, and using their expertise to help students and other stakeholders become self-advocates as well. School counselors are expected to focus on three dimensions of student development in their counseling programs: academic, personal/social, and career. In addressing these three dimensions, they will gain expertise in, and be able to develop a program which addresses curriculum, consultation, counseling, and coordination in a deliberate, comprehensive fashion. This expectation remains at every level, from elementary to secondary education, and it favors preventative, systemic interventions over the “traditional” techniques of one-on-one, focused interventions and testing-based counseling, while still taking into account that individual and small group interventions are important parts of the counselor's tool kit.

Furthermore, the modern school counselor's role is one of a champion of accountability; counselors - for reasons both practical and ethical - should be undertaking their duties in such a way that they can identify the needs of their particular school, develop a comprehensive plan to meet those needs, evaluate the progress their interventions have facilitated, and share that data with the rest of the school, interpreting and advocating for further interventions as appropriate. Finally, of course, the profession has developed a firm sense of what a school counselor's role should not entail. The school counselor should not be an academic tester, a substitute teacher, a registrar, a disciplinarian, a
special education coordinator, nor a clerical assistant. Nor should the school counselor be a stranger in the school, someone isolated from the system who only focuses on college-bound students, or students with discipline referrals, or any other small group of cases. To do so, the literature and professional schema have declared, is a waste of a uniquely trained, highly talented professional in the school environment, whose skill-set is not replaceable by social workers, clinical psychologists within the schools, nor para-professionals.

What has not, historically, been addressed – because the need has not existed – is how the role of the school counselor has been translated into a virtual environment. Virtual environments themselves are new, comparatively speaking, and the historical literature for school counseling has typically included as an assumption so fundamental that it does not need to be articulated that a school is a place where students congregate. That assumption no longer holds with the same strength that it once did, but does that mean that the school counselor should not be held to the same standards of role and practice that ASCA has spent the last decade developing and advocating? It seems unlikely that either professional organizations, or the counselor education programs that train new counselors would suggest so.

However, a dichotomy has historically existed between the school counselor role as developed at the training and research level, and the school counselor role as operationalized within the schools. (Myrick, 2003). Several studies have examined how various factors within the counselor, administrators, or school systems themselves can contribute to this perennial challenge for the profession. A national study by Foster,
Young, and Hermann (2005) compared school counselors' ranking of importance and self-reported frequency of behaviors congruent with the National Standards for School Counseling Programs (NSSCP) with those of a panel of experts. They found that while school counselors often identified priorities in congruence with the experts' judgment, the frequency of performed behaviors was often out of congruence with their stated priorities, particularly in the areas of career preparation and personal/social development.

Scarborough and Culbreth (2008) undertook a geographically-limited correlation study with 600 school counselors investigating variables which may be tied to a significant disconnect between the preferred role of the school counselor and the actual role as practiced by school counselors. They found several variables which could be reliably correlated with higher discrepancies between preferred role and actual practices: employment at a "higher level" of school (i.e. high school, as opposed to elementary school), the total years of counselor experience (with fewer years of experience associated with higher levels of discrepancy), low perceptions of counselor self-efficacy, a lower perception of school climate, and higher frequency of time spent undertaking clerical duties.

Other factors which may contribute to the differences between how the school counselor's role is operationalized in the field include the possibility that school counselors may be receiving different definitions of what that role actually is, or should be. Many school counselors experience a disconnect between what they learn in their programs, and what they are expected to do by non-counseling colleagues and superiors in the field, and this can contribute to role stress (Culbreth, et. al., 2005). Additionally,
although professional associations and counselor education programs may offer one role definition to school counselors, practicing school counselors are also influenced by other perceptions of their role from district personnel, administrators, and other factors within the school itself, which they must address to operate in the setting (Fitch & Marshall, 2004). Some counselors may find themselves the victim of Nice Counselor Syndrome (NCS; Bemak & Chung, 2008), valuing being seen as promoters of harmony over their duties to serve as advocates for themselves and others. Counselors often value their reputation as a "mediator" within the school system and define it as a key part of their role (Ponec & Brock, 2000), but such counselors may agree to any duty assigned, regardless of whether it takes time and priority away from their actual, trained expertise, in order to continue to be seen as the "nice counselor" (Bemak & Chung). This can also impact their ability to serve as facilitators of change within the school environment, as well as hinder their efficacy as advocates (or as an example of self-advocacy) for students who may be subject to systemic or chronic injustices within the school system itself.

Studer, Diambra, Breckner, and Heidel (2011) examined specifically those factors that may facilitate or impede school counselors' implementation of the ASCA National Model in a pilot study. Although their findings were preliminary, their results supported the hypothesis that newer counselors may feel less than confident or empowered in enacting their professional role within the schools.

In the field, there are significant differences in how the school counselor's role is likely to be operationalized, as opposed to how it is defined within professional organizations and counselor education programs. Within schools, counselors are more
likely to be asked to, or voluntarily take on, non-role-congruent activities, such as testing, registrar, and administrative duties. School counselors with fewer years of experience, and counselors in the upper levels of education (i.e. high school) are more likely to have non-congruent practices, particularly in the areas of systemic and comprehensive services. This is particularly relevant when considering the issue of virtual school counselors, as the majority of virtual schools service the high school grades (Queen & Lewis, 2011). Areas of counselor leadership and social justice advocacy may still be emerging for counselors in the field, with some counselors reluctant to extend their role in those areas, whether due to concerns about inexperience or a lack of specific training in the best practices thereof, a desire to be the “nice” counselor, or a feeling that their actions cannot ultimately impact students or the school in a positive way.

For the purposes of the current study, this historical perspective on the role of the school counselor gives a context to understand how school counselors' role has changed. Much of the transformation has been driven by the evolving conception of American public schooling. With the growth of psychometry, vocational planning, and national policy, school counseling is likely to influence future educational technology and technology-mediated education. As electronic communication with students becomes a larger percentage of student contact (or, as in the case of virtual schools, the primary method of student contact), the K-12 educational system is also expected to develop new strategies that promote student achievement and wellness. In turn, there will be an opportunity for school counselors to play viable role in its reconceptualization. Historically, school counseling has struggled to actualize the profession's vision of the
field and what the educational system expects of the profession. Precedent suggests that conflict may not disappear in the virtual realm. Instead, it may intensify.

2.1.6 The Influence of Administrators on the School Counselor's Role

Another significant factor in whether or not school counselors are able to develop and execute their role in a congruent fashion is the relationship between the administrator and the counselor (Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009; Ponec & Brock, 2000). Past studies have suggested that this trend may be the most influential factor (Ponec & Brock, 2000). The literature broadly supports that administrators are a key factor in shaping school counselors' efficacy, progress, and ability to develop a comprehensive, role-congruent counseling program (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004; Zalaquett, 2005). Historically, administrators' perceptions of school counselors' role determine as much as 15% of how their role is demonstrated in the building and as much as 49% of school counselors' overall job satisfaction (Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009). Extant literature has focused on the deficiencies of the relationship between school counselors and administrators and the administrative misunderstanding or ignorance of school counseling (Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004).

There is a growing movement to identify positive possibilities of the administrative and school counseling relationship and to develop a stronger understanding of how an accurate, useful comprehension may be formed between school counselors and principals, and how principals may assist facilitating the school counselors' scope of work (e.g., Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Fitch &
2.1.7 Administrators and counselor role confusion

When administrators do not understand or agree with the role of school counselors as defined by ASCA (2009), school counselors often get placed in "quasi-administrative" roles (Napierkowski & Parsons, 1995). Consequentially, significant amounts of their time are consumed with non-role-congruent tasks, such as master schedule development, testing, and filling in on miscellaneous tasks (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000; Dahir, 2004). More importantly, these non-congruent activities become expectations of the role; school administrators can assume school counselors are and should be devoting significantly more hours of work time to tasks such as Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and special education, testing, scheduling, and other clerical or paraprofessional tasks (Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006) than school counselors feel they should; therefore, the persistent redefinition of the school counseling role by non-counseling superiors may contribute to role stress among school counselors (Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005). In other words, there is a real power discrepancy between administrators and school counselors in the K-12 school system (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007). Administrators possess the autonomy to enforce their own definitions of school counseling, in spite of any standards set by state and/or professional standards (Fitch, Newby, Ballesteros, & Marshall, 2001). Because administrators have so much influence in school contexts, it is quite likely that they may also affect the hiring, evaluation, and
support offered to school counselors (Zalaquett, 2005). Research on the degree to which administrators are educated on school counselors and the degree to which they demonstrate this understanding has produced mixed and inconsistent results (Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005), suggesting that administrative training programs need to include more information on school counseling.

A survey, by Fitch, Newby, Ballestero, and Marshall (2001), found that future school administrators rated role-congruent activities (e.g., individual and classroom counseling, consultation with teachers and parents) for school counselors highly, signifying that these activities were valued and understood within training programs. However, the same administrators rated some non-congruent activities (e.g., record-keeping and other clerical tasks) as important work tasks for school counselors to do. This suggested that, even when educated on the school counselor role, administrators added role congruent tasks, but did not remove non-congruent tasks. It is quite probable that this finding may contribute to the unrealistic expectations on the part of administrators. Nevertheless, it is plausible that these unrealistic expectations may lead to frustration and despair on the part of school counselors because they see their true work as highly valued in the ideal but not in practice.

2.1.8 Administrators and perceived needs of the school over counselor role-congruence

Even when administrators understand or agree on the school counseling role, barriers still may arise as schools confront shortages of personnel and material resources (Zalaquett, 2005). While principals approve of school counselors and their school counseling activities (e.g., individual and group counseling, collaboration, and systemic
interventions; Zalaquett, 2005), there are still discrepancies between what is valued in abstract and what they end up doing. This discrepancy can be even more significant in districts with lower resources, where administrators may not have the funding or staff to move non-role congruent tasks to other personnel (Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006; Zalaquett). With school counseling's history of uncertainty and heavy focus on clerical and administrative tasks, it is not surprising that administrators resolve these resource difficulties by asking school counselors to continue to take on these tasks. However, administrators have significant impact on the way school counselors conceive and operationalize their jobs. In other words, administrators play a major part in defining the school counseling role, due to the power differentiation found between administrators and counselors and administrators' role in the school as individuals who assign tasks (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007). Informally, as school counselors often lack a significant peer faction in the school, they come to identify with their closest peers: administrators. Unfortunately, despite their significant influence in schools, many administrators have not had formal training in where school counselors should be directing their attention. Even when administrators have a strong understanding of school counselors' ideal role, their own role and scope of practice may result in a perceived need to override the requirements of that role and have school counselors undertake non-congruent duties previously mentioned (Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006; Zalaquett, 2005).
2.1.9 Positive relationships with school administrators

It is important to note that the influences that administrators exert on school counselors are not always negative. Research indicates that supportive administrators may exert a strong, positive influence on school counseling programs and that supportive bonds between principals and school counselors are essential for developing exemplary school counseling programs (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Ponec & Brock, 2000). In their 2007 qualitative study of "exemplary" principals, Dollarhide et al. found that principals valued their relationship with their school counselors, their ability to communicate to school counselors, their school counselors' expertise and hard work, and their school counselors' ability to be school leaders. In a growing body of literature, school leadership is a natural fit for school counselors (Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009). This literature base supports the call of the profession to become advocates for social justice in the school, as well as the need for school counselors to advocate for themselves and the value of their role (Dollarhide, Gibson, & Saginak, 2008; Fitch & Marshall, 2004; Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009).

School counselors could easily embrace leadership roles, lead discussions on student advocacy, and convey their understanding to others of how technology may affect the ways students are enabled to achieve and succeed within virtual school environments. However, the virtual counseling literature has highlighted important considerations and concerns with this online medium (Currie, 2010). An examination of these considerations would seem to be valuable to conceptualize how school counseling practice may be shaped by the addition of the "virtual" designation.
In this study, the inclusion of administrators allows for greater understanding of the administrators' influence on school counselors and the execution of work duties. Administrators set the tone of the school's mission and provide or withhold support for school counselors' various initiatives (Amatea, & Clark, 2005; Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004; Zalaquett, 2005). Within virtual schools, many concerns are mitigated by the diffused nature of the student body (e.g., discipline, student disruption of classes, and violence). However, other concerns rise in priority (e.g., truancy and avoidance of assignments, meeting state requirements for promotion and graduation, and student retention). As administrators consider how best to meet these challenges, their decisions are likely to shape the way school counselors in virtual schools may develop their own priorities. If virtual school administrators devalue the social, emotional and humanist duties of school counselors, it is likely that virtual school counselors may have less support in implementing those parts of their counseling programs. Equally important, virtual school counselors may have fewer chances to develop strategies for making meaningful relationships with students (Baker & Ray, 2011; Barnett & Scheetz, 2003; Botella, Garcia-Palacios, Banos & Quero, 2009; McAdams & Wyatt, 2010; Vaccaro & Lambie, 2007).

2.2 Considerations in virtual counseling and school counseling

The use of technology in the field of counseling has traditionally been met with enthusiasm, caution, and even dismissiveness by practitioners and researchers (Goss & Anthony, 2009). Nationwide health services, such as the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence in England and Wales and the Australian government, have thrown
official support behind the development and use of virtual counseling services (Marks & Cavanagh, 2009). However, therapists continue to have significant concerns about issues of ethicality, efficacy, and usefulness of virtual counseling practice (Baker & Ray, 2011; Barnett & Scheetz, 2003; Botella, Garcia-Palacios, Banos & Quero, 2009; McAdams & Wyatt, 2010; Vaccaro & Lambie, 2007). In some states in the United States, virtual counseling services are still prohibited, while some have no regulatory statutes on practice, meaning that practitioners must default to the guidelines set by professional associations and often without the support of local credentialing bodies (McAdams & Wyatt, 2010). For school counselors, the lack of guidance extends even to the ASCA (2010) ethical standards, covering the confidentiality of records, cyberbullying, and the promotion of appropriate technological applications. These guidelines provide little guidance on online school counseling practice. As a result, the concerns of clinical virtual counseling have emerged. These concerns tend to focus on the confidentiality and counselors' ability to build and maintain a therapeutic alliance with their clients. Therapists expressed concern about having no face-to-face contact and lacking the traditional non-verbal cues (e.g., tone of voice and body language), as well as the efficacy of virtual counseling as opposed to traditional counseling formats (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). In a past qualitative study, Haberstroh, Paar, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, and Gee (2008) highlighted barriers and conditions of virtual counseling. More specifically, the counseling interns experienced initial skepticism about the effectiveness of virtual counseling; they had to overcome significant issues with technology (both reliability of technology and their client's familiarity with it), with non-verbal communications, and
with the pace of sessions. In the study, the counselors felt less was accomplished during any given session in the same time as one would spend in a face-to-face counseling session and that sessions were less focused without the aid of strong pacing skills from counselors.

Training, or the lack of training, for school counselors operating in the virtual environment is also a concern (Currie, 2010). Although specialized training for virtual counselors has existed since 2000 (Goss & Anthony, 2009), only one-in-five virtual counselors reported having taken formal training (e.g., a workshop or training program) on how to counsel in virtual environments (Finn & Barak, 2010). Additionally, the noncompliance rates of ethical guidelines by online practitioners have been measured between 23% and 100% (Haberstroh, et al, 2008), suggesting that, despite attempts to address the concerns and set ethical guidelines, these best practices are either not penetrating down to the level of field practitioners, or that there are other barriers standing in the way of virtual counselors undertaking these endeavors. This concern also has an additional dimension for virtual school counselors, as the available training skews towards clinical mental health concerns, rather than developing and implementing a comprehensive school counseling program.

2.2.1 Potential Benefits of Virtual Counseling

Despite the concerns and barriers evident in the current practice of virtual counseling, this emerging field of technology has the potential to revolutionize the face of counseling, both clinically and within schools. Virtual counseling allows anyone with a computer to have access to mental health services, including populations which have
been traditionally underserved, such as those in rural communities. The option for asynchronous communication allows clients to participate in therapeutic interventions at their own pace, and without having to carve a specific time from their schedules, which can be a boon for working class clients, as well as for those who would rather not be seen going to a therapist (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). Young (2005) surveyed 48 virtual counseling clients for their motivations and attitudes for seeking out online counseling, and found that clients felt that online clinical services would preserve their anonymity from friends, family and coworkers; that the flexibility of timing and lack of travel allowed them to participate more fully in online therapy than they would have in traditional counseling; that the cost of virtual counseling tended to be more affordable; and that it allowed clients to access specialized experts (in this case, therapists specialized in internet addiction counseling) despite not having such experts locally. Concerns about participating in virtual counseling almost universally revolved around being “caught” in therapy, or having their therapeutic records shown to family members or employers. This may suggest that virtual counseling has its strongest appeal to those whose primary concern is the protection of their identity, and those who labor under the stigma still attached to mental health and seeking out therapy. The virtual realm allows access to services for people who would otherwise not be willing to be seen in a therapist's office, or be known to be attending therapy. However, in a more recent study, Murphy, Mitchell, and Hallett (2011) found no significant differences in the demographics between clients who sought virtual counseling versus face-to-face counseling. However, no data were collected on
other demographic variables, such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, and other dimensions of diversity other than gender.

2.2.2 Research Gaps in Virtual Counseling

Although research on virtual counseling has existed for over twenty years, there still remain large gaps in the literature. Empirical studies on the process and efficacy of virtual counseling often involve small sample sizes, and few studies focus on the efficacy of virtual interventions with clients with severe mental health diagnoses (Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007). The experience of clients interacting with counselors through asynchronous and synchronous interfaces in virtual counseling has been only minimally explored and largely through survey methods (Young, 2005). How credible do potential clients find online counseling? Does that credibility differ across diverse populations? For that matter, how credible do counseling professionals find virtual counseling? Do those attitudes affect how seriously virtual counselors consider adhering to the established ethical guidelines or gaining formal training and continuing education in virtual practice? How do the emerging technologies (e.g., cellular telephones, social networks, blogs, wikis, etc.) continue to encourage virtual counseling to evolve, and what new concerns do they bring to practitioners? Are some of these venues more effective for certain presenting concerns than others?

Entire areas of practice remain unexplored in the research literature, particularly involving school counselors in virtual schools (Currie, 2010). With this in mind, there has been little research examining how the concerns of diverse populations play into virtual counseling (e.g., the digital divide, multicultural awareness, and advocacy; Liang, Duffy,
& Commins, 2013). Diversity is of particular concern in the area of school counseling, where school counselors are prone to have a diverse clientele (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Dahir & Stone, 2010; Kolodinsky, Draves, Schroder, Lindsey, & Zlatey, 2003). As such, this study was designed to examine what areas are missing in the virtual counseling literature, pinpoint the areas that may be relevant to maintaining efficacious practice, and offer suggestions and guidelines for where and how to address the void in our knowledge base.

2.2.3 Types and Efficacy of Virtual Counseling

There are many challenges to shifting a person-focused profession like counseling to a technologically-mediated setting. For those counselors considering virtual counseling, one of the key concerns was whether a therapeutic relationship could be established and maintained (Sucala, et al., 2012) and how the counseling can be accomplished when counselors have significantly fewer non-verbal cues and communication to use (Baker & Ray, 2011). Counselors want to know how they can make the connection with their clients as they could in face-to-face situations (Baker & Ray). While this research question has not been fully answered to date, counseling researchers have a better grasp today of the different modes of virtual counseling and what some of the ramifications may be for these methods.

Outlining all of the potential individual applications of technology to the field of counseling is beyond the scope of this review, but it is worthwhile examining the broad categories. Much of the research on virtual counseling is focused on one intervention at a time (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). Thus, there has been some attempt to collate the various
interventions and develop a system of categorizing them for study. In 2009, Barak, Klein, and Proudfoot developed four broad categories of virtual counseling interventions: web-based interventions, online counseling and therapy, Internet-operated therapeutic software, and the broad category of other online activities. The first three categories present a more unified and useful picture of the state of virtual counseling and what is left to be explored.

2.2.3.1 Web-based interventions

Barak, Klein, and Proudfoot's (2009) definition for web-based interventions is:

…a primarily self-guided intervention program that is executed by means of a prescriptive online program operated through a website and used by consumers seeking health- and mental-health related assistance. The intervention program itself attempts to create positive change and or improve/enhance knowledge, awareness, and understanding via the provision of sound health-related material and use of interactive web-based components. (p.5)

Included within the category of web-based interventions are education interventions, (e.g., primarily concerned with sharing health and mental health information), self-guided interventions (e.g., where clients go through behavior change content at their own pace, receiving feedback and intervention support from pre-programmed software), and human-supported therapeutic interventions (e.g., where the feedback and intervention support is provided by professionals, case workers, and/or peer support groups over the web).

When translating to the face-to-face counseling context, educational interventions would be the closest comparison with web-based interventions (e.g., the brochures in school counselors' offices, or the bulletins they send out about various counseling related
concerns). They are meant to inform and stimulate further exploration and conversations with the clients and counselors, if they chose to seek them out. The school counseling literature has somewhat addressed these sorts of interventions, even at brick-and-mortar schools, through the use of counseling websites and virtual career counseling centers for students (Van Horn & Myrick, 2001). Such educational interventions are perhaps the least problematic regarding confidentiality and other ethical concerns in school contexts. When these interventions were paired with contact information of counselors or other helpful resources, they were more valuable and effective in helping their clients (Barak, Klein, & Proudfoot, 2009).

The other two modalities of web-based interventions are areas where the counseling, and in particular the school counseling, literature has yet to significantly explore. As a measure of cost-effectiveness in reaching as many people with mental health support as possible, automated web-based interventions were seen as a possibility for the future. For the most part, automated web-based interventions have rendered positive results with certain clients and specific mental health diagnoses (e.g., anxiety, phobias, and depression).

As an exemplar of the category, there is MoodGYM, a completely automated, self-directed intervention for helping those at risk of anxiety and depression learn new coping skills through a cognitive behavioral framework. It serves as a popularly studied example and recommended treatment of choice by the UK National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (Barazzone, Cavanagh, & Richards, 2012). It received a randomized, clinical trial on its efficacy which showed significant mental health and
emotional well-being gains from those who completed the program as opposed to members on a waiting list (Powell, et al, 2013). A cross-national Australian study with adolescents found significant decreases between students who had both low and high adherence to the program as opposed to the control group (Calear, Griffiths, Christensen, & Mackinnon, 2013). Further, it is worth noting that this study had students participating in the program during the school day, where adherence was more likely to happen than it might if, for example, students were expected to participate from home. A proliferation of qualitative studies on the clients' experiences and journey, when using these web-based interventions, is emerging. One study examined interviewees' experiences of the MoodGYM program mixed with more conventional therapy; the researchers found that clients valued the aspect of feeling as if they were actively addressing their problems, and the ability to take in the information about cognitive-behavioral theory at their own pace, and mentally restructure it to their own needs (Lillevoll, et al, 2013). The researchers also found that there was a wide variety of acceptance of the web-based delivery service and that participants highly valued the ability to speak to a face-to-face therapist, as well.

Likewise, an earlier qualitative study examining the experience of clients with multiple sclerosis found that many of the respondents found this method of service delivery off-putting and that it perpetuated a social isolation (Hind, et al, 2010), suggesting that the self-guided variety of web-based virtual counseling can, in some circumstances, be efficacious. Even with such studies, there are still significant gaps in understanding how variations in the population and methods may affect the usefulness of this treatment modality. Many of the self-administered web-based interventions are based on cognitive
behavioral techniques and have some success even without human guidance. Generally speaking, the experience may be incomplete or unfulfilling.

Many of the rapidly expanding research trials in this area are conducted with sub-clinical, symptomatic subjects and not with clients who have clinically diagnosed major mood disorders (Andersson & Cuijpers, 2008). Populations with significant mental health issues, or disabilities which already isolate them from others, may find the technological delivery method to further their own isolation. Although it is unclear how this might play out with special education populations in virtual schools, the duty of the school counselor to advocate for all students suggests that more attention should be given to this area.

2.2.3.2 Gaps and implications of web-based interventions

There has been little work in the area of self-directed, web-based interventions in the field of school counseling. While web-based career inventories and interventions are common and are further being refined as the technology level allows for more sophisticated tracking, module determination, and multimedia presentation (Gati & Asulin-Peretz, 2011), and programs which work on the cognitive restructuring of adolescents' career based views have been found to be modestly effective (Clark, Horan, Tompkins-Bjorkman, Kovalski, & Hackett, 2001), there is still a paucity of studies that examine the effectiveness of virtual counseling with minors (Emmelkamp, 2011). Likewise, although the school counseling literature has acknowledged that technology is changing the way that school counselors communicate with their students, the focus of the literature tends to be on counselor-facilitated communications or educational interventions, rather than autonomous web-based interventions which students engage
with at their own pace (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2006). Like the ongoing debate in healthcare, cost-effectiveness is a serious consideration of the school environment, and a way to share even a modest ability to help students effect change within themselves would be welcome, making the thought of exploring web-based interventions an appealing one (Andersson & Cuijpers, 2008). But, there are many variables still left unexplored when considering how, or if, school counselors may put such interventions to use in the school setting, whether a brick and mortal school or a virtual school.

For both environments, an expansion of research into these areas would need to include developing an understanding of how knowledgeable school counselors and counselor educators are about the various tools under development, how comfortable they are in appraising tools for ethicality and efficacy, and their own level of expertise in interfacing with the tool and interpreting the feedback it provides. Unfortunately, these tools have not been evaluated for their suitability for the school counseling program or environment. Further research needs to explore how easily – if at all – such tools may be integrated into a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program, how well they meet the ASCA ethical standards for use of technology, and whether they create greater opportunities for counselors to enhance their quality of work, or simply create more technological barriers between the counselor and the work. Additionally, much of the research about the self-guided, web-based interventions is rooted within cognitive-behavioral theory (Emmelkamp, 2011), and there is a lack of developed programs which reflect other theoretical orientations. This trend may be frustrating for those school counselors who do not share the theoretical orientation of the software, which may create
problems in following-up with students or interpreting feedback records from the program to identify students who need specialized attention. An additional complication may be found in the concept of feedback records. Previous trials of web-based interventions have been clinical, with mostly adult volunteers, and for a prescribed time period, which is not the ideal school counseling environment. How much data should the tool collect on its users and how does it use that data to help counselors fulfill their duty to protect students? If it collects enough data to identify individual students and their presenting problems, how secure is that data against intrusion or identity theft on the part of other students? Likewise, what would the best practices be for a school counselor in obtaining permission for students to use such a tool; the students most likely to benefit from it are the ones who would be reluctant to self-identify to a counselor but obtaining blanket permission from parents and guardians every year could be difficult, especially if a suite of such software interventions is used.

In a virtual environment, additional factors would need to be considered, including the potentially isolating situation for the students. In a brick-and-mortar school, students would be able to meet their school counselor regularly for other interventions and interactions and would have a chance to build a meaningful relationship with the school counselor that would make it easier to talk about their experience using the web-based tool. In a virtual school, it is possible that the tool could perceived as an additional barrier, or as a way for the counselor to avoid “real” contact with students, either by the student, administrators, or even by the counselor, him or herself. However, the typical virtual learner is considered to be independently minded, self-motivated, and with better
than average academic and technology skills (Barbour, 2007). It may be that such people would prefer to have the option to work on self-actualization at any time of the day or night, much as they show a preference for the same in education. Either way, it is necessary to expand research in this area to know what the best approach with this new technology would be in any given environment and how to deal with the common ethical challenges.

2.2.3.3 Online counseling and therapy

Barak, Klein, and Proudfoot's (2009) second category of virtual counseling is online counseling and therapy, meaning "...individual or group contact, using either synchronous or asynchronous communication mode." (p. 9) In other words, a counselor directly interacting with an individual client or group of clients, using either synchronous (e.g., chat, voice, video conferencing, etc.) or asynchronous (e.g., e-mail, discussion board, wiki, texting, etc.), Internet-based methods. This form of virtual counseling is what most people consider when they think of online counseling. There were over 50 articles reviewed for this study, and the aforementioned modality was the examined the most frequently.

The use of the Internet for virtual counseling began in the mid-1990s (Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, & Shapira, 2008; Barak, Klein, & Proudfoot, 2009; Shaw & Shaw, 2011, Sucala, et al, 2012) and has been hotly debated from its conception. Throughout this time period, many counselors argued that there are too many unique risks in the online environment to be a viable counseling option and that it is too difficult to capture the richness of human expression and emotion through technological mediation and text
(Fenichel, et al, 2002). Others have also expressed their concerns about the use of virtual counseling for certain diagnoses (Barnett & Scheetz, 2003, Fenichel, et al, 2002). Additional concerns about this type of virtual counseling include the possibility of technological difficulties interrupting synchronous sessions (Haberstroh, et al, 2008), the difficulty in reading tone in text-based communications and the complexity in knowing how the other party may read and respond to the counselor's communications from text (Coomey & Wilczenski, 2005), and whether it is possible to create a strong, effective therapeutic alliance in the context of virtual counseling (Sucala, et al, 2012).

In spite of the challenges, many scholars have pitched virtual counseling and therapy as a cost-effective, therapeutic medium. With this in mind, counselors often charge less for online services, making it more affordable for a wider variety of potential clients. The ability of a client to interact with a therapist on a more flexible schedule appeals to people with hectic schedules or a reluctance to be seen attending therapy (Young, 2005). Several studies have measured the strength of the therapeutic alliance in virtual counseling context as opposed to face-to-face counseling (Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, & Shapira, 2008; Sucala, et. al, 2012). A meta-analysis, comprised of 15 years of studies (Sucala, et. al, 2012), found a consensus that the therapeutic relationship in virtual counseling contexts seems as robust as the traditional face-to-face context and that the therapeutic relationship was a significant factor linked to positive treatment outcomes within the virtual counseling context. Another meta-analysis of over 9000 patients treated with various forms of virtual counseling, by Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, and Shapira (2008), found that the average effect size for improvements with virtual counseling was
.53, a medium effect size which is roughly analogous to that found in studies of the effectiveness of face-to-face counseling modalities. In 2006, Schultz (2006) identified several factors that may increase virtual counseling effectiveness, including the ability of the client to retain detailed records of each session as a sort of guide book for improvement and the ability of the client to save face in interactions while accepting confrontation more easily. In a later mixed methods study, including individual and focus group interviews with practitioners, Callahan and Inckle (2012) found that virtual counseling conversations covered more clinical topics and focused more on sensitive issues than in face-to-face sessions.

2.2.3.4 Gaps and implications of virtual counseling and therapy

The limitations of the various studies also create gaps in the counseling literature, especially as they relate to how to apply current findings to school settings, both face-to-face and virtual. One of the most significant gaps in the literature is multicultural considerations. Rose and Blomeyer (2007) specifically addressed diversity related myths about virtual schools. They found that many of the myths may apply to how therapists, researchers, and potential clients conceptualize virtual counseling. Very little, if any, research has been conducted on the different ways that diverse populations may interact with the virtual counseling experience. It is quite likely that racial and cultural differences do not disappear online nor do the potential for facilitating the same kinds of discrimination and exclusion not exist in the face-to-face experience (Rose & Blomeyer). Virtual school counselors must attend to the same issues of diversity and advocacy that their peers in conventional schools face, and should recognize that they must continue to
hone and practice their multicultural counseling competency, even when working with a virtual population. With this in mind, there are a number of important questions that counselors should keep in mind, such as: "How does the virtual counselor explore dimensions of diversity online, when they do not have 'visible' diversity to prompt the question?"

Among the different learned societies and professional organizations (e.g., American Counseling Association), specialized training in multicultural counseling is stressed and included in its code of ethics (ASCA, 2014). Therefore, multiculturally competent counselors should be broaching issues of diversity and inclusion in all their interactions, and multiculturally competent school counselors should advocate for potentially disadvantaged populations. However, although dimensions of diversity are always visible online, it is possible that they could be whitewashed, with differential levels of technology adoption and proficiency across students contributing to some students being locked out of the potential to take advantage of virtual counseling (Fairlie, 2004; Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). Likewise, there have been few attempts to examine qualitative differences in how people of color may experience the therapeutic alliance in virtual counseling contexts. Do they feel welcomed as the whole person that they are, or are parts of their identity excluded from the conversation? Previous research has noted the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) and the speed with which online sessions have a tendency to come to the central issue for which counseling has been sought (Haberstroh, et al, 2008), but is it possible that some of what is not being said may
be the broaching and discussion of issues of personal diversity and how that might affect the therapeutic relationship?

In the schools, the issue is even more pertinent, as school counselors will almost certainly come into contact with students who express every possible dimension of diversity in the years of their career. If virtual counseling is an opportunity for a counselor in a face-to-face school to expand the ways in which they are able to make meaningful contact with students, then the school counseling profession needs to know how that relationship might be affected by the mediating technology. And, as of this moment, there have been very few studies that have attempted anything of the sort, quantitative or qualitative. In virtual schools, the school counselor is faced with a question that goes beyond the simple consideration of if virtual counseling is a technique they wish to incorporate: the virtual school counselor has little choice if they wish to reach out to their students. Without the incidental and deliberate contacts that the face-to-face school counselor relies on, the issue of how factors of diversity relate to students' interactions with technology, particularly with regard to virtual counseling, is one that virtual school counselors must face every single day of their working career. And yet, this remains a significant and noticeable gap in counseling and guidance journals.

An additional issue which the literature has yet to address, is the extent to which some technologically-mediated issues which are becoming significant within the school can be addressed by virtual counseling interventions. For example, cyberbullying is a growing concern for many school counselors, with growing political and professional pressure to develop effective interventions to address incidents within the schools. Issues
of access to students' social media and other venues where cyberbullying takes place can be daunting for school counselors, and attempts to address the issue have primarily been rooted in interventions which take place within the school building itself. However, there seems to exist a possibility that virtual counseling could be used to gain entrance into some of those spaces where cyberbullying takes place, or at least to provide more timely interventions to students affected by them. However, no studies have looked directly at the ability of virtual counseling to affect the frequency or severity of cyberbullying in a school environment. Moreover, no research exists which examines the extent to which cyberbullying is, or is not, a problem within the virtual school environment, and if it is not, what the virtual school does differently than face-to-face environment, and if any of those interventions could be transferred to a brick-and-mortar environment effectively.

Final gaps in the literature worth considering are issues of ethicality and boundary crossing. Although the ethical issues of virtual counseling have been examined before, it has rarely been in the context of the school setting, particularly for direct, one-on-one, or group interventions. Considering that virtual counseling relationships may involve more self-disclosure, more quickly, how is this likely to affect rates of reporting for abuse and neglect or exercise the duty to warn? How much control do parents feel they should have at the different levels of K-12 schooling over virtual contact their students might have with their counselors?, and do the school and the counselor incur any additional liabilities if that contact happens outside of school hours? Should that contact happen outside of school hours, and how do students, counselors, and other stakeholders feel about counselor-student contact through social media, text, e-mail, and other modalities through
which counseling could be conducted? There are a number of similar questions which school settings raise, and which cannot be answered in the same way researchers or practitioners answer them for clinical and agency settings.

2.2.3.5 Internet-Operated Therapeutic Software

The third category of virtual counseling, defined by Barak, Klein, and Proudfoot (2009), is Internet-operated therapeutic software. Their definition for this modality is:

…therapeutic software that uses advanced computer capabilities such as artificial intelligence principles for (a) robotic simulation of therapists providing dialog-based therapy with patients, (b) rule-based expert systems, and (c) gaming and three-dimensional (3D) virtual environments. (p. 11)

In less technical terms, this modality refers to interventions that show some level of independent learning, feedback, and responsiveness to the client. This particular software program acts as a virtual counselor, parsing the voice or text of a client, analyzing it, and generating a response meant to be clinically helpful and empathic. The earliest program of this type was Eliza (Bark, Klein, & Proudfoot, 2009). As technology advances, more opportunities are apt to be available to deliver counseling services in different mediums. Similar to traditional counseling formats, virtual counselors utilize a full-spectrum persuasive dialogue (Shulman & Bickmore, 2009). A second platform of Internet-operated therapeutic software is known as an expert system. It uses a set of programmed rules that often generate an expert opinion in an emerging area of concern (e.g., wellness). A third platform of Internet-operated therapeutic software is virtual environments (e.g., Second Life) and therapeutic games. Virtual environments have shown promise in helping adolescents reduce their cigarette consumption, at least in the
short term (Woodruff, Conway, Edwards, Elliott, & Crittenden, 2007). Virtual environments also have been used as anti-smoking educational interventions (Woodruff, et al).

2.2.3.6 Gaps and implications of Internet-operated therapeutic software

Emerging technologies have shown great promise as counseling delivery systems (Barak, Klein, & Proudfoot, 2007), and many of these technologies are being developed in the areas of health promotion and wellness; however, many effectiveness questions still remain. Examining the effects of computerized aids and promotion of exercise on clients' health, Shulman and Bickmore (2009) found that conversation with a computerized agent show positive effects; however, little effects were found on the therapeutic bond and reduced effectiveness of the persuasive message between counselor and client. It was found in a similar study conducted on an exercise agent that even when the clients were aware that they were speaking to a computerized system, the fictionalized back-story promoted a greater sense of engagement and made the system seem more human (Bickmore, Schulman, & Yin, 2009). However, in the research literature, few effectiveness studies have been conducted, and even with those studies that have shown effectiveness, questions still remain. The counseling literature has not adequately addressed all concerns of today's computerized agents.

2.2.3.7 Other Online Activities

In 2009, Barak, Klein, and Proudfoot highlighted how other emergent technologies may contribute to the proliferation of virtual counseling. Daily usage of technologies, such as personal blogs, online support groups, and online inventories are
adapted to other arenas. It is sufficient to say that more research is needed on how school counselors and virtual school counselors integrate these forms of technologies, as well as advanced modes in their day-to-day counseling duties. Potential areas of exploration may include the use of smart boards, telephones, and instant-response software packages. Likewise, there is a shortage of studies examining the comfort levels of counselors in using technology. Not all technologies are appropriate for every counselor and counseling setting; however, it is critical that counselors possess the knowledge and skills to assess which technologies offer the best utility for effectively and efficiently executing their jobs.

2.2.4 Virtual Counseling and Virtual School Counseling

Extant literature offered important insights on this topical area. It also highlighted blatant gaps in the counseling literature, specifically related to virtual school counseling. First, the implementation gap between school counselor ideals and the reality of educational pressures from federal, state, and local sources has been with the profession since its existence. The proliferation of technology in schools is likely to carry this struggle with it and not transcend it. As virtual schools are embraced for their potential to educate more students at lower costs, student-to-counselor ratios are likely to accelerate. Further, with increasing demands to improve student outcomes, administrators are forced to make critical financial and personnel decisions that sometimes affect school counselors' ability to effectively execute their scope of work.

In school settings with fewer resources, school counselors may not get the training and resources necessary to carry out their jobs. In the case of virtual settings, it is
critical that these school counselors understand how to maximize the resources that are available to them. It is also important that they grasp the similarities and differences of virtual school counseling versus brick-and-mortar school counseling.

Only once the current state of practice is known can the counselor education profession work to develop new ways to train school counselors for virtual and non-virtual school contexts.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The number of full-time virtual schools is steadily expanding (Queen & Lewis, 2011), but although many of them employ professional school counselors, there is little research on if or how the practice and role of the school counselor changes in the virtual environment (Currie, 2010). Research in clinical counseling has suggested that the virtual environment offers unique challenges for the practice of counseling, including difficulty with developing therapeutic relationships (Sucala, et al., 2012), pacing and organization of sessions (Baker & Ray, 2011), confidentiality of sessions (Shaw & Shaw, 2006), and the lack of training and research regarding best practices in this area (Finn & Barak, 2010).

However, the school environment offers unique challenges for the professional school counselor, such as role confusion (Perusse, Goodnough, Donegan, & Jones, 2004), struggling with the balance between counseling and non-counseling tasks (Scarborough & Culbreath, 2008), and relationships with administrators who may not understand the role of the school counselor (Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009), or who may be influenced by funding or personnel issues to push counselors away from their best practices as defined by professional associations (Zalaquett, 2005). There currently exists little research on how these challenges meet in the setting of the virtual school counselor,
nor how virtual school counselors navigate these challenges to deliver their programs to the best of their abilities.

3.2 Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of professional school counselors in full-time virtual schools, how these counselors develop an understanding of their role as virtual school counselors, and how they evolve strategies to adapt their professional school counseling training to virtual practice. This study is designed to develop a greater understanding of the way professional school counselors function within the virtual environment, where they receive the training and practice necessary to become competent virtual school counselors, and how counselor education programs and scholars may be better prepared to aid these professionals in their training and practice.

This study has the potential to enrich the field counselor education's understanding of an understudied setting for the practice of school counseling. In addition, it adds to already extant literature on the roles and challenges of the professional school counselor by examining how these conflicts are mediated or exacerbated by a novel setting – the full-time virtual school. The study is designed to provide insight into the ways that virtual setting affects school counseling practice, as well as to what extent virtual school counselors were supported in their development of their own professional identity and programs. Additionally, this study has the potential to offer a better understanding of where counselor education programs could expand and refine their educational offerings in order to better prepare counselors for all settings, and where
professional organizations could offer relevant professional development opportunities for counselors currently working in virtual settings.

3.3 Research Questions

This study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. How do school counselors come to understand the primary role of school counselors in virtual school context, and what strategies are needed to administer this role to the best of their abilities?

2. How do administrators understand the role of the virtual school counselor, and how do they communicate their understanding to their counselors?

3.4 Research Design

3.4.1 Theoretical Framework

This study used a qualitative methodology based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The rationale for using qualitative methods over quantitative was twofold. First, the experience of virtual school counselors is an area unexplored by the current counseling literature (Currie, 2010). Furthermore, without research-based support and insight into the role of the virtual school counselor, it was difficult to develop an original quantitative instrument to use with this specific population. This led to the second rationale for designing this investigation as a qualitative study. Generally speaking, qualitative research methods possess greater utility when used to investigate topics where little is known. These methods are also useful for gaining novel understanding of topics, where much is known but a new perspective is deemed as valuable (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Virtual school counseling, in a way, satisfied both conditions, such as (a) specific
interactions and strategies that school counselors should develop to execute their school role where they do not have face-to-face contact with their students, and (b) specific circumstances of virtual school counselors are novel enough that traditional understandings of their school role may not apply. By using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the researcher was able to enter the field of practice of the virtual school counselor by examining the phenomenon under study with a nuance and openness that quantitative research methods do not always allow.

In addition, as the interpretation of qualitative data can be heavily influenced by the researcher's inherent perspective, a further lens was chosen to ensure that data were interpreted consistently throughout the study. In this case, the researcher used social learning theory as her interpretive lens. Due to the lack of formalized research, best practices, and focus on virtual school counseling within counselor education programs, there exist few explicit training programs or concrete instructions for school counselors who find themselves working within a virtual environment (Currie, 2010), so when considering how a virtual school counselor develops an understanding of his/her role and practice, we must look to the environment he/she resides within. As developed by Bandura (1977), social learning theory holds that "people are neither driven by inner forces nor buffeted by environmental stimuli. Rather psychological functioning is explained in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction of personal and environmental determinants. Within this approach, symbolic, vicarious, and self-regulatory processes assume a prominent role" (p. 11). It is expected that people acquire new knowledge and processes not just by explicit instruction, but through observation of the activities of
others and the consequences of those actions, through role models who exemplify the processes or roles to be acquired, and innate personal capacity to regulate one's own actions and correct for anticipated results.

Using social learning theory within the context of workplace learning has precedent, as many workplace interactions are highly structured and regulated, providing plenty of pedagogical opportunities (Billett, 2004). Thus, even when explicit instruction is not available for a new counselor, there may be numerous opportunities to observe more experienced colleagues in their practice, and develop an understanding of their role and the processes of administering that role. In environments where counselors do not have role models in the form of more experienced colleagues, they are likely to look to administrative figures for this modeling and instruction (Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009), which is one of the reasons this study also sought out administrative participants. In these cases, administrators' perceptions of the school counselor's role and worth, which they subsequently communicate to counselors through both explicit and implicit means, are more likely to come from their own observed experiences of school counselor practice, rather than explicit instruction within their training programs (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005). As social learning theory examines the ways in which learners develop knowledge within context, through observation, vicarious reinforcement, and role models, this interpretive view is appropriate for the learning of school counselors within an emergent environment where they have few explicit educational guides for practice.
3.4.2 Sampling

Participants were solicited through a theoretical, systemic sampling technique, wherein the researcher identified all possible settings (currently accredited full-time virtual schools in the state), and contacted first as many as could be reached. After the initial gathering of four counselor respondents, additional effort was made to reach out to subjects from under-represented schools and settings, such as smaller, local schools, in order to enhance the breadth of potential experiences. Data on all accredited virtual schools in the state of Ohio were obtained from the Ohio Department of Education, and individual counselors and administrators who worked at such schools were solicited for individual interviews through initial telephone and e-mail contact. In addition to the original selections, snowball sampling was also used with participants. In other words, they were encouraged to identify other school counselors and administrators who may be able to contribute valuable perspectives to the study. Three additional school counselor participants were solicited in this fashion, as well as four additional administrator participants.

Sampling continued until saturation point was reached, based on the continuous analysis of the data during data collection, and until no further participants could be found or solicited through follow-up e-mails and telephone calls. Potential participants were not excluded based on the size of their virtual school nor based on their educational qualifications or time in service as virtual school counselors. However, during data analysis, specific analytical techniques were used to determine if there were significant differences in the role conception of the virtual school counselor across school size and
experience. Recognizing the small population size, it was expected that the saturation point would be reached between five to ten individual interviews among each category (e.g., administrators and counselors). The final count of participants was nine school counselors from three schools and five administrators from two schools. All participants were full-time employees of state-certified, full-time virtual schools in Ohio.

Of the counselor respondents, all nine were female, with eight respondents who self-identified as Caucasian or White, and one who self-identified as Latina. Ages were varied among counselor participants, with a range from 25 to 58, with the average age across counselor respondents being 34.

Most counselor respondents were members of at least one professional organization, with the Ohio School Counselor Association (OSCA) being the most popular (N=7), followed by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) (N=5). Two counselor respondents belonged to no professional organization. School counselor respondents all had advanced education, with all possessing Master's degrees, and all were licensed in the state of Ohio as school counselors. In addition, one counselor respondent held a teaching license in music, and one counselor had an additional credential as a Certified Distance Counselor. Counselor respondents had varying amounts of experience, ranging from being in their first year as a school counselor to their seventh year, with the average amount of experience being three and a half years. Not counting their field experiences while in training, all respondents had all their school counseling experience in the virtual school environment – none of the participants indicated counseling field experience in a virtual environment, although one counselor had
experience in a higher education virtual environment during a previous career. Most of
the counseling respondents served students in the high school grades, with one serving 7-
12, two serving 9-12, three serving 11-12, one serving 9-11, one serving K-8, and one
serving K-12 students. Caseloads for counselor respondents were generally large, with an
average case load of 513, and a range from 100 to 909 students. Seven out of the nine
counselor respondents were from the same school, and practice with a cohort of 20
professional school counselors in the same building. Of the two respondents from other
schools, one was the sole professional school counselor in her building, and one practiced
with four other counselors. Many of the counselors described themselves as working with
high numbers of at-risk and overage youth, with the caveat that as the majority of
respondents work at the same school, which is state-wide, counselors also emphasized
that they had a wide variety of students they served from regions all over the state,
including rural, urban, and suburban. This information is summarized in Appendix E.

Administrator respondents came from two schools. These schools shared similar
characteristics, in that they were both statewide, K-12 schools with multiple counselors.
Additionally, both schools had a dedicated counseling supervisor – one administrator
respondent served as one of these counseling supervisors, four did not. All of the
administrator respondents identified as female, and as White or Caucasian. Ages varied
from 30 to 50, with a mean age of 36. Four of the five administrator respondents were
active in professional organizations, all had Master's-level degrees, and all possessed
current educational administrative licenses for their state (in one case, this was an
alternate-path credential). Respondents' years of experience as school administrators
varied from two to ten, with the average years of experience being five. Four out of five of the administrator respondents had administrative experience only within the virtual school environment, and had been promoted from teaching positions in a virtual school. One respondent had ten years of total administrative experience, eight of which were in a brick-and-mortar school, two within the virtual school. Administrator respondents served a wide variety of students – one served grades 9-12, one served grades 10-12, one served Kindergarten through eighth graders, one served grades 6-8, and one served all grades, K-12. Of the five respondents, only two identified themselves as directly supervising counselors: the counseling supervisor of one school supervised 19 counselors, and one other respondent supervised one counselor. All respondents identified themselves as working with counselors, however; the two schools from which respondents were drawn had five and 19 counselors, respectively. This information is summarized in Appendix F.

The two largest full-time, virtual schools in the state were represented in data collections, as were two smaller schools which served limited geographic areas. The schools ranged in size and demographics, with the largest being a statewide school with over twenty thousand students in grades K-12, while the smallest had an enrollment of 575 students from grades 7-12. The number of counselors also differed by school, with the smallest school having only one counselor, while the largest had 19. Although the students these schools served were not reporting to a central building, the counselors indicated that they were expected to work at a central location for at least three days a week, allowing counselors to work with each other in the same setting. Whether the school accepted students from across the state, or in a limited geographic area also
differed by school – two schools were open to statewide enrollment, while two schools had district-level enrollment.

3.5 Data Collection

Prospective interviewees were approached on an individual basis, and the risks and purpose of the study were thoroughly explained to them (see Appendix B), and they were given the opportunity to consent to an interview which was expected to take between forty-five minutes and an hour. Interviews were arranged at a time convenient to the participant, and took place over the phone. Each participant was given ample time to ask any questions they had about the study or its purpose. Each participant was also offered the opportunity to check their transcribed interview for accuracy and intention. All interviews were recorded, with the participant's permission, and transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

During each interview, participants were given the opportunity to recommend other participants who may have an interest in the study, as well as the researcher's contact information to allow them to share it with any other interested parties. Data collection convened over the course of five months. In addition to interviews, the researcher kept a reflective journal during the process of data collection and analysis. All data collected were stored in password-protected digital folders on the researcher's personal computer. Physical media, such as recordings, notes, and other artifacts, were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home.
3.5.1 Interviews

Each participant was interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendices C and D). Interviews took between thirty-five minutes and one hour and fifteen minutes to conduct and were conducted through the telephone. All interviews were, with participant's permission, audio recorded, and the researcher took notes during the interview. Participants were fully informed of all of their rights, given a full consent form, allowed to express and address any concerns, and reminded that they may take a break or end the interview at any time (see Appendix B). In order to protect participant confidentiality, interviewees were asked to choose a pseudonym for the purpose of the study. All individual references were omitted. Instead, individual names were linked to pseudonyms created by the individual participants.

Two interview protocols were developed for this study: (a) one for school counselors and (b) one for administrators (see Appendices C and D). The school counselor protocol asked targeted participants to share their understanding of the role of the school counselor, how they visualize that role in virtual school contexts, the challenges that exist in implementing the role of school counselors, what opportunities exist in the virtual environment for enhancing the role of school counselors, how their administration in the virtual school has communicated and supported the role of school counselors, and what strategies school counselors have evolved for administering the role of school counselors in the virtual school environment, and how they share those strategies with their peers in virtual school counseling. In addition to these questions, counselors were asked about the demographics of their school, their student caseload
(e.g., size and grades), and their own training and experience in school counseling, virtual or otherwise (see Appendix C).

The administrator protocol focused on the administrator's understanding of the role of virtual school counselors, how they developed that understanding, how they communicate that understanding to virtual school counselors, and what aspects of the school counselor's role that they feel are more or less important in a virtual environment compared to a brick-and-mortar environment (see Appendix D). Within this focus, they were asked what qualities they believed virtual school counselors should have, how they evaluated virtual school counselors, how their conception of school counselors' role has developed while they have worked in virtual schools, and what tasks they thought were most important for virtual school counselors to perform. In addition to these questions, administrators were asked about their level of experience and training in virtual and brick-and-mortar environments, as well as the demographic data of their school, and how many counselors the school has and how many, if any, the administrator directly works with or supervises (see Appendix D).

3.5.2 Reflective Journal and Field Notes

In addition to the raw interview data, the researcher also kept detailed field notes and a reflective journal. The reflective journal is an important part of qualitative research (Morrow, 2005; Ortlipp, 2008), allowing the researcher an opportunity to record her assumptions, biases, reactions, and feelings about the data and the process as it is happening. Through this process, the researcher was able to organize and examine her internal processes by adding rigor to the qualitative research and having another avenue
to address and elaborate on what assumptions she was bringing to the table. The field notes provided an additional reflective quality, allowing the researcher to record the participants' thoughts, observations, and inspirations.

3.6 Data Analysis

During data analysis, the researcher transcribed all interviews and included all journal entries and field notes in the analysis. The process of transcription allowed the researcher to become more familiar with the data, as well as allowing for greater depth and understanding of the data for purposes of coding and theme identifications. In grounded theory, data are analyzed as they are collected. To this end, the researcher did not wait until all interviews were conducted to begin coding and sorting. Instead, she compared each emergent datum with all previous data and refined the protocol with emergent data to drive areas of further or deeper inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first phase of data analysis consisted of microanalysis, defined by Strauss and Corbin as "the detailed, line-by-line analysis of data…to generate initial categories (with their properties and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among categories; a combination of open and axial coding" (p. 57). Open coding is defined further as, "the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data" (p. 101). In this process, collected data are broken down into discrete parts, examined closely, and compared with other discrete parts for similarities and differences. Throughout this process, the researcher developed categories and sub-categories which allowed for comparison to one another in the process of axial coding, defined by Strauss
and Corbin as, "the process of relating categories to their subcategories…linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions" (p. 123).

The rationale for using this method of coding at the beginning of the data analysis process is to require the researcher to attend to the details of every point of data, to pay attention not only to what is said, but how it is said, and what specific words are used and how those words may indicate very specific sorts of context and understanding. After this analysis has been done, the researcher integrated those categories into a theoretical structure, using triangulation between administrator and counselor responses. The detailed breakdown of themes and subthemes can be found in the codebook (Appendix H).

3.7 Trustworthiness and Rigor of Researcher

In traditional, quantitative research, rigor is typically evaluated by means of four constructs: internal validity, external validity (or generalizability), objectivity, and reliability (Morrow, 2005). However, in qualitative research, these criteria for rigor are not considered to apply in the same way – instead, Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit four different standards for rigor in the context of qualitative work: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. For the purposes of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) offer the following definitions of the relevant terms:

*Credibility*: The reconstructions of the researcher derived from the data are considered credible windows into the perspectives of the original holders of the information or input.
 Dependability: The methods and means of gathering the data can be relied upon to be authentic and honest to both the original state and any changes of state created by the study or over the study's duration.

Confirmability: The idea that the developed reconstruction of the data can be traced back in clear and understandable means to the originating data, rooted in time and context.

Transferability: The idea that the researcher describes the origins and context of their data and methods in sufficient detail that readers can accurately judge the extent to which the conclusions drawn may apply to other, related contexts.

There are multiple ways in qualitative research to establish each of these criteria, not all of which are applicable to every study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study used a subset of recognized techniques to establish rigor and trustworthiness.

3.7.1 Credibility

There are several techniques recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to aid in establishing the credibility of qualitative research. A thorough review of the extant literature preceded the study so that an understanding of previous context could be established. During the study and analysis, the researcher used triangulation – targeting different schools, different grade levels, and expanding the subject pool to administrators in order to gain a different perspective on the phenomenon under observation, as well as peer debriefing, where the researcher met with a disinterested peer for the purposes of exposing underlying formulations and assumptions which might be interfering with the
credible analysis of the data, as the researcher's primary methods of establishing the credibility of data.

3.7.2 Transferability

The concept of transferability is offered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a parallel construct to the quantitative concept of external validity, or the extent to which the results can be generalized to other contexts and similar populations. Although the findings of the study are limited to the population studied, the use of multiple cases and robust, illustrative exemplars of every theme and subtheme (Morrow, 2005) was provided to aid the reader in his/her own determination of the applicability of the results on a wider scale.

3.7.3 Dependability

To aid in establishing the dependability of this study, a logical and documented audit trail must be established (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Materials gathered and included for the audit trail in this study are:

1) Research Proposal

2) Intentions and predisposition (i.e. theoretical framework, research assumptions, information about researcher and peer debriefer, see Appendix I).

3) Finalized Interview Protocols (See Appendices C & D)

4) Demographic Information (See Appendices E & F)

5) Raw data (recorded participant interviews, transcripts, e-mail correspondence)

6) Code book (see Appendix H)
7) Reflective journal and notes

3.7.4 Confirmability

In order to meet the standards of confirmability, the researcher should provide adequate and clear examples of how conclusions were derived from the data in such a way that the reader or other researchers can trace the conclusions to their antecedents in a straightforward manner (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the use of a code book, confirmatory sessions with a peer debriefer, triangulation, and the establishment of an audit trail were used.

3.8 Researcher Subjectivity

The researcher's role as a current, full-time doctoral student and a current clinical supervisor for counselors in training influenced this study's research process, analysis, and results, as did the researcher's previous experiences as a school counselor in a brick-and-mortar school. Although the researcher has worked with virtual schools for the purposes of professional development and administrative tasks in the past, neither the researcher nor the researcher partner had any experience as a virtual environment, which means that they lacked a lived understanding of the experience of the population which they were studying. Likewise, the researcher's lack of experience in a similar environment may have influenced which interview subjects were willing to speak to the researcher, and the context for the researcher's interpretation of the interviewees' responses. The researcher's previous experience in studying the literature available for virtual counseling, which is mostly situated within the clinical realm (Currie, 2010), has also shaped the assumptions which developed and implemented this study; it is likely that
some of the assumptions were not equally applicable to the school environment. The assumptions that drove the development of this study were as follows:

1. Based on the research literature, virtual school counselors will identify common themes (e.g. lack of guidance, struggles with establishing student relationships, use of technology, non-role congruent activities) in their perceptions and experiences in the practice of virtual school counseling.

2. Virtual school counselors will look to their peers, their administrators, and their professional organizations for guidance on how to practice their role within the virtual school.

3. Virtual school counselors will find that they have to develop their own processes and procedures for achieving "counseling" work within the virtual school, including innovative uses of technology.

The researcher's subjectivity is being provided for aid in the review and analysis of this study so that readers can develop their own conclusions about the most effective ways to process the data and findings herein. Further information on the researcher and auditor is provided in Appendix H.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

All of the participants in this study were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines of ACA, ASCA, and The Ohio State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Although there were no identifiable risks for participating in this study, participants' information was kept confidential, and all data were secured by either a password or physical lock, depending on what was available. However, it is still a strong
possibility that some of the participants could have felt uncomfortable sharing aspects of their work or about having their words recorded, but it was assured to the participants that they could choose not to participate at any point in the process and that any participant who wished to withdraw would have all identifying data linking them to the study destroyed.

For this study, the participants were also extended the opportunity to examine their transcribed interview and to review the final draft of the report. This step allowed them to visually understand how the data would be used, and it extended the opportunity for them to raise any concerns or questions that they had. Again, every precaution was taken to ensure that every participant felt safe, confident, and free to participate – or not – at every point during the study. The approval form for the study can be found in Appendix G.
Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of professional school counselors in full-time virtual schools, particularly in regard to how they came to understand their role in the school, developed strategies to practice that role, and how virtual school administrators understood the role of the school counselor and conveyed that to their counselors. More specifically, it explored how counselors and administrators from four schools in Ohio defined the role of the school counselor, understood the duties of the school counselor, communicated their understanding to others, developed strategies for implementing that understanding, and found support or resistance for that understanding from peers and associates, both within their schools and without. It examined the social mechanisms by which counselors gained an understanding of their role, the technology they used to implement that role, and the sources, types, and quality of support they received from counselor education programs, counseling peers, professional organizations, and administrators within their building – or the lack of support thereof. In order to achieve this, the following research questions were generated:

1) How do school counselors come to understand the primary role of school counselors in a virtual school context, and what strategies are needed to administer this role to the best of their abilities?
2) How do virtual school administrators conceive of the role of school counselors in a virtual school context, and how do they communicate that understanding to school counselors?

4.2 Demographic Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in this section. The final count of participants was 14 in total: nine school counselors and five administrators. The participants came from four schools, with the counseling cohort drawn from three schools, and the administrative participants drawn from two schools. All participants worked in the same Midwestern state, were appropriately licensed by their state, and had Master’s degrees. Most respondents were active members of at least one professional organization, and ranged in age from 25 to 58, with the average counselor age being 34 and the average administrator age being 36. All grades from K-12 were represented in the sample, but most counselor and administrators indicated working with secondary school students. This matches the general demographic distribution of virtual school students (Queen and Lewis, 2011). Experience varied among the participants from less than one year to ten years, with most respondents indicating the majority or entirety of their experience taking place within the virtual school (see Appendices E & F for a full demographic description of respondents).

4.3 Emerging Themes

After analyzing the different data sources (e.g., interview transcripts, field notes, etc.), the researcher used an inductive approach, rooted in a modified grounded theory methodology. For this study, the inductive approach was utilized, which meant that the
"patterns, themes, and categories of analysis" came directly from the data sources (Patton, 1980, p. 306), and grounded theory supplemented this approach. In other words, emergent themes from the data were used to develop a theory for understanding the phenomenon rather than a theory being imposed on the data from outside (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Interviews were analyzed using a variety of techniques, starting with line-by-line examination of the interviews and field notes to identify reoccurring themes and salient points. Further, the counselor and administrator interviews were analyzed separately to identify emerging themes, and any emerging themes were then compared across counselor and administrator data sources.

At this time, the counselor interviews were separated out into the large school (19 counselors on staff) and the two smaller schools (four counselors, and one counselor, respectively), with the experiences and themes emergent within the small schools and large schools being cross compared to confirm that the themes were constant. Where significant outliers were noted that seemed to be related to the size of the school, or its counseling department, these outliers were included as counterpoints within their individual themes, to ensure that the robust and nuanced experiences of all the counselor respondents were included.

Transcriptions of all interviews were distributed to the secondary research assistant (see Appendix I), and were coded independently by the primary and secondary researchers. The research team then met to discuss the developed themes, discussed the process of identification, correct codes, and areas of disagreement. This discussion
continued until a 100% agreement was reached on the themes identified, which would then form the basis for the theoretical model developed for the study.

4.4 Presentation of Findings

The remainder of Chapter Four involves an in-depth discussion of the findings from the research study. The original themes were collated and grouped into several thematic categories:

(a) Understanding Their Role as Pioneers

(b) The Struggle for Connection

(c) Being Seen as Real Counselors

(d) Mixed Messages from Administrators and Supervisors

(e) Translating Resources And Training, and

(f) New Strategies for a New Environment

The final list of themes were used in the development of a model for virtual school counselor role development, as shown in Figure 1, below.
A sense of isolation and a lack of support, particularly from professional organizations, were key components of the experience of the virtual school counselors interviewed, particularly those practicing in a school where there were few or no counseling co-workers. School counselor respondents expressed feeling prepared for conventional school activities. They also shared receiving no training – or even exposure – that would be valuable in virtual counseling environments, especially prior to employment in virtual schools. Once employed, many of the school counselor participants shared that peer support and modeling was the primary method of transiting into the position and understanding how to best execute their school counseling duties. Some of the school counseling respondents even expressed how they struggled to develop and implement interventions beyond individual counseling and the quasi-administrative, academic-focused tasks.
Similar to many studies in the school counseling literature (Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009; Ponec & Brock, 2000) the school counseling respondents believed that administrators could provide greater support. It is also worth noting the presence of school counseling-trained supervisor positions within more than one of the subject schools. Generally speaking, such supervisors provided more concrete support and professional development than school administrators. When the supervisor was school counseling trained, many of the school counseling respondents felt more comfortable obtaining advice and guidance from the supervisor; they also felt more secure with the provided input. Although there was a near-universal desire for improvement in their practice, very few of the school counseling respondents shared any strategies and experiences in reaching out to other school counselors outside of their virtual environments. Many of the school counseling respondents expressed that neither their brick-and-mortar colleagues nor professional organizations understood the setting of the virtual school, or a counselor’s place within it.

Expectations for the practice of virtual school counselors were often poorly matched between school counselors and administrators, despite both groups of respondents reporting frequent meetings and direct communications (e.g., verbally and electronically) and formalized processes of evaluation in more organized schools. This may reflect a similar phenomenon in the literature, where there is a gap between what administrators may feel should be a counselor's role, and what they actually ask the counselor to do (Fitch, Newby, Ballester, & Marshall, 2001). Mediating factors for this sense of isolation could be found in having supportive coworkers who could provide
informal sources of mentorship and collaboration and the designation of a school counseling supervisor instead of reporting to a principal.

According to many of the school counseling respondents, the administrative portions of their jobs (e.g., scheduling, registration, and clerical tasks) were administrators' highest priorities, which would have reflected similar views and priorities between brick-and-mortar and virtual environments (Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005; Monteiro-Leitner, Asner-Self, Milde, Leitner, & Skelton, 2006). However, when asked about their priorities, several administration respondents shared a different point of view. They expressed specifically that working with students in distress and assisting students with career and college planning were the highest priorities, which aligns with Fitch, Newby, Ballestero, and Marshall's (2001) study on the priorities of future school administrators. Most counselor respondents felt that they had little guidance on developing comprehensive school counseling programs in virtual school environments, which confirms a deficiency noted by Currie (2010) in the lack of exposure or instruction that virtual school counselors receive from training programs or field experiences. Many of them also disclosed that they did not have school counseling handbooks or guide to references, if needed. They were largely left on their own to figure out things. For those individuals who were fortunate to have a school counseling supervisor, they were able to seek useful guidance that often aided them when questions and problems emerged. Likewise, the presence of colleagues working at the same school gave counselor respondents more opportunities to find virtual school counselors who were interested in collaborative programs and role-congruent projects. School counseling
respondents without this kind of support reported lower levels of role-congruent activities and fewer strategies on developing the counseling aspects of their virtual school counseling program. Concrete support from administration (e.g., reducing student caseloads and providing specific training and professional development) and assistance from coworkers helped the school counseling respondents develop ways to execute their job, which is, again, consistent with research regarding the importance of administrative support in both role congruence and job satisfaction (Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009).

4.5 Understanding Their Role as Pioneers

The school counseling respondents were asked to describe their understanding of their roles and responsibilities in virtual schools (e.g., those norms and expectations for their position that were shared throughout the school, the understanding of what their responsibilities were, and types of feedback and evaluation they received from administrators and supervisors in those roles). As a result, several items emerged from the school counselor responses, such as scheduling and non-role congruent activities being commonly identified as key parts of their role and responsibilities but most indicated that they also worked with personal/social student concerns as well as future planning and some also cited academic support tasks (such as collaborating with teachers, and working with students who were struggling academically). For example, Harriet (25, School One, first year) emphasized the non-congruent activities when she said:

It is very heavy on scheduling and administrative duties. Sometimes, I feel like a secretary or a call center rep…I'm often the point person for them [students] for [my school], so they're not really sure who to contact, so they'll often contact me and say, how do I get printer ink, or how do I get
help with my computer? So, it makes it a really unique position to be in as a school counselor. Because I'm often fielding questions that have nothing to do with personal or social counseling.

Sally (37, School Two, 5th year), a respondent from a smaller school, offered similar sentiments:

So I would say that honestly, the majority of the time is spent doing data entry and, um, maybe, um, you know, ASCA recommends the 80/20 ratio. It's completely reversed. It's mostly indirect - 80 percent of the time it's indirect and 20 is direct.

However, many of the counselor respondents indicated that they did consider personal/social and career-related concerns to be key parts of their roles in their current positions. Some, like Tina (31, School One, 4th year), expressed surprise about just how much personal/social work they did in the virtual school environment:

I do a lot more personal social, than what I thought I would. And especially with not being face-to-face, I do feel like I have students who are more willing because I'm not, you know, they're not looking at me, exactly, in the face, because they're not looking at me, they can open a little bit more. I do get a lot of information from them, you know, that is on, you know, through messages and through phone conversations. So I do a lot of personal/social.

Of the counselor respondents, those who worked at the larger school talked in more depth about their role-congruent responsibilities as school counselors, and indicated more specific activities under the academic/personal/career umbrella than did counselors working in in smaller schools, where they were the only counselor, or one counselor among a small group of counselors. Notably, Elizabeth A (31, School Three, 1st year), a respondent who was the only school counselor at her school, was the only counselor to mention testing coordination as one of her primary duties, and both respondents from smaller schools indicated having less time and experience in performing duties associated
with the role of the comprehensive professional school counselor, such as small group
and classroom curricula. This was true even of the counselor who expressed that she felt
highly supported by her administrators and other staff at the school.

Administrator respondents, when asked how they defined the role and
responsibilities of the school counselor within their school, had considerably less
consensus among their responses. Most agreed that counselors made valuable consultants
for teachers and administrators regarding student issues. Sarah (37, School Four, 5th year)
illustrated this view:

I mean, there are times when you know, I'm using my best professional
judgment, but it's so nice to be able to run it across, run it by the manager
of counseling services, just to see if um, a response is going to be correct.
Or the direction that I'm thinking we should go should be, you know, is it
the right one, is there a better way?

Mary (30, School Four, 5th year) spoke about the counselor's role in regards to teacher
support in similar terms:

They're extremely, especially with our younger elementary students, the
counselors play a big role in supporting our teachers to support our
students. Um, so in our self-contained classro--classes, not classrooms,
um, when the teacher really is, um, the main point of contact for a family,
if there's an issue that starts to come up that feels, um, like it could use
additional counseling support, sometimes it, it is, sometimes it's more
effective for us to have that teacher and that counselor meet about the
situation, and the counselor kind of guides the teacher and how best to
work with the family.

Three of the administrator respondents also identified addressing emotional
issues, particularly students in crisis, as being an important part of the school counselor's
role. Interestingly, Sam (50, School Four, 10th year), the one administrator respondent
with both brick-and-mortar and virtual school experience, reflected that she considered
virtual school counselor's role with student emotional issues more prominent in the virtual environment:

Um. They do, I think, as compared to brick-and-mortar they do a lot more with, um, kids with issues. I think in the brick-and-mortar you don't find out about some of the things that the kids are facing, um, you know what I mean, you don't really know that the kid's, maybe, parent is having, um, is in the hospital or whatever. I think here because of the one on one-ness, we find things out. So the counselors spend a lot of time truly counseling, truly um, you know, working with these families and these kids. To help them get past whatever hurdles they're facing. I don't think that happens as much in a brick-and-mortar. Not, not in the big scale that it does here.

Another respondent, Eva (32, School Four, 4th year), also identified the virtual environment as being a key factor in the necessity of school counselors being prepared for emotional issues:

They're an essential part of our school. Just being in this type of environment, we have to keep a very close on students, especially in middle school. They're going through so much emotionally in addition to their academic struggles.

In contrast to counselor respondents, only two of the administrators identified strongly non-ASCA-role congruent activities, such as scheduling and registration, as part of the school counselor's role, and one of those statements was in regard to how the administration had been working to attempt to alleviate some of the burden of "administrative" duties on the counselor. Katherine (32, School One, 2nd year) spoke to this progress with her counseling department:

We've added some more, kind of, I don't want to say administrative support, but support for some of the more administrative tasks that really, when you go to school for school counseling, that's not what you went to school for.

However, few (N=2) of the administrators mentioned career and college planning as important to the school counselor role in their school, and even fewer mentioned small
group or classroom curriculum as key parts of the school counselor's role in the virtual school.

4.6 The Struggle for Connection

Within the virtual school environment, counselor respondents expressed a complex view of their relationships with students. Many of the counselors interviewed had apprehension about their ability to form relationships with students in the online environment. For some, like Rebecca (58, School One, 7th year), that apprehension centered on student engagement:

Like I said, it's hard to gauge the effectiveness of some of the programming if you can't get a hold of the student. If they're not going to engage. But we have that as a general rule, anyway, I think, in a virtual environment, trying to get the kids to stay on task, even on their academics, as well. That's a little bit of a challenge.

Sally (37, School Two, 5th year), expressed a variant on this view:

I, expected, a lot more, I expected more interaction with the kids. And I was disappointed when I found that the kids weren't really all that interested in doing that interaction...but I was a little disappointed that they weren't more interested in taking advantage of those things.

Five out of the nine counselor respondents shared similar concerns about student engagement with counselors, indicating difficulty in contacting students, and in being able to ensure that students were receiving, processing, and acting on the information they were given regarding academic and future planning concerns. This is similar to findings within the clinical counseling literature, where concerns about the quality of client feedback in the absence of face-to-face presence and traditional cues for understanding are a common observation (Shaw & Shaw, 2006).
Others were concerned about the quality of the relationship with students, and their ability to counsel effectively without the usual cues of face-to-face interaction. An example of this is Michelle (31, School One, 1st year):

I do still find it difficult to, I don't know, have a genuine conversation with a person, online. About such serious matters. For me. Because I feel like I don't have them there in front of me, so that's something I struggle with because I can't read their non-verbal cues. I can't read their body language, I can't hear their tone of voice.

Tina (31, School One, 4th year) expressed similar fears in starker language when she said:

To be honest, I was very scared. Just because I was very scared. Just because I was so used to the face-to-face and the one-on-one communication style with students. And being able to see them, their faces and I was more scared than anything.

Concerns about the quality of the therapeutic alliance are common in the clinical virtual counseling literature (Baker & Ray, 2011; Goss & Anthony, 2009; Shaw & Shaw, 2006). However, despite widespread apprehension and concerns about the ability to connect with students and counsel online, several of the respondents indicated that not only were they able to deliver counseling services online, but that that students were more open and seemed more comfortable with sharing important aspects of their life with the counselor than the respondents expected. This is not without precedent within previous literature. Suler (2004) identified the term "online disinhibition effect" for this phenomenon, and in their qualitative study of clinical counselor interns working with online clients, Haberstroh, Paar, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, and Gee (2008) reported that their respondents identified a similar effect with some clients. An exemplar of this response is Michelle (31, School One, 1st year), who said:
However, with that said, I do feel like, and this was unexpected to me, that the kids especially middle schoolers open up, I feel, a little bit more than they would if they were sitting in front of me, face-to-face. I suppose maybe some of that, I don't know, especially since social media has come around, it's easier to just write things out when you don't have to look at somebody face-to-face, and tell them all these terrible, embarrassing things about yourself, or your family, or you know, these things that are going on in your life. It's easier to just write them, because you don't have to see somebody about it. And so I do feel like they open up probably more than they would if we were sitting together.

Rose (32, School One, 5th year) also mentions this perception that students open up more completely because of their feeling of safety with the online environment:

I do have a lot of personal social in an e-school. I have found that students will open up to you fairly quickly, and, my guess is because there is somewhat of a sense of anonymity through the phone or through e-mail. So I see a lot of very personal social topics.

Key aspects of these responses that were consistent among the counselors who felt this way included that such openness was unexpected, and that students were more comfortable opening up because of a perceived sense of anonymity or safety provided by the phone or computer communication. Young (2005) noted that those who sought out online counseling often did so out of a feeling that the online environment provided more safety, supporting similar observations. However, one respondent, Sally (37, School Two, 5th year), offers a contrary experience:

…very much the lack of ability to connect with kids on that, uh, personal level that school counselors are able to do just because of the nature of the job. That's just simply not feasible for us. You know, you can still develop a relationship but it hasn't been, you know, that's, you know, it's not the kind of relationship that you, you know, traditionally expect with a student and a counselor. You know, there's not a whole lot of trust because they don't see you on a daily basis.
Another of the respondents indicated that, because she served a local population, most of her personal-social counseling was done face-to-face. It is difficult to say, in these cases, whether the difficulties in establishing relationships lay with the discomfort of the students, or of the counselors – previous literature suggests that counselor discomfort with online counseling, and lack of training, can be a barrier to providing effective service (Finn & Barak, 2010; Goss & Anthony, 2009; Shaw & Shaw, 2006).

Administrator respondents defined counselor contact with students often in more mechanical terms, such as time between student first contact and counselor response, and the volume of phone calls or e-mails made by the counselor. All five of the administrator respondents indicated that they found time between response, and volume of counselor calls, a metric by which to evaluate counselors and their connections to students. One of the administrators, Katherine (32, School One, 2nd year), spoke to the difficulty of using this as an evaluation of the quality of counselor interactions:

So, you know, I look, I do look at numbers even though numbers don't necessarily always show, it doesn't show that you're saying the right thing to a kid. Even though you sent a lot of e-mails, it doesn't necessarily mean that they're all saying the right thing. But I do check to see how much information is going out.

However, it is worth noting that of the five administrator respondents, only two considered themselves direct supervisors of counselors, which is likely to have an impact on how closely they attend to counselor tasks and connections.

4.7 Support Vs. Isolation

The virtual school counselors were asked several questions relating to their sources of support as virtual school counselors, within the building, among mentors,
outside of the building, and from their professional associations and training programs. Responses from interviewed counselors suggest that virtual school counselors struggle to find support as virtual school counselors outside of the building where they work – and when they do not have a large, organized cohort of within-building support, that struggle may be felt all the more acutely.

All nine of the counselor respondents found their primary support networks among their coworkers within the school building. Most identified their fellow counselors as a primary means of support – all of the counselors who did so were from the larger school, and part of a large counseling department. Michelle (31, School One, 1st year) explained the benefits of a large school environment:

…we're a virtual environment and have so many students, naturally we have to have so many counselors. I mean, you're never going to walk into any school building and have eighteen counselors, all in one building. So, that is an awesome support system. We all sit together in the same office, um, well kind of I guess, it's set up a little bit different and we're separated. But we have, you know, the people so close to us that we can ask questions when needed, we can you know bounce ideas off each other, um, collaborate a lot, um. Consult a lot. I think that's really the main, the main support system there.

Five counselors also identified their administrators and/or counseling supervisor as a significant source of support within the building, which matches with previous literature in brick-and-mortar schools, where the administration is a key support for school counselors (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Ponec & Brock, 2000). School counselors espousing this view came from both large and small schools. Four out of the nine counselors also identified professional development and formal training on the technology used by the school as a major source of support. Of the nine counselors, one
indicated that she received "not a lot" of support. This counselor respondent is also one of the two respondents from the small (four counselors) schools in the sample.

Although no counselor respondent indicated having a formal (assigned by the school or district) mentoring relationship, over half of counselor respondents indicated having close relationships with people to whom they looked to as informal mentors and role models. For most of those counselors who identified a mentor, that mentor was either a peer counselor or a counseling supervisor, with two respondents identifying both a peer counselor and a counseling supervisor as mentors in separate aspects of the job. One respondent, Michelle (31, School One, 1st year), distinguished the two relationships (supervisor and peer mentoring) when she said:

…[the counseling supervisor]'s able to guide more of, I guess, more of the specifics of that school in the virtual aspect of it. You know, like where things should go for department wise. How to handle something because you don't have that person face-to-face with you, that sort of thing. And the other one, the retired teacher, or the retired counselor, sorry, I feel like she is able to just because she's been in the field for so long, she's able to offer, I don't know, support and guidance just in like different situations and scenarios with students. Just because she's dealt with, um, pretty much everything.

One respondent indicated that their mentor was an administrator; this respondent was also the only participant who lacked other counselors in her building. This aligns with previous literature suggesting that school counselors in brick-and-mortar schools, when they lack other counselors in the building, may be seen as "quasi-administrators" (Napierkowski & Parsons, 1995).

To contrast this, every administrator respondent indicated that she had a mentor relationship as a beginning administrator in the virtual school environment. One also
indicated that this mentorship was formally arranged by the school, and two indicated that although their mentorship was informal, their school now had formal mentoring relationships for virtual school administrators, although not for counselors. All of the administrative respondents indicated that their mentorship relationship was a significant help in learning their role within the school.

While many counselor respondents were able to find relationships and support within their schools, connections with virtual school counselors outside of their own school were nonexistent. None of the nine counselors had significant or regular contact with virtual school counselors other than the ones within their own building; the few contacts spoken of were strictly goal-oriented, such as obtaining transcripts or other records from other virtual schools.

In addition, counselor respondents indicated a degree of strain with their peers in brick-and-mortar schools. Six out of nine of the counselor respondents related feeling a lack of support or acceptance from their peers in brick-and-mortar schools, and/or from their professional organizations. Occasionally, the language used to indicate this feeling was rather strong, as in the case of Elizabeth B (30, School One, 5th year), who said:

…sometimes I feel a little embarrassed that I'm a virtual school counselor. That people don't take me seriously. As, well first of all as a school, but I guess that's another issue, but don't take me seriously even as a counselor. Like even when I go to All Ohio every year, and even when I'm there, honestly, it says [virtual school redacted] on my badge, and I just, sometimes I get nervous. I'm like, oh great they're going to see [virtual school redacted] and they're going to think that I'm just a joke counselor, and, you know, that I don't do anything. Like a lot of counselors when I do have conversations with them, are really surprised at all that we're able to do? Which, you know, I think is why I just try to have those conversations, so I guess just, I just feel embarrassed that I might be negatively judged.
In even stronger terms, Sally (37, School Two, 5th year) agreed:

...I remember when I went to my very first conference, and I told everyone I was a virtual school counselor, everybody acted like I was, they acted like I had the plague.

The interaction of participants with their professional organizations is more nuanced. Participants reported feeling as if there was very little support from their professional organizations specifically for them, as virtual school counselors, although two participants noted that they felt organizations and conferences were developing a greater understanding of virtual counseling, and a few shared that they felt that local conferences and organizations were making progress in the area of support specifically for virtual school counselors. For Elizabeth A (31, School Three, 1st year), professional organizations may not have much focus towards her specific part of the field, but feels supported in general:

I think, in general, yes, but as far information really being directed towards you know, this specific part of the field, I don't think that there's much out there, at all. But do I feel like if I had a specific issue and I was looking for support they would try to help me? Yes, I do. So kind of b--, kind of a middle ground, there.

Harriet's (25, School One, 1st year) response is illustrative of how many respondents felt about the information they received from conferences and professional organizations:

I guess I would feel kind of neutral about that. I know there's not a whole lot of knowledge or resources out there about virtual school counseling. But often resources can be sort of tailored and fit to virtual school counseling, but I wouldn't say that there's a huge focus in the, in the field on that.

All of the participants indicated that they would like to see professional organizations become more aware of the virtual school counseling field and that they would like to see
more professional development and presentations specifically geared to the virtual school environment.

4.8 Mixed Messages from Administrators and Supervisors

Both counselor and administrator respondents were generally in agreement that relationships between counselors and administrators were positive in their schools. However, the substance and frequency of those interactions differed both within individual schools, and between schools which had implemented a “counseling supervisor” position, and schools which had not.

School counselor respondents were asked what role their administrators played in their practice, what they perceived administrators' priorities for counselors as being, how those priorities were communicated to the counselors, and what forms of concrete support that administrators provided for counselors to help them meet the expectations of their role. Most counselors felt that their administrators were "supportive" or "helpful", but their actual interactions with administrators varied widely. From Elizabeth B (30, School One, 5th year), who said: "I rarely talk to administration…" to Tina (31, School One, 4th year) in the same school:

I work extremely close with our graduation principal. He has a lot of, um, input on what the graduation team does, when it comes to the graduation requirements changing to which students, you know, need a little extra push. We'll send those his way. And he's very interactive with us. I mean, there's basically not a day in the office when I don't see him. You know, just him coming in and saying, hey, how's your day going, is there anything you need, um, so. I have a lot of interaction with the principals at [school redacted]. And it is, it's actually very positive.

In the schools where a specific counseling supervisor position existed, school counselor respondents interacted with other administrators less, and for more logistic or
administrative tasks, such as scheduling, escalating student or parent complaints, or academic requirements for students. One school counselor, Willie (27, School One, 3rd year), spoke about the split in this responsibility:

I tend to go to my administrator, it's usually about credits or academics. And that, when I say that, I usually mean my principal. I go to him for more about academic stuff. But if I have like a serious personal social issue that I need answered, I'm more likely to go to my counseling supervisor.

From the administrator perspective, respondents were more likely to identify meaningful interactions with school counselors in consultation or administrative matters: organizing school events, scheduling and course selection, and consulting on responses to specific students or families.

School counselor respondents were in almost universal agreement that one of the top priorities for counselors, as communicated by their administrators, was correct scheduling of students. Harriet (25, School One, 1st year) relayed her frustration with a recent conversation that highlighted this point:

But, the conversations that I've had have left me feeling a little discouraged because I think counselors at [school redacted] are kind of viewed as schedule-pusher-outers. Even today at a meeting, the word job security was thrown around because of new Ohio Graduation Requirements and how classes are going to need to be scheduled in the future. And I just couldn't help but think, like, that's not my job, but that's what it is at [school redacted].

At a different school, Sally (37, School Two, 5th year) related a similar frustration:

Just, scheduling, data entry, that kind of stuff. I think that's their priority because they don't know any better. And I keep, keep pushing that education, trying to explain, um, and I'm working on a presentation to just show to our director, hey, this is what we could be doing, these are my ideas.
About half of the respondents identified student retention and helping students graduate on time as a major concern of their administration. Willie (27, School One, 3\textsuperscript{rd} year) offered an example of this focus through the administrator she worked most closely with:

\ldots because we're trying to make sure that that graduation rate stays consistent. So I would say that the administrator I know personally, I would say that's one of his biggest concerns. He wants to make sure, you know, that I am accurate in my work. You know, so kids have the chance to graduate. If they graduate, that's going to be up to them, but, it's important that it will be accurate.

As an interesting contrast, when administrator respondents were asked what their highest priorities for their counselors were, their answers were quite different. All five identified either student contact, or student crisis management, as a top priority for their counselors. Mary (30, School Four, 5\textsuperscript{th} year), at the smaller statewide school, said:

For us, I think the highest priority, first and foremost, is, it's the student safety concern. Um, that's a drop everything and deal with it sort of situation. So that, that takes precedence.

And at the larger statewide school, Katherine (32, School One, 2\textsuperscript{nd} year) placed the highest priority on responding to student contact:

Probably just making sure that they're getting back to the students who are reaching out to them. So, they clearly have a reason they want to talk to you, parents and students, um, that's kind of what they handle first every day…

The third most common priority identified was career and future planning.

The differences expressed in the views of counselor respondents and administrator respondents are striking, but are not without precedent in existing literature. Previous papers in this area highlight that although administrators may prioritize role-
congruent tasks and non-role-congruent tasks equally (Fitch, Newby, Ballestero, & Marshall, 2001), the priorities they share with their counselors for role-congruent tasks may be overridden by financial or organizational requirements (Zalaquett, 2005).

Another factor may be the ways in which expectations are communicated between counselors and administrators. School counselor respondents were most likely to identify meetings and direct verbal communication as the way that administration expectations were communicated to them. As Tina (31, School One, 4th year) said:

A lot of it is kind of the trickle down approach, I feel. It's spoken about in the manager's meeting, or it's spoken about to the assistant director, and then it comes from her. The information typically comes from her, either through e-mail or we usually have meetings, counselor meetings, probably once every two weeks. So we're kept up to date on things are doing well, positive things they're saying about the department, or things they need we to improve on. So we are kept in the loop on a lot of the information that's being said.

Rose (32, School One, 5th year), among other counselors, expressed similar experiences:

I would say kind of just through the school culture. And, policies. Meetings that we have. Um, yeah. I mean it depends on how much information, or how many changes, they might be every other week, it just kind of depends on what's going on. But, yep, they're all department meetings about every other week to monthly.

A notably different response came from Sally (37, School Two, 5th year), one of the counseling respondents from a smaller school without a specific counseling supervisor:

I think it's just an expectation that's always been there, and they just kind of let us do our thing. They, there's really no direction unless I bring something to their atten--., or one of the four of us brings it to their attention, that hey, we need to address this particular thing. Otherwise, they just kind of let us go our own way, and you know. So, in a way that's good, and in a way that's bad. You know? You gotta figure out which side of the coin you want to be on, I guess.
This response, in particular, reflects previous literature which suggests that many administrators may not have a clear understanding of the school counselor's role (Kirchner & Setchfield, 2005). Administrators were also asked how they felt their expectations were communicated to school counselors. The majority concurred with the concept of verbal communication and meetings being the primary source of transferring those expectations. Eva (32, School Four, 4th year) explained what that process looked like for her work with her counselor:

Like I said, I probably talk with the manager of counseling on a daily basis, so I think just, um, informally, just being able to - we work in the same office, which is really nice. So I can just walk over to her room and say, hey, what are we doing to address this, whether this is a student concern, or something about, um, an initiative that they're starting. So just those informal meetings are certainly, are just one of the more effective ways that we just share our ideas, and make sure that we're all on the same page. We also have a weekly meeting that involves all of the administrators, the counselors, and the administrative assistants. And the counseling team does provide updates on how many seniors we have, what, what supports we need to provide to make sure those seniors will be graduating, and any other initiatives that they do have, so that the entire administrative team is all on the same page, when it comes to those counseling initiatives.

And from the perspective of Katherine (32, School One, 2nd year), the counseling supervisor at another school:

I mean we have meetings, kinda how I mentioned before, we have meetings, right now we're meeting about every other week, um, this school year, the start of this school year hasn't been as crazy as the last, so, last year I think we met every week, for I think, the first, maybe four or five weeks at school. But, we meet every other week - I keep myself a running list of things that aren't so urgent that I need to send them out immediately, but that can, you know, wait until we have a meeting…I make it a point to walk around and see everyone every day, just to make sure that they know I'm here. My office is actually in the same office as most of them. So I'm, pretty, pretty accessible when I'm at my desk. But. I
just make sure that they know what's going on and communicating things that way.

School counselor respondents indicated that they did not have many concrete sources of job expectations or what administration expected from them. When asked, seven out of nine of the counselors indicated that they had no written document or program for the counseling department to follow that outlined job and activity expectations. ASCA's Role Statement for School Counselors (2009) strongly suggests that programs have mission and vision statements in order to facilitate faculty understanding of the purpose and role of the school counselor. Willie (27, School One, 3\textsuperscript{rd} year) explained her school's situation this way:

> We have a handbook for counselors that outlines the different rules and different policies...you know why we schedule a kid this way, or how many credits we give them. You know, those real concrete and academic policies, you know, who you call in that situation, and that sort of thing. But in terms of a program for like if we're doing classroom guidance or what's expected in terms of college and career, that stuff we don't really have, I feel like we don't really have stuff written down for that. That's kind of our, I feel like the academics is more black and white, and the other stuff is more grey.

The feeling that administrative expectations were unclear in regards to non-academic tasks was repeated by other counselor respondents, as well. Harriet (25, School One, 1\textsuperscript{st} year) echoed the term "grey" when referring to it:

> There's this weird grey area when it comes to live sessions, or sort of like Skyping or live chatting with more personal social issues, or even um informational, like group--not really like group counseling. I guess, we haven't even reached the point of group counseling, but like informational sessions. Um, that's not really assigned up - it's an optional thing, and some counselors get together and, and do live sessions together and plan materials, and then others don't. So it's kind of this weird grey area, where it's not in our role, but it's sort of expected that we do it.
Elizabeth B (30, School One, 5th year) went a step further, to speak of how the ambiguity of expectations can have an effect on new counselors to the school:

And I think it's really easy, you know, you come out of grad school and you're all zealous and all excited, and I've seen this happen to new students, or to new counselors here, and they realize what the expectations are, and they're just kinda like bogged down by it? And then you kinda lose that motivation to go out there and do more.

And as an illustration of that, Harriet (25, School One, 1st year) spoke to her experiences as a first year counselor, running into this ambiguity for herself:

Um, well, literally like when I started, and um, I went to my first professional development offered by [virtual school] with my coworkers, my boss literally said it's not required, but many counselors like to do it. And I think it is part of our reviews. To see if we are going the extra mile to do things like live sessions. So that that's just where I get the perception that it's sort of expected and sort of not.

The two school counselor respondents who did indicate that they had a written guideline both referred to the departmental handbook. Rebecca (58, School One, 7th year) went into detail about what the handbook contained:

We do have a departmental document of what we do. Of what we're supposed to do. Yes. It goes to the ASCA standards. So, the academic, we help students, um, you know, schedule courses, make sure they're on academic track, um. Help them with academic issues. Which runs into the personal social part, what's keeping you from being successful, that type of thing. And then, um, the career, what's you plan out of high school, the college planning, let's help you plan for that. Let's do some career assessments, those types of things. Uh, basically, it just follows the whole ASCA model. And we, we redid that within the department within the last four years. And, basically, it's a, it kind of goes along with the training we got in grad school, and it's just putting it into practice.

Previous literature has noted that when school counselors lack confidence in their position and their role, their ability to become leaders within the school suffers (Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009). Additionally, Studer, Diambra, Breckner and Heidel (2011) found
that the Management and Accountability components of the ASCA National Model are often the least well executed in the field, which the lack of a program document as observed by many participants may support.

4.9 Translating Resources And Training

Another key theme for the counselor respondents was training in the virtual school. Or, perhaps more importantly, the lack thereof. None of the counselor respondents had received any training in counseling in a virtual environment prior to being hired at their schools. Although most counselor respondents felt prepared by their counselor education program to have the skills of a school counselor, they related a near-complete lack of information shared about virtual schools as a viable setting for employment, as well as a lack of exposure to the skills and issues of counseling in a virtual environment. Rose (32, School One, 5th year) related one aspect of this experience:

That's tricky, because...yes, I had a great program. And I think definitely, students are still students. And so, it really taught me to interact with students. And you know different resources I can utilize. Basic counseling skills, things like that. But, I would say even now, I go to trainings. Let's say I were to attend All-Ohio. There would probably not really be any presentation - it's all brick-and-mortar based, and you find it to be kind of funny. I mean, there's definitely ways you could change things, um, to apply to a virtual school. But some things you can't. And so it's so short sighted, I think. More and more schools are opening virtual branches, or new virtual schools are popping up. It's a great alternative for a lot of different types of students.

Willie (27, School One, 3rd year) agreed to both feeling prepared by her program to be a school counselor, but not receiving any information on virtual school counseling as an option or viable setting:
In terms of the basics, I think I got like the general counseling skills that I needed from it. But I don't, I can't hardly think of a time in my program that I ever talked about virtual counseling. I mean maybe there was, if we did, it was very, very briefly touched on. There's not a lot of emphasis on it.

Only one of the counselors, Michelle, felt that she had been entirely prepared for her current position through her counselor training program, because:

…you know, in the big picture it's really not that different. You're still working with kids about the same types of issues. And, you know, all of the problems and issues that I'm working with, with the students. They're all typical, you know, typical things that I would work with anyway. You know, I have kids who are having a hard time with their families. Or I'm having kids who are suicidal. Or, um, having a hard time with body image. I mean, all the topics are the same, and the way you deal with it is the same, it's just that you are writing back and forth with them, or talking with them over the phone, instead of sitting there face-to-face with them.

All school counselor respondents indicated that they felt their counselor education program could have offered more exposure regarding the virtual environment, or had coursework specifically on counseling virtually to improve that experience. Currie (2010) noted that few counselor education programs in school counseling provide students with any exposure to the possibility of working in an online environment, and the general lack of research in this area. Finn & Barak (2010) observed that, in clinical virtual counseling, only 1-in-5 practitioners had received any formal training in online counseling skills, while Haberstroh, et al (2008), have observed high rates of ethical non-compliance in online counselors, potentially due to a lack of training in this area.

Furthermore, once hired, only one, Rebecca (58, School One, 7th year), indicated receiving any formalized training in the virtual environment, when her school provided the opportunity to allow counselors to become Distance Credentialed Counselors, a
certification course available for counselors who work in online environments. She described the experience for herself and other counselors in the same school:

…we did the training over two or three days, I believe. And then I had to do additional school work on top of that. To fulfill the credential. And I keep it up, every year. I just think it adds value to what I do.

But, for other counselors, their greatest source of information about how to counsel online was their coworkers. Willie (27, School One, 3rd year) explained:

I have learned from my coworkers, like what they say, and how they handle situations, people who have been there before me. But in terms of formal training, I haven't had any.

Rose (32, School One, 5th year) offered similar sentiments:

…when I came here, again it's a very collaborative department. So, again, it was just kind of learn as I go. With a lot of help, and a lot of resources provided to me by the other counselors who are already working.

There were, however, limitations and difficulties in relying on coworkers to provide the on-the-job training of a virtual school counselor. For Sally (37, School Two, 5th year), learning from colleagues could be frustrating, as the norms within her department went against her own sense of what a professional school counselor should be doing:

We started, we're twelve years old and those people started, they built this school from, you know, ten people. Um, so, they had already developed these roles, and certainly their training was very different from what I received. Um, so, there was, you know, there was more focus on the personal-social and the academics and the career than there was for these things, for the people that were here previously. They just, they scheduled. They did transcripts…There are certain norms that I tend to challenge every day. Just based on my, you know, on my knowledge. I don't think we always see eye to eye on that. I don't, I think we should be doing different things, and that's why I am kinda pushing this along. But, I think, that it's the norm right now, is the expectation which I explained is what
I'm currently doing. That's the norm for us. I'm just trying to challenge-push those boundaries a little bit.

For Elizabeth A (31, School One, 1st year), the respondent who did not have coworkers to learn from, as she was the sole counselor in her school, the search for training and resources was a matter of time management and self-motivation:

I haven't been able to find a whole lot out there, and to be honest, I haven't had a lot of, I mean, it was never really a long-term plan of mine, to be a virtual school counselor, so it's kind of, hit the ground running, and I haven't had a whole lot of opportunities to look into, um, you know other things that I'm able to bring to the table, so to speak. I'm hoping that when it settles down, I'll have a little time for research, and you know, to find out some new avenues.

School counselor-specific training, while working in virtual schools, was a developing phenomenon for school counselor respondents, showing up only in schools where there was a counseling supervisor, and largely after the appointment of that supervisor. Rose (32, School One, 5th year) explained the transition:

Previously, depending on your grade level, and so on and so forth, you had a principal who was your supervisor. But the principal didn't really know what we did, or how we communicated with students. So, now we have a supervisor who was a counselor here, and has created a more comprehensive training program, introducing individuals to all the different systems that we use, and how we communicate with students.

Tina (31, School One, 4th year), another counselor at that school, describes the same phenomenon from the perspective of someone hired after the shift had begun:

And then eventually we did start getting, you know, the professional developments that [virtual school] sponsors within our entire department, and then our entire school. They do a lot more of that, but especially with the new counselors coming in, they get a lot of online guidance and you know training when they do start out. But it's different from when I started, I do feel like. Which is, it's a very good different.
On the administrative side, Katherine (32, School One, 2nd year), the counseling supervisor, describes the development of one of these more formal training programs:

When they start, I have a training that I set up, where they sit with one counselor, and learn about this system, and then they move, and they learn about this system. So they learn about our different systems kind of individually, before worrying so much about how they're all going to interact, and how much they're actually going to have most of them open, all the time, on their computers, that kind of thing.

Outside of their school building, contact with other virtual school counselors was scarce. In fact, no counselor respondent indicated having the opportunity to discuss virtual counseling or observe virtual school counseling from anyone who was not in their current building. However, most respondents said that they felt the ability to observe, network, or share information with virtual school counselors outside their own school would be helpful, and could improve their own practice. Elizabeth B (30, School One, 5th year) provided an example of the possible benefits of such opportunities:

I think it would be helpful for me to observe, maybe other virtual school counselors in other schools? Since I have a really good grasp of what we do, since I've been here for four and a half years. And I really think that it would be helpful to collaborate with other virtual schools, just to you know, see how they, you know, do their job.

A common thread in these responses was curiosity about the practices of other virtual schools, and how the respondents might use that information to improve their own professional practice. As Willie (27, School One, 3rd year) said:

I think it would be a really interesting, just to see. Because I don't really know how other schools operate. Like if it's the same as [school redacted] or it's different...I think that we could be supportive to each other, learning about those types of things. And I think that we could learn a lot about things we would be able to relate to and share experiences.
New Strategies for a New Environment

Although large caseloads, lack of face-to-face interactions with students, lack of pre-service training in virtual counseling, and mismatching expectations create challenges for virtual school counselors, many of the respondents were able to identify innovative practices and strategies which allowed them to continue to work to deliver well-rounded services to students within their unique environment. For some counselor respondents, taking the time and making the effort to reach out to distant students was an effective strategy. Methods of reaching out to students included regular newsletters, e-mails, phone calls, large group sessions, virtual office hours, and intentional notetaking to stay abreast of the needs and goals for large caseloads of students. Harriet (25, School One, 1st year) explains her strategy:

It's very easy to just answer their concern, and just send them along their way, but really, getting to know the students. Taking a second - even though I have 800 students to tend to every day - really taking a second to talk to them and see how things are going, and ask some questions about their lives, and just really go the extra mile to get to know my students and assist them.

Tina (31, School One, 3rd year) also highlights this strategy in action, as well as how it interacts with the challenge of large caseloads:

I just make myself available and I feel that I am getting to know my students. I mean, I still actually have, you know, last year our rosters were a lot bigger, I was around eight hundred kids on my roster, so it was a little bit more difficult. But now, having the smaller caseload has allowed me to get to know a lot of them. On a, on a more personal basis... And I'm one of those types of counselors that on a weekly basis, I send out, every Monday, I send out an inspiration Monday quote. You know, to try and get my students involved on Mondays. I'm going to be starting open office hours. And there are things that I, I put myself out there, I make myself available to my students, so they know that I'm there.
For Sally (37, School Two, 5th year), her counseling department's attempts to reach out to distant students takes a more ambitious form:

We also have purchased mobile units. So we're actually going to be going out to our kids. We have two big busses, I guess—I'm not supposed to call them that—and we're going to travel across the state and be available to actually interact with kids on their own turf, you know. Most of the, you know, we have, we have a very high poverty level. So a lot of our kids can't get to our re—even our regions. We have offices in five regions throughout the state. And even that sometimes is a stretch for students to come. Um, so this, this is a new opportunity that [name redacted] and I had talked about. Like how to utilize that, that opportunity with the counseling piece, there. So, you know, if we say, okay, here, this is gonna be college day, and we're gonna do applications on this day at this site and if you are interested and you're close by and you want to come, this is the day to come, and we'll be here, and we'll, you know, help you with your college application. So sort of some things like that that we're trying to actually, you know, bring it to them rather than them coming to us.

Many of the counselor respondents reported developing and implementing direct counseling services including the individual, the small group/focused group, and the large group/classroom curriculum. Neither of the 'small school' respondents had had the opportunity to conduct small group counseling in the virtual environment, and the counselor respondent who had no coworkers had not had the chance to implement either large group or small group counseling curricula, although she had conducted extensive one-on-one counseling. This may reflect barriers observed in previous literature, such as burden of administrative tasks, lack of confidence (which may be exacerbated by a lack of online-specific training), and case load (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008).

When asked about how large group and small group curricula were conducted in the virtual setting, counselor respondents were in agreement that these events, when they took place, did so within the schools' virtual classroom software, although the specifics of
that software differed across sites. Some counselors had their own virtual classroom space that they invited students to, while others went into classes hosted by teachers to conduct a lesson, in an echo of the similar experience in brick-and-mortar schools.

Counselor respondents who had conducted these sessions offered different strategies for success. Some, like Elizabeth B (30, School One, 5th year), stressed the effort to make the sessions interactive and engaging for the students:

Large group sessions are mostly like psychoeducational. I would do lessons from anywhere, like in middle school, like I guess it was anywhere from, um, I did a stereotyping one, I did healthy relationships, study skills, I'd do one about what to expect in ninth grade. So I would say typical things. Um, and those look like...I usually load up a PowerPoint into the program, and I try to make it as interactive as possible, so I do a lot of, I'll let the students, you know, we talk a lot, I do an overview and then I'll let the students, they can, you know, write on the board and things like that, so I'll be like draw arrows to what you think matches up, or, um, in the larger sessions, here's some, here's a blank board, write what you think stereotyping is. And I'll have them write it down, and then I'll have someone else read.

Three counselors mentioned “tag-teaming” sessions with other counselors in the building as being a way they conducted sessions. Rose (32, School One, 5th year) explained one of the benefits of working with another counselor in virtual classroom curricula:

There's usually more than one counselor in the session, because students will raise their hands, raise hands, and ask to have chat. Or speaking privileges to verbally ask a question. But, then a lot of students are also chatting. And, like, text in a text in a text box. So, you know, you also want somebody to be able to monitor that and, um, answer those questions.

Fewer than half of the counselor respondents referred to doing small group counseling within the virtual school. Those who had not included two of the school counselors in their first year, and both of the school counselors from the "small" schools.
School counselors who did report doing small counseling groups reported that the format is not what brick-and-mortar counselors would always consider a “small” group counseling experience. For one, the closed group experience was a difficult one to replicate in the virtual school. Elizabeth B (30, School One, 5th year) speaks to the difficulty with the traditional, closed group format:

When I first started, I tried to do a couple of closed small groups. That didn't work out very well because of how transient our students are. You know… it's go from fifteen people to three, and sometimes the same three didn't show up, so it was really hard to keep the consistency, or the continuity going? You can't just pull them out of the lunch line and make them come to your office.

Tina (31, School One, 3rd year) has seen the same thing in her attempts to run similar programs:

I have tried to do some, um, one on one, or just some small group with like, you know, young girls on healthy relationships, that kind of thing. And the biggest thing that I see is that it's not consistent. And what I mean by that is, I'll ask all the girls to attend. And say the first week I have ten show up. And then the next week I'll have five new show up. So the consistency is the biggest thing. So I'll try to run those groups, but you know, say they come to one, and I feel like we've built that relationship and, we've gotten a good jump start on some things and then they don't come to the next one. And then, you know, if they show up to the next one then they've missed a piece.

Michelle (31, School One, 1st year), on the other hand, highlights another issue with small group counseling – larger numbers of students that make the line between "small group" and "classroom/large group" a blurry one:

…they're calling them small group lunch bunches, but to me, in my opinion, what, I think they're set up more like...they're very much a combination of classroom guidance and small group. They can't really be small group, because there could be so many students in the room, at once, or in the classroom at once. It's not going to be, you know, like a typical small group would be max ten people. And that would be a lot. So that
you're able to get that really comfortable connection with the people. Um, so that you can, for sharing and for revealing personal information. Um. That sort of thing. And what we're going to be doing is more, I would say that it's more similar to classroom guidance. Just because there will be so many more students there. It depends on who shows up, but there could be thirty to a couple hundred kids.

In cases where the numbers of "small group" participants may outnumber the total number of students in a grade in a brick-and-mortar school, small groups may be distinguished more by their focus and the quality of the experience, rather than the quantity of the members. Michelle (31, School One, 1st year), again, discusses how she distinguishes the two:

I don't think it's quite as strict as classroom guidance. Like, if I was doing classroom guidance, you know, in a brick-and-mortar, I would make it very structured. Because I would be teaching a lesson. And we would have a pre-test and a post-test, to, you know, to gauge how much they learned. And so, the setup of it is more similar to a small group where it's more just about let's talk about this, what do you guys think, more conversational.

Elizabeth B (30, School One, 5th year) agrees:

I have a few slides but it's a lot more conversation. I allow the students to have chat privileges and they can share with each other, ask questions, so it's more personal, I would say. You know, and sometimes in, you know, in grief and girls group we don't even get past the first slide. And it's a half-hour later. So it's a lot more student directed, rather than counselor directed.

4.11 Summary

This chapter used the transcripts of the semi-structured interview responses to provide empirical data which explored the experiences and strategies of virtual school counselors at four full-time virtual schools. These findings led to the development of themes that described the experiences and processes that these participants developed to navigate their experiences. The following six themes emerged: (a) Understanding Their
Role as Pioneers, (b) The Struggle for Connection, (c) Being Seen as Real Counselors, (d) Mixed Messages from Administrators and Supervisors, (e) Translating Resources And Training, and (f) New Strategies for a New Environment. These themes shaped how confident and able virtual school counselors felt to perform their duties.
Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Overview of the Study

As introduced in Chapter One and explained in Chapter Two, the school counselor is a vital part of the American school system, and a key to both student success and to encouraging the school system to consider every need of every child, not simply the quantifiable learning measured by conventional assessments and pedagogy. Counselor educators, professional organizations, and stakeholders have struggled for decades to understand and promote the role of the school counselor which has the best outcomes for all students. In doing so, the field has developed an understanding that a professional school counselor should strive for a comprehensive program which incorporates academic, future planning, and social-emotional services to all students, not just as crisis management, but as part of intentional programming which touches every child, whether they are currently in need of direct services or not. In addition, ASCA has urged counselors to understand accountability measures, and advocate both for their students and themselves, becoming leaders within the school building and district. Traditionally, many school counselors face challenges in their pursuit of this ideal: an inaccurate understanding of their role, institutional distress which requires counselor to cover non-role-congruent activities, administrator confusion over the proper school counseling role, and prohibitively large caseloads of students, just to name a few. The advent of the virtual school adds another: an unfamiliar setting where the counselor's
most traditional assets – their interpersonal skills – cannot be accessed in the same ways counselors are used to, and where there is a lack of awareness and training throughout the profession on how to prepare counselors for work in this setting. Although virtual school counselors are a minority in the profession, their numbers are growing. And as those numbers grow, and more counselors take work in virtual schools, they are developing modes of practice which many will, then, communicate to their successors within their building, as well as their peers in other schools, virtual or otherwise. Virtual school counselors are active within their professional organizations, serve on state boards, and develop presentations at conferences for their peers. For good or ill, the practices and attitudes that virtual school counselors develop have a lasting impact on the profession, just as the profession's attitude and engagement with virtual school counseling has a lasting impact on the performance of virtual school counselors… and the lives of their students. However, this emerging subfield is almost entirely unexplored by both researchers and training programs, leaving the status and experiences of virtual school counselors as an unsightly blank spot in school counseling's knowledge base. With that in mind, this study was developed to begin to draw back the curtain on the question of virtual school counselors, and shed light on the ways that the profession can better support virtual school counselors, and what researchers and counselor educators might learn from virtual school counselors to better facilitate the development of every school counselor, no matter where they practice.
5.1.1 Research Question 1

How do school counselors come to understand the primary role of school counselors in virtual school context, and what strategies are needed to administer this role to the best of their abilities?

The findings of this study indicate that most of the participants in this study come to understand their role in the virtual school through interactions with their peers in the virtual school context, most commonly other counselors within the building. Some participants exist within an organizational structure which gives them access to a counseling supervisor, and this supervisor can provide more structure and definition for role-congruent activities. However, communication, assumptions, and factors such as large case loads and a lack of formal training in virtual counseling techniques can make developing an ASCA-congruent role difficult. Although ASCA (2009) suggests that school counseling programs should have program goals and a stated vision of the school counselor's role, few participants described their programs as having any concrete indication of their role. Instead, many participants described their understanding of their role coming from meetings and personal communications, and that these methods could be ambiguous or contradictory.

Likewise, the environment itself poses challenges – traditional school counseling tasks such as small group and classroom curricula are not described as impossible within a virtual environment, but the participants describe their implementation of these tasks as looking very different. Those participants who did not have support and examples from fellow counselors on how to design and execute these interventions in this unique
environment were less likely to develop them on their own, and could get stuck in the "planning" stage. This matches the concerns raised by Currie (2010) with the lack of training regarding the virtual school environment, and suggests that the lack of training in virtual techniques noted in clinical practice (Finn & Barak, 2010) may also be a problem for virtual school counselors.

For the counselor participants in this study, connecting with their students was also listed as an area of concern. Experiences in this area varied significantly. Although several counselors described feeling that students were quick to connect over the means provided, others mentioned that it was an ongoing challenge to create and sustain a connection with their students. Again, large case loads of students were a factor in some cases, as was an awareness that students had to be approached deliberately and that a large portion of the work to establish connections fell to the counselor, since, by and large, students did not have the capacity to just "walk in" and discuss their concerns.

An additional factor in this was the lack of support for virtual school counselors from programs and professional organizations. Many of the participants described feel that they did not receive much support or professional development aimed at virtual school counselors, and although they found traditional school counseling professional development useful, they had to find ways to adapt it to their home environment. Some participants indicated that they had a counseling supervisor who was specifically trained and focused on the promotion of the counseling program; these counselors described receiving more, and more focused, support when this position was active.
Several participants indicated that they felt isolated, or "embarrassed" by their position as a virtual school counselor, even among other professionals, and many participants indicated a desire for greater exposure and opportunities in the wider profession. Contributing further to this sense of isolation was a lack of contacts with virtual school counselors outside their own buildings – none of the participants described any experience working, collaborating, or sharing information with virtual school counselors outside their home school, although most participants indicated that this was something that they felt would improve their practice, and was desired by them.

Overall, the findings of this study found that virtual school counselors had a wide variety of experiences in developing and executing their roles. They identified several factors which improved their ability to execute their role, as well as numerous challenges to their ability to understand and implement that role. They relied heavily on the experiences of their fellow counselors for support, instruction, and modeling, and those counselors who had a counselor supervisor (as opposed to a traditionally trained administrator) had more opportunity to receive counselor-specific professional development and support.

5.1.2 Research Question 2

*How do administrators understand the role of the virtual school counselor, and how do they communicate their understanding to their counselors?*

This study found that many administrators were disconnected from direct interactions with virtual school counselors in a supervisory capacity. Of the administrators interviewed, only two indicated that they were in direct supervision of
counselors – one of these participants was a counseling supervisor whose primary administrative focus was on the counseling program, and the other directly supervised only the lead counselor of their school. Respondents’ experiences regarding the role of virtual school counselors was, therefore, typically drawn from what they observed counselors doing in their day to day interactions with them. Administrator priorities for virtual school counseling focused around crisis and personal counseling, and collaboration with teachers and administrators, although some respondents still prioritized non-role-congruent activities as well. Career and future planning components were typically not identified as a priority for administrator respondents.

Although administrators’ conception of the school counselor's role was closer to ASCA congruence than expected, this study found that there seemed to be a discrepancy between administrator and expressed counselor conceptions of administrative priorities. Some counselor respondents indicated experiences of ambiguity or conflict in understanding administrative priorities, although both counselors and administrators indicated that there were ongoing and frequent communications of task and role. However, administrators did not share experiences of trying to concretely identify or promote a mission statement or programmatic goals for counselors, and reported using metrics for counselor evaluation which focused on quantitative measures (such as number of phone calls, e-mails, etc. made within a specific time period, or the number of students scheduled, or who had transcripts checked and approve) instead of qualitative measures.

Personal contact between administrators and counselors varied. Some administrators and counselors indicated working together frequently, while others
indicated that they rarely had personal contact, or only had personal contact regarding specific tasks. In schools where there was a specific counseling supervisor, traditional administrators reported having little knowledge of the counseling program's goals, training, or experiences. Some traditional administrators in schools with a counseling supervisor participated in the hiring process for school counselors, but more often, the counseling supervisor was described as taking on the bulk of that task, as well as the evaluation of virtual school counselors after hiring. The counseling supervisor was also described as the person most likely to be involved in bringing in counselor-specific professional development, advocating for counselors to the rest of the administrative staff, and evaluating counselors throughout the year.

Overall, this study found that administrators indicated having positive relationships with their counselors, although their knowledge of what counselors did varied significantly based on how involved with the counseling department they were. Administrators who were not counseling supervisors typically described not knowing how counselors were generally trained or evaluated. Most administrators highly valued counselor abilities to intervene with students in crisis and to collaborate with staff and faculty over student concerns, but many counselor respondents did not share this understanding of administrative priorities, suggesting breakdowns in communication. Most counselors and administrators reported that communication took place over e-mail and through regular meetings, but some counselor respondents described that communication as not leaving them with a clear understanding of the school counselor's role and duties. The presence of a counselor supervisor was described as being associated
with more role-congruent training and supervision, but administrators who were not
counselor supervisors described knowing less about counselors and their ongoing
priorities and tasks within the school.

5.2 Conclusions

Analysis of the 14 interviews led to the development of six themes: (a) Understanding Their Role as Pioneers, (b) The Struggle for Connection, (c) Being Seen as Real Counselors, (d) Mixed Messages from Administrators and Supervisors, (e) Translating Resources And Training, and (f) New Strategies for a New Environment. Additionally, dimensions were discovered which had influence across several themes. The two transcendent dimensions discovered were (a) the presence of fellow counselors within the school, and (b) the presence of a counseling-trained counselor supervisor. Derived from the data and the themes which emerged, a preliminary model for the process of role development for virtual school counselors was developed.

To this end, 14 virtual school counselors and administrators were interviewed, purposively sampled from the population of credentialed, full-time virtual schools in a single Midwestern state; there were 9 counselor respondents and 5 administrator respondents, representing in total four schools. These schools ranged in size from very large – 19 counselors in a single building – serving a statewide student district, to very small – one counselor – and servicing a small, local area. All grades, kindergarten through senior year of high school, were represented. The primary form of data collection was through phone interviews with single individuals, conducted over several months. The results of this data collection were described in Chapter 4; this chapter will discuss
the implications of the findings in greater detail, examine the similarities or divergences from previous literature in related fields, and develop a theory for understanding the role of the virtual school counselor. The limitations of this study will be examined, and suggestions for addressing these limitations in further work in this area will be outlined. Additionally, this chapter will suggest further areas of research inquiry in this emerging sub-field of counselor education, and offer implications and suggestions for how to improve the experience of current virtual school counselors, as well as preparing counselor education students for potential work in virtual schools during their training programs.

5.3 Findings and Interpretations

Analysis of the 14 interviews led to the development of six themes: (a) Understanding Their Role as Pioneers, (b) The Struggle for Connection, (c) Being Seen as Real Counselors, (d) Mixed Messages from Administrators and Supervisors, (e) Translating Resources And Training, and (f) New Strategies for a New Environment. Additionally, dimensions were discovered which had influence across several themes. The two transcendent dimensions discovered were (a) the presence of fellow counselors within the school, and (b) the presence of a counseling-trained counselor supervisor.

5.3.1 Preliminary Model

As outlined in Chapter Four, the data allowed the researcher to create a preliminary model for understanding how virtual school counselors come to understand their roles and abilities within the virtual school, and how this understanding then translated to their practice as professional school counselors. The first piece of this
development happens before the school counselor is even a school counselor, in their graduate school training. When counselor education is missing the awareness of virtual schools as a potential setting for practice, then counselors may be surprised by the existence of virtual schools, and once they take the plunge and apply, they may have apprehensions or fears about their ability to perform in that environment.

In research on school counselors in conventional, brick-and-mortar schools, lack of confidence and self-efficacy both enhance role confusion (Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008; Studer, Diambra, Breckner & Heidel, 2011), as well as erode counselors' ability to be successful leaders in their new settings (Dollarhide, Gibson & Saginak, 2008). Once within a virtual setting, the new virtual school counselor looks about themselves for mentors and models by which to "learn the ropes" – that they did not receive training in this environment in classes or field experiences makes this process even more important. Overwhelmingly, they look to their peers for support, consultation, and guidance. To a lesser extent, they model themselves on their perception of their administrators' expectations of them.

When they are successful in finding role-congruent models and expectations, virtual school counselors are able to conceive of their role in a more robust fashion, and develop interventions across all three domains (academic, future planning, and personal-social) as well as on all three levels (individual, small group, and large group). Although the environment provides challenges, when counselors have strong peer relationships and counselor-specific training from a supervisor who understands counselors' needs, they are able to undertake the same sorts of tasks, activities, and roles as their peers within brick-
and-mortar schools. This leads towards the development of a full, congruent role as a virtual school counselor, and a more robust counseling program. However, when virtual school counselors do not have appropriate peer models, mentors, or expectations from administrators, they have fewer places to turn for appropriate information and support.

Virtual school counselors may not feel valued by their professional organizations or brick-and-mortar colleagues – worse, they may receive messages from these sources that virtual school counseling is inherently a "lesser" practice, and that they are not "real" counselors. This may encourage virtual school counselors to cling, then, to those non-role-congruent, quasi-administrative tasks, and inhibit their abilities to conceive of a more robust school counseling role, as well as their ability to develop practical innovations for working around the challenges inherent in the setting. Counselors in these positions may become stuck in an “eternal planning” stage, thinking about what they would like to do, but unsure how to proceed, or if it is even possible. This leads to a very different sort of outcome: a counseling program which is delivering only a fraction of needed services, and which may be slow to implement needed changes or develop new programs to meet the needs of a constantly evolving student population. With this model in mind, several recommendations for virtual school counselors and counselor education programs can be made.

5.4 Discussion and Implications

5.4.1 Theme One: Understanding Their Role as Pioneers

The first theme discovered related directly to the central research question of the study: How do virtual school counselors and administrators understand the role of the
counselor, and what factors within the virtual school influence the way they conceptualize, negotiate, and implement those roles? Much like their peers in brick-and-mortar schools, virtual school counselors struggle with the definition of their role between the ASCA National Model recommended by the profession, and the quasi-administrative role that has been a traditional function within brick-and-mortar schools, which includes such duties as testing, scheduling, and other primarily clerical or administrative tasks. An interesting variation found within the responses, however, is the mismatch between the reported priorities of virtual school counselors and virtual school administrators – where administrators named role-congruent tasks as highest priorities, even while counselor respondents believed their administrators' highest priorities to be scheduling and student retention. In the traditional school counseling literature, counselors and administrators often agree in their perceptions of priorities, even when those priorities involve non role-congruent activities. Why, then, is there such a mismatch between counselor and administrator perspectives in this study?

The limitations of the study itself suggest one of the main reasons. Although four schools are represented within the data, the majority of the administrator respondents came from a school where no counselor consented to be interviewed. Thus, there could be a systemic difference in that particular school which is not adequately reflected in the data. However, the administrators largely agreed, even across two schools, about their priorities and on other dimensions, so other factors might also be coming into play. Other reasons may lie within the way administrators communicate and evaluate counselor performance, regardless of their stated priorities. Overwhelmingly, the administrator
respondents mentioned using metrics for evaluation which emphasize easily quantifiable criteria: numbers of calls made, time between initial contact and response, etc. In addition, counselors report receiving ambiguous or no direction from administrators regarding socio-emotional priorities and role-congruent activities such as large group and small group counseling, despite having regular meetings and verbal communication with supervisors and administrators. It is possible that, while administrators understand the vital need for counselors skilled in socio-emotional interventions, their day to day interactions with counselors focus on the more mundane needs of the school, particularly those non role-congruent tasks. In guiding their conversations and contact with counselors to those quasi-administrative tasks, they model and reinforce an expectation that virtual school counselors internalize. In doing so, virtual school counselors could experience frustration, role confusion, and be discouraged from attempting more role-congruent tasks, even though administrators may actually be supportive of counselors doing so.

5.4.2 Theme Two: The Struggle for Connection

Virtual school counselors face additional challenges when trying to connect with students. Many respondents in this study indicated that virtual school students had low levels of engagement in provided counseling services and, additionally, could be difficult to contact when counselors had concerns about their academic progress, social and emotional state, or physical well-being. Concerns about connection went beyond simply being able to get in contact with students, or reassurances that they were receiving and understanding the information counselors had provided, however. Counselors also
expressed concerns about the quality of the relationship between counselor and student, when the counselor could not enter into a face-to-face counseling relationship. These concerns are reflective of those shared in counseling literature by clinical counselors practicing in the virtual realm. However, they may be exacerbated by a lack of pre-employment training, and ambiguous signals from administrators and co-workers about how much and what quality of contact can be expected by a virtual school counselor. Respondents indicated that they did not receive any training on making connections with students in online spaces, or how to build and maintain those relationships once established, in their counselor education programs. More, most indicated that they did not receive formalized training on these skills after employment, either. Most of their understanding of how to work with these students came from a combination of their basic counselor training, and observation of their peers within their building – while this was clearly helpful, it was also highly dependent on the availability of such peers, and the quality of the modeling those peers provided.

The virtual environment also provided a benefit in connecting with students that the respondents did not expect: by their reports, many students found it easier to "open up" to a counselor over the phone or through virtual communications, whether that was e-mail or through online chat engines. This phenomenon is not unknown in other studies of online communication, and has been named the "online disinhibition effect" by some researchers (Suler, 2004). The online disinhibition effect has been typically divided into two broad categories: benign and toxic. Primarily, the variety discussed by respondents could be classified as benign disinhibition in that it enables counselors to create and
deepen bonds with students, and address social and emotional concerns which otherwise would fail to come to the counselor's attention in the virtual environment. However, neither counselors nor administrators seemed to have considered the possibilities in this effect for intentionally deepening their programs…or how toxic disinhibition could affect the school climate, if students are being as uninhibited with each other as they are with counselors. Furthermore, this study did not have any way of assessing how online disinhibition may be affecting the counselor's performance and disclosure to students – the disinhibition effect does not necessarily flow only one way.

Additionally, Sally's contrary response of feeling that individual counseling in a virtual environment was not really possible may indicate that counselors with less than helpful peer models may internalize the idea that the virtual environment is inherently inferior in the area of student connection. Once that belief is internalized, it could affect not only their current counseling practice, but also their willingness and ability to push for a more role-congruent practice in the future, especially in the absence of support from professional associations, and a lack of contact with virtual counseling peers who may provide the knowledge that connection is possible and guidance on how to develop those connections with students.

5.4.3 Theme Three: Being Seen as Real Counselors

One of the most pervasive themes throughout the study was the effect that support had on virtual school counseling role and practice, and the isolation that many of the respondents experienced from their peers in brick-and-mortar schools and their professional organizations. Virtual school counselors rarely received training about
virtual practices in their counselor education programs, they rarely received formal training in anything but the most mechanical tasks once hired on to a virtual school, they found few sources of support for virtual counseling practice outside of their schools, and they had rare or nonexistent contacts even with other virtual school counselors outside of their own schools. As a result, a virtual school counselor's understanding of their role and how to practice that role leans heavily on the support that they could find in their particular building, especially from their virtual school counselor peers.

The lack of supportive peers could create a substantial detriment for the efficacy of the new virtual school counselor. Counselors in schools where peers exist, but do not model effective student contact or value comprehensive services, may find that they are learning inadequate skills and building non role-congruent understandings of appropriate practice. Counselors who are alone in their buildings, may find themselves stuck "reinventing the wheel," unable to make progress with comprehensive counseling services because of the combination of their present duties and having to develop entirely new procedures and practices without the opportunity to benefit from more experienced peers. This, in turn, may lead to fewer counseling services being provided, and a sense of counselor frustration and role confusion.

Another source of support which seems available only to those larger, more organized virtual schools is the position of a "counseling supervisor" or "counseling director": an administrative figure which is the direct supervisor for counselors in the building, and in the examples in this study, is also a trained counselor. This position is not one that has a close parallel in brick-and-mortar schools. While many brick-and-
mortar schools with multiple counselors have one counselor designated as a lead
counselor or a program director, that position is often closer to a “team lead” teaching
position – a peer with additional, quasi-administrative duties. The virtual school
counseling supervisors spoken of in this study, however, are equivalent to full
administrators or, in a corporate sense, division managers. They have primary authorities
in areas of hiring and evaluating virtual school counselors, the ability to advocate for the
creation of training and professional development programs specifically for counselors,
and without student caseloads of their own, can expend more time and energy on steering
the course of a virtual school counseling program.

Counseling supervisors, where they exist, can then be considered catalysts of
support: they create a source of advocacy and concrete support for the counselors
underneath them, and counselors in those programs report that they receive more training,
as well as a lowering of pre-supervisor caseloads. This also, however, seems to lead to a
decoupling of the counselor/administrator relationship which is spoken of in much of the
brick-and-mortar school counseling literature; administrators become less involved in the
direct supervision of counselors, which may hinder the ability of administrators to
communicate their expectations, as well as impact how administrators understands the
help that the virtual school counselor could provide in new school initiatives. Whether
this leads to more or less role confusion in the long term could depend on the quality of
training and support that the counseling supervisor receives for him or herself, as well as
what resources they can find to provide to counselors under their authority.
5.4.4 Theme Four: Mixed Messages from Administrators and Supervisors

Although both counselors and administrators generally related positive feelings about the relationship between them, and agreed that regular communication took place verbally and through meetings, it is clear that there persists some miscommunication between the professions across schools. Reported perceptions of priorities had some overlap, but diverged in a very important way: administrators relayed a high priority for the social-emotional tasks of counseling, particularly in the area of student safety and crisis management, while counselors were under the impression that this was a low priority for administrators. Why did this disconnect exist?

One reason may have to do with the methods by which administrators communicated their expectations and priorities. When discussing meetings and verbal communications, counselors and administrators suggested that these were often task oriented – they discussed tasks which needed to be done, particularly in the areas of scheduling, academic support, and specific events happening in the school at the time. No respondent, including the one counseling supervisor interviewed, mentioned having meetings or deliberate discussions about the counseling program's direction as a whole, or about how to develop more comprehensive services. In addition, responses from several counselors indicate that what is communicated in those meetings is often ambiguous as to how comprehensive services fit into that counseling role, with non-administrative tasks occupying an "optional" role or "grey area" in the information counselors are receiving.
In addition, the lack of formal programmatic documents could be impacting the quality of communication between administrators and counselors. In the absence of clearly stated programmatic guidance, counselors report relying on observations and consultations with their current peers, as well as in-the-moment communications with supervisors to develop their understanding of what they should be doing. With high caseloads and many counselors serving in grades where scheduling, graduation requirements, and other academic supports are persistent day-to-day tasks, counselors attempting to learn their role by observation and modeling on peers are likely to develop a very concrete, quasi-administrative understanding of the virtual school counselor's role.

A third factor in the disconnect between administrators' priorities and the counselors' understanding of those priorities may be in the process of counselor evaluation. Those administrators who indicated having evaluative authority over counselors indicated that they used concrete metrics such as number of calls returned and number of e-mails sent as primary evaluative tools. Many factors of a comprehensive, ASCA Model school counseling program cannot be accurately evaluated using these tools; in fact, the nature of these tools may actually result in lower evaluations for counselors who are doing more role-congruent activities, simply because quality interventions with students (such as classroom or large group curricula) may reduce the quantity of total student contact, at least in the sense of single phone calls or e-mails, by preventing problems before they reach the point of needing to contact a counselor for aid. The fact that counselors are made aware of these criteria and throughout the year may, actually, impede their progress towards a comprehensive understanding of the school
counselor role, as it provides aspirational goals which are focused towards the quasi-
administrative and easily quantifiable metrics that the administrators rely upon.

5.4.5 Theme Five: Translating Resources And Training

Pre-employment training for virtual school counselors can be considered to exist in two categories, one which counselors feel confident about, and one which could be termed a "missing piece" in counselor preparation. The first category is traditional counseling training, obtained from counselor education programs. This refers to all the skills and competencies which have traditionally been valued for a comprehensive school counselor: clinical skills, programmatic skills, evaluation skills, and an understanding of the school setting and system. All of the counselors indicated being happy with their training in this area – they felt confident in their ability to be professional school counselors in a traditional sense. But, there was additional training which was not there: the second category of pre-employment training, the "missing piece" of virtual counseling exposure and training. It is hard to say what effect adding this piece to counselor training would have, since none of the interviewed counselors have had the opportunity to experience it; however, they report feeling that they would benefit from virtual-specific counselor training, as well as the opportunity to observe, or at least be exposed, to other virtual school counselors in their work. Considering how strongly the learning of the counselor participants seemed to be affected by the quality of peer support and modeling that they experienced, it seems likely that including opportunities to be exposed to virtual school counselors, or virtual school counseling techniques, within their
counselor education programs may provide a stronger baseline from which new virtual school counselors could continue to grow.

Within their schools, training for virtual school counselors was variable, with schools with a counseling supervisor appearing to have higher incidents of counselor-specific professional development, and more organization in their training and support for virtual school counselors. However, this was clearly a work-in-progress according to both the counselor supervisor interviewed and the counselors under her. Within the school counseling literature, successful leadership by school counselors has been linked to the ability to take responsibility for change, focused and concrete goals, a clear knowledge of role, and support from other stakeholders during the process (Dollarhide, Gibson, & Saginak, 2008). The existence of the counseling supervisor as an elevated counselor in a leadership position for an entire department creates a unique opportunity to develop and facilitate the growth of numerous virtual school counselors. The counselor supervisor position enables a trained and professional virtual school counselor to take responsibility for change in the training of new virtual school counselors in a way that is rare within the brick-and-mortar environment, including – perhaps in the future – the implementation of formal mentoring processes for new virtual school counselors, and the pioneering of action research into specific interventions and best practices for counselors working within virtual environments.

5.4.6 Theme Six: New Strategies for a New Environment

Although they faced significant challenges in the virtual school environment, counselors continue to develop strategies to implement interventions in line with their
understanding of their role within their schools. All of the interviewed counselors report doing one-on-one counseling, most report doing large group or classroom curricula, and some, but fewer than half, reported attempting small group counseling. Challenges to conducting individual, classroom, and small group curricula included: large caseloads of students, a lack of student engagement, and concern about the quality of the counseling relationship online. However, some virtual school counselors have worked to develop ways to bring their performance closer to role-congruent standards. Counselors cited developing methods of contact to facilitate student engagement, such as regular newsletters or e-mails, "office hours" in virtual classrooms, tag-teaming classroom and large group counseling with other counselors, and an intentional habit of note-taking to help the counselor remember important personal details about individuals within their large caseloads.

This is another theme where the presence of other counselors, and of a counseling supervisor, seemed to make a real difference in the ability of the counselor to develop appropriate practices and activities. In some cases, this was a direct effect: obviously, some strategies like tag-teaming classroom guidance are impossible within a school which has only one virtual school counselor. Likewise, in the absence of both formal training from professional organizations and of peer models, a counselor in a school alone has a severely limited well of resources to draw upon for ideas for activities or interventions. Or, in some case, when the peer models are not, themselves, invested in the professional school counseling role, a motivated virtual school counselor has to expend time and energy which could be devoted to learning and practicing to struggling against
the prevailing attitude among her colleagues, as Sally mentioned. This is an area where
the counseling supervisor seemed to have significant impact, both in providing some
opportunity to school counselors to access professional development which, in turn, aided
them in developing their practice, but also in mitigating some of the barriers for practice
– such as reducing caseloads – and creating a more consistent series of expectations
across counselors. Even when those expectations were not, in themselves, entirely ASCA
role congruent, they still provided an atmosphere where role congruent activities were
more possible than when counselors were left to rely on administrators who may not
understand the role of the school counselor, or solely on their own discretion.
Presumably, counselor supervisors could also take a leadership role in developing strong
vision and program statements to guide virtual school counselors to a more consistent and
role-congruent view of the school's expectations for them.

5.5  Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of the study, several suggestions are provided for virtual
school counselors, counselor education programs, researchers, and professional
organizations. These recommendations are also offered to improve virtual school
counseling programs, as well as to help current virtual school counselors find support and
professional development now and in the future.

5.5.1  Exposure to Virtual School Counseling in Counselor Education Programs

There are good arguments to be made against making virtual school counseling
skills a significant part of the average school counseling program. For one, virtual school
counseling remains a small minority of the field of practice of the profession, and time is
always at a premium within programs which may already be intense. Also, not every school counselor is likely to be cut out to be a virtual school counselor: although the respondents here interviewed expressed satisfaction in their jobs, they are a self-selected sample of people who both chose to apply and to accept jobs in a virtual environment. It is unknown how many counselors rejected even taking that first step towards being a virtual school counselor, or why they did so. However, exposing counseling students to the existence of virtual school counseling and the possibilities for employment and leadership within that field could have valuable results for all school counselors, whether they go on to practice there or not. Such exposure would encourage students who may be highly successful in such an environment to seek out those opportunities, and it would also help to reduce some of the fear and ignorance surrounding the practice of the virtual school counselor, which could make for a more accepting and helpful professional environment for virtual school counselors. In addition, it could open the lines of communication between virtual school counselors in different schools, as well as between virtual school counselors and brick-and-mortar school counselors, allowing the exchange of support, information, and best practices – some of which may have benefits for brick-and-mortar school counselors as they practice in an increasingly technological society.

5.5.2 Development of a Cycle of Skill Learning with Virtual Schools

Virtual school counselors are working together to develop ways to use technology, surmount the barriers formed by lack of face-to-face contact with students, and deliver services equal to those found in brick-and-mortar schools. However, because there is very little contact between virtual school counselors from different schools, and
little available professional development specifically for them through professional organizations or conferences, counselors in each school must reinvent the wheel, spending time which could be used to develop their programs further just in catching up to providing basic services. Counselor education programs, professional organizations, and virtual school counselors should be working together to understand and develop these programs further. Professional organizations can reach out specifically to virtual school counselors, who often feel neglected or devalued, to advocate for their inclusion in professional organizations and conferences. Virtual school counselors can use these venues to share the current practices they have developed, the challenges they face, and how they wish to grow their programs further in the future. Counselor educators and researchers can use these opportunities to reach out to virtual school counselors, develop a research-based understanding of best practices and methods of supporting virtual school counselors in their practice, then share these through service to the community, professional organizations, and updates to counselor education programs. In doing so, new counselors enter the virtual school counseling world with a heightened understanding of the setting and the skills required to succeed, and time currently spent on just getting "up to speed" can, instead, be spent on pushing the programs further towards ASCA Model compliance.

5.5.3 Clarified Expectations and Assessments for Virtual School Counselors

Administrators and counseling supervisors who directly supervise virtual school counselors should be encouraged to develop clearly stated expectations for their school counselors, as well as ways to assess counselor progress which accurately reflect those
expectations. Few counselors in this study reported having a counseling program
document or plan to which they could refer as a guide for creating their goals for the year
or an understanding of where their priorities should be. Administrators or counseling
supervisors, working with counselors, could create documents which clearly outline the
expectations and priorities of the virtual school counseling program. This would provide
guidance for virtual school counselors in their duties, as well as allow them to create a
road-map for moving towards a more comprehensive program. In addition, administrator
and counselor supervisor stated priorities were often at odds with both counselor
perception of those priorities and the tools which administrators used to evaluate
counselor progress.

Virtual school counselors, researchers, and counselor educators could work
together with virtual school administrators to create assessments which more accurately
reflect both administrators' priorities and the ASCA National Model for school
counselors. In doing so, they can facilitate accurate understanding between administrators
and counselors within virtual schools, as well as help guide the virtual school counseling
profession towards greater efficacy and closer alignment with professional standards.

5.5.4 Cultivate Relationships with Counselor Supervisors

Where they exist, counselor supervisors in the virtual school offer an excellent
"key personnel" for counselor educators who wish to help develop the sub-field of virtual
school counseling. Researchers and counselor educators interested in virtual school
counselors should identify and cultivate relationships with these individuals to better
understand their models of leadership and the influence they have over their programs.
Counselor-trained administrative positions with primary control over the hiring, training, professional development, and evaluation of virtual school counselors could form the linchpin for any further attempts at research or advocacy for virtual school counselors, as well as a source of valuable insight and collaborative opportunities with counselor education programs.

Because of the relationship between counselor supervisors and their counselors, and how many counselors each supervisor may support, the counselor supervisor could be a transformational actor within the virtual school – and often is. With support from counselor educators and researchers, that potential could be developed further, and create new opportunities to develop virtual counseling programs, and counselors, to their highest possible potential.

5.6 Limitations

As an initial study, there exist limitations and boundaries to the usefulness of this study and its conclusions. The sampling for this study, ultimately, was convenience, although every effort was made to gain a wide variety of experiences within the limited scope of a single state. It is entirely possible that the experiences of virtual school counselors in different geographic areas, as well as the experiences of counselors in schools who chose not to participate in the study, will be very different in systemic ways which will render the current model inaccurate. Additionally, the sample itself contained no male counselors or administrators, and limited diversity across racial or ethnic lines – as gender and ethnicity are significant parts of personal identity, which have often had relevance for school counselors in other settings, it is entirely possible that this study is
missing nuance and experiences which participants of greater diversity could provide.
Likewise, the participants were, with very few counter-examples, counselors or administrators who had spent their entire counseling or administrator careers in the virtual school environment – although in a previous study on the same population, approximately half the sample of virtual school counselors had previous brick-and-mortar counseling experiences (Baughman & Dollarhide, 2013). Counselors with the insight into both settings, and a sense of role built from brick-and-mortar experience, could have entirely different perspectives on the development of their role and practice. Finally, the sample of administrators and the sample of counselors were developed and solicited independently – which means that there was limited opportunity to directly compare and triangulate two perspectives on the same school and environment, something which would no doubt reveal interesting and useful results, particularly on the mismatch of counselor and administrator expectations. In further follow-up to this study, a matched-pairs design might give a more robust understanding of each school's particular experiences.

There were limitations within the implementation of the study, as well. The protocol, particularly for administrators, was developed with an understanding of the relationship between counselor and administrator in brick-and-mortar schools; the existence of counselor supervisors and their relationship within the administrative context was an emergent finding in the data. As a result, the protocol for administrators may not have yielded data which was as accurate and as illuminating as it otherwise could have been. Any follow-up to this study will certainly use a revised protocol, building from the
information discovered in this study to further develop an understanding of the relationship between counselors and all possible administrative structures. Additionally, data were gathered primarily through phone-based interviews, with limited opportunities to observe virtual school counselor practice in the field, or meet with participants in a face-to-face venue. The same limitations mentioned by the virtual school counselors could easily apply here – without the usual cues of face-to-face interaction, the researcher may have missed nuance and experiences which could have enriched the data. In follow-up studies, an in-depth case study of a limited number of virtual schools with significant levels of observation and field notes could only deepen the robustness of the data gathered.

Finally, there are limitations to be considered in the researcher and auditor themselves. Although both researcher and auditor are doctoral students with previous qualitative research experience, as well as previous school counseling experience, neither of them have had previous experience within a virtual school environment. This means that they could be missing nuance in the interpretation or analysis of data which would provide a greater insight into virtual school counseling. In future studies, effort will be made to find auditors who have previous or current virtual school experience, in the hopes that their expertise will provide greater insight into the experiences of the participants.

5.7 Suggestions for Further Research

One of the dimensions of the virtual school counselor's struggle is that so little is known about virtual counseling in the field of counselor education. Much of the literature
around this subject has focused on ethical considerations and whether it "should" be
done, that there's little practical advice for those counselors who have no choice but to
practice in the virtual environment. Counselor respondents in this study repeatedly
referenced having few outside resources to turn to about how to practice their craft; one
of the strongest recommendations which can be made to improve their practice is that the
field of counselor education acknowledge their existence, and give the field of virtual
school counseling the same thoughtful, critical research it does to all other relevant
subjects. The field of virtual school counseling, and to a lesser extent, the field of virtual
counseling in general, is vastly under-researched by counselor educators, particularly
considering the growing impact communications technology is having on the way
humans communicate and seek support from one another. Further areas still ripe for study
in the area of virtual school counseling include but are not limited to: counselor
characteristics which facilitate or hinder virtual school counseling performance –
particularly counselor self-efficacy; how the relationship between counselor and student
is developed within the virtual school and what factors are associated with better student
outcomes; leadership styles of counselor supervisors, and how counselor supervisors
develop relationships with traditional administration and with their counselors; and
factors that lead to satisfaction and retention among virtual school counselors.

For a follow-up to this study in particular, the researcher intends to revise the
counselor and administrator instruments, and expand the sample to a national one, with
emphasis on finding parity in volunteers among schools with multiple counselors and a
designated counselor supervisor, schools with multiple counselors but no counselor
supervisor, and schools with single or isolated counselors. The researcher will also make further efforts to expand the participants to those who have had previous counseling and administrative experience in brick-and-mortar settings previous to their employment in a virtual school. In doing so, the researcher hopes to add more nuance and robustness to the model previously explained, and develop a richer understanding of the complexities of this emerging setting.

5.8 Summary and Conclusion

Chapter One introduced the central question of this study: How do virtual school counselors and administrators understand the role of the counselor, and what factors within the virtual school influence the way they conceptualize, negotiate, and implement those roles? By interviewing counselors and administrators from four schools from a single state, a model was generated to begin to address this question. The results of this study revealed that, as posited in Chapter One, the development of the role of the virtual school counselor is a complex phenomenon, taking into account many different variables: training (or the lack thereof) in graduate student programs, interactions and communications from administrators and supervisors, and the results of modeling and consultations with peers inside the counselor's building. Outside support for virtual school counselors is more limited than for their brick-and-mortar peers, with virtual school counselors often feeling isolated or a lack of support from professional organizations and peers outside the virtual setting, or even outside of their own counseling department. This creates additional challenges for counselors with non-supportive peers within the building, or no peers at all, although the presence of a
counselor-trained counseling supervisor may be able to mitigate some of these challenges by providing additional guidance and concrete support for the counseling program. Virtual school counselors with more support were able to do more "real" counseling tasks, collaborating with peers to create and implement individual, small group, and classroom/large group curricula across all three dimensions of professional school counseling. Counselors who lacked peers, or whose peers were less than supportive, were able to conceptualize and implement fewer of these programs, and tended to struggle more with non-role congruent activities as barriers to implementing a comprehensive counseling program.

With this data, this study was able to generate five suggestions for improving the field of virtual school counseling: Exposure to virtual school counseling in counselor education programs; creating a cycle of skill learning between counselor educators, virtual school counselors, and professional organizations and conferences; supporting clarified expectations and assessments for virtual school counselors; cultivating relationships with counselor supervisors; and developing further research into the field of virtual counseling in general, and virtual school counseling in specific.
References


counseling programs and the Transforming School Counseling Initiative. *Professional School Counseling, 7* (3), 152-161.


APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT E-MAIL MESSAGE
Subject: Research Study on Virtual School Counselors

Dear Counselors and Administrators,

My name is Amber Baughman, and I'm a doctoral candidate at The Ohio State University, in Counselor Education. I am looking for counselor and administrator participants in a research study looking at the role and practice of the school counselor in the virtual school. Counseling in virtual schools is an emergent and growing phenomenon which often lacks support from counselor education programs and professional associations, and I hope that with this study, I can help to develop training and continuing education to help support virtual school counselors in the very important work that they do. The requirements of participation would be brief - only forty-five minutes to an hour out of the participants' times, in a recorded phone call (or face-to-face interview, if the participant would prefer).

I've included an informed consent document for anyone who might be interested, and I invite questions, comments, and concerns. I can be reached through e-mail at baughman.181@osu.edu, and by phone at 803-730-3316. Please forward this to any virtual school counselor or administrator who may be interested in participating in this study, and invite them to contact me with questions, or to arrange a time for an interview.

Thank you for your time,

Amber Baughman

Doctoral Candidate, Counselor Education

The Ohio State University
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Dear Potential Participant,

You are being invited to participate in a study to understand the role and practice for professional school counselors in virtual schools in Ohio. As professional school counselor educators engaged in counselor training, it is our hope that exploration of this environment will result in a better understanding of the unique needs and challenges of school counselors employed in virtual schools.

If you decide to participate, your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. There are no incentives or rewards for participating in this study, other than knowing that you are helping other counselors understand the unique role of the virtual school counselor.

Because this study is designed to foster a better understanding of the specific application of professional school counseling in the virtual school, your input is valuable as a professional school counselor or administrator working in a virtual school. You are being asked to participate due to your unique experience in this type of school.

*We believe that this study will begin a line of inquiry into the role of counselors in a virtual school which will allow counselor educators to establish standards and practices that more effectively reflect the unique challenges faced by students and counselors in virtual school environments.*

If you are interested in participating in this study, you will be asked to schedule a time at your convenience with the researcher of approximately forty-five minutes to an hour. During this time, you will be asked several questions about your thoughts, experiences, and practices as a school counselor, or as an administrator working with school counselors. You will not be identified by your real name, nor will personally identifying information be asked in any of the questions. All data will be kept secure using encryption and password protection for the duration of the study and five years in the future. You may choose not to answer any questions at any time, for any reason. In all publications that may result from this study, all data will be reported using pseudonyms. However, some responses may be quoted directly to illustrate a theme, contextual issue, or an archetypical experience. You have the right to request to see the article before publication.
Contacts and Questions:

If you would like to participate, or have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact Amber Baughman, doctoral candidate in Counselor Education at The Ohio State University, at baudhman.181@osu.edu, or by phone at 803-730-3316 or Dr. James Moore III, Professor of Counselor Education at The Ohio State University, at moore.1408@osu.edu or by phone at 803-361-2191.
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR COUNSELORS
Part 1: Demographic Information

Identifier (Psuedonym):
What is your gender?
What is your age?
What is your racial or ethnic identity, in your own words?
What professional organizations do you belong to?
What is your highest educational degree?
What professional certifications or licenses do you hold?
Years of total experience as a school counselor:
Years of experience as a school counselor in a virtual school:
Currently, what grades do you serve as a school counselor?
Currently, what is your approximate case load?
How many school counselors does your current school have?
What areas and demographic distribution of students does your school serve?

Part 2: Study Questions

1. Please describe your role and responsibilities as a school counselor in your current school.
   a. Is what you've described typical of the other counselors in your current school?
   b. If not, how does it differ?

2. Please describe how you chose school counseling as a career.
   a. How did you come to take a position at a virtual school?
   b. Have you noticed any differences in what your responsibilities are in your current position, compared to your previous experiences?
   c. If so, could you talk about that?

3. What expectations did you have for being a school counselor in a virtual school?
   a. How did those expectations match the reality?

4. What concerns did you have about being a school counselor in a virtual school?
   a. If any, were those concerns reflected in the actual experience?
   b. If so, how did you develop ways to address those concerns?

5. Can you please describe the types of support you've received as a virtual school counselor, within either the school or the larger organization?
   a. Do you have a mentor? If so, briefly describe what role this person has served for you?
   b. Is the support that you received what you needed? If yes, why? If no, why not?
   c. Where do you go for information or advice about school counseling or issues in your building?

6. I am interested in the contact that you have on a regular basis with other virtual school counselors, both formal and informal.
   a. Can you tell me how often you talk with other virtual school counselors, in what kinds of situations, and what you talk about?
   b. Have you gotten a chance to observe other virtual school counselors? If yes, how has this helped you execute your virtual school counseling duties? If no, how do
you think that it would help you better execute your virtual school counseling duties?

7. Is there a common sense among school counselors of what school counselors in this school and/or district should do in their work? Are there certain norms and expectations?
   a. If yes:
      i. Could you describe these norms and expectations?
      ii. Where do these norms and expectations come from?
      iii. How do you know, or how did you learn, what is expected of you?
      iv. Do you share these norms and expectations?
   b. If no:
      i. Why do you think this is the case?
      ii. Are there groups within the faculty that have certain norms and expectations?

8. What are your primary methods of contact with students?
   a. Do you conduct classroom guidance lessons with students in the virtual school? If so, what does that look like?
   b. Do you conduct small group counseling sessions with students in the virtual school? If so, what does that look like?
   c. Do you conduct one-on-one counseling sessions with students in the virtual school? If so, what does that look like?

9. What kind of training did you receive on counseling in a virtual environment?
   a. Where did you receive that training?
   b. What training was pre-service (before you took this position), and what training was in-service (after you took this position)?

10. Do you feel that your counselor education program prepared you to become a virtual school counselor?
    a. If so, how?
    b. If not, what would have been valuable to have received in the program?

11. What are the largest challenges for you when developing and implementing the academic component of your program?
    a. The career component?
    b. The socio-emotional?
    c. Can you speak to one of those challenges you've been working to overcome, and how that's been going?

12. Have you developed any new or unique methods for practicing school counseling in the virtual school?
    a. If so, could you talk about one of them?
    b. If not, what would you like to work on in the future, and what challenges do you see in doing so?
    c. What would help you develop your virtual school counseling practice further?

13. Do you feel supported by your professional organizations as a virtual school counselor?
    a. If so, how do those organizations support you?
    b. If not, what could they be doing differently?
14. Administrators take on different roles in different schools. I am interested in understanding how you see your administrators. What role would you say they play?
   a. Is this what you think administrators should do? If yes, why? If no, why not?
   b. What are the administration's priorities for the counselors?
   c. How do you feel those are communicated to you?
   d. What do you feel administrators value the most about school counseling in your building?
   e. What do you feel administrators value the least about school counseling in your building?
   f. What kinds of concrete support do administrators provide to counselors in your building?

15. Do you have a school counseling "program" that you are expected to follow or create?
   a. If yes:
      i. What kind of things does it or should it specify (general goals, specific topics, specific lessons, how to use time)?
      ii. In your view, is it meeting the needs of your building? If not, what changes would you like to make?
      iii. Does anyone check to see if you have established a program for your school? If yes, who?
   b. If no:
      i. How do you decide what to implement and how to execute needed services?

16. How do you receive feedback on your performance or program?
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR ADMINISTRATORS
Part 1: Demographic Information

Identifier (Psuedonym):
What is your gender?
What is your age?
What is your racial or ethnic identity, in your own words?
What professional organizations do you belong to?
What is your highest educational degree?
What professional certifications or licenses do you hold?
Years of total experience as a school administrator:
Years of experience as a school administrator in a virtual school:
Currently, what grades do you serve as an administrator?
Currently, how many counselors do you directly supervise or work with?
How many school counselors does your current school have?
What areas and demographic distribution of students does your school serve?

Part 2: Study Questions

1. Can you tell me a little of how you came to be an administrator in a virtual school?
   a. What was the first year in a virtual school environment like for you?
   b. Did you have a mentor?
   c. Who did you go to for questions about the virtual school experience, or issues in this school in particular?
   d. What expectations did you have for being an administrator in the virtual school?
      Were those expectations different from the reality in any way? If so, how?

2. Please describe how you see the role and responsibilities of the school counselors in your school.
   a. Do counselor duties and expectations differ between counselors? If so, how?
   b. Is there a specific model or program that school counselors in your building are expected to follow? If so, can you describe that model or program to me?

3. The hiring process often has a significant effect on the culture of a building. I would like to ask you a few questions about how your school hires virtual school counselors.
   a. Are you involved in the hiring process, either in interviewing, evaluation, or otherwise? If so, how?
   b. What qualities do you look for in a virtual school counselor? How do candidates demonstrate those qualities in their resumes? In interviews?
   c. Are there any qualities, in your experience, which matter more for counselors in the virtual school than in brick in mortar schools? Any qualities that matter less?
   d. If so, how did you come to identify these qualities?

4. Could you talk a little bit about how you work with counselors at your school? Are there collaborative projects, or joint responsibilities that administrators and counselors share?
   a. If so, how are these responsibilities assigned?
   b. What are the counselors' roles in these responsibilities?
5. In your current school, what do you feel your counselors’ highest priorities should be?  
   a. What do you expect to see counselors doing in the area of academics?  
   b. Career exploration?  
   c. Personal and social interventions?  
   d. How are those expectations communicated to your counselors?  
6. How do you measure a counselor’s effectiveness at their work?  
   a. When and how are counselors made aware of these evaluation criteria?  
   b. What support is provided to first year counselors in the building for meeting the expectations for evaluation?  
   c. Are there any additional measures of support given to counselors without previous virtual school experience?  
7. What challenges have you seen counselors face in the virtual school in academics?  
   a. Career interventions?  
   b. Personal and social?  
   c. What strategies have you seen them develop to overcome those challenges?  
8. How have you seen the counselors in your school use technology to implement their programs?  
9. What training and resources are provided for virtual school counselors in your school?  
   a. Where does that training originate (conferences, provided by the school, universities)?  
   b. How often do counselors receive in-service training specifically for counselors at your school?  
   c. What kinds of topics and skills has such training covered in the past?  
   d. What programs or topics do you feel have been especially effective for helping counselors meet the mission of your school?  
10. How do you think that counselors could be better prepared for working in a virtual school environment? What should the priorities be for counselor training, in your opinion?
APPENDIX E: COUNSELOR PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS
Table 1

*Counselor Participant Demographics*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>&quot;Name&quot;</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th># of Prof Orgs</th>
<th>Highest Ed</th>
<th>Yrs total exp</th>
<th>Yrs virtual exp</th>
<th>Grades served</th>
<th>Case load</th>
<th># of couns</th>
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APPENDIX F: ADMINISTRATOR PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS
Table 2

*Administrator Participant Demographics*

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APPENDIX G: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL FORM
Dear Investigators,

The Office of Responsible Research Practices has determined the above referenced project exempt from IRB review.

Please note the following:

- Retain a copy of this correspondence for your records.
- Only the OSU staff and students named on the application are approved as OSU investigators and/or key personnel for this study.
- No changes may be made to exempt research (e.g., personnel, recruitment procedures, advertisements, instruments, etc.). If changes are made, a new application for exemption must be submitted for review and approval prior to implementing the changes.
- Per university requirements, all research-related records (e.g., application materials, letters of support, signed consent forms, etc.) must be retained and available for audit for a period of at least three years after the research has ended.
- It is the responsibility of the investigators to promptly report events that may represent unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

This determination is issued under The Ohio State University’s OHRP Federalwide Assurance #0000378. All forms and procedures can be found on the ORRP website: www.orrp.osu.edu.

Please feel free to contact the Office of Responsible Research Practices with any questions or concerns.

Thank You,
Ellen

Ellen Patricia, MS, CIP
Program Director
HRPP Quality Improvement
Office of Research Office of Responsible Research Practices
307 Research Administration Building, 1960 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210
614-688-5556 Office / 614-688-0366 Fax
eunisia.l@osu.edu www.orrp.osu.edu
APPENDIX H: CODEBOOK
Understanding Their Role as Pioneers

- ROLE: Role Congruent Activities
  - PERS: Personal/Social Counseling
  - CARR: Career Planning
  - POST: Post-secondary and college planning
  - COLL: Collaboration with teachers and staff
  - ACAD: Academic counseling
  - INDV: Individual Counseling
  - GROU: Small Group Counseling
  - CLAS: Classroom/Large Group Counseling

- NROL: Non-Role Congruent Activities
  - SCH: Scheduling
  - REG: Registration
  - TEST: Test administration and coordination
  - ADM: Administrative duties/Data entry
  - TECH: Tech support

The Struggle for Connection

- ENGA: Difficulty with student engagement
  - CONT: Contacting students/student response
  - PROC: Lack of evidence of student processing

- COUR: Quality of the counseling relationship
  - DISI: Online disinhibition effect
  - F2FC: Lack of face-to-face contact

Being Seen as Real Counselors

- PERS: Support from other counselors in the building
- PERI: Isolation or disalignment from other counselors in the building
- PROS: Support from programs and professional organizations
- PROI: Isolation from professional organizations, peers outside building
- ADMS: Support from Administrators
- MENT: Presence of a formal or informal mentor
  - ADMM: Administrative mentoring
  - COUM: Counselor mentoring
  - DUAM: Two mentors/splitting of mentor roles

Mixed Messages from Administrators and Supervisors

- COSU: Presence of Counseling Supervisor
- ADCO: Administrative Contact with Counselors
  - EMAL: E-mail/electronic contact
MEET: Face-to-face meetings
ACNS: Consulting on students
ADAD: Consulting on administrative tasks
ADSC: Scheduling and course tasks

- COPR: Counselor perception of administration priorities
- ADPR: Administration perception of administration priorities
- DOCR: Documentation of counseling program goals/mission/etc.

Translating Resources And Training

- CSPD: Counselor-specific professional development (or lack)
- OSPD: Online-specific professional development (or lack)
- OSCE: Online-specific prep from counselor program (or lack)
- PELR: Peer learning (or lack)
- PERL: Personal-driven learning

Strategies for Role Performance

- TAGT: Cooperating with peers
- FLEX: Flexibility in structure of small groups
- FTFC: Making effort to make face-to-face contact
- RESP: Response rate and organization
APPENDIX I: RESEARCH PARTNER DESCRIPTIONS
Description of Research Team Members

**Researcher: Amber V. Baughman**

The researcher in this study is a 36 year-old Caucasian female student currently pursuing a doctoral degree in the Counselor Education program at Ohio State University. She gained her Education Specialist degree in Counselor Education from the University of South Carolina, and worked as a professional school counselor for two years at Emerald High School in South Carolina. During the doctoral program, the researcher co-taught internship, practicum, and seminar courses. She has taken a qualitative and quantitative research course series and participated in qualitative research studies. She does not have previous experience in virtual counseling, but has conducted a previous study on the subject.

**Research Partner:**

Research Partner is a 26 year-old Caucasian male student currently pursuing a doctoral degree in the Counselor Education program at Ohio State University. He gained his Master's degree in Counselor Education from Ohio State University, and is currently pre-Candidacy. He has taken quantitative and qualitative research courses, and participated in qualitative research.