AN ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELING PROFESSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS, COUNSELORS, AND SCHOOLS

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AN ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELING
PROFESSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS, COUNSELORS, AND SCHOOLS

Abstract

by

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Adolescents in high schools today are a vulnerable population prone to personal and school-related obstacles that can impede their success. High school counselors are in a position to help students succeed because of their training in social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary counseling. Unfortunately, there is much evidence to suggest that school counselors are not living up to their potential. Between an extraordinarily imbalanced student-to-counselor ratio of 470-to-1 and an extensive breadth of both counseling and non-counseling duties, counselors are often cited as failing to serve students adequately due to being overworked.

Yet what the focus on the overworked nature of school counselors fails to consider is how deeply embedded the conflict between their counseling and non-counseling roles is within the structure of the profession and the schools as the organizations in which they work. To understand the school counseling profession and its impact on students, what is needed is a theoretical research approach that incorporates the institutional and organizational influences and constraints on the school counseling
profession, and the agency through which counselors choose to work. This will help reveal how high school counselors work, and by extension, how their work impacts the students they serve.

In this dissertation, I explored how school and counseling organizations and institutional frames of counselor work structure the profession of school counseling and the counselors themselves. I conducted a comprehensive, multiple-method study of high school counselors in two public, urban high schools. I incorporated interviews with counselors and school administrators with extensive observations of counselors and counselor-student interactions. This in-school data was supplemented with interviews from local and national counseling graduate faculty and counselors, and observations of school counselor conferences. Together, these multiple data sources combine to create an uncommon and systematic look into how the work of school counselors is structured, and how this might impact student outcomes.

In Chapter 2, I discern the rules, guidelines, and practices that oversee school counselors within public high schools to determine which logics frame their utilization, attention, and behavior. Evidence from this study suggests that there are two main logics that govern the work of high school counselors which compete for the time and attention of counselors – a student-centered logic and a school-centered logic. In Chapter 3, I connect these rules and guidelines of the profession with how high school counselors, as street-level bureaucrats, are actually utilized and how their value to the school is communicated through the allocation of resources. I find that high school counselors must contend with high caseloads and task allocation that preferences school-centered tasks at the price of student-centered attention, provoking burnout and alienation.
In Chapter 4, I find that the structure of schools and the loose coupling between the graduate programs that train counselors and the high schools that employ them leave counselors vulnerable to role ambiguity and role conflict through misaligned expectations of the position, misaligned goals of the counselors and the schools, and poor evaluative and reward structures. Without an accurate and consistent definition of their work across schools – and thus without an appropriate evaluative framework – the high school counselors in this study suffered from poor boundaries, inconsistency in tasks, underutilization, and reduction of their role to class schedulers.

In Chapter 5, I observe how high school counselors navigate the constrained resources, conflicting logics, and role ambiguity when deciding how to spend their time and how they interact with students. I find that the high school counselors developed both student-centered and school-centered techniques to manage their work, but engaged in school-centered strategies more often, leaving less time for students.
For Toby and Madeline.
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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

Unlike the psychiatric and social work professions, school counselors have the potential for almost total contact with the members of American society. Their location in public and private schools means that, eventually, almost every person in the country will have been exposed to the information and advice given by a counselor. These particular features of the school counselor, as well as counselors’ expertise being based on the behavioral sciences, make it a social role whose general characteristics and function are of considerable interest for study.

--David J. Armor (1969:3)
The American School Counselor: A Case Study in the Sociology of Professions

Adolescents in high schools today are a vulnerable population prone to personal and school-related obstacles that coincide with their “physiological and developmental changes, including puberty, burgeoning independence, experimentation and risky behaviors” (Kaiser Family Foundation 2011:1). Almost half of all 13-18 year olds have a mental disorder such as anxiety, depression, or ADHD at some point during this time (Kaiser Family Foundation 2011; National Institute of Mental Health 2017). Thirty percent of high school students in 2015 indicated they felt sad or hopeless for an extended period of time, with 18 percent seriously considering attempting suicide (Child Trends 2016b). Many students also report school-specific issues such as bullying (Child Trends 2016a).
Unfortunately, many adolescents with these issues are not receiving treatment, especially low-income and minority students, who may not have the financial resources or protective social support networks to help address their issues (Kessler et al. 2005). Many adolescents lack health insurance, and are thus particularly vulnerable to social/emotional issues and the consequences for life and academics. Even those with insurance may avoid seeking care for mental health or personal issues if the issue is sensitive and they are worried their parents may find out through insurance billing (Kaiser Family Foundation 2011). If teens and adolescents do get care, they may face some of the same obstacles to health care as adults, such as “inadequate time with a provider, lack of transportation, lack of continuity with a physician or place of care, racial, ethnic, gender and language-related barriers…or inconvenient office location” (Kaiser Family Foundation 2011:5). Thus for many students, mental health care may be non-existent, and these issues invariably impact their academic success and future (McLeod, Uemura, and Rohrman 2012).

In addition to mental health issues, high school students must contend with navigating the social and academic environment of their schools. Academic course-taking is particularly important for opportunities to learn and future outcomes (Gamoran and Mare 1989; Oakes 2005). Students who take courses with a higher curricular intensity have a greater chance of entering college on time, entering four-year institutions in particular (Austin 2017), and completing a bachelor’s degree (Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson 2011; Rosenbaum et al. 2015). This is especially true for low-income students, who benefit academically and in postsecondary trajectories from higher-level
courses (Brand and Xie 2010; Gamoran and Mare 1989; Morgan 2001). However, low-income students are less likely to take such high-intensity courses (Lucas 2001).

Because of differential opportunities to learn, such as access to course-taking or increased personal or social obstacles in the home, low-income and minority students also lag behind high-income and white students in college enrollment and completion, thus missing out on a vital step toward socioeconomic mobility (Goyette 2008; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). This is in spite of higher educational aspirations, expectations and behaviors (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Harris 2011). Indeed, only 56.5 percent of recent black high school graduates enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges in 2016, versus 70.5 percent of whites (National Center for Education Statistics 2017a). Low-income students in particular have suffered from unequal access to college (Gamoran 2014). In 2016, 82.5 percent of high-income high school students transitioned to college, whereas only 65.4 percent of low-income students enrolled in a college program (National Center for Education Statistics 2017b). Disadvantaged students, who are often found in urban, public high schools, lack the social and cultural capital gained from exposure to higher education, such as parental knowledge of college (Reardon 2011; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995).

For those who do reach college, they may overestimate how much college will cost, underestimate how much financial aid they will receive, and lack knowledge regarding requirements to enroll in college (Avery, Kane, and Hoxby 2004; Deil-Amen and Tevis 2009; Grodsky and Jones 2007). This can lead to mismatch in college choice, downgrading of college expectations, and subsequent failure to graduate, especially for disadvantaged high school students (Dillon and Smith 2013; Hoxby and Avery 2012;
Roderick, Coca, and Nagaoka 2011). Once in college, students may not understand how remedial placements can derail their progress, or fully understand their potential to succeed (Deil-Amen and Tevis 2009; Rosenbaum et al. 2015). Thus, despite a 55 percent increase in the percentage of high school graduates who entered college from 1960 to 2016 from 45.1 to 69.8 percent (National Center for Education Statistics 2017a), there has not been a proportional increase in completion, with only two-thirds of those starting at a four-year college graduating with some sort of degree, and only about one-third of those starting at a two-year college graduating with some sort of credential (National Center for Education Statistics 2016).

1.2 The Potential of Counselors

Adolescence is a particularly critical time for the transition to adulthood. During this stage, brains are more malleable than in adulthood. Adolescent brain development is sensitive to change, risk taking, influence of friends, and the environment, while it overemphasizes rewards (Steinberg 2014). In addition to these changes, high school students today face a myriad of obstacles to their social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary success. This time sets the stage for future behavioral development, and requires a greater focus on teaching social and emotional skills to students in high schools (Steinberg 2014).

As students come to rely on schools more and more to fill the gap for social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary preparation – especially for low-income, minority, and first generation college students who may lack the social capital elsewhere (Holland 2015; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995) – high school counselors could be
the cornerstone to their success. First, high school counselors are in a position to provide information and guidance on courses through guidance on course placement (including Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses), and have the influence to do so (Tyson 2011). Their training is focused on helping students develop strong work habits, a sense of belonging in the school environment, strengthen goal setting and decision making, and positive attitudes towards education, work, and life-long learning (American School Counselor Association 2018). At the elementary level, they have also been shown to improve math test scores, especially for boys (Carrell and Hoekstra 2014; Reback 2010b).

Second, school counselors can provide information on college application requirements, college fit, and career information to which students may not be exposed (Belasco 2013; Engberg and Gilbert 2014; McDonough 1997; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995). School counselor availability and counselor time and attention spent on college advising and course taking have been shown to be a moderately strong predictor of college going for high school students (Engberg and Gilbert 2014; Hill 2008; Hurwitz and Howell 2013). Research suggests that more counselors per student can lead to higher rates of SAT taking (possibly through their control of fee waivers (Kimura-Walsh et al. 2009)), higher college application rates, and higher college attendance rates (Hurwitz and Howell 2013; Robinson and Roksa 2016; Shank 2016; Woods and Domina 2014).

Their work can be especially important for first generation students, for whom college enrollment and graduation is partially limited due to a lack of exposure to adults in the home with college experience (Andrew 2009; Carbonaro, Ellison, and Covay
Students without parents or others in their lives with college experience often overestimate how much college will cost, underestimate how much financial aid they will receive, and lack knowledge regarding requirements to enroll in college (Avery et al. 2004; Deil-Amen and Tevis 2009; Grodsky and Jones 2007). Many students must rely on school personnel to provide them with the right information (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995), and in fact may do so more than white and high income students (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000). Rosenbaum et al. (2015) insist that the advice counselors provide low-income students can considerably influence students.

Third, in addition to providing academic and postsecondary counseling, school counselors are trained to provide social/emotional counseling to students. While not long-term therapists, counselors are trained to identify mental or physical abuse at home and drug and alcohol abuse by the student or parent/guardian, and trained to address bullying, conflict, and many other psychological issues the student may display and that undoubtedly impact student learning (Herr 2002). Therefore, if students are reluctant to seek help from someone outside of the school, they have a designated adult within the school to be a resource (Kaiser Family Foundation 2011). Increases in the number of school counselors have been shown to reduce misbehavior in elementary classes, on par with smaller class sizes and an increase in teacher quality (Carrell and Hoekstra 2014; Reback 2010a). High school counselors (as well as social workers) may be the only viable option for teens to receive social and emotional counseling. Knowing that one-third of adolescents with symptoms of serious issues such as depression or anxiety will not seek care (Gulliver, Griffiths, and Christensen 2010), it is significant to consider
Armor’s (1969) words at the top of the chapter: virtually all high school students have access to a school counselor who is free to consult and already in the school.

1.2.1 Struggles within School Counseling

Unfortunately, there is much evidence to suggest that school counselors are not living up to this potential. Between an extraordinarily imbalanced student-to-counselor ratio of 470-to-1 (American School Counselor Association 2014), and an extensive breadth of both counseling and non-counseling duties, counselors are often cited as failing to serve students (Corwin et al. 2004). While most counselors feel like they can uniquely contribute to postsecondary access for students, less than half feel like their schools utilize them for this skill (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011a). This less frequent access to high school counselors, particularly for low-income and minority students, can lead to less access to guidance regarding course taking, which results in these students being more likely to be placed in lower-track courses (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963; Lee and Ekstrom 1987).

Students – especially low-income and minority students – report a lack of trust in their high school counselors, and may not seek them out for support (Holland 2015). Limited research measures to what extent students seek school counselors for personal issues, but we do know that these students may not believe that their counselors consider them to possess high enough potential for college, or may receive infrequent or inadequate advice regarding high school and college success (Corwin et al. 2004; Holland 2015; Johnson and Rochkind 2010; Krei and Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum et al. 2015). Some studies suggest counselors focus more on high achieving students, rather than reaching out to and establishing trusting relationships with
disadvantaged students who need them most (Holland 2015). In fact, about half of the 1300 respondents in one study said they felt like “just another face in the crowd” (Johnson and Duffett 2005). If anything, students felt that the only role of school counselors was to create schedules and manage transcripts (Gast 2016), something that was often susceptible to mistakes or misguidance by counselors (Corwin et al. 2004).

Counselors need to develop trust with students to serve as a viable resource for social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary counseling (Holland 2015). While there are certainly exceptions to this, by and large, research suggests that school counselors are not seeking students out who might need help, and not engaging in any substantive sort of social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary counseling (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011b; Johnson and Duffett 2005). For those who do seek their counselors, many express frustration with the quality of the counseling experience (Johnson et al 2005). Previous research suggests that high school counselors provide a “one size fits all” type of counseling, providing every student with information on college with little time spent discerning the appropriate pathways for the future (Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum, Miller, and Krei 1996; Smith 2011). Whereas in previous generations they were criticized for acting as “gatekeepers” to higher education through the withholding of information that could help students succeed in college (Armor 1969; Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963), today with caseloads exploding since the 1960s and fear of being the “bad guy,” counselors cannot and do not really engage in gatekeeping or any helpful discernment process for students (Radford 2013; Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum et al. 1996; Smith 2011). Even valedictorians face obstacles in meeting with high school counselors to
discuss elite out-of-state college options, requiring many to navigate the system alone and at a disadvantage to those with more access to information (Radford 2013).

These issues regarding school counseling are not unfamiliar within the profession. Those within the profession are quick to point to why they are not doing as well as we would want them to: they are overworked (especially with non-counseling tasks such as high-stakes test administration and data entry), their caseloads are too high, and they do not have time to actually counsel students as they would like. Policy reports, news reports, and academic literature alike have exposed the over worked nature of high school counselors (Murphy 2016; Paisley and McMahon 2001; Radford, Ilfill, and Lew 2013; Smith 2011), making it unlikely that they have the opportunity to display sensitivity and attention to actual student needs. Further exacerbating the problem is the fact that 20 percent of high schools do not even employ a school counselor, impacting almost 700,000 students (Office for Civil Rights 2014).

1.2.2 The Structure of School Counseling

But the problem within school counseling lies deeper than how many students they must serve, or how well they develop trust with students. We cannot just view the behaviors of high school counselors as indicative of their faults and failings, but instead consider that the problem within school counseling is structural (Lipsky 2010). Yet what the focus on the overworked nature of school counselors fails to consider is how deeply embedded the conflict between their counseling and non-counseling roles is within the structure of the profession and the schools as the organizations in which they work. We need to take into consideration a theoretical approach that incorporates the institutional and organizational influences and constraints on the school counseling profession (Meyer
and Rowan 2006), and the agency through which counselors choose to work. This will help elucidate how high school counselors work, and by extension, how this work impacts the students they serve.

1.2.3 Current Study

For this dissertation, I use institutional logics at the individual level to view how the structure of the school counseling profession may hinder the ability of high school counselors to be effective at helping students through social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary needs. The institutional logics perspective provides a framework to analyze people embedded within organizations and embedded within society (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsberry 2012). Institutional logics are “the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality” (Thornton and Ocasio 1999:804). Institutional logics are the “master principles of society,” (Thornton 2004:40), and structure the guidelines for action and interaction that influence actors in their decision making to complete the organization’s goals, and provide meaning for their work (Thornton and Ocasio 1999). They frame how individuals and organizations think and act about their work.

The institutional logics approach views both structure and agency in action as they shape the organization and the people in it. It is not bound to viewing just macro or micro level interactions, enabling me to have a complete and accurate picture of the work of school counselors. This is in contrast to most research on high school counselors, which has only focused on one mechanism through which they impact students, such as
social capital or organizational habitus. My approach also allows me to balance both material and cultural explanations when viewing institutions, exploring how they both influence change (Thornton and Ocasio 2008).

I supplement this approach with research on street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010). High school counselors, as bureaucrats, are educators with the responsibility for the academic success of students, and the management of the school (through coordination of class scheduling and high-stakes testing). They work in schools under the laws and hierarchy of local, state, and federal governments. But, as counselors and not as administrators or legislators, they are not the source of the authority (Lipsky 2010). Using this framework, I explore not only the obstacles high school counselors face in their day-to-day jobs, but also how they manage these obstacles, leading to a better understanding of how these decisions impact students.

1.2.4 Utilizing School Counselors to Reduce Educational Inequality

If we are interested in reducing racial/ethnic and income inequality in college enrollment, then we need to understand how the field of school counseling is structured, and how this impacts how high school counselors allocate their time, attention and advice to students. What is required is an in-depth, ethnographic approach that utilizes not just interviews with school counselors regarding what they say they do, but also observations of student-counselor interactions, interviews with faculty members in the graduate programs that train them, and interviews and surveys with students regarding their perceptions of high school counselors and subsequent behaviors regarding their social/emotional, academic and postsecondary needs.
We know that the impact of school counselors can be great (McDonough 1997; Reback 2010b) – but we do not know how they come to exercise this impact under the constraints of their positions, and through the influence of the atmosphere of the school environment and their profession. Therefore, understanding how high school counselors allocate their time, attention and advice is vital to social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary outcomes of all students, especially low-income and minority students.

1.3 Outline of the Dissertation

The effort that educational school counselors expend in their jobs is largely dictated by the rules and guidelines of the organizations in which they train and work. These guidelines are manifestations of, and legitimized by, the logics of the institutions in which they are embedded, institutions such as the profession and the bureaucratic state (Thornton et al. 2012). In Chapter 2, I discern the rules, guidelines, and practices that oversee school counselors within public high schools to determine which logics frame their utilization, attention, and behavior. I do so by conducting in-depth interviews and observations with counselors in two public high schools in an urban Midwestern city, conducting interviews with the counselor educators who train school counselors in master’s programs, and conducting observations at school counseling conferences to gather the information and meanings inherent in those sessions to determine the institutional frames and logics in which high school counselors are embedded.¹

¹ I also conducted beginning and end of the year interviews with 71 students, and surveyed them six times throughout the school year regarding their perceptions of high school counselors and teachers, and their engagement with academic and college-going behaviors. This data will be explored in separate manuscripts.
Evidence from this study suggests that there are two main logics that govern the work of high school counselors: a student-centered logic and a school-centered logic. These logics dictate the amount of time and attention counselors spend on the multiple facets of their job. School counselors are operating under these sometimes conflicting and contradictory logics. By viewing the school counselor as embedded in multiple logics, I determine how these frames – as governing principles of their training in the profession and work within schools – explain why students commonly perceive high school counselors as ineffectual. I lay out what each of these logics means, how each developed, and evidence of these logics in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 3, I connect the rules and guidelines of the profession with how high school counselors are actually utilized and how their value to the school is communicated through the allocation of resources. With research on “street-level bureaucrats,” I define the problem of how resource constraints limit the ability of high school counselors to reach students in ways that both sides expect. I find that high school counselors must contend with high caseloads and task allocation that preferences school-centered tasks at the price of student-centered attention. The disconnect between their student-centered training and their school-centered use by the principals and the district can lead to counselor burnout and alienation from their positions.

In Chapter 4, I extend my analysis of high school counselors as street-level bureaucrats with social psychological theory by exploring another obstacle to their effectiveness in serving students – the role ambiguity and role conflict inherent in the profession. I find that the structure of schools and the loose coupling between the graduate programs that train counselors and the high schools that employ them leave
counselors vulnerable to role ambiguity and role conflict through misaligned expectations of the position, misaligned goals of the counselors and the schools, and poor evaluative and reward structures. I found a lack of a clear, coherent, and consistent identity of the school counselors in the study, consistent with other studies (Burnham and Jackson 2000; Freeman and Coll 1997). This role ambiguity and conflict could be traced to the ambiguity in the purpose of schools and schooling, and the distinct evolution of a profession with one foot in education and one foot in social/emotional counseling. Without an accurate and consistent definition of their work across schools – and thus without an appropriate evaluative framework – the high school counselors in this study suffered from poor boundaries, inconsistency in tasks, underutilization, and reduction of their role to class schedulers.

In Chapter 5, I take this analysis a step further by observing how high school counselors navigate the constrained resources, conflicting logics, and role ambiguity previously discussed when deciding how to spend their time and how they interact with students. I explore how these conditions contribute to patterns of practice by high school counselors regarding their time and attention that shape the quality of services that are or are not delivered to students (Lipsky 2010). I find that the high school counselors developed both student-centered and school-centered techniques to manage their work. Unfortunately, they engaged in school-centered strategies more often, and received push back from the district, school leadership, and even other counselors when trying to employ student-centered strategies in an environment of limited time and resources.

Each of these chapters contributes to a larger sociological perspective on school counseling as a profession built in the social sciences but embedded within educational
institutions with the expectation that they further student outcomes. This dissertation’s essential mission is to understand how school counselors are trained and utilized and how high school counselors currently navigate the tension between conflicting logics, which are structured by the profession (through graduate training and professional organizations) and the school. This focus provides greater knowledge regarding school counselors’ place within high schools and how to utilize their education more effectively, especially to improve educational outcomes for low-income and minority high school students. High schools today are doing students a disservice by not utilizing school counselors to their fullest potential. We need to look at the organizational and institutional structures surrounding school counselors to understand how they can more effectively impact student outcomes. Thus, one of the most promising routes to reduce inequality in social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary outcomes is to identify the organizational barriers that prevent high school counselors from delivering the necessary information and support to disadvantaged students (Bidwell 2001; Thornton et al. 2012).
CHAPTER 2:
AN ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELING PROFESSION

2.1 Introduction

High school counselors are in the position to have significant impact on student success outcomes in schools. As educators trained to provide social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary counseling to students, they can provide a whole-person approach to student success. However, research suggests counselors fail to live up to the potential of their positions because of constraints imposed by low-resource schools and a profession without a strong identity. This leaves students underserved and counselors themselves underutilized (Corwin et al. 2004; Holland 2015; Johnson and Rochkind 2010; Krei and Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum et al. 2015). Identifying and understanding the impact of these macro-level constraints on counselors requires an in-depth analysis of the larger organizational and institutional context of their work, as well as micro-level interactions. In this chapter, I begin my study of high school counselors with a short history of the profession, their graduate training, and the expectations of modern high school counselors. I then define my organizational and institutional approach, and how I will use it to analyze the school counseling profession to answer my research questions.
After a description of my sample and methods, I discuss how the profession and the schools in which they reside impact how high school counselors approach their jobs and create conflict regarding how counselors should spend their time and attention. In later chapters, I will discuss the ramifications of these conflicts on how counselors allocate their time and attention to students.

2.2 The School Counseling Profession

2.2.1 History of the Profession

To understand the school counseling profession as it is structured today, it is important to take a (quick) look at how the field developed in the United States and the historical context of its emergence (Abbott 1988; Dunn and Jones 2010; Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton and Ocasio 1999). The overall field of counseling has its roots in the guidance movement of the early 1900s (Gladding 2013). The early emphasis was on guiding people to make choices in the world of work, and especially to address worries regarding the adverse effects of the Industrial Revolution on the labor market (Aubrey 1977). “Its emphasis was on prevention and purposefulness — on helping individuals of all ages and stages avoid making bad choices in life while finding meaning, direction, and fulfillment in what they did” (Gladding 2013:6).

Frank Parsons, considered the founder of guidance, established the Boston Vocational Bureau in 1908 to help young people discern their future careers. He connected knowledge of the self with knowledge of work in an effort to help people connect their personal strengths and desires with potential careers (Gladding 2013; Schweiger et al. 2011). At about the same time in 1907, Jesse B. Davis, the
superintendent of schools in Grand Rapids, Michigan, began the first systematized guidance program in a school system. He built guidance into the English classroom in an effort to provide students with preventative education regarding their ability to deal with major life events (Gladding 2013; Schweiger et al. 2011). The first “guidance counselors” within schools were largely teachers and administrators within schools (Gladding 2013).

Through the 1920s, the profession’s focus was on vocational guidance, evidenced by the emphasis on education courses for counselors, and the government’s desire to support war veterans with the practice (Gladding 2013). The profession also expanded within schools, leading to an increase in personnel (Armor 1969). In the late 1920s and into the 1930s, there was a movement to expand the number of counselors and the role of the counselor beyond employment counseling into helping strategies for emotional problems, partially in response to a mental health movement hastened by World War II (Armor 1969; Gladding 2013; Hollis 1997). This approach was emphasized in Carl Roger’s 1942 book *Counseling and Psychotherapy*, which stressed non-directive counseling (meaning less direct advice regarding vocation plans). This instigated a shift from prior practical vocational placement tasks to a more psychological approach to counseling (Armor 1969; Gladding 2013). The emergence of the non-directive approach led to an increased lack of role definition as some in the profession still supported a more directive, guidance approach (Aubrey 1982). As early as the late 1930s into the 1940s, researchers cited disagreement and lack of uniformity within the profession regarding appropriate “vocational guidance” roles, contributing to an increase in non-counseling administrative duties within schools (Fitch 1936).
The 1950s and 1960s was a period of transition, with the profession shifting from a dispersed to a consolidated group of professionals trained specifically in guidance (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963). By the end of the 1960s, the coming of age of the baby boom generation and the increase in various government acts and grants (such as the National Defense Education Act in 1958) led to increased funding for secondary school counselor preparation and a push for counselors in elementary schools. From 1958 to 1965, the student to counselor ratio in high schools decreased by almost half, from 960-to-1 to 507-to-1 (Shertzer and Stone 1966). The field of school counseling also grew in the number of graduate training programs (Herr 2002). However, school counselors were still considered ancillary to the education process (Aubrey 1982), and continued to struggle with increasing administrative duties, such as testing, tracking attendance, and data entry (Stewart 1959).

The 1970s saw the profession expand outside of schools, instigating a further shift away from the strictly “guidance” model of directive advice regarding schooling, to the “counseling” model of helping with personal and social issues (Myrick 2011). This shift can be seen in the American Personnel and Guidance Association’s 1984 decision to change its name to the American Association for Counseling and Development (and again to the current name of the American Counseling Association, or ACA). This highlighted the profession’s goal to expand past just guidance and into a comprehensive “helping profession” dedicated to serving all students, not just the college-bound or at-risk (Gladding 2013). In addition, further solidifying itself as a mental health profession, the counseling field was included in statistics compiled by the Center for Mental Health Services and the National Institute of Mental Health, establishing its place among
psychology and social work as a mental health field (Gladding 2013; Manderscheid and Sonnenschein 1992).

In the 1980s, a burst of professionalization led to the creation of counseling education standards, the creation of the counseling accreditation body Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP) through the ACA, and the creation of a national registry of professional counselors, the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) (Schweiger et al. 2011). Today, there are approximately 128,950 elementary and secondary school counselors in the U.S. today and with diverse job descriptions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017). They contend not only with the historical responsibilities of the position, but a growing high-stakes accountability environment ushered in by No Child Left Behind and efforts to ensure meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (Bardhoshi 2012).

2.2.2 Graduate Training in School Counseling

As of today, all states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) require school counselors to have some sort of graduate education in school counseling in order to practice, and 44 states and D.C. specifically require a master’s degree in school counseling or a related field as of 2012 (American Counseling Association 2012; CACREP 2018). This illustrates the increasing legal jurisdiction the profession now demands (Abbott 1988). Graduate training, as in other professions, sets the standard for professional practice as nearly all school counselors must enter the profession through it (Dunn and Jones 2010). CACREP accredits counseling education programs in a variety of subfields, including school counseling, addiction counseling, career counseling, clinical mental health and rehabilitation counseling, college counseling and student
affairs, and marriage, couple, and family counseling. As of November 24, 2017, CACREP listed 259 master’s programs in K-12\(^2\) school counseling in the U.S. on their website (CACREP 2017). Compared to the approximately 491 programs that specifically list a school counseling master’s or counseling master’s with a school counseling concentration on November 24, 2017 through the ASCA website (American School Counselor Association 2017b), I calculate about 53% of master’s in school counseling programs are 48-hour CACREP accredited programs.\(^3\)

The “setting-based association” (Abbott 1988:68) for the profession is the American School Counseling Association (ASCA). Started as a division with the American Counseling Association in 1953, ASCA focuses specifically on counselors within elementary, middle, and high schools (American Counseling Association 2016). According to email correspondence with ASCA, as of August 2015 they had 30,000 members, about 6,000 of which were high school counselors. For their national conference, they have on average 2,000 attendees, about 600 of whom are high school counselors.

Today, graduate training and professional organizations stress the movement of the field away from strictly guidance to a helping profession, which focuses on developmental and transitional concerns of people of all ages, as well as overall wellness (Gladding 2013). “The assumption underlying the field is that unless the social and

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\(^2\) School counselors are trained in K-12 counseling programs. Elementary, middle, and high school counselors train alongside each other and many times have internship or practicum experiences at two or all three levels. This dissertation is focused specifically on high school counselors, though I wish to note here that their education and some of the obstacles they face are similar.

\(^3\) Newly revised CACREP accreditation requirements will increase master’s programs to 60-credit hours by 2023 (CACREP 2018).
psychological barriers to achievement are recognized and removed, students will not achieve success” (Seashore, Jones, and Seppanen 2001:33). Typical classes in school counseling master’s programs include counseling theories, individual and group counseling, career counseling, multicultural counseling, and supervised practicum and internship experiences. Often, school counseling programs include courses shared with clinical mental health programs, with just one or two school counseling-specific courses.

2.2.3 High School Counselors Today

The high school counselor job description today varies from school to school based on the school sector, student body, and resources within the community and district. But in general, school counselors interact with students in a number of areas: a) social/emotional needs counseling, b) academic support (course-taking, high school graduation requirements), c) college and career counseling, and d) administrative non-counseling tasks (scheduling, registration, coordinating testing, discipline) (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011b).

School counselors are trained to provide social and emotional counseling to students, even more so in schools serving low-income populations (Belasco 2013). This counseling involves identifying mental or physical abuse at home, bullying, drug and alcohol abuse by the student or parent/guardian, conflict resolution, suicide threats, and many other psychological issues the student may display and that undoubtedly impact student learning (Herr 2002). Counselors are also charged with supporting students academically in course-taking choices (usually paired with their responsibility for creating the master schedule of classes), as well as more administrative tasks such as
tracking students’ progress on high school completion requirements (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011b).

High school counselors are also in charge of supporting and guiding students with *college and career counseling*. This aspect of their jobs includes providing information on the requirements of college enrollment, preparing students for various college preparatory tasks such as taking the SAT or ACT, discerning college choices, and walking students through the college application process, and discerning career choices. College and career counseling is closely aligned with academic support, and both of these fit within the comprehensive school counseling paradigm that counselors are taught in graduate school.

School counselors are also sometimes assigned non-counseling or *administrative* tasks due to lack of other qualified personnel in the school, or the overextension of the assistant principals. These non-counseling tasks include data entry, coordinating standardized tests, discipline, and keeping clerical records (American School Counselor Association 2016). These tasks are very time intensive, can take them away from building relationships with students, and are rarely included in any formal delineation of their roles (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011b).

2.3 Institutional Logics

When viewing high school counselors, who are embedded in both their profession and the school in which they work, it is helpful to take an institutional approach. “Institutions are rules and shared meanings (implying that people are aware of them or that they can be consciously known) that define social relationships, help define who
occupies what position in those relationships, and guide interaction by giving actors
cognitive frames or sets of meanings to interpret the behavior of others…Institutions can,
of course, affect the situations of actors with or without their consent or understanding”
(Fligstein 2001:108). Influenced by neo-institutionalism in a long tradition of work
partially focused on the school as an organization (Bidwell 2001; Meyer 1977; Meyer
and Rowan 1977, 2006), the institutional logics approach frames high school counselors
within multiple social institutions and at multiple levels – as individuals embedded in
organizations (schools), within a profession (school counseling), and embedded in
institutions (frames and logics).

High school counselors are influenced by institutional frames and guidelines that
guide the work they do. Each frame, or “institutional logic,” has a “different set of
expectations for social relations and human and organizational behavior” (Thornton and
Ocasio 2008:104). For example, those under circumstances that stress accountability
might find a performance logic to be the most prominent logic as they gear their attention
and action to performing well by the relevant metric (Bridwell-Mitchell and Sherer
2017).

Each frame shapes the attention and behavior of individuals and organizations to
some issues at hand through rules and guidelines that prioritize certain issues or tasks
over others (Goodrick and Reay 2011; Thornton 2002). These frames provide goals,
expectations, and a blueprint for action toward certain tasks, and can either constrain
actors or provide valuable supports and shortcuts that guide their work (McPherson and
Sauder 2013; Scott 2014; Thornton et al. 2012). For example, Dunn and Jones (2010)
highlight how two logics – care and science – developed together over time in medical
schools as these schools balanced the scientific exploration of medical issues with an increasing imperative toward primary care of the patient. Generally, actors succeed when they follow the implicit assumptions regarding legitimate behavior rooted within the logics (Thornton and Ocasio 1999; Thornton et al. 2012).

Viewing actors as influenced by these institutional frames or logics does not mean they are without choice or agency in their social structure (Thornton et al. 2012). Individual and organizational actors can choose whether or not to follow the implicit rules, and thus may influence and change the rules themselves through embedded agency (Thornton 2004). For example, teachers may not adopt institutionally-based practices that go against their professional logics (Bridwell-Mitchell 2013). Institutional logics are not solely causal – they can change and vary by context (Thornton et al. 2012) in a macro-micro feedback loop as actors influence logics and logics influence actors (Hallett and Ventresca 2006).

Logics define which problems and issues counselors respond to, and how to solve them (Thornton 2004). When used to determine the antecedents of decision-making, the logics perspective gives me the opportunity to view how a counselor’s decision within a particular interaction is constrained, and how it can have larger organizational consequences (Lipsky 2010; Thornton et al. 2012). In addition to defining the logics of the school counseling profession, in this chapter and in Chapters 3 and 4, I will discuss how the logics of the profession (and their attendant obstacles) constrain the actions of high school counselors, while in Chapter 5 I will focus on how counselors utilized responded to these logics and obstacles.
2.4 Research Questions

I use the institutional logics approach to answer the following questions regarding the structure of the work of high school counselors:

1. What are the logics that govern the work of high school counselors?
2. How do these logics help explain how high school counselors do their work?

2.5 Data

In order to identify the institutional logics of school counseling, I gathered qualitative data to see how high school counselors do their work, how they interact with students and administrators, and how this impacts their work with students. Qualitative work within a school provides detailed descriptions both of how a counselor works and the consequences. A qualitative approach to understanding the school counseling profession is rare, though there are some exceptions that are typically student-centered (Holland 2015, 2013; McDonough 1997; Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum et al. 1996; Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018).

Gaining the trust of the counselors required providing clerical help, technical support and advice (i.e. how to use Excel), cookies, and my role as an informed observer. I understood their concerns, but since I was not a counselor, I could be naïve and ask questions that a more knowledgeable counselor couldn’t. After gaining the trust of the counselors, I was intricately involved in the inner workings of the counseling office in a way that a quantitative researcher cannot be (Creswell 2003). With embedded observations within the schools and triangulating qualitative data with interviews within and outside of the schools, I am able to provide detailed descriptions of the work that
counselors conduct, the influences on their work, and how their work impacts students (Burawoy 1998; Creswell 2003; Johnson 1990; Lareau and Shultz 1996). I look to determine how these frames – as governing principles of their training in the profession and work within schools – might explain why high school counselors are perceived as ineffectual and underutilized. Below, I outline the various forms of data collection for this study.

2.5.1 Sample

The sample school district is in a mid-sized city in a Midwestern state in the United States that I call Ashview. Ashview School District has a high percentage of low-income students who participate in the free and reduced lunch program (70 percent), a common though imperfect measure of poverty in educational literature. Ashview also has a high percentage of black and Hispanic students in the district (over 50 percent).

I choose to observe counselors in two high schools in Ashview. Hunter High School (HHS) is half white, and half black or Hispanic, with 50 percent of its students on free or reduced lunch (FRL). HHS has the reputation of being the best high school in the public district, according to most people I spoke to. It has a large population of middle- to high-income students due to this stronger reputation and an International Baccalaureate (IB) program that consists of mostly middle- to upper-class white students. It is the biggest public high school in the district, with an enrollment well over 1,700 students. But with an approximately 350-to-1 student-to-counselor ratio (above the 250-to-1 ratio recommended by ASCA), the counselors struggled to maintain significant relationships

4 All names of places and people are pseudonyms.
with students, especially the relatively large number of low-income and minority students that had migrated from other schools in the area.

In contrast, Edward High School (EHS) is comprised of 75 percent black or Hispanic students, and 20 percent white students, and it has a larger percentage of students on FRL. It is ranked much lower in the state than HHS, and has experienced large declines in student enrollment over the last 10 years due to open enrollment in the district and its declining reputation. With a smaller enrollment than HHS, the student-to-counselor ratio for EHS is slightly below the ASCA recommended ratio. However, EHS is considered an under-performing school, so the counselors spent a lot of time responding to state and federal accountability mandates, tracking high school graduation progress, and performing administrative tasks to boost the rating of the school, with less time spent on either social/emotional or postsecondary counseling.

These two high schools were chosen as a representation of urban high schools in the country, with high levels of racial and economic diversity. However, they also offer unique qualities such as the focus of their curriculum that informed this study. In addition, I purposely choose two public high schools in the same district for my sample, as opposed to some of the other high schools in the area, as I preferred to isolate any variation in approaches to counseling based on the student body, and not the administrative structure of the district. There was still plenty of variation even within the district due to the relatively different racial and income demographics of HHS and EHS. In addition, their reputations in Ashview and the state are almost polar opposites, impacting selection into the schools and how the schools were run.
2.5.2 School Counselor Interviews and Observations

I conducted school counselor interviews with all of the incoming and outgoing counselors in the two sample high schools during my study – four from EHS, and seven from HHS. I also interviewed at least one counselor from each of the eight other public and private high schools in Ashview and the other major neighboring town, as well as four counselors from across the country for a total of 26 high school counselors and two counseling administrative assistants interviewed, listed in Table 2.1. Formal interviews with counselors were conducted between June 2015 and October 2016, and were semi-structured, recorded, transcribed, and each lasted between 45 and 180 minutes, with an average time of 76 minutes.

My questions for the school counselors focused on their roles, the constraints under which they worked, and how they spent their time on their various responsibilities. Questions specifically discussed course selection and scheduling duties, social/emotional counseling, postsecondary counseling, and high school graduation support. Similar to Rosenbaum et al. (1996), I also asked the counselors about the types of students they typically met with (whether college-bound or not, what grade, etc.), the effort with which they attempted to reach out to students regarding life after high school, and their approach to giving advice to different types of students. Questions were also informed by the work of Amatea and Clark (2005). See Appendix A for the full school counselor interview guide.

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5 The interview with one of the local Catholic high schools was completed in a group setting with all three counselors, bringing the total to eleven Ashview-area counselors interviewed.
# TABLE 2.1

## LIST OF SCHOOL COUNSELOR STUDY PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focal School Counselors/Assistants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Edward High School</td>
<td>School Counselor/Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Edward High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard</td>
<td>Edward High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nia</td>
<td>Edward High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janelle</td>
<td>Edward High School</td>
<td>Administrative Assistant/Registrar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Hunter High School</td>
<td>School Counselor/Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becca</td>
<td>Hunter High School</td>
<td>School Counselor (Outgoing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>Hunter High School</td>
<td>School Counselor (Temporary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Hunter High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Hunter High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Hunter High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>Hunter High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>Hunter High School</td>
<td>Administrative Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other School Counselors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>Other Ashview High School 1</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>Other Ashview High School 2</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Other Ashview High School 3</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trisha</td>
<td>Neighboring Charter High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooks</td>
<td>Neighboring Private High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Neighboring Catholic High School 1</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>Neighboring Catholic High School 2</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia</td>
<td>Neighboring Catholic High School 2</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theresa</td>
<td>Neighboring Catholic High School 2</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>Neighboring Public High School 1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeannine</td>
<td>Neighboring Public High School 2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>West Coast High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>State Capital High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Western High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooke</td>
<td>Western High School</td>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An overarching theme of the interview questions was the meaning the counselors made out of their training and the school they worked in, and how they divided their attention among the many competing elements of their job. In particular, I was interested in how they believed their graduate training influenced their approach to counseling, the role of professional organizations in their ongoing training, and the role of the school and district administration in their day-to-day jobs. Placing the counselors within the context of the school and the profession informed the theory and how the logics coexisted or competed to affect counselors’ decision making.

To capture the yearly cyclical nature of counselor relationships and advisement of students, I completed twice weekly observations of general counseling operations in the counseling office in the two sample schools from October 2015-June 2016, with an additional observation in August 2016 to observe beginning of the year activity. This form of observation kept me in the main counseling office of both EHS and HHS for the majority of my time, watching who came in and out of the office and noting who they wanted to see and why. Many conversations between counselors would take place in the main reception office, and it also made me visible to the counselors, who would often explain something they were dealing with or pull me back into their office to observe a meeting. The counseling administrative assistants at both schools, who were also the registrars for the schools, became key informants for this project as I was always in their eyesight and would often chime in with questions about what was going on.
I also observed one-on-one student-counselor interactions and meetings for eight of the eleven counselors. The interactions ranged from student drop-ins and short meetings to schedule classes for the next year, to “junior” or “senior” meetings during which counselors would meet with each student to discuss what these students needed to do to graduate and move on after high school. For confidential and ethical reasons, I set boundaries for which type of meetings I would observe. I would excuse myself if the topic of conversation ever revolved around mental health concerns, problems at home, discipline, or other personal matters for confidentiality and ethical reasons. If, in the context of discussing college preparations or scheduling, personal information was released, I did not document or use any of that information, though in some cases I noted how often they occurred. I never documented the names of the students the counselors were meeting with (besides those I formally interviewed, when I used pseudonyms), whether in my formal or informal writings or field notes. I also did not tape record these meetings. Finally, students needed to agree to my presence in the room before I observed.

Informal interviews with the high school counselors working in the two sample schools occurred regularly during observation days as each day unfolded. These informal sessions allowed me to capture in-time reactions of counselors to situations, and to receive clarification of the observations I had made, thereby reducing recall bias that is

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6 One counselor at EHS, Nia, never agreed to allow me to observe one-on-one meetings with her in her office for reasons she did not explain, though she was usually very willing to answer questions when I asked. Of the seven HHS counselors, Becca was interviewed in June 2015, but then left for a new job the next week, so she was not included in the observations. I also never observed interactions between students and Dave, a retired counselor who arrived at HHS in April 2016 to fill in for Robert who left the job abruptly in February 2016. Dave was often more than willing to share information and his opinion regarding his work, and came with the knowledge of working at a different high school in Ashview before retiring and being pulled into this temporary work with HHS. However, I did not ask to observe Dave’s student meetings to allow him to settle into this new position without interference.
endemic to formal interviews alone. These interviews or “check-ins” provided clear cause-and-effect information as the counselors perceived it, and I often received some of the best insights from these informal interviews, as most of the counselors were eager to help me learn. Some counselors even appreciated the ability to vent to someone who understood what they were going through. Therefore, as the year went on and I established greater trust with the counselors, I was able to gather increasingly insightful personal reflections from the counselors.

2.5.3 School and School District Administrator Interviews

To capture the logic espoused by the school, formal interviews with key school and district administrators who worked with or impacted the work of the counselors took place throughout the school year. These administrators included the principals, social workers, career guidance specialists, the district administrator over the high schools, and others (see Tables 2.2 for the list of interviewees, and Appendix B for the interview guide). Information from these participants highlighted the expectations that each school (and the district) had for their counselors with respect to each of the logics. These interviews were crucial to comprehend how counseling was structured in the district and schools, and to determine how administrators viewed and utilized counselors. Each of these administrators either worked directly with the counselors or had influence over how the counseling position was structured. All administrators were asked the same core set of questions, with additional questions targeted toward how they personally worked with the counselors. For instance, questions of the principals covered how counselors were hired and trained. Questions of the career specialists focused on how they interacted with counselors, and how their work supplemented or overlapped that of the counselors.
TABLE 2.2
LIST OF SCHOOL AND DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR STUDY PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>School/Location</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EHS Principal</td>
<td>Edward High School</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HHS Principal</td>
<td>Hunter High School</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Ashview School District</td>
<td>District Administrator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Union Rep</td>
<td>Ashview School District</td>
<td>Teachers Union Representative</td>
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<tr>
<td>EHS Support Staff</td>
<td>Edward High School</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>HHS Support Staff</td>
<td>Hunter High School</td>
<td>Support Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EHS Teacher</td>
<td>Edward High School</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HHS Teacher</td>
<td>Hunter High School</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecilia</td>
<td>State Education Representative</td>
<td>State Education Representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td>State Education Representative</td>
<td>Former Counselor/Consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRiO Person</td>
<td>TRiO</td>
<td>TRiO Representative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.5.4 School Counselor Graduate Program Faculty Interviews

In order to comprehend which logics the profession instilled in school counselors and how counselors were trained to enact these logics, eleven faculty members from different counseling graduate programs across the state and five across the country were interviewed for 60 to 90 minute semi-structured, recorded and transcribed interviews, in person or by phone. I asked these counselor educators about their education and work backgrounds (especially as they related to how they approached teaching in the program), about the goals and nature of the coursework and internships, about their students, and about their thoughts on the state of the field. As the majority of high school counselors in Ashview obtained their master’s degree in school counseling in the same state, and over half of those in EHS and HHS from the same regional university, these interviews supplied information regarding the training process of the counselors in their situation.
and the logics as they pertain to them. See Tables 2.3 for the list of faculty interviewees. See Appendix C for the full faculty interview guide.

### TABLE 2.3
**LIST OF SCHOOL COUNSELING FACULTY STUDY PARTICIPANTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td><strong>Faculty at In-State Universities</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Wyatt</td>
<td>Large State University</td>
<td>School Counseling Faculty Member</td>
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<tr>
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2.5.5 Observation and Informal Interviews at School Counselor Conferences

I also conducted data collection at one national and two state school counselor conferences to situate my dissertation in the context of contemporary training and ongoing professional development of counselors. These conferences were chosen to represent the profession both nationally and locally, providing both national and local context for the profession. I attended the ASCA national conference in the summer of 2016, and the state ASCA’s yearly conference in the Fall of 2015. I also attended a third conference sponsored by a state non-profit organization dedicated to college counseling in the summer of 2016.

At these conferences, I spoke with school counselors between content sessions for 10-15 minute informal, unrecorded interviews. We discussed what they believed the purpose of the high school counselor was, how well they were able to live up to that idea, and what they might change or maintain if they could design the ideal counselor position. I also observed educational sessions to understand what knowledge the profession provided conference attendees. Analyzing the program and attending the sessions gave me a unique insight into the profession and its logics, an insight not gathered in previous research.

2.5.6 Data Analysis

These elements of data collection combine to create a novel and systematic description of the work of school counselors and how it impacts students. Multiple data sources obtained throughout the school year provided an excellent opportunity for analyzation as they allowed me to triangulate the data to increase reliability and answer the proposed research questions (Johnson 1990; Lareau and Shultz 1996).
I coded all of the field notes and interview transcripts with all participants with MaxQDA using an iteratively-based coding scheme that I devised, informed by the theoretical approach, by findings from initial interviews and observations, and by previous research. In particular, I looked for examples of the logics, how they manifested in the schools, how the counselors responded to the logics, and how they enacted the logics, thus examining micro-process of interactions that form and define the logics (Everitt 2013; McPherson and Sauder 2013). Ultimately, this collection of data answers questions regarding how high school counselors allocate time to their counseling and non-counseling duties, and the potential impact of this allocation on students.

2.6 Logics in School Counseling

The effort that educational school counselors expend in their jobs is largely dictated by the rules and guidelines of the organizations in which they train and work. These guidelines are manifestations of, and legitimized by, the logics of the institutions in which they are embedded, institutions such as the profession and the bureaucratic state (Thornton et al. 2012). School counselors exist within overlapping “institutional spheres” such as school counseling graduate programs, the profession and its representative organizations, and K-12 schools. Each of these spheres are influenced by different logics (Dunn and Jones 2010). In addition, institutional logics are “inhabited” by people who create and communicate rules and norms through behavior and interactions with others (Hallett and Ventresca 2006; Scott 2014; Thornton et al. 2012).

In this section, I discern between the rules, guidelines, and practices that oversee school counselors within public high schools to determine which logics framed their
utilization, attention, and behavior. Evidence from interviews and observations of interactions in this study, as well as prior research, suggests that there are two main logics that governed the work of high school counselors within these institutions: a student-centered logic and a school-centered logic.

2.6.1 Student-Centered Logic

Professions typically have one dominant logic through which workers learn appropriate actions, identities, and answers to issues, though multiple may exist as well (Dunn and Jones 2010; Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton 2004). As an example, the ideal logic of the accounting profession would be to determine and enact “appropriate accounting standards” among other accountants and with little to no governmental oversight and among other accountants (Goodrick and Reay 2011).

The school counseling profession has an overarching logic that guides the training and intentions of school counselors (Thornton et al. 2012). In the context of the history of the counseling profession, we can see how the profession – throughout its development – has been focused on the growth and development of people through individual and group attention. Findings from this study, informed by previous research, suggests that the school counseling profession has a student-centered logic, whereby counselors’ training and time is dedicated to the social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary needs of students. The student-centered logic emanates from and resides in the professional organizations that oversee the profession, ASCA and ACA. In addition, the organizations that oversee the training of counselors – such as CACREP and graduate programs – also influence the profession through principles, guidelines, and standards (Scott 2008).
The student-centered logic is first identified in graduate training, where school counselors are exposed to theoretical approaches to social/emotional counseling (Armor 1969; McDonough 1997; Rosenbaum 2001) in order to identify obstacles to a safe and productive learning environment and to respond to physical and emotional abuse or social problems that prevent learning. They are also trained and expected to guide students through the academic, college and career discernment process (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011b). The profession values those who excel in these areas, as evidenced by the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) award to recognize those who implement an ASCA-designed comprehensive school counseling program that covers the three main areas of counseling (social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary). The assumptions of the student-centered profession logic are that they help students to succeed academically and can do this best by providing individual and group counseling.

Since "institutional logics are both symbolic and material" (Thornton et al. 2012:150), this logic is evident in the classes required to be a counselor. CACREP accredits programs in school counseling, addiction counseling, career counseling, clinical mental health counseling, rehabilitation counseling and others. Programs wishing to be accredited must meet the latest standards as indicated by CACREP with “the intent to promote a unified counseling profession,” with standards for all counseling programs, but also additional standards for each subspecialty (CACREP 2015).

According to CACREP, graduate programs may meet these standards in a number of ways. However, when I asked the faculty members what made their programs similar or different from others in the state, they all said that CACREP accredited programs basically followed the same blueprint. Dr. Ware, a new professor at the regional public
university responsible for conferring the majority of graduate degrees for the Ashview counselors in this study, indicated that school counseling graduate programs emphasized counseling through about ten general counseling courses, but with one or two courses specific to school counseling (such as introduction to school counseling, and career counseling). In many ways, she said that school counseling programs are indistinguishable, except for different ways of obtaining internship and practicum hours (such as through in-school free clinic), or for the influence of the school’s mission on the content of courses (such was the case at a religious institution).

This standardization across programs ensured that counselors across the country were obtaining a consistent education, and that the student- (or client-) centered logic of the profession was almost uniformly presented to counselors. Multiple faculty members, such as Dr. Ware, highlighted how important it was that school counselors be “counselors first” with school counseling as their specialty, and that they have a “therapeutic relationship” with students. Mr. Coughlin, a former adjunct professor-turned-program coordinator at a public university, said they needed to have “basic clinical skills.” These are aspects of the job based on their individual student-centered relationships with students. The ability to counsel and care for students was more often than not indicated as a “vital skill” for graduates of school counseling programs. As Ms. Martin, another former high school counselor now program coordinator, illustrated: “You’re there to listen and to figure out what is the barrier? What’s the problem keeping a student from doing his or her best?”

The student-centered logic in some ways is also a client-centered logie, with some of the faculty members (like Dr. Christopher, whose institution had a community
counseling center as a part of the training) referring to students as clients, and counselors viewed as “skilled clinicians” with an individual-focused mentality. Mr. Coughlin explained why clinical counseling skills were vital to the position: “Because so many times, a student comes into your office for one thing and it turns into something totally different. You know, you – they came in to change their schedule, and five minutes into the conversation, you find out they’re cutting.” Institutional logics are imbued with meaning regarding identities, derived from structures and practices (Thornton and Ocasio 2008; Thornton et al. 2012). Thus counselors developed meaning out of being “school counselors” and not “school managers.” The identity of school counselors, as Dr. O’Brien, a faculty member at a mid-Atlantic school counseling program, put it, is to “identify as counselors [who] straddle the world of mental health and education,” while excelling in clinical skills.

For faculty and counselors, completing the job successfully involved considering “the whole person,” and tackling the social/emotional issues to understand how to fix the academic issues. Dr. Callahan, a faculty member at a small private university, talked about the types of issues school counselors see and how counselors are necessary for caring for students:

There are an awful lot of social and emotional pieces that have to be lined up to help with the academics. Which is why I went into counseling to begin with. We have to look at a whole person, so, there may be services that are necessary for kids, they could be homeless, they could be being abused, they could be suicidal. I mean, all those come through the door and of course we have the bullying stuff now and the cyberbullying. And so, to think that you could separate that out is impossible.
Counseling faculty generally eschewed any non-counseling tasks that crept up in the actual performance of the job, and thus did not typically (with one exception) devote their limited curricular time to these tasks.

The student-centered logic was also evident in my conversations with school counselors, and in my observations of when they would activate this logic. I asked every counselor what his or her responsibilities were. Each of them inevitably referenced activities such as helping students choose their courses, handling course conflicts, counseling them when their academics were poor, attending to the social/emotional needs of students, and providing classroom guidance to students and teachers on these issues. Julia, the guidance director at HHS and 15 year counseling veteran, indicated her responsibilities included: “keying them into the things and the resources they need to be thinking about for being successful in the high school realm and preparing them for after high school and college and career readiness.”

School counselors would enact this logic through individual meetings with students, group presentations in classrooms or after school, and other counseling tasks. Counselors would spend their time talking with students about their courses, talking about how they could stay on track toward graduation, meeting with other staff such as the social worker or assistant principals to discuss students individualized education programs (IEPs) or academic progress, or just establishing a rapport with students to engender trust and awareness of the counselor and what they could provide.

Activating this logic was not always easy for the Ashview counselors, though. Whereas their clinical counseling counterparts received the same or similar training and operated in a clinic setting, the school counselors worked in an education setting.
supervised by and working alongside non-counseling educators. Despite being actively taught and preferring to engage this student-centered logic, their approach was not reinforced by an organization filled with counselors like it was for those counseling in a clinical setting. While the student-centered logic was available to all school counselors, regardless of school sector or age group with which they work, and could be activated by any of them, activation of this logic was contingent on the schools they worked in and competition with the next logic I will discuss: the school-centered logic.

2.6.2 School-Centered Logic

While the student-centered logic is the logic of the school counseling profession, public high school counselors are embedded within bureaucratic organizations managed from the federal government to the state, to the district, and then to the principal, receiving instructions along the way with little say in decisions (Belasco 2013; Bridgeland and Bruce 2011b; Lipsky 2010). Through my interviews, observations, and review of the literature, it became evident that Ashview counselors often grappled with a second school-centered logic, which focused their attention on tasks to support the management of the school, often at the expense of time devoted to students. The school-centered role of the counselor was focused on the overall functioning and successful management of the school, a role both the EHS and HHS principals greatly relied on the school counselors for, but which pulled them away from building positive individual relationships with students. With “non-counseling tasks” such as data entry, creating the master schedule, and coordinating high-stakes testing, tasks indicative of the school-centered logic were focused on the management and efficiency of the school. The Ashview counselors were operating in a school-centered environment, utilized to serve
the organizational goals of efficiency and bureaucratic compliance (Lipsky 2010) through school management, which may or may not serve the students’ immediate interests and needs regarding social/emotional, academic and postsecondary matters (as they are trained to do), but may support the overall functioning of the school.

Evidence of the school-centered logic could be heard symbolically in the words of the Ashview administrators, and materially in the ways they utilized the counselors (Thornton et al. 2012). For instance, the HHS principal talked about the counselors as the “glue” of the school, referring to the role they played in the smooth operation of the school, rather than as the mental health professionals they saw themselves as. Similarly, the EHS principal described the school counselors as the “artillery” (opposed to the teachers as the “frontline”) due to the “sheer background work that seems to be done” by the counselors. Both of the principals’ language implied a job description dedicated to the management of the school. The source of the school counselors’ work identity in the schools was not their professional identity as counselors, but to the role they played in managing the school.

Evidence of this logic could also be seen in the ways that the principals and school district leaders utilized the counselors. One particular situation comes to mind to illustrate this point. The counselors at both schools were tasked with ensuring that grades were accurately inputted and stored by teachers into the school management software for each student at the end of each semester or trimester before report cards were distributed. This was a large undertaking in these schools. Consider the fact that HHS, with 1700 students and 7 class periods a day had 11,900 potential grades to verify. Luckily, the grading software was generally reliable in automatically calculating grades, except that it
could not apply the district’s “2 out of 3” grading policy. This policy allowed a student to obtain credit for a course as long as their grades from two out of the three grading periods (1st six weeks, 2nd six weeks, and final exam) were passing grades. For instance, a student with two Ds and an F that resulted in an overall grade of an F when averaged across the semester could still earn credit because they passed the first two grading periods with Ds. Teachers were supposed to override the credit for the course to reflect this policy. However, Ashview teachers were not consistent in applying this policy, leaving over 125 grade conflicts for each school, conflicts that the counselors were asked to fix.

The EHS and HHS counselors took two different approaches to this task, both which placed a burden on the counselors. At the end of the semester for HHS, one night as they were leaving the office, the district sent the counselors the list of 163 students whose stored grades were not correct. The teachers were already gone, so the counselors decided to fix the grades themselves since grades were due for report cards the next week. The HHS counselors split up the students and overrode the teachers’ grades in 1.5 hours. Not a huge undertaking, but one that prevented them from doing other work or going home at their contractually stipulated time.

EHS counselors contacted teachers to make the changes for the 131 incorrect grades, with the mentality these were their grades and the teachers should fix them. But between this initial correspondence emailing each teacher about each student (the principal did not allow them to send a mass email), and follow ups for those who failed to follow through, the counselors spent a few days on a task that seemed to be more within the realm of teacher responsibilities.
Counselors also spoke of their school-centered roles in our one-on-one interviews and throughout the school year. For instance, Julia noted that the administration saw the counselors as “the cog of the building, we kind of keep everything with students and schedules that runs the high school.” This comment seems positive, referring to the counselors as indispensable to the school. But their indispensability was not due to their roles removing obstacles to academic success or in serving the students’ needs, but in ensuring the school ran smoothly. These school-centered tasks left them less available for supporting students’ academic obstacles, postsecondary plans, and social/emotional needs.

An even more pertinent example of the school-centered logic with which the counselors contended was their responsibility to the master schedule of courses for the school. This entailed not only inputting students into classes in the school management software, but also determining how many sections of classes were needed, when teachers had planning periods, and who taught the courses (essentially playing a role in determining whether teachers had a job the next year). Rose, the guidance director at EHS and 15 year counseling veteran, noted not liking assigning planning periods for teachers because she thought the teachers looked at the counselors as “villains” when they did not get the schedule they wanted.

But their role in the master schedule extended beyond just assigning teachers planning periods. In a conversation with Julia, at HHS, and Susan, a guidance director at another Ashview high school, the two directors spoke to the seriousness of the task as many jobs were rumored to be on the line that year. The school district had lost 10% of student enrollment in the past year and some were worried teachers would be laid off.
Julia said it would be a big deal because it would be the first major layoff they had had in her time in the district. Julia spoke of a meeting she had with her principal and district leaders literally staffing the school for the following year. While most of the decisions on teacher staffing was due to student enrollment and student choices for courses, some of the staffing was based on how Julia and the principal made judgment calls regarding how many teachers they need, often asking the district for more than needed in order to protect teacher positions (more on the master schedule in Chapter 3).

Faculty spoke of the school-centered logic as well, often with chagrin. Mr. Coughlin noted that the role and identity of counselors was “shifting into a more systemic and leadership role in the school,” but not in a way he approved. He continued: “schools that are letting counselors take on a leadership roles are simply piling on non-counseling, administrative responsibilities on them. What they need to be doing is letting counselors be administrators within the field of counseling within the schools.” By this Mr. Coughlin meant that school counselors should be leaders and advocates for students, finding ways to use their knowledge and training to improve the lives of students, rather than contributing to the management of the school.

Understandably, it takes many members of a school’s staff to ensure its smooth operation. And under a strong school-centered way of structuring counselors’ work, the tasks they do may indirectly support the student in that they are ensuring the successful running of the school, minimizing disorder. But, this role often left the Ashview

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7 In future work, I will focus on how high school counselor guidance and suggestions played a role in student class choices (especially for incoming freshmen), so that even though essentially the student’s choice on whether to take a class, the counselor could have some influence, influence that may not be based in sound practice.
counselors questioning whether is was appropriate for them to be doing those tasks – Susan stated that her degree in counseling did not lend her particularly to the management of the school. Rose struggled with this in particular. She noted being trained to do developmental counseling, where “you have 8-10 students, you work with them for 6, 8, 9 weeks and then you can see the before and after.” She loved this part of her training and looked forward to it in her job. But she was disappointed to find that this form of developmental counseling, or “groups,” was never possible in her school. This impacted her professional identity as she feared others wouldn’t see her as a “real counselor.” “I can say that I’m a real counselor because I’m certified in the state, because you wouldn’t want anyone saying ‘oh, you’re not a counselor, you’re not a real counselor.’ Well, I got my certification, so I’m a real counselor.” But she never practiced those skills.

2.7 Competing Logics

The two institutional logics embedded within the school counseling profession dictated the amount of time counselors spent on the multiple facets of their job. School counselors are trained to provide student-centered care in the social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary realms, but the Ashview high schools constrained the amount of time counselors could spend counseling students (Lipsky 2010; Ocasio 1997), focusing instead on school-centered managerial tasks.

Part of the challenge of these conflicting logics arose from the fact that as heteronomous professionals (versus autonomous professionals) (Abbott 1988), the counselors worked in schools that have a slightly different mandate than the clinical
counseling centers in which their clinical counseling classmates were employed. A few of the faculty members I spoke with addressed this conflict and why this was particular to their subfield. Dr. Mario, a faculty member at a Southern university, spoke of counselors having feet in two different areas:

They’ve got a foot in [the] world of education and they’ve got a foot in […] the area of mental health and good counseling. And so they have to be very cognizant about how they can handle it both ways […]. The school counselor has to figure out how to live in both of those fields where [s/he] can do the small group for 6 to 8 weeks on divorce issues but not 6 to 8 months, and how does [s/he] keep [himself/herself] from being the person that always gets called when a teacher is sick or when the librarian is out? So that’s tricky, but it’s something that a school counselor has to figure out and they don’t learn that in graduate school.

Mr. Coughlin used the language of the profession to explain the predicament of school counselors:

The problem is that counseling as a profession is a totally different set of Holland Codes than the [workplace] environment that they’re in […]. We are a profession that has a foot in two different camps and that’s what makes it hard.

Holland Codes use personality types to direct people to potential careers (Holland 1959). Mr. Coughlin refers to the fact that the personality types that direct school counseling graduate students to counseling are very different from the types of personalities that excel in a school management setting.

Ms. Meyer, the school counseling program coordinator at a regional state university, spoke of the multiple audiences that school counselors work with as creating a complex work environment that entails more balance than that of a mental health counselor:
It’s a very complex world that school counselors play, and I always say it’s more complex than being a mental health counselor. And I’m not saying being a mental health counselor is easy […] But when you’re working in the schools and you have to deal with students and parents and teachers and administrators and you’re working in all three of those domains [social/emotional, academic, postsecondary], and you’re trying to find a balance among all of that, it’s very complex. And you have to be prepared for that.

Thus counselors’ placement in schools creates an environment prone to managing conflicting logics. These competing logics set up the potential for school counselors to encounter competing frameworks for action, with no one logic necessarily dominating (Goodrick and Reay 2011).

One particular example stands out regarding how conflicted counselors were in juggling the student- and school-centered approaches to their work. As a part of their attempts to achieve the highest recognition that ASCA has to offer school counseling programs (the Recognized ASCA Model Program, or RAMP designation), the HHS counselors convened an advisory panel that included current counselors, former counselors, a student, an assistant principal, a district administrator, the social worker, and two teachers. Prior to one of their meetings, the HHS counselors had to calculate how much time they spent on the various responsibilities they had within their school over a two-week span. When the counselors tracked their hours, they calculated that only 45% of their time went to guidance, counseling, and advocacy – with the last two only garnering 5% of their time total. This was in contrast to the ASCA recommended 80% of their time. Management activities like emails, granting hall passes, setting up how to schedule with the student, and planning events took 16% of their time (versus the recommended 10%). The non-programmatic duties they completed included state testing,
state reports, book rental, substitute teaching, attendance, report cards, transcripts, GPAs, class ranks, honor rolls, master scheduling, balancing class loads, and planning awards and graduation. These activities took upwards of 38% of their overall time over the two weeks (versus the ASCA recommended 10%). In addition, these percentages were averaged among all five counselors, so that Julia and Jessica (the guidance director and the counselor in charge of test coordination, respectively) spent more time on non-program and management tasks, so that their students (two-fifths of the student population) received fewer services. Upon hearing this in an advisory panel meeting, a retired counselor from a neighboring district on the panel said derisively that school counselors “are pseudo-administrators.”

There are certainly management-like responsibilities within the student-centered logic - part of helping students is the tedious tracking of class scheduling and graduation requirements to ensure students graduate on time. But those responsibilities, ultimately, get students to the finish line. Dr. Mario suggested that there could be a balance between the school-centered and student-centered logics, with counselors playing an important role in helping the school run, but within certain boundaries: “Am I diametrically opposed to high school counselor proctoring an exam, covering the class when somebody’s sick for a day? No. Or administrating the high stakes test? No. But if those things take away from the small groups, or one on ones or classroom guidance that have to do with personal development, academic development then that’s where I have an issue.”

One counselor even made the observations that teachers engaged in counseling more than counselors. When I asked him how much actual counseling he was able to do,
Dave, a retired high school counselor and former teacher who came to HHS after Robert left in February, juxtaposed the difference between counselors and teachers and how teachers often became *de facto* counselors because of their higher access to students:

I’ll be honest with you, as a teacher I probably did more counseling because I had kids everyday, and I had the same kids everyday. And so I probably did more counseling as a teacher […]. Whereas in this job, for example, you’re here [in the office], somebody else comes in, this, that [happens to distract you]. That’s not saying that counseling is bad or teaching is good or whatever. It’s just that you meet with that kid everyday [as a teacher]. You get to say “you’re smiling today,” next day “you’re not smiling, you got some kind of scratch on your face here.” Or you can say “your clothes are torn today” or something like that. Whereas you can’t do that here [in the counseling office] because you don’t really know if the kid, what kind of the attitude the kid has, unless you get to know the kid.

Teachers are poised to provide counseling-like services to students because of their daily interactions. But teachers are not trained counselors, and they might not see that student again after the semester is over, whereas a high school counselor is typically assigned to a student all four years and *is* trained, but does not have time to interact with students on such a regular basis.

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed how the logics of the school counseling profession and the schools high school counselors reside in impact how they approach their jobs, and create conflict regarding how they should spend their time and attention. I found that the work of high school counselors is guided by two often conflicting logics – a student-centered logic and a school-centered logic. While the Ashview school counselors wanted to and were trained to provide student-centered counseling for social/emotional,
academic, and postsecondary needs, they were often tasked instead with school-centered management tasks such as data entry that pulled them away from students. These competing logics created situations where counselors had to determine how to balance conflicting frameworks and issues.

In subsequent chapters, I will discuss more examples of when Ashview high school counselors faced situations under competing logics. In Chapter 3, I explore how school counselors are subjected to resource constraints in public high schools, and how this tilts their work environment to one that is more school-centered. In Chapter 4, I discuss how the role ambiguity inherent in the profession due to its unique evolution exacerbates the conflict between the school-centered and student-centered logics. In Chapter 5 I discuss how high school counselors manage these competing logics, and how they use their limited agency to activate one over the other.
CHAPTER 3:

BEYOND CASELOADS: THE BURDEN OF RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS ON SCHOOL COUNSELORS

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I introduced the idea that the Ashview high school counselors operated under conflicting logics of work – a student-centered logic and a school-centered logic. In this chapter, I will use the institutional logics framework to discuss how these logics interacted with the obstacles that the counselors faced within a typically resource constrained environment – the public high school. I frame this chapter around school counselors as “street-level bureaucrats,” and how this role, the competing logics, and the resource constraints structured their work.

3.2 Street-Level Bureaucrats

The work of school counselors work is much like the work of “street-level bureaucrats,” who work under rules and guidelines structured by an outside authority, but who have some discretion with how policies are enforced (Lipsky 2010; Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018). School counselors work within organizations – schools, school districts, and state and federal governments – that have implicit and explicit goals and expectations for their work. As bureaucrats, school counselors are educators with the responsibility for the academic success of students, and the management of the school (through coordination of
class scheduling and high-stakes testing), but little control over allocating those tasks. Kathy, a school counselor at a high school in the state capital, described it as: “It’s like any other bureaucracy. When you’re the foot soldier, you have little say in the policy.”

Organizations strongly institutionalize the work environment, having direct oversight of the resources that school counselors need to do their job, and communicating preferences for how counselors do their work through the resources allocated. There are two main ways that the resources allocated by school organizations to school counselors structure and constrain their work: One, by how many counselors are employed per school (which impacts the student-to-counselor ratio and student caseloads), and two, by task allocation. Each is directly related to the amount of time that counselors have to attend to students and tasks, and how they prioritize their attention. Theoretically, in a resource rich environment with multiple school counselors and staff to handle school management tasks, school counselors could activate the student-centered logic as much as they wanted, as there would be less competition for their time and attention. But as is common in public high schools, without those resources, that will be difficult.

The extent to which the school-centered and student-centered logics competed was partially a function of the resource constraints they faced. For instance, like teachers who face large classrooms (Gamoran and Dreeben 1986), school counselors too face high student caseloads. In addition, in a school environment with increasing accountability but stagnating or decreasing budgets that sometimes cuts funding for counselors (Brown 2016), counselors in general and those in this study found themselves with more responsibilities regarding the management of the school (Blackburn 2010).
But despite lack of control over the resources allocated to them, school counselors do have discretion in how they work with students. They must use their own judgment in balancing informal rules, their conceptions of the work, and resource scarcity when allocating their time and attention to the job. As “clinical professionals,” school counselors essentially create “agency policy” regarding student-counselor interactions on a case-by-case basis with how they respond to student needs under resource constraints and competing logics (Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018; Scott 2008). So while a lack of resources constrain high school counselors, counselors retain discretion within those constraints in how they accomplish their work at the individual client level (Lipsky 2010). In Chapter 5, I will explore how the high school counselors used their discretion to navigate resource constraints in providing services to students and the school. But first, I explore in depth how a lack of resources impacted the ability of counselors to attend to student needs.

3.3 The Resource Constraints of School Counseling

3.3.1 Student-to-Counselor Ratio

One of the more visible resource constraints facing school counselors across the country is the startlingly high student-to-counselor ratio. The nationwide average of the student-to-counselor ratio is 491 students per one counselor (and rising), though even this stark number masks large state variation. States like Arizona and California have ratios upwards of 800 or 900 to 1 (American School Counselor Association 2014). With this high caseload, school counselors must juggle the individual needs of a whole host of students across different issues, grade levels and income levels each year. Higher caseloads reduce the amount of time a counselor can spend with any one student (Sattin-
Bajaj et al. 2018). If districts do not allocate enough counselors to schools, then student caseloads are likely to be too high to accommodate the needs of all students, essentially making high student-to-counselor ratios akin to the educational inequality of high teacher-to-student ratios (Hurwitz and Howell 2013). In some cases, students do not even have access to a school counselor.8

Student-to-counselor ratios are set at the state, district, and school level. States may have mandatory ratios, recommended ratios, or they at the very least may establish that counselors are required at certain grade levels (American School Counselor Association 2017c). States also allocate funding to districts, whether specifically for school counselors or school personnel in general. Districts then allocate funding to schools as they see appropriate.

School counselors were mandated in the high schools in Ashview and other high schools in the state, although there was no required ratio or funding for this mandate. This constraint was illustrated when I asked the high school counselors if they had the chance to meet with each of their assigned students one-on-one at least once a year. All the counselors (in and out of Ashview) indicated yes, largely because of the need to meet with each student in order to create a class schedule for the following year. However, calculations from my observations of these meetings indicated that on average, these meetings took at most 5-20 minutes, especially at the larger Hunter High School (HHS).

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8 Overall in the country, one in five high schools has no school counselor for their students. Students in Minnesota and Florida have the least access to school counselors, with upwards of 43% without access to a school counselor (Office for Civil Rights 2014).
So unless a student sought out their counselor outside of scheduling, a student may meet with their counselor for at most 20 minutes a year.

Even during those meetings about scheduling, the conversation would not necessarily be a quality one. For instance, other counselors often interrupted Julia, the guidance director at HHS, during her scheduling meetings with questions about their own meetings. Most of Julia’s meetings were interrupted at least once, disrupting the conversation with the student and potentially leading the student to believe Julia was not paying attention to them or did not have their best interests at heart. HHS students did notice how busy the counselors were. Jessica, a new counselor at HHS, spoke of an internal survey the counselors did of all students, telling me “responses on those surveys overwhelmingly were ‘there’s not enough counselors, they don’t have enough time for us. I feel like they’re always busy. They don’t know who I am.’ So those kind of things that would be corrected if we had a smaller student-to-counselor ratio.”

Time is a finite resource, so time spent with one student or task is time unavailable for another student (Lipsky 2010). This issue becomes magnified in schools where caseloads are 300, 400, or 500 or more per counselor (Lipsky 2010). But even in schools with more reasonable ratios, the needs of a larger disadvantaged population could mean that the ASCA recommended 250-to-1 ratio is inadequate, as it is just a recommendation meant to encompass all types of schools and student populations. For instance, even in the smaller Edward High School (EHS), where caseloads were under the recommended ratio, the high school counselors had to juggle establishing relationships and meeting the needs of a wide variety of students, from the valedictorian to those barely graduating, in a largely low-income, first-generation, minority population.
For instance, Nia, a middle school-turned-high school counselor at EHS, noted how time consuming it was to check on the transcripts of students (seniors especially) at a low performing school on a trimester schedule:

Checking on and policing seniors [is one of the most time consuming parts of the job] for sure. I would say it's all seniors because you're constantly policing them. You're going back through their schedules making sure that they have everything that they need to graduate. And once you finish one trimester and they flunk stuff, then you have to change their schedule and go back. You're constantly checking attendance. You're seeing who might be dropped down to a [modified]³ diploma because they can't get a [standard] diploma. Who is not going to graduate? Who hasn't passed testing? Who needs a [GQE test] waiver? Do they have the attendance for the waiver? You know, that's all I spend my time doing, is constantly policing seniors.

Even in a school under the ASCA recommended ratio, the at-risk nature of the student population required more time and attention for counselors to ensure not only that students were on progress to graduation, but also to provide academic support beyond platitudes and a “you can do it!” attitude during one short meeting a year.

3.3.2 Task Allocation

In addition to setting high student-to-counselor caseloads, the Ashview district and school administrators allocated school-centered management tasks such as master scheduling and the coordination of high-stakes testing to high school counselors. This exacerbated time constraints and left less time for social/emotional or academic

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³ The state in which Ashview is located determined a number of options for high school diploma. The most common option was what I call the “standard” diploma, which was designed to provide students with many of the requirements for entering a two-year or four-year college. Students who failed to obtain the standard diploma could earn a “modified” diploma, but this was generally reserved for students in special education or who had failed the Graduate Qualifying Exam for the state. It was not designed to be a goal for the average student to achieve.
counseling (McDonough 2005). These two responsibilities (and other related tasks) garnered a large chunk of the counselors’ time in these schools, and were in addition to their more traditional role of counseling. For example, the HHS counselors tracked how much time they spent on different tasks over two weeks, whether they were counseling or non-counseling tasks. Julia and Jessica – busy as the school counseling office director and the testing coordinator, respectively – estimated they spent only 50-56% of their time performing actual school counseling activities (such as meeting with students about personal issues or advising them about college or career opportunities). The other HHS counselors estimated they spent 70-72% of their time on counseling activities. Putting the time counselors spent on counseling together, they calculated that time spent actually counseling only amounted to a total of three full-time counselors at the school, ostensibly making the ratio 600-to-1.

Below I discuss the three most time-consuming school-centered tasks allocated to counselors: testing, class scheduling, and creating the master schedule.

3.3.2.1 Coordinating Testing

High school counselors are often responsible for coordinating high-stakes testing, such as state graduation qualifying exams (GQE) (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011a). At HHS, Jessica’s testing responsibilities were particularly time consuming. Coordinating test administration entailed: a) working with the state and the testing agency to develop the list of students who should be taking the test, b) ensuring all of these students had the appropriate test booklets, c) scheduling when and where each student would take the test (and possible “practice” tests to prepare the student and ensure any necessary technology
works – which it often didn’t), d) notifying teachers when students would be missing class, e) notifying students where to be and when, f) proctoring the test, g) finding additional proctors if needed, h) tracking down students who missed the test, i) rescheduling them to take the test at another time, j) compiling any reports necessary for state accountability regarding the test, and k) start the process again for other tests (like the PSAT) and other iterations of the GQE if administered multiple times a year.

The increasing number of high-stakes tests not only pulled students out of the classroom as they prepared to take the tests, but they also monopolized the counselors’ time as they neglected developing meaningful and trusting relationships with students in order to focus on planning and administering tests to hundreds of students.

I asked Jessica in a December informal interview how much time she had devoted to coordinating the GQE at HHS. She indicated that she had started coordinating the test in mid-October, but other than knowing when she started, it would be hard to determine how much time she spent as it was so much. When I asked how she gets all her other work done, she said she didn’t, to a certain extent. It wasn’t uncommon for her to be in the office late at night, even as late as 10pm, trying to tie up loose ends. With the amount of time Jessica spent on the test during the end of the first semester, she couldn’t get her own work done during the work day, let alone meet with students. And the December exam was just the first of three iterations of the graduation qualifying exam (GQE) that Jessica would need to coordinate throughout of the school year; she would have this problem again in February and May.
Kathy said she felt like the testing responsibilities were only increasing over time and taking a larger percentage of her time. She said that at least 60% of her time starting in March was testing:

And I know that sounds crazy to think, really do you spend more than...? Yes, we spend more than half our time, half our day with some dimension of testing. You know, it may not actually be administering the test, but it may be sending emails to all the kids who are assigned to you and say, “don’t forget: you’re meeting me in [this room] tomorrow for such and such testing.” Or going and physically getting a student who continues to not come to testing. You know, they don’t show up so you physically go get them out of the classroom. Those things are not necessarily what you spend the most time doing but when you put them altogether, combine that with actually getting the test, which is hours, you know, it takes several hours to give the tests. So that’s from March to the end of the year.

The work with the testing was often tedious. Julia, as the coordinator of the PSAT at HHS, told me she had to go through over 700 PSAT test booklets to ensure students had accurately filled in their name and school information. She also had to track down over 100 students who had not been there for the test administration to schedule a retake. Leonard at EHS asked me to help him with this same process at EHS. We went through each of the PSAT booklets to make sure students had filled in everything correctly, especially focusing on their names and the school code. Of the approximately 60 booklets I looked at, only about 5 were completely filled in correctly. Some had very small problems, such as the student had not filled in the space bubbles between the words and numbers in the address. But others put their address in all one line, so Leonard asked me to erase them and add spaces. Other students filled their names in but not the bubbles underneath. Some students skipped whole sections, only filling out part of their address. A handful of students did not complete the affirmation section at the end correctly (where
they have to copy a statement certifying they would not cheat). Leonard and I had to fix these problems before sending the answer sheets back to the PSAT.

The responsibility for testing would only become more complicated in Ashview as the state transitioned for the second time in so many years to a new graduation qualifying exam. The Ashview high school counselors administered two different versions of the GQE during my observations, sometimes to the same students (increasing their testing time). There would be a year in the near future where counselors would have to administer *three* different graduation qualifying exams for the different grade levels as the two older tests cycled out and a new one was implemented.

The workload required for testing administrations put counselors in a difficult position. Multiple counselors mentioned wanting to be team players and being okay with various responsibilities that might not have been explicitly in their job description. They did take offense, though, when those extra responsibilities impeded their ability to perform their counseling responsibilities. Susan, the guidance director at one of the other Ashview high schools, talked about how the counselors were not uniquely qualified to run a test. I noted her saying, “there is nothing in their degrees that makes counselors the best coordinators.” Julia believed it was a poor use of high school counselors as resources, complaining that master’s level trained counselors shouldn’t be spending 30-60% of their time or more doing something that is fairly simple (though tedious) to coordinate. If anything, some of the counselors complained that they could be academically and emotionally preparing students for these tests.
Mr. Coughlin, a professor at one of the school counselor master’s programs in the state, highlighted this balance between being a team player and using the counselors effectively:

The way I describe it to my students is that every job in a school is really important. If somebody wants you to do something, you can’t say “Oh that’s not important; I’m not doing that.” Because everything is important. It is. Everything that’s related to the kids is extremely important. The question is: Is it important for a counselor to be doing? Or is there something more important that you should be doing than that?

Dr. Callahan pointed to increasing accountability mandates for the testing crisis in school counseling:

DR. CALLAHAN: Well, I can tell you that back in the ‘80s, I was responsible for giving an achievement test called the California Test of Basic Skills once a year to sophomores. And it did a lot of what the GQE would do, it tested many content areas, we got the results back, we worked with teachers to look at different areas. I think that’s fine. I think what’s happened though, since No Child Left Behind is that we became test-focused to the point where it is downright ridiculous.

MARY KATE: And that has disproportionally hit counselors?

DR. CALLAHAN: In almost, I would say probably 90% of the schools, that’s who gets that job. There are a few schools who have some extra money, and they hire a testing coordinator or someone to do that. But, most schools just look within, who they have on staff that’s not in a classroom. “Oh, well, we have a school counselor, let’s have her do it.”

Dr. Callahan continued, pointing to the disconnect between how the state claimed to view counselors, and how they were actually utilized:

I have never in all my years seen a testing mess like I’m seeing now. So, it’s a critical point in time for counselors because if that’s what we’re doing and that’s all we’re doing, we might as well change our title to test coordinator. We should not be called a school counselor. And you know, it’s interesting, the state just
legislated that we were no longer “guidance” counselors. We are professional school counselors, right? Well, then why are we doing these tests, you know? Because we can? Actually, a substitute teacher could probably come in and do it.

Both professors, as well as others I interviewed, were adamant that counselors operating under a school-centered logic were being underutilized, to the detriment of students. If most of their time was spent coordinating tests and other non-counseling tasks, why had they spent two to three years in graduate school? Increasing standards of accountability created unfunded requirements and time commitments of counselors who were trained and could be doing more substantial student outreach. While challenges to student-counselor relationships were not solely due to testing, it was one of the most pressing and frustrating issues for Ashview counselors.

3.3.2.2 Class Scheduling

Another task generally assigned to high school counselors is class scheduling, when counselors meet with each of their students to help choose the courses the students would take the next year. Class scheduling is generally seen as an appropriate counseling activity as it involves academic counseling, but it is a double-edged sword. On one hand, helping students choose their courses gives counselors the opportunity to talk about the classes students want to take, how to succeed in high school, and how to connect their classes to what students want to do after high school. And it can lead to social/emotional counseling. Mr. Coughlin, a faculty member in a school counseling program at a regional state university, mentioned that students can sometimes come in for scheduling but start talking about another (like he had, with a student who was cutting herself).
On the other hand, the scheduling process, its attendant responsibilities (such as data entry into the class scheduling software), and tight deadlines due to teacher staffing timelines made these meetings perfunctory and superficial in Ashview. Every counselor I interviewed mentioned class scheduling as one of the top three responsibilities that consumed the majority of their time. For instance, each of the counselors at HHS had a month to help over 300 students figure out what classes they wanted to take, input those choices into a computer, and then perform the delicate dance of scheduling those courses for the entire school (otherwise known as coordinating the “master schedule” – see next section for more). Scheduling pervaded everything the counselors did. Jane, a 35-year veteran of school counseling (though new to HHS), spoke of scheduling in this way in our interview:

That’s something that never ends. It’s just a continuous hum. It never ends. It has a kind of a rollercoaster effect. Scheduling maybe is more intensive at times than others, but it never ends. Of course right now [we are] on the fringes of second semester scheduling. But that never really ended either.

Each new semester brought with it a whole host of course conflicts and students who wanted to switch their courses, increasing the workload of counselors around class scheduling. While both large high schools had to contend with many course options typical of large public comprehensive high schools, scheduling was a more prominent issue for the counselors at Edward High School because they were on a trimester schedule. Rose, the guidance director at EHS, estimated that scheduling took up at least 75% of their time because they had an additional section of the year to schedule and reschedule students.
Still, scheduling students for classes can be an important way to reach students. A few of the counselors recognized its utility, especially as a way to identify students that were struggling in classes and might need adjustments to their schedules and/or additional supports. But, the counselors did not believe that the data entry part of scheduling had to be a part of their jobs, and would mention this to the district. The response from the leadership wasn’t promising. When Susan complained about how a particular part of the process of assigning classes to students in the school scheduling software was inefficient (and could be fixed with an update to the software), she was told that this process only added 2 or 3 minutes of extra scheduling work per student for the counselors. Susan calculated this time over all the students in her school and said it added an extra 60 hours of work to the counselors’ workloads. Divided among the counselors, that was two full extra days of data entry, which Susan says was way too much, and they didn’t have that time to spare. But she felt like her comments fell on deaf ears, and nothing changed with the process.

3.3.2.3 Master Schedule

In addition to meeting with students to determine class schedules and inputting those schedules into the computer, high school counselors are often in charge of creating the “master schedule” for the school (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011a). This can be a complicated process. Leonard at EHS explained what the master schedule process looked like in conjunction with class scheduling. First, the counselors would meet individually with students to schedule their courses. Then, the counselors would input these preferences into the school software. Then, through trial and error, the counselors would
work with the software to establish the optimal school schedule – a process that would take at least a week or two. This schedule determined how many teachers the school needed and when classes would be offered. Then, the counselors had to go back to the students’ schedules and rearrange anyone whose preferred courses didn’t fit into their schedule. This process was extra complicated at EHS because of the trimester schedule, career and technical courses that could only be offered in the afternoons, and medical magnet courses that were only offered in the morning.

While sitting in the guidance office at HHS, a former school counselor at one of the other Ashview high schools and now a part-time tutor at HHS sat down next to me and we talked about his responsibilities in the district. He explained that building the master schedule for the whole school was not on the job description of school counselors. When I asked who was supposed to create the master schedule, he said it was the responsibility of the principal since it included staffing and setting the building schedule for the whole year. But the principal never wanted to do it so he would give it to the counselors. This counselor admitted that it sort of made sense for the school counselors to coordinate the master schedule since they knew the process so well having scheduled the students. But he said he encountered political issues, especially around teachers who would complain to him if they didn’t get a certain free period, or a certain classroom, or a certain student. Since he was friends with the teachers, and not their boss, it created friction between them. Ms. Martin, a faculty member at a large urban university in the state, agreed saying:

That should not be for the school counselors. Because think about it, you’re scheduling all your coworkers. I’ve heard people talk about the English teacher will come to them like bribing them to
give them like the first period prep [laughs] or puts you know, these kinds of kids in their class.

But in Ashview, the school counselors (especially the guidance directors) did do the master schedule, placing them in this precarious position, and leaving them less time to work with students.

3.3.3 How Principals Allocate Tasks

Part of the reason why high school counselors were tasked with so many non-counseling duties was due to how the principals allocated those tasks. Surveys of principals have found that non-counseling duties such as administering tests are considered appropriate uses of a school counselor’s time by principals (Fitch et al. 2001; Pérusse et al. 2004). When I asked the HHS principal to describe the counselor position, he answered: “Well, the guidance chair is ideally the most important position in the school. If you do not have a good – or maybe great – master schedule, your school will not run. So that’s first and foremost. And that schedule is where you start.” For him, the guidance chair (or “guidance director”) was integral to the school because of her role in creating the master schedule (espousing a school-centered logic), not in her role in creating a comprehensive school counseling program with a focus on the social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary needs of students (a student-centered logic).

In our formal interview, the EHS principal implied the use of the school counselors was somewhat outside of his control due to the nested layered approach of school financing. I asked him if there was anything the counselors were doing that they shouldn’t be, or was inappropriate for counselors to do. He responded:
EHS PRINCIPAL: I don’t have a good answer to that because I think I need them to do what they’re doing. I just think I need to clone them [the counselors].

MARY KATE: Clone them? How many do you need? [Laughs]

EHS PRINCIPAL: I want them to be happy and I don’t want them to be overly burdened. I know they feel taxed so you know… I don’t have a good answer for that.

MARY KATE: What do you think the counselors’ ideal job description would be?

EHS PRINCIPAL: I don’t know. I think that right now the counselors’ job description is probably – if I thought it needed to be different and I had the ability to affect it, I would. So I think it looks like it should. That’s healthy. I don’t have a better answer than that. They’re getting the job done. Like it or not, they’re getting the job done.

MARY KATE: Well, you had said earlier that you thought that they may want to do more.

EHS PRINCIPAL: Oh I’m sure that they would, so I don’t know where you would assign that duty elsewhere. If I assigned master scheduling to my assistant principals, then their roles as disciplinarian and manager of students would have to shift to some other responsibility. And we’re trying to effectively manage a building the best we can with the resources we have and I don’t know where you would shift that. It’s gotta go somewhere.

The EHS principal seemed aware of the complaints of the counselors, but took an “I can’t do anything about it” approach. He mentioned how he structured the school and their work in the best way he could with the resources he had, even if that meant underutilizing school counselors and their particular skills. Because if they don’t do a task (like master scheduling), who would? If the assistant principals, then they would have to reduce their role doing discipline and student matters, and who would pick up those tasks?
While the EHS principal might not have a lot of resources to handle all of the potential tasks school personnel should be in charge of, it is telling that he prioritized discipline handled by the assistant principals over the potential positive efforts counselors could have on students. School counselors are trained to work with students on mental health issues and be first line responders to issues that might need more therapy, like suicidal thoughts or problems at home (Herr 2002), and at least at the elementary school level have been shown to reduce some disciplinary issues and poor behaviors in students (Carrell and Hoekstra 2014; Reback 2010b). These strengths of counselors could reduce the need for reactionary discipline. But his approach to student behaviors was one of reaction rather than prevention.

The school-centered utilization of the Ashview school counselors was also evident in the relationship between the counselors and Virginia, the district administrator who oversaw the counselors. At a meeting that included all counselors in the district at both the middle and high school levels (there were no elementary school counselors in the district), Virginia went over the course description booklet, summer school applications, career and technical program applications, and class scheduling (which took the bulk of the meeting). She gathered their feedback on these school-centered tasks, did not given them an opportunity to discuss issues they might want to bring up, and no mention was made of their college and social/emotional counseling duties.

3.3.4 Disconnect Between Training and Use

The disconnect between training and use of school counselors does not seem to be new. Dunlop (1965:1024) observed: "Casual observation and more precise investigations suggest that tasks for which modern school counselors are trained are not necessarily the
same tasks which they are actually expected by their various publics to perform on the job." While much of this can be traced to the lack of resources within the schools, faculty in graduate programs recognized this disconnect yet continued to teach to the ideal of the profession. The faculty I interviewed seemed to scoff at the school-centered responsibilities of school counselors, downgrading the importance of those tasks. When I asked Mr. Coughlin about whether his program taught the school-centered tasks counselors often engaged in, he said: “there are just some things you just have to learn once you get on the job. We’re not going to start teaching things like how to enter schedules into certain data systems […]. We’re not going to turn into a trade school for that.”

When I asked Dr. Elizabeth, a faculty member at a Southern state university, about her thoughts on a recent national survey of school counselors that found that school counselors felt their graduate training left them unprepared for the actual work of their jobs (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011a), she responded saying she wasn’t surprised. She said students coming back from their school-based internships – which have special protections in place to ensure they are only doing counseling-related things – were disappointed with how little counseling they would get to do in the jobs they were applying for:

I can definitely see that our program prioritizes teaching them empathy and understanding students’ needs and meeting students where they are and helping them move forward and whatever makes sense for their lives those counseling skills, and doesn’t really prepare them for the day to day of what some counselors do in setting where their work is more administrative.
Many of the faculty admitted to teaching to the ideal, student-centered approach. But they also understood that the work didn’t match what they were teaching. They determined it was still the best to teach theory and the ideal, while also hoping that counselors could advocate for themselves to change what they do when they get to the schools. Dr. Callahan said:

Well, realistically I teach the ideal. But I am also a realist and I spent a lot of time explaining to students what could happen, what might happen, how they could be used differently. And how that they—that work flexibility is really important, because if they want to survive, they’re gonna have to learn other skills along the way.

Dr. Mario, a faculty member at a Southern private university, pointed to the fact that some of the realities of school counseling were difficult to teach: “even if you write about it and read about it, how do you know what it feels like to have a 600:1 ratio until you’ve had that? And how do you get something out of that without either A) burning out before you get in or B) becoming jaded and resentful?” His program’s approach was to help graduate students process their feelings regarding these resource constraints in their classes, noting this was “the best we can do.”

The faculty often encouraged students to change the culture of the school to allow them to do the counseling-related things they were trained to do, placing a lot of onus on newly trained school counselors to change their work structures. Dr. O’Brien, a faculty member at a Southern regional university, said:

We also talk about how we …how part of our role then as advocate and change agent is to understand that some of the things that they’re learning are the ideals. They’re the way that we would love to have things be. But the ideal is very rarely gonna be the actual, and so their job is gonna be to join with their school and work with their colleagues and with their students to try to start to move the school culture and the benefits of the students towards the ideal.
As I discuss more in Chapter 5, school counselors were expected to change the culture of their schools from within. However, “it is the extremely rare newcomer who is able to assert unpopular or unsanctioned values,” (Lipsky 2010:204), such as counselors pushing for a student-centered approach.

3.4 How Resource Constraints Impact High School Counselors

3.4.1 Burnout

At a state conference for effective school counseling, the presenter – a prominent figure in the state regarding school counseling – noted a report from 2014 conducted on school counseling in the state that indicated that time was the number one problem identified by counselors as a hindrance to their jobs. Of those surveyed, 81% agreed or strongly agreed they wanted to spend more time with students. They felt overwhelmed by clerical duties and administering tests.

The results from this state mirror those in the nation. In surveys of school counselors across the country, the assignment of school-centered non-counseling duties and more hours spent on these duties has been shown to lead to higher rates of school counselor burnout (Bardhoshi 2012; Moyer 2011). However, non-counseling duties that were considered “fair share” were not associated with burnout, possibly because these fair share duties were elements of being a part of a school team, versus being underutilized (Bardhoshi 2012).

Ashview counselors and faculty members spoke of feelings of burnout due to high caseloads and non-counseling duties. Linda, the guidance director at one of the Ashview high schools, discussed feeling burned out because they as counselors “tend to just do
everything.” Mr. Coughlin explained how the tediousness – but importance – of some of the school management tasks led to stress on the counselor:

I mean at one time I was at [his former high school of employment], with four grade levels, we were working with three different sets of graduation requirements. And the way I explained it to somebody is, okay so you have a caseload of three hundred students. Every one of those students gets about forty, fifty credits. Forty minimum. Let’s say fifty credits, right? That’s fifteen thousand credits you have to keep track of. And if you screw up one of those, you’re in trouble. So when you talk about stress on the job, and there’s no extra support to safeguard a lot of that, it’s on the counselor.

But burnout was not just a consequence of scheduling. Julia discussed feeling burned out by the increasing responsibilities of her role and the feelings of powerlessness associated with being a street-level bureaucrat who had little say in decisions around her:

But let me also say that at the end of the day I do – I am probably a little jaded right now just because it’s been a frustrating last several years with our school district and things you want to do and you can't do. You just find yourself a little bit burned out […]. So just in September it gets to be too much you know? Those first few weeks of school are like, "Enough!" I get grumpy and "I already saw you for a schedule change. Get out of my office."

There was also the feeling of being overworked. When Rose told Laura, another counselor at EHS, to speed up her scheduling of students so that the district could staff the school for the upcoming year, Laura responded: “I can’t do any more than I’m already doing. I can’t work harder than 13 hours a day. If it’s not done, and they’re going to have to staff it, they’re going to have to staff it.”

3.4.2 Alienation

These feelings of burnout were attached to the Ashview school counselors’ alienation from their work and their students as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010).
School counselors might also become alienated from their work and their students because they cannot control which students are assigned to them or control their students’ personal and home circumstances (Lipsky 2010). Dr. Ware, a faculty member at a regional university where most of the Ashview counselors received their training, pointed to how her students were burned out because they believed there was only a “small subsection of what they” could do for the underprivileged groups in Ashview. “They just get really burnt out by that.” Because of this, the school counselors needed to choose on whom to focus their time, as there were not enough counselors and not enough time to attend to and reach out to all students (I will discuss this more in Chapter 5) (Lipsky 2010). Or they might exit the profession. Dr. Jenkins, a professor at a large state university, pointed to her own personal experience as a school counselor, and why she left school counseling after only two years:

I had the inability to separate my professional and personal, so I took a lot of the stuff home with me. And so I think with some reflection I knew I probably couldn’t do that job for 20 years, because of the stress that it was having in my own life.

The Ashview school counselors also lacked control over some of the basic tenets of their work. They were not able to control the timing or pace of their work, often operating under quick turnarounds and hectic school schedules as Laura’s comment about “13 hours a day” above illustrates (Lipsky 2010). Kathy spoke of how she couldn’t even really set the mission of her guidance office without feeling conflict with the school. When I asked the counselors what the mission of their offices is, Kathy responded by talking about the difference between what she thought the mission was, and what her school district wanted her to focus on:
Well, our school district tells us what the number one mission is and that is to get kids graduated. And they’re emphatic about that. And they like to use the expression “get them across the finish line” [...] I think their burden is that the state says to them “you have a report card, school, you have an evaluation. And part of that is who graduates.” Well, the state then is accountable to the federal government. The federal government is leaning on the states about graduation and so the farther away that you get from the student, the more it just becomes very meaningless, you know? Get kids graduated – what does that mean? Well, we can get them graduated but they’re not graduating the way I think they should be graduating. We lean on teachers to not to give F’s. We changed our grading scale. It used to be anything lower than a 70 percent would be failing. Well, now it’s anything lower than 60 percent is failing. We’re doing anything we can to make the grades better so the kid doesn’t fail government.

The use of the term “finish line” implies that Kathy views her high school as only seeing their goal as encompassing student graduation, rather than student growth, citizenship, personal and social maturity, and preparing students to be productive citizens of the future and community.

School counselors might also become alienated from students because they are within an educational organization with multiple goals and limited resources to achieve those goals, and they cannot control student outcomes (Lipsky 2010). Kathy noted one of the things she “hate hate hated” about her job was that she was the person in her school district to tell a senior they did not earn a high school diploma in a system designed for some students to fail. Kathy noted:

I’m the one that has to look in their eyes and tell them, “yes, I know you came to school for 12 years and I know you didn’t get in any trouble and I know you made all D’s and you didn’t qualify for a [graduation test] waiver, but you didn’t pass the [graduation] test, so you don’t get a diploma,” when in the back of my mind I’m thinking they knew not everybody was going to pass this test, and I said to myself if every single kid in this school passed this test, there would be an investigation for cheating.
Kathy disliked this aspect of her job as a street-level bureaucrat, lamenting a test that was designed to ensure some students failed. She recognized that those who designed it were not responsible for enforcing it – she was.

3.5 Resource Constraints and Student Outcomes

Overall, the constraints imposed on the Ashview school counselors due to the school-centered logic and low resources created efficiency goals that undermined the counselors’ efforts to offer specialized assistance to students. During scheduling season when Ashview counselors had the one opportunity a year to meet with each and every student, some received negative feedback from the school and district leadership – and even each other – for taking too long to meet with students. “Taking too long” was as simple as holding a 15-minute meeting instead of a 10-minute meeting with students, surely not an inordinate amount of extra time with an individual student, but a practice that could put the counselor back days in reaching scheduling goals if implemented with all students. Counselors felt pressure to move students in and out of their offices quickly, instead of getting to know them and how their class choices can impact their future goals (which I talk about more in Chapter 5).

It is important for school counselors not only to be available to students – an obstacle in both of the focal schools – but also to be able to reach out to students. Low-income students have a difficult time seeking help (Calarco 2011; Lareau 2003). A personal connection is less likely, and thus trust cannot be developed (Castleman 2013; Holland 2015). Trust is also difficult to nourish when student and counselor expectations of the counselor are not aligned (Holland 2015). Therefore students do not reach out for
help when they need it, if they even can identify that they need it. School counselors need to be more pro-active, understand student expectations of counselors, and understand how more effort must be expended for disadvantaged student populations. Schools must support this effort through additional resources, as counselors cannot currently be proactive in a high student-to-counselor ratio environment, where their jobs are being coopted for administrative responsibilities.

As street-level bureaucrats, high school counselors do have some discretion regarding how they approach their work in a resource-deficient environment (Lipsky 2010). I explore this more in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 4:
OTHER DUTIES AS ASSIGNED: THE AMBIGUOUS ROLE OF THE HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELOR

4.1 Introduction

Schools – at different times and among different people – have been tasked with improving society, preparing students for the society we already have, training the future workforce for employers, or for providing a means for individual student success (Labaree 1997; Lipsky 2010; Tyack and Cuban 1997). These divergent goals have created an environment where schools and school personnel must try to achieve multiple student-focused and societal-focused goals, despite their contradictions (Labaree 1997).

Embedded in schools with limited resources and susceptible to the problems inherent in working in an organization with these ambiguous and conflicting goals (Lipsky 2010), school counselors have struggled to identify their role in schools in a way that is consistent, impactful, and reflective of their training and intention in going into the profession. In this chapter, utilizing research and theories in social psychology, I present findings that suggest that high school counselors are particularly susceptible to role ambiguity and conflict because of the ambiguous and conflicting purposes of schooling, the lack of an adequate organizational framework inherent to the profession and its history, disparate expectations of relevant stakeholders, overlap with other similar professions, and unhelpful forms of evaluation. The extent to which role ambiguity and
conflict exist and impact high school counselors’ work is related to resource constraints and their roles as street-level bureaucrats (as discussed in Chapter 3).

Interviews and observations of high school counselors and administrators in Ashview show that for high school counselors, a) it is not always clear what tasks they are expected to perform, b) the explicit tasks they are assigned may not be appropriate for them or do not require their level of training, and c) some tasks conflict with each other and their goals of their work, forcing counselors to choose one expectation of their work over another. As street-level bureaucrats who interact directly with students but who have little control over the structure of their work or the tasks they complete (Lipsky 2010), this role ambiguity and conflict has negative consequences on the high school counselors and students, more of which I will describe in Chapter 5.

Personal and interpersonal characteristics of the employee, the supervisor, and their relationship can impact levels of role ambiguity (and conflict) (Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler 1981). However, for this chapter, I am interested in how conflicting institutional logics and the placement of counselors within educational organizations influence the perceived existence of role ambiguity and conflict in school counseling (Van Sell et al. 1981). Survey data that measures how school counselors perceive their professional role within schools has described role ambiguity and conflict in broad terms (Bardhoshi 2012; Culbreth et al. 2005; Freeman and Coll 1997; Fye 2016). In this chapter, I use ethnographic data to examine in greater detail how role ambiguity and conflict structure the work of high school counselors, and the consequences of this role ambiguity and conflict for the work of school counselors.
4.2 Role Ambiguity

Role ambiguity is characterized by vague, incomplete, or inconsistent information or expectations regarding role responsibilities, how these responsibilities should be met, and how they will be evaluated (Biddle 1986; Freeman and Coll 1997; Rizzo, House, and Litzman 1970). Role ambiguity can occur when there is not enough information to do the job well (Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter 2001), when expectations of the job prior to starting do not match the reality of it, or when there are multiple sources of authority to report to (Culbreth et al. 2005; Maslach et al. 2001; Rizzo et al. 1970). Below I outline contributors to the role ambiguity of Ashview high school counselors.

4.2.1 Lack of an Adequate Organizational Framework

Because of the lack of an adequate organizational framework...guidance had become the add-on profession, while counselors were seen as the “you-might-as-well” group (“While you are doing this task, you might as well do this one too”). Because of the absence of a clear organizational framework for guidance, it was easy to assign counselors new duties. Counselors had flexible schedules. And, since time was not a consideration, why worry about removing current duties when new ones were added?

A Model Comprehensive Guidance Program

Along with those in professions such as nursing (Brief et al. 1979), school counselors suffer from role ambiguity (and role conflict, which I discuss below), and have so throughout the development of the school counseling field (Burnham and Jackson 2000; Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963; Culbreth et al. 2005; Freeman and Coll 1997; Paisley and McMahon 2001). As outlined in more detail in Chapter 2, the school counseling profession underwent multiple changes in purpose as schools responded to
societal-level transformations such as World War II and increases in the mental health needs of students (Gladding 2013). The transition counselors made from being teacher-counselors to full-fledged educational school counselors was partially pushed because of the additional responsibilities of growing schools, including school management tasks such as testing, data entry and clerical work connected to the management of students (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963). Early in the 20th century, the field was preoccupied with vocational counseling and placement. Toward mid-century, however, providing social/emotional counseling to students took root in the profession.

Dr. Callahan, a school counseling graduate program faculty member at a small private university, spoke of even more recent changes in the profession since her master’s training at an east coast school in the 1980s:

> I would say that most of the courses that I took at [my master’s institution] were counseling-based, and very little education-based. There might have been one education course or two, but…back, back, in the original days of counseling, school counseling, I think we were trained certainly far more in counseling than we were in anything else […]. I think that was the intent of school counseling to begin with. But it has morphed…dramatically morphed. […]. I’m sad because I feel like our counselors are being bombarded with testing, and that’s not what they’re trained to do.

As schools today have taken on more special education services, testing, and accountability, school counselors – lacking professionally defined standards that are recognized outside of the profession – were assigned these additional duties, diluting their job description (and thus their identity as counselors) (Bardhoshi 2012; Gladding 2013; Paisley and McMahon 2001). This may have been exacerbated by the profession’s attempts to achieve legitimacy and recognition of importance within schools (Gladding 2013; Hatch 2002; Mamett 2008).
4.2.2 Varying Expectations

School counselors must answer to a diverse group of stakeholders: students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and community members. Each group has different expectations for counselors that sometimes conflict and that impact how the role of the school counselor is defined and implemented (Freeman and Coll 1997; Paisley and McMahon 2001; Rizzo et al. 1970; Van Sell et al. 1981). For instance, goals and expectations of the work of counselors vary by grade level, by school sector, by school district, or by locality. As Dr. Mario, a faculty member at a Southern private university indicated:

As a school counselor you cannot part and parcel where you end up, right? I mean, if you are in [his state] and you’re at an internship at a suburban sized school and you move to DC or you move to Los Angeles or you move to Miami, it’s going to be different. Like demographically, those places are different, the level of violence, the level of funding, all those things are different.

Dr. Richards, a faculty member at a state university, agreed and indicated when I asked how closely instruction matched practice:

There’s such disparities between what a counselor does if you are in [local low income school] compared to [local high income school]. I mean, you can’t even compare those. And so it’s really difficult for me to say what the reality is because it depends upon what school you’re in and what the expectation is there […]. So it can be a whole host of stuff, and that’s one thing that I try to instill in my students is find your voice that you don’t end up doing all this work and you don’t have time to work with students individually.

In addition to the location and type of school served, the values and priorities of the school district and the school administrators that employ school counselors will also direct how counselors are used (Herr 2002). For instance, a principal at a state conference
for principals and counselors complained that he had been an administrator in three
different districts in the state, and in each one, the role of the counselor had been
different. In one school, one counselor might be in charge of standardized test
coordination while another is in charge of scholarships. In just his experience, there was
no consistent school counseling job description, making it difficult for the counselors in
his schools to have a clear understanding of their role, or to have a coherent identity
understood by parents, students, teachers, and administrators alike. As Mr. Coughlin (a
faculty member at a state university) reiterating literature in this area said (Seashore et al.
2001), “the principals have a lot of power in the school. And that role of the counselors
can change overnight with a change in principals. There’s no standardization.”

Ms. Tanner, a faculty member at a private university, restated this point, saying:

I think the problem too is there’s not this one definition for school
counselors. Every school has its different idea of what they’re
supposed to do […]. There’s a lot of work that needs to be done to
defining what the role is. It should be to service the student body in
those three categories [social/emotional, academic, and
postsecondary], right? But, instead they’re sitting in the lunchroom
doing lunch duty or they’re out at the bus, or they’re on the
playground.

When I asked what her responsibilities were, Julia, the guidance director at
Hunter High School (HHS), said, “Well, yes I can tell you what I think they are. As each
day passes I find out that what I'm expected to do I didn't think I was supposed to do. It
seems to be just about anything and everything falls in my lap.” School counseling
graduate faculty had to train counselors for all situations to make school counselors as
flexible as possible. However, this flexibility could make them prone to ambiguity that is
not specific to the type of school or demographics of students. Much of the role
ambiguity and role conflict counselors suffered from came from the prevalent struggle between what expectations they had of the job coming in, and what reality actually looked like (Freeman and Coll 1997). The counselors in this study left their graduate programs never sure what their roles would be, and it seemed as if few understood how different it would be from their expectations.

Teachers too need to know how to work in low income or high income schools, big and small schools, public and private schools. But they still have one clear goal to accomplish: teach their academic subject to their students. In comparison to teachers, who are more numerous in schools and work within departments to bargain for certain job conditions, school counselors are small in number and have less with which to bargain.

4.2.3 Overlap with Similar Professions

Another reason why the role of the Ashview school counselors seemed ambiguous was the presence of other similar personnel in the school, especially the social workers. School social workers are trained mental health professionals who specialize in providing services at the school, but also utilize resources in the home and community to respond to the mental health needs of the student. In Ashview and other districts, the school social workers also often coordinated special education assessments and Individual Education Plans (IEPs). While school counselors provide mental health counseling and academic support during the school day from a psychological perspective, school social workers focus on the personal, social, and emotional health alone, often reaching outside of the school and the function of education to get at the root of the problem from a sociological perspective (Fuller and Juniper 1967; Kontak 2012).
This thin line separating the roles of the social workers and the counselors in regard to social/emotional counseling was apparent to both groups in Ashview. Robert, a newer second-career counselor at HHS, said: “The school counselor and the social worker are the same person when it comes to counseling.” But because the social workers had a clear goal – personal, social, and emotional health – whereas the school counselors were trained in this plus in charge of academic counseling, postsecondary counseling, and administrative tasks, some counselors complained they never had the chance to provide social/emotional counseling to students. Julia, the guidance director at HHS, was open in her displeasure at the division of responsibilities: “The social worker gets all our goods. They get all the stuff we want to do. It's funny. We're like, ‘Oh, we chose the wrong path.’ I wish somebody would have told me that.”

Robert agreed: “Here it’s thought if the student has an issue we send him to the social worker. Which is okay, but that’s what the school counselor is for as well. That’s what that school counselor went to school for.” Dr. Ware, a faculty member at the regional university that trained most of the Ashview counselors, referred to this as a sort of “turf war” between school counselors and social workers, as school counselors, social workers, and psychologists all engage in some form of “therapy” (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963).

Not all the counselors in Ashview felt envious toward the social workers. Most appreciated the social workers and lamented there was only one of them per school. Kathy (a school counselor at a high school in the state capital) and Linda (guidance director of another Ashview high school) noted the social workers’ expertise in institutional support, and how counselors weren’t trained for responsibilities that social
workers took on, such as doing home visits, and working with pregnant students. But relying solely on social workers for personal, social, and emotional counseling was problematic, for two reasons in particular. One, there was only one social worker for each high school in Ashview, while there were four to five counselors at each school. This meant that the social workers were responsible for 800-1800 students, depending on the school. As Susan, the guidance director at another Ashview high school, put it, “they’re understaffed and overwhelmed.”

Secondly, by rejecting the role school counselors could play in providing social/emotional counseling, the Ashview school counselors were underutilized, forgoing the most specialized part of their education. They were not seen as counseling professionals but as school managers. When I interviewed the principal at Hunter High School and asked him what he thought the role of counselors in schools was, he never mentioned social/emotional counseling as a role – a role that most of the counselors felt as essential to their desire to be in the field, their training, and their potential (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011a), though he did acknowledge this role when I brought it up. Virginia, the Ashview district administrator over the school counselors, did the same thing, and even went as far as to help sponsor a program to bring school counseling graduate students into the district to provide (essentially free) social/emotional counseling, failing to see she already had professionals trained in this in the school counselors. Nia, a counselor at Edward High School (EHS), felt that the administration was “minimizing” what counselors could contribute when they relied solely on social workers for non-scheduling interactions with students. If given the same responsibilities regarding social/emotional counseling, Cicorel and Kituse (1963:129) argued the “professional
orientation [of school counselors] would probably be more routinely and effectively implemented.”

According to Rose, the guidance director at EHS, the conflict between the roles of school counselors and social workers in Ashview was heightened when about 15 years prior, the school district – facing budget constraints – asked the principals in the elementary schools to choose between social workers and school counselors. They chose social workers, and all counselors at that level were let go. The consequence of this, per Rose, was that this move to remove elementary school counselors created a sense of distrust of the district, and a worry among counselors that they were expendable. This move personally impacted Rose, Julia and Stephanie, who had to find new jobs with very little notice. Even 15 years later, it was a sore point for the counselors, and calls for bringing elementary school counselors back were repeated throughout my observations of meetings with administrators, to no avail.

Dr. Callahan provided a broader look at this relationship between school counselors and social workers:

There’s a history with school counseling and school social work that goes all the way back to the ‘80s probably where social workers really fought very very very hard to get their foot inside schools. And the school counseling profession, way way way back in the day, was a little leery of that, because they said, “well, are they going to take our jobs?” So, what I’ve seen recently, again, has to do with budgets. But there are schools, some of them right in this county, who have hired social workers. For instance, definitely happens a lot at the elementary level which then, they were not coming in at a teacher pay, they were less, and so it was cheaper to hire the social worker and yes, indeed, the school counselor got bumped.
4.2.4 Supervision of High School Counselors by Non-Counseling Administrators

The high school counselors in this study repeatedly insisted they preferred to engage in student-centered counseling. The student-centered logic, like some logics (Scott 2014), is supportive of counselors’ desires to counsel students and why they got into the field. But part of the ambiguity of school counselors is due to the unique way that the school counseling profession is arranged. School counselors are trained in their graduate school classes and internships by current or former school or clinical counselors. However, when they enter the work force, principals and other school and district administrators supervise counselors. Typically, school counselors’ supervisors and evaluators are people who were not trained as counselors, and have little experience working with them. In Ashview, two people – the school principal and the district administrator over high schools – supervised each of the high school counselors. These supervisors were unfamiliar not only with what counselors were trained to do, but also what they were actually doing in the schools, especially regarding student social/emotional needs (Amatea and Clark 2005; Seashore et al. 2001). According to Virginia, the district administrator over school counselors, she admitted not knowing exactly what counselors did. When she took over their supervision, she said she had to look up what they do. I mentioned ASCA [the American School Counseling Association] a number of times throughout the interview, and at one point she asked me to spell out what ASCA stood for, saying she was embarrassed she didn’t know what that organization was. Dr. Clara, a school counseling faculty member in an urban, private Southern university, called the counselors the “most misunderstood entity” that schools have.
The lack of experienced supervisors is not just an issue for Ashview. According to a presentation at the 2016 ASCA conference, 50 to 60% of the people who evaluate school counselors are not school counselors themselves.\textsuperscript{10} School administrators typically come from a teaching background (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015; Seashore et al. 2001), so they rarely have experience as school counselors. While they may have a good idea of how to supervise teachers, these administrators do not have experience being or supervising school counselors, nor may they have the time to manage human resources in a large, public high school (Seashore et al. 2001). The EHS and HHS principals indicated they were not educated in their educational leadership master degree programs on the role of school counselors or how to supervise them. The HHS Principal was even surprised when I asked him if he received this training, having not considered the issue before.

The absence of a supervisor with training in counseling particularly bothered Stephanie, a mid-career counselor at HHS, who connected this to a lack of a clear job description. When I asked her what her job description was, she said: “It changes every day. You know, we don’t really have any clear policies and procedures. I find it a little disgruntling that the person who’s in charge of the counselors [Virginia] has no counseling background.” As practitioners deeply invested in their field, the Ashview school counselors were frustrated with supervisors with no experience working with counselors. As counselors and their supervisors are trained in very different ways, it was not surprising that the Ashview principals and administrators (and in other places) had

\textsuperscript{10} In some places, it is possible that school counselors are overseen by other school counselors, whether their guidance director in the school, or a counselor who has risen to a supervising and coordinating position in the district. But in this case, and in many cases, the only people overseeing the counselors are the principals and perhaps a non-counseling supervisor in the district.
different perceptions of what a counselors’ role should be versus professional counselor standards (Fitch et al. 2001; Pérusse et al. 2004). This was evident in how they allocated non-counseling tasks to counselors (more on this in Chapter 3).

Because principals and administrators like Virginia directly oversaw the Ashview school counselors, their perceptions of the role of school counselors was integral to the kind of work counselors actually did (Amatea and Clark 2005). As Dr. Callahan explained:

This is also time immemorial, who defines the role of a school counselor? And it is probably the principal. And if a principal does not understand the role of a school counselor, or doesn’t care to know about what…then, you’re stuck. If you want a job, you do what the principal tells you to do.

Poor communication between counselors and principals regarding the role of counselors in the school led to role confusion and disagreement regarding counselor tasks (Lapan and Harrington 2010). This conflict of perceptions contributed to role ambiguity for the Ashview counselors (Mamett 2008).

4.2.5 School Counselor Performance Evaluations

Role ambiguity could also be due to lack of clarity in performance evaluations (Van Sell et al. 1981). Ashview was going through a new way to evaluate school counselors the year I observed them. In March, the counselors were informed that the Assistant Principals would evaluate them in the same way as the teachers, using growth on student learning objectives with deadlines less than a month later. The HHS Principal said this was because school counselors were on the teacher’s contract (who he also had to evaluate throughout the year). Counselors were evaluated with the same student learning outcomes growth rubric, and with some of their evaluation score being the
schools’ overall performance on the graduation qualifying exams (GQEs), just like the teachers, so he said there was “a lot of skin in the game for everybody.” Both principals recognized how this might not be very applicable to counselors, but hadn’t found a better way.

In an informal interview, Julia complained that the counselors were only given two weeks’ notice for this new way of evaluation. She indicated the HHS counselors weren’t really doing the evaluation and were taking it very lightly. Indeed, I saw very little evaluation of the Hunter High School counselors. For instance, Jessica, the newest counselor at HHS, was supposed to meet with the principal in the spring so he could observe her working for her evaluation. He had observed her and Stephanie in the fall during the administration of a test, when she said all she was doing was “running around.” But when she asked him when to schedule an observation for the spring, he said he’d skip that observation since he was just going to observe her doing testing again. In the end, the observation/meeting was never scheduled, there seemed to be no other evaluation of her work, and he submitted her evaluation to the district without ever going over it with her.

This was in contrast to the evaluation system at Edward High School. They too were told late in the year of the new evaluation system. But, possibly because of the priority status of the school (as one of the lowest performing schools in the state), or just the desires of that principal, there was more emphasis on the student learning objectives for these counselors. This led to more stress. They were told to choose five juniors within each of their caseloads to track to graduation. The objectives they would be measured on were how many of these juniors would graduate from high school the next year – just one
part of their responsibilities in the school for a very small percentage of their caseloads. In addition to this narrow sliver of their responsibilities, the EHS counselors got to choose which students they would follow, and they all chose students they were fairly sure would graduate, making this part of the evaluation less meaningful. The counselors were explicit in noting that they were not going to take the risk of following kids who were likely not going to graduate because there was no reward in doing so. Those students might need the most help, but the counselors were unlikely to have the time to devote to them and were unsure of the success or consequences should they fail, so why even try? (Elements of prioritizing student needs and downgrading of expectations of helping students like this will be discussed in Chapter 5). Along with following these students, the counselors would also submit a two-page letter written by Leonard that detailed 20 tasks the counselors were in charge of throughout the year (though it was unclear how this piece was evaluative, versus just being a list of the things that they did).11

While the EHS counselors were allowed to choose which students to follow, they had little other influence over what form the evaluation took. After the meeting when the evaluation system was discussed, Nia mentioned to Leonard and me that she looked up counselor evaluations from ASCA and other organizations and sent them to the district. However, she heard nothing back, and they were not using those evaluations. Nia thought

11 Interestingly, of those 20 tasks, only one was vaguely related to social/emotional counseling, six were administrative tasks (one of which was the massive testing responsibilities), six were academically focused, and seven were college counseling (though the majority of those were very task-oriented, like sending transcripts to colleges).
it was unfair to measure counselors by growth. They didn’t have pre- and post-tests like teachers do. And they didn’t have a baseline in which to measure growth.

Each of the counselors at EHS expressed their frustrations with the evaluation system. Nia worried they were trying too hard. Laura and Leonard fretted and seemed stressed by the process. But Rose, the guidance director, recognized the opportunity to use evaluation as a way to prove to others in the school that the counselors worked hard and had a lot of responsibilities on their shoulders. When Rose said others in the school didn’t know what counselors do, Laura chimed in and sarcastically said, “We don’t do much of anything. We just have two pages of crap we don’t do” (referring to the list of 20 responsibilities submitted with the evaluations).

4.2.6 School Counselor Evaluation and State Accountability

Dr. Jenkins, a faculty member at a large private university, highlighted the pressure principals face in a high-stakes accountability environment, based on her research of school counselors and principals:

It’s not that administrators aren’t supportive, but if they’re not aware of what the appropriate roles and responsibilities… Or I think the other thing is that some of it is that accountability piece that comes back to the counselor to be able to demonstrate success.

Because principals are under immense pressure to prove their schools are effective, school counselors too must demonstrate success, especially in a highly constrained budgetary environment (see Chapter 3). The goals and expectations on which school counselors are evaluated are largely in control of the principals, and could be an extension of their own evaluations and of the increasing accountability mandates of the school (Smith 2011). I asked Rose about this, especially in regard to how she and the
other high school counselors would be evaluated. In my field notes I noted that it sounded like they were being measured solely on the academic tracking part of their job. I asked her about this directly – were they only being measured on academics? She didn’t answer that question with a yes or a no, but did say that was how the principal viewed his job (getting kids out of school), and so she assumed that’s how he thought counselors should be evaluated. She implied the principal didn’t know what counselors do, and thus only focused on academics. The principal at HHS told Jessica as much, indicating that choosing “bubble” students to track through the year to see if they graduate was a good goal because it also helped reach the goals of the school, and ostensibly his goals in particular.

The practice of being a high school counselor is generally unobserved, like with teaching (Gamoran, Secada, and Marrett 2000). During a session at the annual ASCA conference in 2016, the presenter at one of the sessions said that after funding cuts in his state, school counselor positions were some of the first to go. Counselors that remained were being asked to “prove their worth.” This message was echoed through at least nine sessions at the conference specifically dedicated to using data to measure school counseling programs, as well as in the news (Brown 2016). The conference sessions tried to encourage counselors to gather more data to establish their value, as if their value wasn’t already inherently known.

Dr. Ware spoke of what she perceived the role No Child Left Behind (NCLB) played in how school counseling programs were and continue to be structured:

No Child Left Behind really hurt us, as an education system. I’m sure you’re aware of that. And we’re fighting to get through that and the more pressure on teachers for testing results is gonna increasingly take away from that, that piece of the counselors’ role
Basically now federal resources will only go towards data-driven outcomes, and they’ve relied all on academics for that data. So now we have to basically prove – you have to be sneaky with it – so we have to prove that school counseling positions are needed. You have to tie that somewhat into academic outcomes. So that’s really what our [school counseling] class is about, is how can we prove that really helping with that social/emotional stuff helps academics. And it shouldn’t be just about testing, especially when we’re talking about math and reading and that type of thing, removing barriers will ultimately, hopefully help in that area, but what about happiness? What about self-esteem? You know, why isn’t that more important? I think No Child Left Behind really hurt us in that area.

Dr. O’Brien, a faculty member at a Southern state university, agreed. When I asked what were some of the biggest challenges facing counselors in high schools today, she said:

I think having people understand what we do and how it’s valuable. I think that there are lots of folks that get tied up in all of the accountability and academic achievement and the high-stakes testing that has no grounding in what’s actually beneficial to students, which is frustrating to no end […]. There is this dance that’s happened between our school counselors having to sort of justify their existence using things like-- standardized testing are being used in ways they’re not supposed to be used and don’t directly measure what our school counselors are doing. So, how do they work within that narrative to justify their time and their salary and what’s going on at school, and at the same time help educate folks that are not in education so that they understand that school and education are more than test scores? And that’s a really delicate balance.

According to Dr. Ware and Dr. O’Brien, the push toward data-driven accountability and evaluation put school counselors in a tough spot, as it does teachers. So much of school accountability is based on quantifiable metrics, like teacher value-added growth, graduation rates, and graduation qualifying exams results. But very little
of this work is directly impacted by the counselors (as in, it would be difficult to claim these outcomes were solely a measure of the work of counselors) (Hatch 2002).

It is also difficult to measure goals of a position if there is no agreement on what those goals are. Even when schools have an idea of what a counselor should be doing, much of this work isn’t measurable (Hatch 2002), such as their impact on the health and well-being of students or whether the student was scheduled in the “right” class. These and other goals are not only hard to measure, they are difficult to observe from the outside (Hatch 2002), and difficult to directly attribute to the influence of school counselors (Lipsky 2010). For instance, how do you know that the counselor’s relationship with the student is what is responsible for a student’s academic or postsecondary success? Isn’t that the goal of every school personnel with whom the student comes in contact? School counselors work with students on many obstacles to academic and postsecondary success, but so do teachers and principals. If counselors must use metrics such as high school graduation rates to measure their work, how can schools know how much of this metric is attributable to counselors? If the rate is low, does that mean counselors are poorly performing? “There are too many variables to take into account to make evaluation realistic…there is rarely any way to determine on a regular basis what would have happened to clients in the absence of intervention” (Lipsky 2010:49).

Ashview tried to address this by having counselors evaluated on the same growth system as the teachers. Denise, a school counselor at another high school in Ashview, thought this was problematic:

It would be like asking a stay at home mom, “What’d you do all day?” when the house is a mess. It’s like, “What did I do all day?
If the kids are alive, that’s what I did all day,” you know? […] And I think that’s what makes it so hard. And they keep trying to make school counselors accountable and to prove that we serve a purpose and how the children graduate or the test scores are better because we’re providing this emotional assistance or you know. I don’t think they’ve come up with a good, relevant way. I really don’t […]. I mean, how do you ever measure the fact that I have a parent come in here and hug me and say, “Thank you, thank you so much for not giving up on my kid!”

But while teachers are often evaluated based on observations of classroom teaching and growth on high-stakes test (as controversial as this may be), there is no obvious way to evaluate the work of school counselors besides graduation. ASCA has a readily available school counselor performance appraisal (American School Counselor Association 2017a), but it is based on evaluating school counselors implementing the ASCA National School Counseling Model, which not all counselors have time to do, even if their school districts would desire such a program. The evaluation model also is not based on measureable outcomes for students, so it is unlikely that it would fit into today’s accountability climate.

Thus, “in the absence of adequate performance measures and in the context of making significant judgments affecting clients' well-being, street-level bureaucrats depend heavily on subjective assessments of the validity of their practices” (Lipsky 2010:114). For the counselors in Ashview, it seemed to mean that barring any major catastrophe, no negative evaluation would be put on record – and few suggestions for improvement would be offered.

4.2.7 Clients and Evaluation

Students in schools are the “clients” of school counselors, just as students are defined as clients served daily in the context of classroom teaching (Lipsky 2010).
Students could be a part of the evaluation process for counselors as they were the ones being served (just like they could have a role in teacher evaluations). But repeatedly in Ashview I found this was not the case. The opinions of students were not a part of the process to define the role of the high school counselors, or to evaluate them. “Clients are not a primary reference group of street-level bureaucrats. They do not count among the groups that primarily define street-level bureaucrats’ roles […]. These people do not primarily or even secondarily determine bureaucratic role expectations” (Lipsky 2010:47).

Despite being the main recipients of the services of counselors, students were not consulted regarding the work of the counselors. Per Denise:

One thing they haven’t done is sat down and talk to kids. “How does a counselor make a difference to you? Why are you different today because there’s a counselor in the building?”

Failure to collect information from students regarding their satisfaction with their counselors was problematic.12 When I asked Leonard how satisfied he would guess students were with him and the work of the office he said:

It’s really hard to evaluate. Particularly when you’re dealing with students. We don’t, at least to my knowledge, I don’t think we use some kind of assessment where they ask students how satisfied they are with their… I would be interested in getting that feedback. Because it would be honest.

Without consistent feedback from students – that goes beyond the extremes of the really upset student and the really grateful student – counselors could not adjust their strategies for student success, and thus had little chance to grow, or correct their mistakes

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12 In interviews with students, I asked them in many ways how satisfied they are with their counselors. Their responses will be evaluated in depth in later work.
When I asked the Ashview high school counselors what their feedback from students might be, counselor after counselor gave me vague answers, just guessing what students might think of the work they did. There was no way, besides perhaps measurable outcomes of whether or not they received a scholarship to go to college, to measure their satisfaction with the work of the counselors. The counselors didn’t have time to systematically look at this data; they relied on anecdotes alone.

4.3 Role Conflict

4.3.1 Care Versus Accountability

School counselors answer to a number of different groups who have different expectations of their roles (Freeman and Coll 1997). Ashview counselors provided teacher support, student support, parent support, and administrative support throughout the school year, thus answering to at least four different groups with different expectations. These expectations often conflicted with the roles the counselors saw for themselves (Hatch 2002). Operating under a student-centered logic and a school-centered logic created multiple goals and identities for the school counselors, and “bounded” their intended tasks and effects (Thornton et al. 2012:80), creating role conflict.

Role conflict is “the concurrent appearance of two or more incompatible expectations for the behavior of a person” (Biddle 1986:82).\textsuperscript{13} In other words, school counselors experienced role conflict when the tasks they were assigned were in conflict, based on differing expectations of their role (Freeman and Coll 1997). Ashview

\textsuperscript{13} Role conflict can also have an element of role overload, where expectations of the work far exceed the time to complete them (Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler 1981), as discussed in Chapter 3.
counselors were often in the position of choosing between working for the best interest of
the client, and the best interest of the school (Armor 1969). For instance, not only were
the Ashview high school counselors supposed to provide social/emotional and academic
assistance, they were also supposed to be representatives of the school, often with
responsibility of the reputation of the school.

This was especially true for the counselors in charge of administering high-stakes
accountability tests. For example, some of the role of Jessica at HHS and Nia at EHS
when coordinating the GQEs was tracking students down to ensure they completed the
test. Since the counselors believed the state graded schools partially on how many
students took the test (regardless of whether they passed), the counselors had to track
down missing students to protect the school’s ranking. This was particularly important to
both schools as HHS competed with the private schools in the area for high-achieving
students, and EHS tried to avoid another year of probation with the state.

When Jessica and Nia encouraged students to come in for a make-up of the test
they missed, they no longer acted as counselors but as administrators, worried about the
bottom line for the school, and pleading with students to take the test. As the GQE for the
student, if the student didn’t take the test, they could not graduate (with some
exceptions), so one might interpret the work of Jessica, Nia and others in tracking
students down as a service to the student. However, as one teacher proctoring the GQE
told me, students would often skip the test when they were supposed to take it their
sophomore year knowing they could take it again their junior and senior years before
graduating, so students may not have seen or felt the immediate need the schools did for
them to take the test. This responsibility took the counselors away from their originally intended purpose of guiding and supporting students.

As an illustration, I observed a conversation between Rose and a teacher talking about tracking down students to take the GQE. The students in question had serious issues. One recently gave birth and could not get to school without daycare for her newborn. Another had been incarcerated five times, and was not coming to school anymore. But the conversation between Rose and the teacher revolved around tracking the students down for the test, not to reach out and help with these obstacles to successfully complete the GQE and graduate. Rose was evaluated on how well testing went, which included getting all students tested. She was not evaluated on any attempts to help these students manage their personal obstacles to succeeding on the test.

Similarly, according to the EHS counseling office administrative assistant, students sometimes suffered from test anxiety, hiding in the bathrooms so no one could find them during the test. This was a missed opportunity for the counselor to provide social/emotional support to a student scared or refusing to take a crucial test to graduate from high school. Since the role of the counselor was to convince students to take the test, they were not impartial support persons set on determining why it was the students were unwilling or unavailable to take the test.

The Ashview high school counselors had to use influence to suggest or even strongly encourage students to comply with test taking. This position of support but also authority could achieve opposite goals. Students may not feel like they fully see school counselors as counselors when some of their interactions with counselors are administrative in nature. If students see counselors as authority figures, this undermines
the counselor’s ability to be a safe person to confide in, leaving only the social worker for this role.

4.3.2 Care Versus Guidance

Similarly, another role conflict I observed was the conflict between the expectations and roles associated with being an educator and being a counselor. School counselors are trained to provide client-centered care, like other mental health counselors. But this position can be compromised by the fact that they are also academic guidance counselors. While the former position is about listening and providing support and referrals, the latter is about the (sometimes tedious) tracking of progress, conversations about said progress, trying to convince the students to come to class and get better grades, and having conversations about their future. The social worker at EHS pointed this out to me in our interview:

The counselors are very focused on, “You’ve got to get this credit. You have to take this class.” And sometimes kids don’t want to talk about what’s going on with their class. “My mom’s really sick. I don’t care about my math class right now.”

The EHS social worker explained that she liked that she did not have responsibilities regarding students’ grades or discipline, and so could focus solely on their well-being. The students could just come to her to talk, and she didn’t worry about their academic progress. She thought that worrying about those things could be problematic for establishing a counseling relationship. The high school counselors might be hampered by their jobs to make sure students are on track to graduate to provide them with the counseling services they needed. For instance, as the social worker explained, there might be a personal or family issue that is preventing them from being on time in
the morning (like morning sickness if pregnant). But if a student did not see the counselor as a social/emotional counselor, then they might not tell them what the true issue is; their counselors and teachers would not see the real reason why the student was late to class and could not reach out to help. The EHS social worker implied that the school counselors’ responsibilities in keeping students on track might conflict with their roles as counselors as they served as an authority figure there to keep students on track, instead of just listening to them.

I asked Julia about the social worker’s observation. Would trying to get students to stay on track in academics ever get in the way of social/emotional counseling, making students less likely to share personal issues with her? Julia sort of agreed, but then said she wouldn’t change it because that is what she does as a school counselor. That’s why they are school counselors. And the education piece is important. For Julia, school was the only thing these students have power over, and getting that right can fix a lot of the other issues.

This observation by Julia illustrates the type of role conflict within which high school counselors work. An important aspect of their job was to ensure academic success, which involved a more directional relationship than someone would typically have with a mental health counselor. School counselors give advice, but they also guide students in the direction they feel is best for students in a way a typical therapist would not. But school counselors still need to be available and ready to be a counselor for a student who needs personal support. The EHS social worker implied, though, that students, wary of the counselors’ motivations, did not seek counselors out in this way because of this conflict.
Julia also inadvertently highlighted the difficulties in supporting students both academically and personally by pointing out the circular logic of academic and social/emotional issues. Instead of addressing the social/emotional issues that prevent educational success, Julia indicated she preferred to focus on the educational issues to solve the social/emotional issues. This will likely be a good solution for many students, who come from low-income households – a college degree will help them get out of poverty. However, they may have social/emotional issues right now that are too large to overcome in high school without help from an adult trained in this area, and thus may distract them from educational success. If a counselor is not available to be a resource for these social/emotional issues, student educational success may suffer. Therefore, even if high school counselors had the ability to provide academic counseling and social/emotional care to students in most of their work, those two roles may conflict in certain situations and make it difficult for counselors to do both well.

4.4 Consequences

Ashview school counselors and students alike suffered the consequences of the role ambiguity and role conflict of the counselors. Having the least articulated role in the school with differing student, administrator, and state expectations of what they should do, the counselors were often left with duties that neither teachers nor administrators said they had the time to do, and counselors pushed off student-centered responsibilities for these more time sensitive and immediate tasks.

What were some of the consequences of the “other duties as assigned” ethos of managing school counselors? In this section, I highlight how this impacted the work of
counselors. In Chapter 5, I’ll discuss how the Ashview high school counselors then managed these consequences.

4.4.1 Poor Boundaries

“When you seem really purposeful, you don’t seem like a vacuum to be filled.” -ASCA Conference participant.

In some instances, the ambiguity of the position led to “mission creep” for school counselors, as new administrative tasks and requirements from higher levels in the bureaucracy filtered down to the “street level” where bureaucrats served clients, at the expense of student-centered duties associated with the role (Lipsky 2010). “The division of labor must then be renegotiated, with the common result that boundaries of actual professional jurisdiction change to accommodate organizational imperatives” (Abbott 1988:65).

For instance, when I asked the social worker at EHS what the high school counselors do, she said “On my gosh. They do everything.” Susan, the guidance director at one of the other Ashview public high schools, spoke of the role ambiguity meaningfully:

My responsibilities are poorly defined, I think. And I think it’s a challenge for all guidance counselors – at least in our district – and [guidance] directors. Because there’s not a lot of unanimity around stakeholders about what’s expected of you, then it tends to be a dumping ground or, “we don’t know what they’re doing up there anyways, so we’ll give it to them.” When I was teaching English, nobody expected me to do math stuff. But you’re kind of in a no-man’s-land [as a counselor]. You might have a teacher’s contract, but you’re not a teacher, you’re not an administrator […]. I guess [the many responsibilities are] the price of competence [laughs]. And also the price of poor boundaries. You don’t want to be the person who says, “Not my job, not my job.” But then you get completely overwhelmed with, if you say, “Sure I can help you
“out.” And you can’t get a bazillion other things done. I think that’s a real problem with those boundaries.

Susan highlighted a number of good points in this comment. First, she pointed out how the Ashview school counselors had such poor boundaries because of ambiguity in their roles. Consistent with national surveys of counselors, parents, teachers and administrators, each group of stakeholders has different expectations of counselors (Burnham and Jackson 2000; Freeman and Coll 1997; Paisley and McMahon 2001). Because there wasn’t a lot of “unanimity” or agreement regarding the types of tasks counselors should perform and how to prioritize them (Freeman and Coll 1997), the Ashview high school counselors ended up having the kind of position that did everything, a sort of “dumping ground” for tasks that didn’t fit under someone else’s job description (thus “other duties as assigned”). Nia and the teacher’s union representative 14 agreed, both remarking that counselors were “dumped on” with additional tasks.

Second, while any educational professional may deal with poor boundaries to some extent, when she was a teacher Susan had a set boundary of teaching English – no one was going to ask her to teach math. But as a counselor, her role was so poorly defined that there was little in the way of a strict line of what she would be assigned – she could be assigned any sort of task in the school, even teaching15 (Seashore et al. 2001).

14 School counselors in Ashview were on a teacher’s contract and invited (though not required) to join the teachers’ union. The union representative, having been called in twice in recent years to adjudicate issues between counselors and district administrators, indicated he thought they were treated as volunteers or as the “principal’s assistant”, especially when asked to come into work over the summer without being paid or being paid very little to do so.

15 Jeannine, the guidance director at high school near Ashview, spoke of a counselor at her school who also taught a difficult-to-staff Japanese class.
But, this placed the school counselors in a difficult situation – either set clear boundaries, or be a team player and help the school and thus be overwhelmed by the “bazillion” things to do. Susan pointed out how difficult it was to say no sometimes to these extra tasks. Julia echoed Susan’s statements in a more colorful way, saying on two separate occasions that they, the counselors, were “everybody’s bitches!” The counselors wanted to be seen as team players, and they feared that if they said no too many times to additional responsibilities, there could be employment consequences. Julia and Susan implied they felt at the will of those around them, and had no choice but to concede to ever changing expectations and responsibilities in order to keep their jobs. However, the consequence of taking on too many responsibilities could mean many tasks left undone, and less time with students.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the issue of role ambiguity in their roles, for the high school counselors, was that the administration already knew of these concerns. I witnessed counselors providing feedback to administrators on multiple occasions regarding how they could complete their roles more effectively, with little eventual changes in their work. Julia, who had been working in the district for about 15 years, shared that the district already knew of their issues, referencing a 2006 report conducted by an outside consultant agency at the request of the district to evaluate guidance services in the district. This report concluded (specifically regarding role ambiguity and evaluations):

- There are no clearly, consistently defined roles for the guidance counselors

- Ineffective counselors do not get feedback or improvement coaching. There is a lack of training and understanding of
the needs of high school students by the counselors whose primary training was for the elementary school level.

- Administrators request consistent, clearly identified roles.
- There are no school counselor performance standards.
- There is no performance evaluation of guidance counselors.
- Performance varies greatly according to the individual.

Yet Julia believed that the district made no efforts to address any of these issues, and I observed these were the same issues the counselors spoke to me about during my observations ten years later.

4.4.2 Inconsistency in Work

The lack of a clearly defined role, consistent between their graduate training and their actual work, led the Ashview counselors to realize discrepancy and contradiction in their work roles, goals, and expectations (Herr 2002). This realization is consistent with other research on street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010). It was an issue that the faculty members of school counseling education programs I spoke to were aware of. Most of the faculty I interviewed indicated that one of the challenges to training school counselors was how different their experience would be between districts or school type.

Stephanie at HHS spoke at length about how she felt like the district often changed the responsibilities and expectations of the school counselors, and how she wanted a “policy and procedure manual” for the counselors, as there were no consistent policies. I asked the principals of both schools and the district administrator over the counselors whether there was a job manual for the counselors. None were aware of one.
Curious as to whether there was any sort of job description (if not a job manual) for the counselors to work off of, I reviewed Ashview district’s posting of two school counselor jobs in the summer of 2016 – one for a middle school counselor and one for a high school counselor. Both descriptions were identical, to the point that they even forgot to change “experience with HS age students” under job requirements for the middle school position. This was despite categorical differences in serving the different age groups, and the fact that middle school counselors worked as the only counselor for an entire school, while high school counselors worked as a team. The job descriptions were also very scant on details, not fully encompassing all the responsibilities I observed of them. Of the responsibilities they did include, the order was scheduling, testing, liaison with parents, and then social/emotional counseling.

There were opportunities to address this lack of a job description. For instance, during my formal interview in the summer of 2016 with Virginia, the district administrative over the counselors, she mentioned how she wanted me to be on a committee to rewrite the school counselor job description for the upcoming 2016-2017 school year. But when I followed up with her in December about this at a meeting with the counselors, she did not seem to recall the conversation or the suggestion of a committee, and nothing came of it.

This role ambiguity bled into the high school counselors’ conceptions of what their job responsibilities were. Denise said: “I have no idea what my job description is. I’m sure they gave it to me when they hired me. It’s probably somewhere, somehow.” This was a particular sore spot for Stephanie, lamenting “I just wanna know what I’m supposed to be doing.” Robert from HHS indicated, when I asked him what his
responsibilities were in the job, that, "It really changes. It literally changes every single day."

The role ambiguity in the job could be made worse in the change of a principal, according to Mr. Coughlin:

A lot of it depends on the principal. I think there’s a lot of - the principals have a lot of power in the school. And that role, the role of the counselors can change overnight with a change in principals. There’s no standardization. I think ASCA’s done a great job of articulating that, but it doesn’t always seem filter into the school’s array.

With the lack of training of principals regarding school counselors, if a new principal arrives in a school, the school counselors’ responsibilities could change.

4.4.3 Underutilization

Tied closely to poor boundaries was the frequency of underutilization of counselors based on the level of education they received. Ashview counselors consistently noted feeling underutilized because of the ambiguity regarding their roles. Leonard said: “I don’t really need a master’s degree to do this. Why did I take that class in theory?” This seemed to be the mantra of counselors, as it was repeated by most of them. According to Dr. Wyatt, a faculty member of a public university school counseling program: “I don’t think that professional school counselors as being utilized to the fullest potential, in thinking about prevention and intervention and just developmentally appropriate counseling that can be happening with students.”

Many times, counselors were allocated tasks that seemed to underutilize their educational preparation. Kathy, from a high school in the state capital, talked about how her administration used her and the other counselors as “warm bodies”:
This administration doesn’t want to hear that an hour and a half of cafeteria duty is not an efficient use of time. Because they needed a body. They didn’t want you to do anything, but they needed a body in there to for any kind of inappropriate activity. I’m like “why are we wasting our time on problems in the cafeteria?” [...] I think people are starting to realize, “Hey, you’re paying me a decent amount of money to get something else out of it. You can pay somebody ten dollars an hour to do cafeteria duty” [...] And their rationale is “You got a captive audience in here. You know you can do counseling while you’re in here,” because we always talk about curbside counseling […]. Yes. That is true. There is some merit in going to the cafeteria and plucking out three or four or five kids and following up on something…But when a student is sitting in your office with a genuine concern and the bell rings and you gotta go to cafeteria duty and you’re like “Hey, your dad’s on crack but I’m gonna go to the cafeteria and do cafeteria duty.” You know if you weren’t there [in the cafeteria] then it was like “Well, where were you?” It just was not a very fruitful experience. I think we should go down and be present but not on a schedule like that.

For Kathy, while she saw the opportunity to interact with students during lunch time, the purpose of lunch duty was not student support but prevention of “inappropriate activity” by students. Plus, this responsibility took her away from times students truly did need her help. The school counselors in this study believed that utilizing master’s trained counselors for a job most anyone could do was a waste of counselors as educated resources. According to Mr. Coughlin, “a lot of the functions counselors are doing in schools could be done by somebody with a high school education and some inside knowledge about the functioning of the school. Fixing schedules, things like that, you know. The scheduling process especially.”

Despite being highly educated (as school counselors are required by most states to have a 48 credit hour master’s degree in school counseling from a nationally accredited program), a recurring theme in my conversations with high school counselors regarded how the district disregarded their education. In a conversation with Susan and Rose, they
talked about how the district did not take them seriously, despite having master’s degrees – all the counselors had master’s, some had two, and some of them even had administrator certificates/licenses. Susan pointed out that one former counselor even had a superintendents’ license/certificate, though he never used it. Regardless, even with all that education, some of which was in common with school leaders, they felt were never taken seriously by the district leadership.

Similarly, Denise, the counselor at another Ashview high school, said in a meeting with district administrators that “many of us feel like overpaid clerks” who don’t need master’s degrees to do what they do. Jeannine, the guidance director from a neighboring school district, said she did not feel valued as a counselor or team player, and her educated viewpoint was discounted:

I think that sometimes from my position I can see trends with students developmentally or academically and I can bring those up to them. But if it’s not something that’s on their agenda, then it’s brushed aside because it came from the counseling office. I feel like they’re not really valuing all the things that we have to offer or can see happening.

I observed this during meetings regarding funding for school counseling programs. During these district meetings of mostly administrators with maybe one or two counselors, counselors were rarely mentioned as recipients of funding, and administrators believed everyone in the school did counseling. While possible, this mentality seemed to diminish the importance of counselors by making it seem like anyone could counsel.

In addition, Ms. Meyer, a faculty member at a regional university pointed out that, especially with the impending increase in credits required for accreditation by the national accrediting agency of school counseling graduate programs (CACREP) to 60
credits, school counselors will be working under administrators with almost half the credits. It is hard to predict if schools will utilize the additional skills the counselors will gain from these credits, but signs in Ashview suggest not.

This can become detrimental to the schools. They have a resource to help students socially, emotionally, academically, and for their futures. Counselors can support the work of teachers, and supplement the work of social workers (who are invariably fewer in number). They could address problems in school climate, discipline, and under achievement on a school-wide scale. But this becomes difficult when they are used as low-level data entry persons, and this underutilization is a classic problem for street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010). Mr. Coughlin explored this issue in a report he wrote with Dr. Jenkins, telling me:

One of the best things that would help school counseling is for the administrators, when they go through training, is to understand the resource they have in school counselors. They don’t get, when they have a half a dozen people that all have their master’s degrees, that you can make them do better things than walk around the room, supervising a test […] Principals don’t understand the magnitude of the impact counselors can have on the school, so they reduce that role to a kind of fire-fighting mode. “Oh, we have to get something done, call the counselors. They’re not stuck in classrooms.”

4.4.4 Reduction of Role to “Schedulers”

One almost contradictory consequence of the role ambiguity of the Ashview high school counselors was that their roles were so poorly defined that in some ways, despite a whole host of tasks not typically delineated in any sort of job description or work manual, they were mostly seen as class schedulers. This was evident in the consultant report from 2006, which said that district administrators generally noted that there was no specific
mission of school counseling, with one result being that the role of the school counselor was reduced to that of scheduler. Feelings of role ambiguity were intensified by the fact that the high school counselors’ positions were often narrowly defined by others because they did not know what to expect of the counselors, as described by Susan:

Counselors in general, and at least in the Ashview schools for sure, for decades have suffered from perception. You know, a lot of perception that it gets, that boundary is still there. Since people don’t know what’s expected of you or what you do, then a lot of the time, the assumption is you’re not doing anything or you’re scheduling. So pretty much the only thing… when we come back to scheduling and scheduling and scheduling, it’s hugely expected although that’s not what you’re evaluated on. That’s not in your, whatever the plan du jour is for teacher evaluations. It’s not “how well do you schedule?” But that’s the only piece that students, parents, teachers, administrators, that they all go, “Oh, I know what you do.” That’s the only universal so it’s a huge…You know, they don’t train you how to schedule, but if you don’t do that, then people don’t think you’re doing anything. [When evaluating counselors,] “Nobody says, you know, how well do you schedule?”

In this case, Susan believed school counselors were only expected to schedule, yet they were not trained to schedule (and in fact were trained on many other things they didn’t do), nor were they evaluated on this crucial school-centered management task. Susan pointed to the lack of transparency in their work as one reason why no one knew what the counselors did. Since others didn’t see the school counselors meeting with students like they saw teachers in classrooms, they didn’t see that part of the job. They only saw the scheduling and testing portions of the job.

Stephanie also observed that the administration only saw and used the counselors as schedulers because that was the task that was most visible to others in the school. She said this hurt counselors’ ability to work with students. Stephanie was particularly
annoyed about an incident at the beginning of the year. When the principal of HHS was introducing the school counselors at freshmen orientation, he introduced them as the people who did students’ schedules, as if this were the counselors’ only function. Julia defended the principal, saying he was one of their biggest advocates, but Stephanie pushed back noting that comment set the groundwork for how the young high school students would see the counselors for the next four years, merely as schedulers. In fact, in each of my interviews with the school and district administrators, scheduling was the first job responsibility they mentioned for counselors, with other tasks not mentioned or seemingly an afterthought.

4.4.5 Lack of Rewards

What are the consequences of this lack of a clear evaluation system? School counselors could find themselves without any financial incentives for good work. “Street-level bureaucrats’ performance is not tied directly to wage incentives. Promotions and raises, when they are given out, do not depend so much on job performance as on personal relations, additional outside training, work-load handling, and other factors unrelated to client servicing” (Lipsky 2010:175). Since evaluations of the Ashview school counselors were based more on output rather than student servicing, counselors could only really be rewarded for measurable outcomes, like scheduling and test coordination.

The high school counselors (and teachers) in Ashview were in a particularly demoralizing situation because they encountered not only low pay in comparison to nearby districts, but also a lack of raises for almost a decade. Even if they received good evaluations, there was no way to reward them. Laura was particularly annoyed that the
administration was receiving raises each year (as evidenced by the publicly available information online), yet the counselors were not.

4.5 Conclusion

Embedded in schools with limited resources and susceptible to the problems inherent in working in an organization with these ambiguous and conflicting goals (Lipsky 2010), school counselors have struggled to identify their role in schools in a way that is consistent, impactful, and reflective of their training and intention going into the profession. The Ashview high school counselors in this study reported suffering from role ambiguity and role conflict for various reasons, such as the different expectations stakeholders had of them, mismatched forms of performance evaluation, and conflict between their roles as counselors and educators. Counselors suffered from poor boundaries in their work, receiving multiple non-counseling duties that monopolized their time and reduced their time with students. Through these non-counseling tasks, school administrators underutilized the specialized education the counselors received, and counselors questioned why they had spent so much time on an education they rarely used. Understanding the role conflict and ambiguity the counselors faced in a resourced constrained environment operating under conflicting institutional logics, in the next chapter I will discuss in detail techniques the Ashview school counselors utilized to manage these issues in their attempts to serve students.
CHAPTER 5:

IF THE WHEEL DOESN’T SQUEAK: HOW HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS
MANAGE CHALLENGING WORK CONDITIONS

5.1 Introduction

As street-level bureaucrats, the Ashview high school counselors worked in an environment of scarce resources, large caseloads, limited time, and role ambiguity and conflict. Faced with these obstacles, the school counselors had to balance issues competing for their attention in complicated situations that arose in their day-to-day work in order to serve students’ needs, but in an efficient manner so that as many as possible could be seen. In this chapter, I examine the techniques the counselors utilized to manage their workload. But first, I start with a story indicative of the types of tradeoffs the Ashview school counselors needed to make to accomplish their work.

5.2 The Beginning of the Year

At the beginning of each school year in Ashview, there was some necessary class schedule jostling. Some students passed a summer course and need to adjust their fall schedule. Some students found holes in their schedules due to the overfilling of class sections or changes the high school counselors had to make over the summer to the master schedule. Some new students arrived and needed to create completely new
schedules. And some students simply changed their minds about a class they had chosen the previous February.

The processing of changing classes largely occurred en mass two times a year in Ashview – the add-drop period in the summer before school started, and the first day of school. These days would form the first impression incoming freshmen will have of their high schools, and one of the only times any students would see a counselor through the school year. This could be a good opportunity to set the tone with students at the school.

Because of the nature of large schools like Hunter High School (HHS), with high student-to-counselor ratios, the beginning of the year was often chaotic. During the add-drop days, about 200-230 students and their parents came through the counseling office door looking to solidify class schedules. The guidance office was not big enough to accommodate all these students, so the counselors sent them across the hall to a big classroom to sign in and wait to be called by their counselor. At any one time up to 35 students and their parents were waiting to be seen by the 5 counselors.

This way of managing students changing classes at the beginning of the school year accomplished a number of unintended consequences. First, there was a cattle call feel, with students being shuffled in and out of offices and the large waiting classroom. Second, by having a line of people waiting in the classroom, the counselors created an experience that felt rushed. After waiting 30-90 minutes, parents and students might feel the need to be quick in their meetings with the counselors to avoid holding other students up. Parents and students could feel as though they didn’t have time and shouldn’t ask all the questions they wanted to of the school counselors.
Third, because each counselor wanted to see the students in their assigned caseloads, each counselor had a separate waiting list. This meant that somebody waiting for Jane who arrived at 9:30am might actually be seen after someone who arrived at 10:00am who came to see Jessica. Jane, who had about the same number of students waiting for her as the other counselors, had students waiting inordinately longer due to her more thorough approach to counseling. This approach tended to lead to longer meetings, with a few upwards of 2-3 hours during observation, while Jessica had her students in and out in 20 minutes. It was unclear whether Jane’s meetings warranted the length, but what was clear was that Jane sacrificed efficiency to meet longer with students, leaving other students waiting for her.

Thus, the first impression of the school and the school counseling office for many students would be sitting in the large classroom for over an hour waiting to be seen. This waiting came with no warning, either – new students and their parents didn’t know that they would have to wait so long when they arrived. This set a poor standard for expectations of the Ashview high school counselors for the approximately 200 students and their parents who arrived during this period.

5.3 School Counseling Conditions of Work

As street-level bureaucrats, high school counselors must “build into their work life responses to decisions made at the system level” (Lipsky 2010:184), which essentially becomes agency policy (Scott 2008). School counselors around the county (like teachers) do not decide to have high caseloads (Lipsky 2010). But they do have to deal with this and other resource constraints. The limited resources the Ashview high
school counselors were provided to complete their jobs made it very difficult for them to meet the needs of students and the management of the school. How the high school counselors responded to these constraints, then, is particularly interesting as both a study in how they try to meet the needs of their clients, but also a study in how any actor, performing under constraints, may respond. School principals and superintendents cannot oversee directly the day-to-day decisions of counselors, nor counselors’ individual interactions with students; they can only set expectations, deadlines, and resources to complete these responsibilities. This leaves high school counselors to use their judgment when deciding how to accomplish their tasks and how they interact with students.

How do these conditions contribute to patterns of practice by high school counselors that shape the quality of services that are or are not delivered to students (Lipsky 2010)? How do high school counselors interpret their work environment, and decide how to respond with their time and attention? In this chapter, I help illuminate the aspects of the job that influence how high school counselors make decisions about their time management and their attention. I then examine the techniques the counselors used to manage their responsibilities and the many obstacles in their jobs within the schools. I explore how high school counselors at the individual-level allocate their time, attention, and advice when influenced by the two main logics that govern their work: the student-centered logic and the school-level logic.

5.4 High School Counselor Time and Attention Management

Ocasio’s (1997) theory of attention and action is an apt conduit through which to look at the conditions that influence the work of high school counselors, namely how
they focus their attention and spend their time in their positions. For Ocasio (1997),
decision makers must notice an issue, make sense of and interpret the issue, and then
decide whether (and how much) time and effort to spend on the issue. Both the issues that
seem pertinent and the answers to address those issues are made available and interpreted
by the organization (Cho and Hambrick 2006; Ocasio 1997). In other words, decision-
makers take cues from various locations – such as the logics that guide their work, the
organization, the situation, and the clients – to filter through potential issues to address
and the answers through which to address them (Ocasio 1997; Thornton 2004). Using this
attention perspective with institutional logics allows the researcher to “link macro logics
to micro behaviors and decisions” (Thornton et al. 2012:77–78).

Because there are limits to the amount of time and attention any one school
counselor can devote to all aspects of the job (as outlined in Chapter 3), it is usually
impossible to fully dedicate oneself to all relevant issues. As street-level bureaucrats,
school counselors must “manage their difficult jobs by developing routines of practice
and psychologically simplifying their clientele and environment in ways that strongly
influence the outcomes of their efforts” (Lipsky 2010:xii). Some issues will garner the
attention of counselors more than others, depending more on the situation than on the
individual characteristics of the counselor (Cho and Hambrick 2006; Ocasio 1997). There
are certain things an organization can do to control the amount of time and attention a
worker can dedicate to certain tasks (Ocasio 1997).

For high school counselors (as outlined more in Chapter 3), organizational control
of their time and attention occurred through resource allocation. Because there were not
enough high school counselors per student in Ashview, and because certain non-
counseling tasks were assigned to counselors, the schools structured the time that counselors had to attend to the job. There was little time allocated to counselors to provide the comprehensive school counseling program they had been trained to implement. Because social/emotional counseling was typically distributed to the single social worker in the school (see more in Chapter 4), the counselors found they were not tasked with this responsibility despite their training. Instead, the schools kept the counselors intricately involved in scheduling, testing, accountability, and overall management of the school.

This structuring of the work of high school counselors toward school management tasks grew out of the conflicting institutional logics that guided their work: a student-centered logic and a school-centered logic. As street-level bureaucrats, high school counselors are caught between the “rules, regulations, and directives” from their school-based superiors, and the “norms and practices” of the school counseling profession (Lipsky 2010). The student-centered logic, derived from a counseling-based graduate education and by the counselors’ desire to help students, focuses attention on helping students academically, socially, emotionally, and in deciding their futures. However, counselors work in a bureaucratic organization (the school) that stresses order and accountability (in many ways just in order to survive), and relies on the high school counselors to provide many school management tasks such as coordinating the master school class schedule. In this way, the organization structures the work of counselors through a school-centered logic, establishing the importance and order of issues counselors were to attend to (Ocasio 1997:196).
Understanding how schools steer counselors toward a school-centered approach, and how the school counseling profession steers counselors toward a student-centered approach, how do high school counselors balance these two sides? Below, I outline how the Ashview high school counselors attempted to meet all of the expectations of their positions in the limited time they had.

5.5 Activating the School-Centered Logic

As I outlined in Chapter 3, the counselors faced resource constraints that limited the time they had to attend to student needs, which led to burnout and alienation. With not enough time to address both student-centered and school-centered tasks, counselors had to choose. Ashview counselors also encountered ambiguity and conflict in their roles (see Chapter 4), leading to poor boundaries and a discounting of their potential as social/emotional counselors. In situations where roles are ambiguously defined, workers focus on what they believe they will be formally and informally evaluated on: that which is most pertinent, timely, and in need of immediate attention for the school to function properly (Rizzo et al. 1970).

I found evidence that Ashview high school counselors were engaging the school-centered logic more often than the student-centered logic, largely because they were overwhelmed with school-centered tasks and deadlines. Below, I outline school-centered strategies Ashview counselors used that prioritized school-centered tasks.

5.5.1 Mass Processing

High school counselors often must choose between being efficient in their meetings with their students, versus building relationships with students. Due to the high
student caseloads and time consuming responsibilities, they might have to sacrifice establishing and cultivating strong relationships with students in order to meet their tight administrative deadlines. Like other street-level bureaucrats, counselors often would engage in “mass processing,” allowing them to reach each student, but not having to do so with in-depth individualized meetings (Gast 2016; Lipsky 2010). This was most apparent during the busy scheduling season of January and February in Ashview. Once first semester classes had ended, finals were taken, and grades were in, counselors would look through each of their students’ transcripts to determine what classes each student needed for the upcoming year. This was an important time, as ensuring students were taking the right class was imperative to ensuring they graduated on time and with the right diploma. Scheduling students is a crucial task especially in public comprehensive high schools with multiple class and diploma options, as illustrated by the HHS Principal who commented about the school counselor that, “I don’t think that there is any other position in the building that could stop a kid from graduating.” If a counselor was rushed and not detail-oriented and missed something on the student’s transcript, the student could be pushed back a class or more from graduating on time and/or with the desired diploma.

The counselors in each of the Ashview high schools handled the scheduling process differently. The five Hunter High School counselors needed to schedule over 1,200 rising sophomores, juniors and seniors, and upwards of 450 incoming freshmen, all within a four-week span. They took all the students in an English class (ranging in size from 15 to 30 students) to the library and tried to schedule them for next year’s classes within the 45-minute class period. Theoretically, this meant that, assuming each
counselor had six students in that class (30 students ÷ 5 counselors = 6 students), they could meet with each of them for 7.5 minutes during a 45-minute period (45 minutes ÷ 6 students = 7.5 minutes per student). That is not a lot of time, and it rarely worked this way as one high school counselor may have upwards of ten students in any particular class due to how caseloads were assigned. In this case, each student received only five minutes of attention, or another counselor the student didn’t know would meet with them. The scheduling in the library became the HHS school counselors’ way of “processing large amounts of work with inadequate resources” and developing “shortcuts and simplifications to cope with the press of responsibilities,” much like street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010:18).

The more responsibilities, the more time selective the Ashview high school counselors became (Lipsky 2010). Counselors spent their time on the most measurable and “immediate” tasks, such as class scheduling and the coordination of high-stakes testing, both of which had strict deadlines and understandably significant implications for the school. If the Ashview high school counselors had any interaction with the student during the school year, it was planning classes for the following year and adjusting schedules as needed. However, as I noted before, these meetings would average only between 5 and 20 minutes, making it extremely difficult to talk about deeper social or emotional issues. In the majority of the meetings I observed at Hunter and Edward High Schools, counselors merely recorded student class preferences, rarely actually guiding them through their choices. In an informal conversation, Susan – a guidance director at another Ashview high school – noted the difficulty of “trying to compact four years of high school in 10-15 minutes” during those scheduling meetings. Linda, another Ashview
The high school guidance director, noted that even when meeting with students, the tasks associated with scheduling such as data input and resolving class conflicts "really lessens the time and the opportunities for you to actually talk with the kids face to face about what their concerns are, and get to really, really know that kid for who they are."

Little actual guidance was occurring between students and counselors. I noted one day after observing HHS counselors Julia and Robert schedule freshmen that while their system of scheduling students was incredibly efficient (especially in comparison to Leonard and the EHS counselors, which I will outline below), the system at HHS felt impersonal. The students sat in the library as the counselors called them one-by-one for 5-10 minute meetings. The scheduling part of any meeting is going to be short, especially for freshmen that have a specific set of core classes they should take. But longer meetings (if counselors had the time or energy) might elicit more information on the students’ goals, the kinds of classes they were interested in, or their desired college and career pathway. No interaction I saw that day included a conversation about college. Julia mentioned it once when trying to convince a student to take a language class even though it wasn’t a diploma requirement, but she and Robert never asked their students if they wanted to go to college. The students were freshmen, so more pointed questions might be a little premature, but even if they changed their minds about college, having that initial conversation as early as 9th grade could have set the standard for a relationship built toward that goal.

The Ashview school counselors, because they had such an enormous caseload to work through in four weeks, didn’t or couldn’t start longer conversations on what the student wanted to achieve beyond “what do you want to be when you grow up?” These
meetings were the only meetings most of the freshmen would have with their counselors that year, and they were very perfunctory, superficial, and focused more on the task of filling out a schedule than integrating the high school experience into the goals and dreams the students have for the future.

In such an environment, it seems improbable that a young student in a school with a high student-to-counselor ratio could build a meaningful relationship with their counselor. They would have to wait until their junior or senior year, when much of their study habits and early grades will have cemented (and potentially undermined) their future academic projections.

5.5.2 Fighting Fires

When determining how they prioritized her time, Nia and other counselors talked about how the district and school leadership typically established school counselor priorities, namely scheduling or resolving grade conflicts. There was general agreement among the counselors regarding situations that would call for a student-centered approach to their work: generally, the student was in immediate need because of a “serious” situation, such as their safety.

Joe, a 25-year counseling veteran and guidance director at a neighboring high school, had to receive a student in immediate need to switch his focus off of other tasks, and assess whether it was a real emergency. “It’s not always a first come, first serve. I mean, you might come in with something that you feel is urgent and I think is important, and then a next person comes in with something that I feel is really urgent, and that person takes precedent over you.” In order to warrant his attention, the student must seek him out or be in a “real” crisis (however he defines it), and the issue must be immediate
enough to push off his other responsibilities.

Instead of building a comprehensive school counseling program that provided ongoing support and prevention of issues, the school counselors moved from issue to issue, crisis to crisis, as they came up (Seashore et al. 2001). Jessica, a new counselor at HHS, said, “It kind of feels like we put out the fires as they come, but there’s no map of the frequent fires or what firefighting activities have been to prevent them.” Whereas some efforts in education are diverted to students who are on the “bubble” (students that are close to passing state-mandated tests) in an effort to increase school and teacher ratings in a triage mode (Booher-Jennings 2005; Lipsky 2010), the counselors focused their efforts on those who seemed in immediate need of support, and not to others.

Sometimes a student just had to know enough to ask for help from a school counselor to get that attention. Research suggests that middle class students are socialized to and more likely to ask for help in school (Calarco 2011), implying that the students who needed help the most were least likely to ask for it and were more likely from lower income homes. Joe highlighted how the way the high school counseling office is typically structured preferences students who ask for help over those who don’t:

If you want to know something, you can easily find the answer to whatever your questions are either through our website or Gmail groups or announcements. But there are sometimes when people don’t know what to ask, and those are the people I worry about the most. Because they’ve never had that experience before, they don’t know exactly what their kid needs to do. And so, there are all kinds of people with all kinds of needs that don’t verbalize those needs and it’s like… how do you know? I mean if the wheel doesn’t squeak, how do you know it needs grease?

Jessica also admitted that she was “really dependent” on students being open with her – if the student didn’t bring an issue to her attention, she couldn’t help them. As Jane
said: “you know the old saying, ‘the squeaky wheel gets the oil’? And my whole thing is that we deal with 20% of the clients 80% of the time.”

More than once, Ashview counselors noted that the middle students – those not at the top or bottom of their class – would lose out on the attention of the counselors the most. This is in contrast to previous research that suggests those in the middle are helped because they could be pushed above a level of competence, whereas those at the top (who are already succeeding) and those at the bottom (who are too far from meeting proficiency) are not prioritized (Booher-Jennings 2005). Laura, a counselor at Edward High School (EHS), explained how the middle students were overlooked:

They have kind of the middle child syndrome. They're smart enough, they're kind of doing well enough that they're going to make it if they want to go on to college or do some kind of technical training. It's usually the really gifted ones that I spend a lot of time trying to get them into the school that they're looking to, or spending time talking about “what do you want to do and how do you plan to get there?” Or the really challenged ones that take up a lot of the time because I'm having to go through and explain over and over “well, this is where you're at with the GQE [graduation qualifying exam],” because often times those are kids that haven't passed the GQE.

Many of the counselors spoke of the extra efforts needed to get the high achieving students into prestigious colleges, or the time spent meeting with low-performing students calculating test scores and attendance rates for those at risk of not graduating. Students in the middle did not create situations where immediate attention was needed or asked for extra help, and thus Laura and others acknowledged that they were underserved.

There was a sense among the school counselors in this study that these middle students were falling through the cracks because they didn’t ask for help and they as
counselors were too busy to identify and help those that needed it. I asked Brooke, a counselor at a high school in the west what she might request on behalf of the counseling office, if cost was not a factor. She said she would request three more school counselors because there was so much to do and she couldn’t attend to it all. Brooke was worried that she wasn’t doing enough for the “middle” students – those students who don’t have the supports at home, but also aren’t catching her eye because of a particularly dire situation. She was worried that these students would fall through the cracks, “fall to the bottom because of everything else that’s at the top that has to be done.” The priorities of her position were not to serve these students, but to complete paperwork and meet deadlines and “everything else that’s at the top that has to be done.”

Because of this tendency only to serve the loudest students or those at the extremes, some counselors recognized they were forgoing relationships with younger students. For instance, take this conversation with Leonard, a second-career counselor close to retirement at EHS. When I asked him if he got a chance to meet with all of the students in his caseload, he responded:

Juniors, yes. And seniors, yes. Generally not freshmen. The only time I meet with freshmen is if I have to change their schedule or they have an issue. Ideally, we should be able to meet with all of our students but it is really difficult.

Jessica echoed Leonard’s point, that counselors at HHS had “almost no” involvement with the freshmen class. Not serving freshmen students can be a missed opportunity, as success freshmen year is a critical predictor of later academics and high school graduation (Allensworth and Easton 2005). And the counselors knew that freshmen needed extra attention. Rose often complained that students who were not
motivated enough to do class work their freshmen year and earned poor or failing grades were haunted by this behavior four years later when they were trying to graduate. They tried to make up for these mistakes their senior year, but often it was too late. This group of freshmen – promising but not putting forth the effort – could be a group on which high school counselors particularly focused. But their issues were not seen as pertinent – counselors had seniors to worry about. And no effort was made to reach out to freshmen in particular.

5.5.3 Downgrade Expectations

Partially because of this firefighting and “call for service” model of serving students, the Ashview high school counselors were skeptical of their ability to reach all students in the caseloads, downgrading expectations of what they were able to accomplish (Lipsky 2010). This served the purpose of bridging the “gap” between the few resources they had and the goals of their position (Lipsky 2010). For instance, Jane from HHS talked about balancing the desire to help all students, with the reality of the job:

I really want these kids what they so richly deserve. All of them. Not just the 20%. And I know that there’s probably not enough of us to go around and make that happen, but each one reaches one. Sometimes I’ll have kids who will come in and bring another kid. And so I could get them that way.

Rose echoed this sentiment: “I’m old school, and I’m old and I just feel that if I can help one more to get their diploma, I’ll do my best and do that.” Her sentiment suggests the street-level bureaucrat technique of serving a small portion of the student body in an ideal manner (Lipsky 2010), reducing her expectations that she could help all students (or at least a lot of students) in a meaningful way. For Rose in particular, she
admitted spending extra time and attention on the younger siblings of former students and students she knew through her church.

Amy, guidance director at a Catholic high school in the area, said something similar, recognizing how she was downgrading her expectations regarding how many students she could impact:

Are you going to be able to help every student? No, but when you’ve helped one or two and you know you’ve made an impact… I mean that’s one or two. And that doesn’t sound like a lot in the scheme of things, but if everybody’s truly making an impact on one or two — and I think we’re making an impact on more than one or two — but you’ve got a student that comes back to you and have a family that comes back and thanks you, it kind of makes up for all the many that aren’t happy with you.

Amy recognizes “all the many that aren’t happy with” her, and suggests that just one or two telling her thank you is all she needs. This is likely an effort to maintain optimism and a sense of a good job done, essential to positive feelings about one’s job. But it lowers the bar of expected outcomes.

Nia, a former middle school counselor now at EHS, mentioned downgrading expectations for not just the number of students she served and their satisfaction levels, but also for the type and quality of service she was able to provide. When discussing “comprehensive counseling” in the form of the ASCA National Model (the effort to provide academic, social/emotional, and postsecondary counseling to each student), she said: “you cannot focus on comprehensive counseling because you literally are everything to everybody.” Faculty members echoed these sentiments. Dr. Callahan, who in her former position as a high school counselor had a caseload of 500 students, was just
happy if she could know all their names, admitting, “honestly I couldn’t say that I made an impact on 500 students.”

Dr. Elizabeth even indicated her place as a professor in the system of the profession and how there was only so much she could do:

I often feel overwhelmed by national challenges and I just have to channel my energy into to doing what I can in my program to graduate, like, eight more people and get them out there into the schools and they can do their part. I have to feel some satisfaction and fulfillment in that because there’s much bigger systemic issues that I wish we had a more profound change. But this is what I know to do. And then in some ways our students go out and do the same thing. They do what they can with their resources and in their settings.

With Ashview student caseloads in the 300s (or more in other communities), the faculty training counselors knew that the counselors would not be able to help the students in ideal terms. They taught the counselors to lower their expectations from the beginning so as not to become discouraged or burned out.

5.5.4 Avoiding “Voluntary” Tasks

Some Ashview high school counselors avoided “voluntary” tasks with no immediate deadlines that were not evaluated, but that might have been helpful to students. For instance, one of the purposes of tests like the GQE and other college and career readiness exams is to give students and schools an idea of how prepared the students are for college. Accuplacer, a college and career readiness test created by the College Board, was required of all sophomore students in the Ashview district. The school counselors administered this test (in addition to the PSAT and the GQE). It was implied through this arrangement that the school counselors would sit down with each and every student to go over the results of the test, which were presented to the student
immediately upon completion of the test. This could be helpful as the test gave students
detailed information about their strengths and weaknesses in math and reading. It also
provided them the opportunity to determine if they needed remediation in a particular
area to prepare for college (with the Accuplacer webpage encouraging school counselors
to purchase a remediation package through the College Board).

However, Julia told me she didn’t go to college for a math degree, implying that
she wasn’t trained nor felt it was in her job description to provide remediation support for
students. She also implied the counselors did not have the time to sit down with each and
every student who took the test. So while the district required that students take this test
to determine their college and career readiness, and required the counselors to administer
it, there was no actual follow up with the students on the results. This raised the question
as to why the test was even administered if not to improve students’ readiness or to be
used for any sort of accountability for the school.

At least, if the student printed off the results, they could review them on their own
at HHS. While at EHS, Leonard collected the test results at the end of the test to put into
students’ cumulative files; at EHS students didn’t even receive the document that would
highlight their strengths and weaknesses. He made no mention of remediation, though he
commented that he would do whatever else the principal wanted him to do with the
results.

Not considered “voluntary” by students or parents, the Ashview school counselors
would sometimes treat college counseling as such. Leonard used to work for a college-
based TRiO program dedicated to increasing low-income and minority student
representation in postsecondary education and thus had a more extensive knowledge of
college-going than most counselors. Yet on multiple occasions, he suggested students “Google” information on colleges that had their intended majors, or talk to teachers regarding career discernment, instead of engaging in that discernment with him. He later admitted he was surprised how little time he had to engage students in college counseling. Rose noted her utilization of resources provided by programs such as TRiO or free programs found in the community, such as SAT preparation courses. She utilized these when she couldn’t ensure those services were being provided by her and her office. At one point Laura asked if the EHS-designated TRiO representative could meet with a student to complete her FASFA, suggesting Laura was too busy to do this college counseling task. In my interview with the TRiO representative, she said she helped the counselors to get the information out about college “because the counselors are so bogged down with paperwork.” She provided the information regarding college that the counselors did not have time to (though only to her subset of students in formal TRiO programs). She saw herself as an additional counselor within the school. But not all high schools have access to a TRiO staff member or separate college counselor. They must do with just the school counselors.

Fortunately, all freshmen students in Ashview were required to take a college and careers class. The school counselors were very rarely a part of this process, though, as it was typically taught by a business teacher. Jessica noted that the college and careers teachers were doing a lot with the ninth graders that the high school counselors could not do, which she said was good. However, this class was just for the ninth graders. There was no formal follow up by the school for the college and career needs of students, outside of the career and technical program which was only for students who were
enrolled in half day vocational courses their junior and senior years. Whether or not the information learned in that class was retained as students entered their junior and senior years was unknown.

5.6 Activating the Student-Centered Logic

When I asked Dr. Elizabeth, a faculty member at a Southern public university, what she thought was the biggest challenge facing counselors in high schools, she responded:

Goodness! Well the volume of opportunity and all of the different students’ needs and kind of the impossibility of doing it all. And so really needing to be strategic about how you use your time and energy and what you try to work towards in terms of what the school counselor can do.

For the most part, when laden with scheduling and testing, the counselors regretted not spending more time with students one-on-one. Counselors attempting to balance the school-centered and student-centered logics needed to be strategic regarding their use of their time and attention (Biddle 1986). Below are examples of patterns of practices the Ashview counselors engaged in an effort to balance these two conflicting logics, and put more focus on student needs.

5.6.1 Working Outside Typical Work Hours

The high student-to-counselor ratios and numerous administrative tasks forced Ashview counselors to deal with their lack of time in many ways. One typical way the counselors would attempt to balance student-centered and school-centered tasks was to stay late or bring work home with them. Like in any busy job, pretty much all of the counselors admitted to or I observed them forgoing contractually stipulated lunch, and
working outside of typical school hours. Rose explained that their contract stipulated they work between 7:30 AM and 2:55 PM, but it was rare that I observed them leaving so early. If they did, they often noted they were bringing work home because they had to leave for some sort of appointment or to pick up their children. Stephanie indicated she did email work after hours so she had time during the day to meet with students. Jane said she came in on Martin Luther King Day despite it being a national holiday because of the impending Spring semester rush. Rose admitted waking up as early as 3:30 AM not only to attend to her own personal routine but to address any lingering work obligations from the previous day. Julia said she was usually “here until the cows come home.”

If the counselors tried to take their time with students, engaging them in more detailed conversations, they received push back. This was the case for Jane. During the scheduling season, Jane made sure never to rush a student out of her office. She was warm and inviting and seemed to enjoy chatting with students about both school and non-school related things, just to get to know them. Jane specifically mentioned dropping what she was doing to talk with students who needed their help during the day, necessitating extra work at night. I note during an informal interview with her:

She gives me a meaningful look as if to convey even more the importance of being with the students. I probe asking if this means she has to stay late. She says yes, there is always work to be done, so she stays late when the students aren’t here to get it done, and thinks she gets it done in half the time because she doesn’t have the distractions. She says (now in hushed tones) that when she started here she was told to get the students in and out, in and out as fast as she could. But that’s not what she wants to do, so she stays late to be available for the students during the day.

This need to work outside of paid hours extended to summer work as well. There seemed to be an expectation that the counselors would work over the summer especially
in light of financial issues the district was facing, despite not being paid for this work. Working over the summer was not taken lightly. Various middle and high school counselors, who were represented by the teachers union, lodged a complaint with the school district union representative who intervened two separate times in the last few years to find a solution. Afterwards, the counselors were no longer told to come into work over the summer without being paid after this intervention, but some still did if the end-of-the-year scheduling problems were not resolved. If the counselors did not take on this extra workload outside of the workday or school year, they understood that it meant missing deadlines and a general lack of time interacting with students.

The Ashview high school counselors were more willing to engage in this practice during busy seasons like scheduling. These extra hours were not meant to be a permanent fix to their lack of time, though, meaning that students were not getting substantially more time with counselors. While the counselors may have lamented the loss of this piece of their job (as Rose often did), the counselors would have had to extend the work day on a regular basis to engage in regular social/emotional counseling (rather than reactive counseling, when the students sought them out). Many of the counselors were not willing to do so for various reasons such as family, desiring a work/life balance, or years of being discouraged. These practices of working outside normal work hours were not evaluated or rewarded (unless to meet bare minimum requirements for deadlines), providing little external incentives to continue. And sometimes the extra hours weren’t even enough. As Laura said regarding the busy scheduling and teaching staffing season: “I can’t do any more than I’m already doing. I can’t work harder than 13 hours a day. If
it’s not done, and they’re going to have to staff it, they’re going to have to staff it.” And long hours could lead to mistakes, such as putting students into the wrong courses.

5.6.2 Creating Personal Boundaries

The logics approach allows for the “partial autonomy of actors from social structure” (Thornton et al. 2012:7) – i.e. the structure impacts the actor and the actor responds, by either confirming or pushing back/changing the logic(s). The Ashview counselors weren’t just passive recipients of mandates. They had “the potential for agency in choosing which of the multiple logics they rely on for social action and interaction” (Thornton et al. 2012:83). There were times when they ignored or actively pushed back on the overwhelming school-centered logic.

For instance, the counselors responded to the issue of the lack of time to complete the multitude of responsibilities by setting personal boundaries when they could. In this way they developed “techniques to salvage service and decision-making values within the limits imposed on them by the structure of the work” (Lipsky 2010:xv). For Leonard, that might mean loudly announcing to students waiting for him in the office that he had too much work to do and that he had to close his door and attend to that work, essentially limiting demand by limiting supply to him as a counselor (Lipsky 2010).

Rose had a favorite saying for setting her boundaries: “they would like for me to do something administrative, but I keep saying that I need to stay in my lane. That’s my favorite last words, ‘stay in my lane.’” Rose’s definition of her “lane” included what she had learned in her graduate training, such as group counseling, academic, and postsecondary counseling. It typically did not include administrative responsibilities. Rose would often say she was “staying in her lane,” meaning she would advocate for
herself and the role she saw for the position by doing what she could to maintain counselor duties, and to avoid additional administrator responsibilities. If she didn’t protect her time like this, this could impact her self-identification as a trained counselor (Mamett 2008). Rose said she was “staying in her lane” when administrators asked her to take on more administrative responsibilities, to which she declined. Rose suggested this approach to Susan, after Susan complained how stressed she was around scheduling. But Susan responded, “our lane is a little crowded.”

5.6.3 Utilizing Extra Resources

High school counselors must sometimes use their discretion when making decisions on how to manage their workload (Lipsky 2010). This was obvious during the time of year when the high school counselors would go into the middle schools to schedule the 8th graders who would be incoming freshmen the next year. The counselors had grumbled that during the year of my observation, the district scheduled one counselor per high school to go to each of the middle schools to schedule incoming freshmen. The rationale seemed to be that, no matter what the middle school was, there would be students going to each of the high schools. However, this tended to be quite lopsided depending on the school. Though Ashview was an open enrollment district where students could choose their high school regardless of where they lived (up to an enrollment cap), tradition and proximity still played a large role in making certain middle schools feeder schools to certain high schools. For instance, East Bridge Academy was the academically rigorous magnet middle school that took the students who had achieved the highest on a gifted and talented exam, as well as maintained racial diversity. While
technically not a feeder school for any high school, a large proportion of their students went to HHS because of the International Baccalaureate program.

Thus, when it came time to schedule the East Bridge Academy eighth graders, Julia decided to bring in an additional counselor to help her schedule the students that were coming in to Hunter High School. The district supervisor had allowed HHS to bring two counselors already (unlike any of the other high schools), but Julia did not think that was enough. So in addition to herself and Stephanie, Julia asked Jessica to come and schedule as well. She did not tell the East Bridge guidance counselor this at the time, though, so Jessica had no students scheduled for her. She was used as backup in case the other counselors were too busy. It was as if Julia was trying to subvert the system set up for them by the district in order to accomplish their goals in the best way she could think of. This resulted in more incoming HHS students seeing HHS counselors, though at the expense of angering counselors from other schools who thought HHS was being given preferential treatment.

5.6.4 Advocating to Expand Resources

Ashview counselors sometimes relied on each other to help when time was limited. Jeannine pointed to her staff’s efforts at sharing resources from professional development conferences so others could stay back to meet with students. During scheduling season at HHS, if one counselor had more students to schedule than others during a class period, the other counselors would pick up those who might require less one-on-one assistance to schedule their courses. Counselors at both schools also would work together on a project, as when Julia helped Jessica at HHS coordinate testing. In one example, someone took some responsibilities off the plate of Julia so she could focus
on a student who came in crying after seeing “Dead Poet’s Society” in class and being reminded of a friend’s suicide.

While the counselors generally felt powerless, there were albeit rare times when advocating for themselves or their students could initiate meaningful change. For instance, both HHS and a neighboring Catholic high school added an additional high school counselor to the staff in the year before my observations. Amy at the Catholic high school was also able to advocate for an additional, full-time test coordinator. This person was able to address “pieces that we haven’t been able to do because there wasn’t time. So now not only can you do the state reporting and the testing but he can actually dig in and we can actually analyze and spend time analyzing reports.” In her eyes, the hiring of a full-time test coordinator not only relieved some of the duties of the counselors’, but also made the school’s approach to testing more robust because now they had someone who could do something with the test scores to help students perform better.

It was particularly noteworthy for HHS to get a fifth counselor. They were the only high school in the district with five counselors instead of four. But they also had twice the student population than the other schools, so even with the additional counselor, they still had the highest caseloads of all the high schools in the district.

5.6.5 Advocating for the Profession

The Ashview counselors often spoke to the administration regarding their concerns, whether during all-counselor meetings or talking individually with the principals. There were also times that it seemed like the Ashview counselors wanted to use me as a way to advocate for their needs. I noted from a day with speaking with the EHS counselors that they wanted counselors to be more involved in the decision making
process for the rules they had to enforce. Whether because they did not feel like they
could speak to the school leadership about these issues, or because they had but felt their
words fell on deaf ears, they wanted me to get the word out about their place in the
school hierarchy.

Faculty too saw the value of counselors advocating for themselves to set
boundaries. As Mr. Coughlin put it:

Know what you need to do and make sure you can articulate what
you are doing because otherwise, one of those many other tasks at
the school will get pushed on you. And the only defense against
having someone throw a bunch of things at you is being able to
explain exactly what you are doing and why you’re doing it. That’s
probably an involved way of saying “I’m too busy; leave me
alone.” But the truth is, if they have something that’s important to
do, you have to be able to say “I have something that’s more
important to do.” And be able to explain that with some degree of
professionalism instead of just whining.

The message of counselor advocacy for the profession was an overwhelmingly
common theme in my interviews with school counseling graduate faculty, with all faculty
mentioning it at one point. From Dr. Ware, a faculty member at the regional university
the majority of Ashview counselors graduated from:

We really try to break them out of, “oh school counselors just do
testing.” Or “they just do scheduling.” I think that’s a stereotype
and a stigma associated with school counseling, and some of them
get into their fields and they’re like “gosh, that’s what they want us
to do.” And I…we advocate for them to find a voice to do
otherwise. To really promote that mental health perspective, that
social and emotional part of the ASCA National Model rather than
just academics.

While it makes sense that school counselors should play a role in changing the
way the profession is perceived and utilized, it seemingly placed the majority of the
burden of changing the profession on the shoulders of recently graduated school
counselors. Mr. Coughlin warned that students, who have “an ethical obligation to apply what they know at least the second and third years they’re on the job,” must advocate for change before their fifth year or “the system has absorbed” them and they are “no better or worse than that.” He recognized this sounded cynical, but he reiterated he believed they could make change:

If you know that school counselors have a capacity to help kids in a bigger capacity than they are right now, it’s your role to break down the barriers that are keeping you from doing that. You know, the kids are being hurt when you have a bunch of counselors sitting around not being utilized to their full potential, right? So that becomes a political thing, not a counseling thing. [...] I think it’s up to the counselor to help [principals] understand what they’re capable of doing and how they can help them.

But this method of advocating for the profession meant that changes to the profession would be incremental, and could change with the change of administration or even across schools in the same district, as Ms. Martin, a faculty member at a regional university pointed out:

Every school, even same schools within the same districts, are different. And they have different expectations, and I think a lot of that comes from the administration, kind of a top-down thing. You have administrators who have been trained with no knowledge of what a school counselor is or does, that can affect greatly what a school counselor walks into. That’s what I tell students, it can be a very slow process of changing that thought process of their perspective of what you should be doing. You have to start small and just be consistent and gradually…change minds [chuckles]. Which is a slow, slow process.

Some of the high school counselors disagreed with the sentiment that they could change the way their work was structured, or even that they should. Nia pushed the focus back on graduate schools to provide a more realistic education. When I asked her if there
was anything she would change about her master’s program in school counseling, she said:

I would just try to be more realistic […]. What they teach us is not how it is. They want us to come in and do more of the counseling and they talk a lot about being paper pushers, but you have to go in and do what that district, whatever they're dictating, that's what we need to do. I think things that are happening to our students are dictating that we have to get back to that and we need more training in things like suicide, dealing with LGBT [students]. You know things of that nature that's really on the forefront, we need to have training on that because we're starting to experience it with our students. So I don't think it's realistic in that point of view because they teach us one thing, but then you can't....I can't come in here and tell [EHS Principal] what to do. This is his school.

Nia was skeptical that it was her role to tell the principal how to run the school, and believed her graduate education didn’t train her to do so. But in the same breath, she recognized the types of issues students today face and her need to be trained in those areas – areas the principals may not tap them to address.

5.6.6 Using Discretion to Meet with Students

In rare cases, despite working in a system built for efficiency, the high school counselors would take their time to meet with students (Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018), either because of their slow work style, the desire to meet with students and not rush them out, or both. Jane at HHS often worked at odds with the system of meeting students, having much longer meetings with students than the other counselors and spending more time getting to know them and conducting a more unhurried meeting. As Jane said:

I’d like to think that I’m a person that’s approachable, so a lot of times kids will come in, not particularly because they need something, but they just want to connect, which is good. And I never stop them from doing that when they want to do that. Even if I whittle it down from five minutes to three because I’ve got something else that I need to be doing. But it becomes very
difficult sometimes to keep in mind what you’re really here for. You know, we’re really here for them, and we really should be rolling out the carpet for them. But not all the time that can happen because of all the other things that can encroach upon that. But I try to really remind myself often that you’re really here for them. If they weren’t here, they would be no need for me to be here.

Because of the sheer size of HHS, school leadership and even the other HHS counselors looked down upon Jane taking more time to meet with students. Jane received push back from Julia as the guidance director, who perceived Jane as slow and inefficient. Julia even tried to enlist me to help Jane with data entry of class schedules. The HHS Principal also complained about Jane to me during our interview (although not by name; context told me who he was speaking of). He said she was “extremely slow” and worried about her completing deadlines.

It is possible that Jane may have taken longer than she needed to complete tasks for reasons unconnected to her building relationships with students. However, this example shows how there is very little room for inefficiency or speaking at length with students, especially in high caseload environments. There was not time for Jane to be both personal and efficient, or any room for error or slowness. While her push back of the “efficiency” model of meeting with students may seem laudable since the system of scheduling was set up around short 5-15 minute meetings, Jane’s lengthier meetings just meant that students in the waiting room would have to wait much longer for her, often missing class. In one case at the beginning of the year, a student and her mother waited for two hours for Jane to meet about scheduling, and both were visibly and audibly upset at this wait. Thus, even if Jane tried to push back on the “efficient” system by focusing on students, she might cause unintended negative consequences elsewhere, especially for
students waiting for her. She as an individual wasn’t going to change the way counselors worked with students because the structure of the work would push against her.

At EHS, where the counselors had smaller caseloads, the counselors set up what they called “junior meetings” and “senior meetings.” Whereas the HHS counselors would rush to fit each of their students into the 45-minute class period for scheduling, I observed the EHS counselors meeting with students anywhere between 5 and 60 minutes. Nia would write passes for students to come down at pre-arranged times, which seemed to help her work load, but then would meet with them for maybe 5 minutes as she quickly went through a checklist of classes the students needed to graduate. Rose, Laura and Leonard were on the longer side, meeting upwards of 45 minutes to an hour. These meetings, usually an extension of the yearly class scheduling meeting, ran the gamut of topics, from classes to the SAT, from college applications to what they wanted to be when they grew up. The counselors provided very detailed information on the scheduling process and provided the opportunity to meet with students to build knowledge, trust, and information about each other. Of all the meetings I observed, the junior meetings of the EHS counselors were the most thorough regarding academic and postsecondary counseling.

However, the district instructed the EHS counselors not to take so long to meet with students, wanting them to be more efficient (and thus cutting down on relationship building the one time of year counselors met with all the students). This caused Laura and Leonard stress in particular, as they had to deal with stern warnings and constant reminders of deadlines. But they advocated to keep meeting with the students longer than just to schedule classes. I asked Laura why EHS did not do scheduling in the library as
HHS did in a sort of mass processing technique. She said that it was too difficult to try to “jam” all the students into a class period, and they didn’t have computers to look up the students’ schedules to verify grades. So they preferred to call students down to their offices when they were ready.

5.6.7 Information Overload

Despite the effort of EHS counselors to take their time to meet with junior and senior students, they still faced the challenge of imparting everything the upperclassmen needed to know about their remaining high school career and postsecondary plans in a relatively short amount of time. The EHS counselors often took that opportunity to provide students as much information as possible so that the student could understand where they stood in school and what the college process looked like. However, this just meant that the students were overloaded with so much information in a short amount of time that even I couldn’t keep up. In addition, these meetings were typically one-sided, with the counselors unloading a lot of complicated information about scheduling and the college application process, but little to no information about college or career options or discernment, suggesting that these meetings were still too short and too cursory. The students I observed rarely talked or shared their thoughts.

After a day observing Rose meet with juniors, I noted that each meeting with the juniors was about 20-30 minutes long. In each meeting, Rose would go through what seemed like an internal agenda that she checked off for each student, such as grades, taking the SAT or ACT, career aspirations. Despite the type of information being mostly uniform across students, she had no written mechanism to relay the information, instead relying on her memory to inform them, and relying on their memory to remember and act
upon what she said. It seemed that in the meetings I observed, Rose could more
efficiently and effectively convey the very repetitive information in verbal and written
form to ensure the student retained the information and acted upon it later. There were a
number of times when she would tell a student to come back to her office another day
with some piece of information, but the students never wrote anything down, and I’m not
even sure they brought pens to write with, so it was unlikely they’d follow up.

Leonard approached his junior meetings in a similar way, and I noted in one
meeting the student’s response to all of this information:

Throughout all of this, the student looks bored, and has a glazed
over look in his eyes. Sometimes he’ll bite his fingernails, and he’s
not writing anything down. None of the students Leonard met with
today are writing any of the information down. And the only
information he physically gives them is their progress report of
grades and the SAT and ACT dates.

This technique of information overload was particularly used at EHS because the
counselors insisted on meeting with each of their juniors to discuss not just classes but
postsecondary plans (HHS counselors preferred to engage in mass processing, through
presentations given to juniors through their English classes). Laura and I discussed the
struggles she had regarding this method of providing information to students. From my
field notes after a meeting I observed between her and a junior:

She says she has an internal battle regarding how much
information she should share with the students – she doesn’t want
to give too much or not enough. Sometimes she’s worried that she
gives too much. But then she’s worried that if she doesn’t cover
this information, they won’t be prepared. That’s especially true
with the FASFA. She’s worried that she saw the student’s eyes
glaze over, and realizes that at a certain point, she needs to stop
telling them everything. But she also wants to make sure they are
prepared and can started on a lot of this before senior year, for
when they come in next year for their senior meeting.
Despite all the information provided to students in these meetings, missing from these meetings was meaningful conversation regarding the students’ future. Besides exchanging general plans for the future, the counselors did not engage in career or college discernment with the students. Thus, it was unclear what the students were retaining from these meetings or if the counselors had any impact on their college and career plans, though not for a lack of trying on the part of the counselors.

5.7 Conclusion

Street-level bureaucrats attempt to do a good job in some way. The job, however, is in a sense impossible to do in ideal terms. How is the job to be accomplished with inadequate resources, few controls, indeterminate objectives, and discouraging circumstances?

--Michael Lipsky (2010:82)
Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service, 30th Anniversary Expanded Edition

School counselors join the profession to help students succeed academically, socially/emotionally, and in their adult lives (Lipsky 2010). However, the conditions of their work – conflicting logics, resource constraints, role ambiguity and conflict – do not allow them to do so. Thus, the “myth of service altruism” (Lipsky 2010:72). Ashview counselors, like street-level bureaucrats, became alienated from their work and their clients, and developed patterns of practice that helped them manage these problems; but some of these techniques left students underserved (Lipsky 2010).

Ashview counselors may have unique ways of managing the competing logics and resource constraints of their profession. But these ways speak to the level of what most high school counselors must do to manage their jobs – mostly in a sub-optimal way.
No counselor is perfect, and thus much of what I write could be due to personal failings of each of the counselors I observed. To be sure, there are other counselors who go above and beyond the Ashview counselors (American School Counselor Association 2018).

However, the larger issues I address are not just issues of Ashview high schools. The school counseling profession is well aware of how their profession is perceived and in many ways underutilized (Herr 2002; Paisley and McMahon 2001). So while individual narratives I have presented are in no way definite evidence of all high school counselors’ conditions of work, they do speak to a larger trend regarding school counseling and how this type of personnel is underutilized in schools today. These methods of management likely have negative consequences on the perceptions students and parents have of counselors as individuals, and student outcomes (Lipsky 2010). Especially when this workload increases, school counselors are thrust into a tension between desires to do good and the lack of resources to do it, and thus “are often trapped in a cycle of mediocrity” (Lipsky 2010:38). So even when counselors try to be their best selves, the structure of their work prevents them from really improving at all.

These competing institutional logics offer a useful theoretical framework for understanding how the current educational system may be failing students. My perspective to improve educational attainment for disadvantaged high school students focuses on understanding how high school counselors utilize their embedded agency to navigate the tension between these conflicting counseling logics, which push and pull them in different directions.
6.1 Dissertation Summary

High school students face numerous obstacles to their academic and postsecondary success, from social/emotional issues to lack of knowledge regarding positive academic skills and college-preparatory information (Goyette 2008; Kaiser Family Foundation 2011; Lucas 1999). In this dissertation, I specifically explored the hurdles that face high school counselors in their attempts to address these obstacles to student success by utilizing an institutional and social psychological approach to understand the counseling profession and how school counselors are utilized by and within schools. Using data from interviews and year-long observations of high school counselors in and around a diverse urban Midwestern school district, I conducted a comprehensive analysis of the structure of the school counseling profession and how it impacts students.

In Chapter 2, I argued that two different frameworks or “logics” guided the high school counselors in this study, which created competing pressures on their time and attention. The student-centered logic was focused on the social/emotional, academic, and postsecondary needs of students, and emanated from the history of the profession of school counseling, graduate training, and the professional organizations that oversee the profession. The competing school-centered logic was a function of the bureaucratic
organization of schools, and focused the attention of counselors not on the student, but on the management of the school.

In Chapter 3, I extended this analysis of the competing logics of the school counseling profession by placing it within the context of the limited resources endemic to public high schools, and the role the high school counselors played as street-level bureaucrats – those who enforce policy in a public setting with little to no control over the creation of policy (Lipsky 2010). Schools in this study constrained the time the high school counselors had to attend to students by giving them high student caseloads and more than the recommended school-centered non-counseling tasks. This overburdening led to inefficient use of the master’s level trained counselors, and to counselor burnout and alienation.

In Chapter 4, I discussed how the unique history of the school counseling profession, the counselors’ placement in schools with non-counseling supervisors, and the overlap of counselors’ work with that of school social workers led to role ambiguity and conflict for the Ashview high school counselors. With a mismatched evaluation system, and efficiency goals that overshadowed more interpersonal and seemingly less immediate work, the school counselors faced poor work boundaries and underutilization of their graduate-level specialized skills.

In Chapter 5, in the context of these obstacles – competing logics, resource constraints, and role ambiguity and conflict – I presented strategies that the school counselors in this study utilized to focus their time and attention to manage their workloads. Some high school counselors actively pushed back against the school-centered logic that was structured by their principals and districts, either by arranging
their work to prioritize students (thus creating more work for themselves outside of the typical work day), or advocating for the profession and expanding resources within the school. However, much of their work utilized strategies that activated the school-centered approach, such as mass processing students, prioritizing the most immediate student needs, and downgrading expectations of what they were able to accomplish. These techniques left students vastly underserved, but were necessary to maintain the amount of work that counselors encounter on a daily basis.

6.2 Contribution of the Dissertation

6.2.1 Contribution to the Literature

This dissertation contributes to a number of areas. First, there has been groundbreaking sociological research on school counseling as a profession, but it is outdated (Armor 1969; Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963). More recent research has been influential in this area (Holland 2015; Krei and Rosenbaum 2001; McDonough 1997, 2005; Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum et al. 2015), but does not place the school counselor within an institutional framework (an article on New York City 8th grade counselors advising students on high school choice by Sattin-Bajaj et al. (2018) is a recent exception). Other studies from school counseling and education researchers are largely atheoretical or are focused on a narrow range of theoretical approaches such as social capital (Bryan et al. 2011) or organizational habitus (McDonough 1997; Palardy 2014). While valuable approaches to how counselors shape opportunity, these frameworks are already well researched, and utilizing them adds few new insights to the literature or to policy.
This project is unique in that it utilized a theoretical approach that accounted for
the individual level agency of the school counselors, but within the constraints of their
professional training and workplace environments. This dissertation addresses the lack of
research through in-depth observations, interviews, and surveys, all of which are
informed by the theoretical approach. Previous research typically relies on interviews at
one point in time, which, while informative, does not fully capture consistent counselor
behaviors (e.g., Rosenbaum 2001; Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018). Unlike previous research, this
dissertation includes multiple types of data over multiple points of time, with multiple
groups of people, providing a more complete and well-rounded view of the work of high
school counselors. With observations and interviews, I gathered a more comprehensive
analysis of the work of high school counselors and can compare counselors’ discourse
about their work to their behaviors and practices in the workplace. As school counselors
have multiple responsibilities, it was imperative that qualitative data be collected and
include the quality and nature of these interactions. With this dissertation, I connect the
school structure to the behavior of high school counselors to potential student outcomes.
This dissertation also examines how high school counselors respond to resource
constraints and competing logics, taking the research in this area a step further.

For educators, this dissertation answers the call of many recent authors for more
research and attention spent on school counselors, their impact, and how we can improve
their performance (Belasco 2013; Bridgeland and Bruce 2011b; Rosenbaum et al. 2015).
As educational research and policy has concentrated on testing and teachers, there is a
large gap in the literature regarding school counselors at all grade levels. As a vital link
for students for information on college and the job market, this is disheartening. Though
high school counselors may have less of an obvious role in determining who goes to college than they did in the past (Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963), they still have influence over students, especially in academics, course-taking, and postsecondary outcomes (Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018). As these processes are highly stratified by income and race, to the detriment of low-income and minority students, understanding the role school counselors do have, and the positive role they could have, could be imperative to increasing the number of academically and vocationally prepared citizens. This dissertation is on the front end of a burgeoning literature on school counselors in sociology and educational research, and in non-academic realms as the government and society in general put a larger focus on the academic achievement and attainment for social mobility.

6.2.2 Contribution to Understanding Inequality

   School counseling is considered one of the “most-neglected components of increasing access to college” (Murphy 2016). This suggests that a lack of student access to counseling can have a large negative impact on college admission. High school counselors can help or hinder student educational outcomes through the time, attention, and advice they give to students regarding academic and college readiness (McDonough 1997; Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018). High school counselors can play a fundamental role in the student college-going process, but are hampered by obstacles at the school (Corwin et al. 2004; Morgan, Greenwaldt, and Gosselin 2014). If we are interested in reducing racial/ethnic and income inequality in college enrollment and completion, we need to understand how high school counselors allocate their time, attention and advice. Thus, understanding how counselors approach their work is essential for understanding the
college enrollment trajectory of students, especially low-income, minority, and first
generation students.

My questions of how high school counselors approach their work and the
potential impact of this work on low-income and minority students is in line with a recent
report shared by the William T. Grant Foundation regarding the need for research on
understanding the role of counseling in the lives of low-income and minority students
(Rosenbaum et al. 2015). The institutional logics approach helped me answer these
questions by using the logics of the profession to explain why high school counselors
spend their time as they do and provides us a lever for change in schools. In future work
based on student interviews in Ashview not incorporated into the dissertation, this study
can connect the work in the counseling office with student perceptions and behaviors
regarding the college preparation process, which will help uncover a possible link to
inequality in college enrollment, especially among low-income and minority students. It
will also help to determine any mismatch between student knowledge and what high
school counselors teach.

6.2.3 Theoretical Implications

While viewing schools through an institutional lens can be found in many
different works in education as a whole (Bidwell 2001; Meyer 1977; Meyer and Rowan
1977, 2006), few take the institutional approach in examining the role of the school
counselor. In addition, school counselors are not the only actors who inhabit a role in
organizations that require them to adjudicate the demands of multiple logics, requiring
them to decide which information is useful and on what to spend time. This dissertation
contributes to the literature on institutional logics, as it connects how social actors
interpret and act upon multiple and often competing logics in their everyday work (Goodrick and Reay 2011; McPherson and Sauder 2013; Thornton et al. 2012). This approach is unique in its analysis of a profession trained in one logic but whose work is structured within another.

6.3 Limitations

Despite the insights gained from this in-depth qualitative analysis of the school counseling profession, it is important to discuss any potential limitations or issues generalizing the results of this study. The two public, urban high schools in this study are distinct schools in a particular geographic and social context. The Ashview high school counselors in this study were mostly trained within one state which does not represent all states, as policies regarding student-to-counselor ratios and funding of counselors vary by state (American School Counselor Association 2017c). While I did include interviews with counselors in different types of schools in and near Ashview, as well as in different states, I was limited in my ability to achieve high-quality observations of high school counselors in more than two schools over the course of the study. Thus, I restricted my observations to two schools within one public district. The dynamics of school counseling in other schools – big or small, private or public, East coast or West coast – may be different. For instance, Catholic high schools might also be driven by a religious logic, while the market logic could drive charter schools.

However, these schools are by no means unique. They are characteristic of public high schools with limited resources and high minority and low-income student enrollments. Thus, the context these counselors worked in are generalizable to a large
portion of high school counselors in our country. Likewise, the overwhelming majority of low-income and minority students in this country are educated in schools just like these – public schools in urban districts with limited resources, many in majority-minority schools. These students are most in need of school counseling; thus counselors in these schools in particular will impact this student population the most. Lastly, according to the faculty in this study, the graduate training these counselors received in accredited programs is almost uniform across the country due to curriculum standards provided by CACREP, the accreditation organization that oversees the field. This means that these high school counselors would largely receive a similar graduate education across the country. Therefore, this study provides a context of graduate training and school environment typical of many high school counselors in the United States.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

The results of this study suggest that there are multiple avenues for future research on school counselors. First, data collected with this study included interviews and surveys of high school students in Ashview regarding their school counselors and their college-going behaviors. While not included in the dissertation, future papers will integrate findings from the counselors and observations with student perceptions and their actual behaviors, connecting these results with student outcomes.

Another future project based on the data from this study will analyze in-depth the student-counselor class scheduling meetings that occurred in the month of February at both high schools. In these meetings, I took careful notes of how teachers recommended classes for students, the classes the students expressed a desire to take, and the classes the
counselors assigned to them. I can use this data to explore how school counselors provided advice to students on class schedules to see what management techniques that they used to manage this rushed time, and how it impacted students’ schedules.

There is also room for growth in understanding the impact of school counselors quantitatively. There is very little causal quantitative research on the impact of school counselors on elementary and middle school student academic and behavioral outcomes, as there has been with teachers. Much of the quantitative research is correlational or descriptive in nature, or focused on program implementation in a particular district. Despite an industry recommendation of a 250-to-1 student-to-counselor ratio and states that recommend certain ratios (American School Counselor Association 2017c), there is no clear data to suggest whether more school counselors positively impact student achievement, what the optimal ratio should be, nor how this ratio could or should change with the demographics of the school. The 250-to-1 ratio is the recommendation for all schools, despite categorical differences between students in elementary and high schools, or schools with a larger proportion of disadvantaged versus advantaged students.

There are a handful of exceptions to this lack of causal research. For instance, utilizing a dataset based on information from Alachua County, FL and the exogenous shock of the introduction of student counseling interns within schools, researchers found that smaller student-to-counselor ratios decreased misbehavior, the number of disciplinary incidents (especially for low-income and minority students), and improved math test scores, especially for boys (Carrell and Carrell 2006; Carrell and Hoekstra 2014). Similarly, Reback (2010b) found that state policies that favored more school counselors and counselor availability increased 3rd grade math and reading scores in the
ECLS-K dataset, as well as improved behaviors. However, in another paper using regression discontinuity within districts in Alabama, Reback (Reback 2010a) found no impact of the student-to-counselor ratio on test scores, though he believes this may have been because counselors increased test participation which might have depressed overall test scores.

Future research should connect state-level policy information regarding school counselors, their actual presence within schools, and student academic performance to get a national view of how they contribute to the success of elementary, middle, and high school students. In particular, randomized control trials and interventions that consider heterogeneity within and across schools should be employed to better understand the range of acceptable student-to-counselor ratios for different types of schools.

6.4.1 Remaining Questions

Future research must not only determine the causal relationship between counselors and student outcomes, but also – in conjunction with school counselors, educators, and policy makers – answer the simple yet thus unresolved question: What should high school counselors be doing in their positions? One cannot measure the effectiveness of a counselor without first determining and agreeing upon a set of goals and objectives they should achieve in their work. Once this question is answered, a host of issues that arose in this study may be addressed, such as the appropriate role of counselors in schools, appropriate training of counselors for these tasks, and the appropriate resources allocated to school counselors. Undoubtedly, answering this unresolved question will be difficult, especially considering the vastly heterogeneous educational structure in the United States. School counselors in an urban school like
Ashview face a different set of students and issues than school counselors in a private school in Massachusetts. However, a basic understanding of the role of the school counselor would go a long way in utilizing them to their fullest potential, regardless of the school context. This understanding should be reached at all levels, so that lawmakers who require master’s-level trained counselors from CACREP-accredited schools (like in many states) provide the resources to utilize counselors in the way they are trained, rather than over-credentialing the profession. Workers who are over-credentialed are less likely to work their hardest for their organization, which can harm performance (Kalleberg 2008), and in the case of school counselors, could harm student outcomes.

The answer to this unresolved question may also change over time, depending on the needs of society and on how the profession evolves. For instance, some of the school counseling faculty interviewed in this study expressed the concern that the focus of high school counselors was becoming too college and careers focused recently. One faculty member discussed it as a pendulum swinging from vocational training (in the beginning), to mental health (in the middle years), back to college and careers today. Continuing to have this conversation over time is crucial to solidifying this position within schools over the long term.

Without this time and energy dedicated to solidifying the role of school counselors in high schools, we beg the question – why educate school counselors so extensively if not to use them for these skills? Schools can use them as trained, or suggest they be trained in a way more suited to their use in schools. Not doing so is a waste of time and resources of the graduate programs that train them and the school counselors themselves. At the same time, if schools had the resources to use school counselors as
trained, they may see that counselors are indispensable to the success of students. Understanding the impact of school counselors in an ideal setting would go further in connecting school counselor training with student outcomes.

6.5 Conclusion

The current structure of resources allocated to counselors concealed the potential the Ashview high school counselors could have to support their students. By using them as administrators who coordinate high-stakes testing or organize the master schedule for the entire school, the Ashview school district and others effectively turned their counselors into administrators rather than the student support professionals their graduate programs intended them to be. Because of this, they ended up being over-trained school bureaucrats.

If high school counselors are to have an impact on students beyond contributing to the organization of the school, the nested-layers relationship cannot just be top down – counselors need to be able to communicate upward and have an impact on how their time is structured (Gamoran et al. 2000). The administrative decisions at the school and district level greatly influence what is the role of high school counselors, and limit student outcomes, albeit if unintentionally. Counselors spent the great majority of their time scheduling and testing in these schools. These are measurable outcomes, and necessary tasks to complete in these schools and in this state of federal accountability. However, they are not entirely connected to what school counselors were trained to do. Thus, the area of impact counselors could have on student outcomes – helping students discern classes appropriate to their ability and postsecondary expectations, and providing
postsecondary and social/emotional counseling – are pushed to the wayside in favor of more immediate accountability issues. This left the counselors with very little concrete or substantial impact on students beyond a ten-minute conversation on scheduling classes each year. In particular, this lack of time spent advising and guiding students has been shown to increase inequality in college enrollment as low-income and minority students have few other avenues for guidance on the college and career process (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011b; Krei and Rosenbaum 2001).

In this way, the high school counselors are like street-level bureaucrats, hampered in their ability to conform to the standards of their field due to a lack of time and resources to interact with students in a meaningful way (Lipsky 2010). They had little control over the time and resources allocated to them, and they were plagued by the role ambiguity and role conflict that came with answering to multiple stakeholders with conflicting expectations. Therefore, it was difficult to determine how effective counselors could be in serving students, or to determine whether further resources allowed to them would be used adequately (Gamoran et al. 2000).

Counselors are not the only adults in the school who can be a personal resource for students. Social workers are trained in counseling as well, but at least in Ashview, there was only one per school. Teachers are natural resources for students as students develop daily relationships with them. But teachers, as well trained as they are in their fields, are not trained in counseling (nor do they typically have the time to provide these services) and thus cannot fulfill the role counselors seek to fill when they enter the field.

The high school counselors in this study addressed issues that are common to the field: too many non-counseling tasks, not enough time to meet with students, not enough
resources to address student issues. This is especially concerning as the 230-to-1 and 340-to-1 ratios of Edward High School and Hunter High School, respectively, were far lower than the ratios found in states such as Arizona (941-to-1) and California (822-to-1) (American Counseling Association 2011). If the counselors in these schools did not have enough time to address the needs of their students, then the students in schools with much higher ratios are most certainly missing out on support that could be provided by school counselors.

This dissertation is one step toward understanding how school counselors can contribute to student success and reducing inequality, but it is also a call for more research on school counselors. If we are to understand where counselors can succeed, we need to understand the circumstances under which they thrive, and the situations where they don’t.
Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this study! You were chosen to participate based on your position as a high school counselor. The purpose of this interview is to obtain candid and accurate information about the counselor office in your school, the roles and responsibilities of counselors in your school, and how you interact with students. The information I gather from this interview will be used for my dissertation on the role counselors play in students’ lives. There are no foreseeable significant direct benefits to you by participating in this research.

I expect the interview may last approximately one-and-a-half hours, but you may end the interview at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you. During this interview, I will audio record and take notes. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide, and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you feel uncomfortable being recorded, you may decline being recorded.

Consent Section:

“Do you wish to participate?”

“Do you agree to be audio-taped?”
Questions:

I am going to start by asking you some questions regarding what you do at your school.

1. Let’s start by you telling me what your particular responsibilities at are the school.
   a. *Prompt {if they fail to mention them}*: What about --- personal needs counseling, advising student course scheduling, developing a master schedule, college counseling, occupation counseling and job placement, family and community outreach, teaching, discipline, academic testing.

2. How do these responsibilities vary by counselor?

Now I am going to ask questions about your particular experiences as a counselor.

3. What encouraged you to become a counselor?
   a. *Prompt: Do any particular experiences stand out?*

4. Educational path. Where did you go for undergrad, what was your major, and what year did you graduate?

5. Where did you go for your graduate training, what was your degree, and what year did you graduate?
   a. *If you can figure out where everyone else was trained, then try.*

6. What was your internship experience?
   a. What were your three main responsibilities in your internship?
   b. With what aspect of your internship were you *most* comfortable?
   c. With what aspect of your internship were you *least* comfortable?

7. What was the major focus overall, or in class work in your graduate program?

8. What did you enjoy most about your graduate program?

9. What would you change about your graduate training?

10. Similarly, what types of classes or experiences do you believe graduate programs should provide students that they don’t currently?

11. Where have you worked prior to this job, and during what years?

12. What year did you start working at this school?

13. *If a counselor prior to this school*, how does your experience at this school compare to previous schools?

14. Besides graduate work, what training have you completed, either in preparation to be hired or to maintain your position? This might include continuing education units (CEUs), mandatory school in-services, etc.?

15. Was this training required by the school, district or state? Was it voluntary?

16. How was this training financed?

17. Do you belong to any professional organizations, whether national, regional, or at the state level?

18. *If they belong to organizations*, why do you belong to these organizations?

19. *If they belong to organizations*, how often do you go to the national/regional/state conferences?

20. What role does the ASCA guidelines for establishing a school counseling program play in your work or in how the work of your office is structured?
21. What role does the school leadership play in how the counseling office works?
22. What could the school leadership do to help support you more in your position?

Now I am going to ask you some questions about the counseling program in general at your high school.

23. What three job responsibilities consume the majority of your time?
   a. Leave open for them to explore this question. Probe with questions on personal/social counseling, like how many of their students seek them out for this kind of counseling.
24. How many students are assigned to each of the counselors in your school?
   a. If information was not available online: How are students assigned to counselors?
25. Do you see each of your assigned students at least once per year on a one-on-one basis? In a group setting?
   a. If they don’t, what percentage of the students assigned to you do you see during the course of a school year?
26. What are the most prominent reasons for students to seek out a counselor?
   a. If not already answered, how do students choose their courses? What role do the counselors play?
27. How do you balance your time between these responsibilities?
   a. Leave open for them to explore this question.
28. How satisfied would you guess students are with you and your counseling office? You might gather this information anecdotally or through formal evaluation or assessments.
29. What would you say is the number one mission of the counseling office?
30. What is the number two mission of the counseling office?
31. How do you accomplish the goals of these missions?
32. What should be a focus of the counseling office, but is not?
   a. Prompt {if they needed it}: Options include --- being an advocate for students, inspiring them to reach goals, address problems on the road to high school graduation, help students develop skills for the adult world, inform students of college requirements, inform students regarding career options, advise (which is separate from inform) students regarding college and/or career options, particularly support the low-income and disadvantaged students.
33. Why is this goal currently not a focus of your job or of the counseling office?
34. If you could request something for the counseling office next year, what are two things you would request (e.g. another counselor, less time spent on a particular task, more material resources, etc.)?
Now I have some questions about the students and their trajectories after high school.

35. How do students generally find information about college and how to apply to them?
36. What role, if any, does the counselor office play in college and/or career counseling? *(Probe for:*
   a. *Specific events (college information days, college fairs, SAT prep, Naviance or other college planning software, access to college readiness applications, college application week, career exploration)*;
   b. *Handouts – whether in house or from an outside organization*;
   c. *Mandatory meeting with counselors, activities based on grade level*;
   d. *Four-year high school graduation plan.*
37. What focus does your office place on 2-year versus 4-year colleges?
38. Who are the students who need the most guidance when it comes to college and career readiness? How do they differ from the other students?
   a. *(Prompt if they need it: Vary based on race/ethnicity, income, parents, academic performance, ability, motivation, Individualized Education Plan (IEP), etc.)*.
39. What else could the school do to help students prepare for college or a job after high school?
40. What role does programs or policies at the district or state level play in helping with college going?

Lastly, I would like to end on some questions to get your general impression of your work.

41. What do you like most about being a counselor?
42. What do you like most about working at this school?
43. *For this last question, please look back on your graduate training, job training, and job experience.*
   a. What suggestions would you have for school-counselors-in-training regarding the types of work expectations they should be getting them ready for?
APPENDIX B:
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

NOTE: Questions for administrators will vary based on the person I am interviewing. Below I have listed questions for those I know I would like to interview, as well as questions I will ask for each specific group.

Everyone

1. Let’s start by you telling me what your particular responsibilities are with the district.
2. What responsibilities consume the majority of your time?
3. What does a typical day look like for you?
4. What was your educational path, including major and year graduated?
   a. High School
   b. Undergraduate
   c. Graduate (if applicable)
5. What year did you start in your current position?
6. What was your work path? Where have you worked prior to now and in what capacity?
7. Who do you report to?
8. Who reports to you?

Now I am going to ask you some questions specific to the role of counselors in the high schools.

9. If they haven’t already shared this, what role do you play in connection to the counselors in the high schools?
   a. Do you play any role in hiring counselors?
   b. Do you play any role in structuring the work of counselors?
   c. Do you play any role in evaluating the counselors?
   d. Do you work in a collaborative way with the counselors?
10. How often do you meet with the counselors?
11. How would you describe your relationship with the counselors?
   a. Interpersonally (we are on good terms…)
   b. Professionally (I try to help them do their job…)
12. How would you describe the counselor position? What do they do?
13. Please rank the responsibilities you believe counselors are in charge of.
14. What should be the focus of the counseling office, but is not?
15. Why is this goal currently not a focus of the counseling office?
16. What shouldn’t be the focus of the counseling office, but is?
17. Why is this the case?
18. Do these goals vary by high school in the district? If so, how?
19. What do you believe students and parents expect or desire from the counselors?
20. What do you believe the counselors’ ideal job description would be?
21. Does the district support the work of counselors? If so, how?
22. What more could the district do to support the work of counselors?
23. Why does the district not provide these services to counselors?
24. If you could request something for the counseling office next year, what are two things you would request (e.g. another counselor, less time spent on a particular task, more material resources, etc.)?
25. Anything you would request the counselors do more?
26. Are you aware of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA)?
27. If so, what do you know about this organization? What do you know about how it influences the work of counselors?

Now I have some questions about the students and their trajectories after high school.

28. How do students generally find information about college and how to apply to them?
29. What role, if any, does the counselor office play in college and/or career counseling?
30. What else could the school or counselors do to help students prepare for college or a job after high school?
31. What role do programs or policies at the district level play in helping with college going?
32. What role do programs or policies at the state level play in helping with college going?

Lastly, I would like to end on some questions to get your general impression of your work.

33. What do you like most about your job?
34. What suggestions would you have for school-counselors-in-training regarding the types of work expectations they should be getting ready for?

Principals

1. What is the hiring process for high school counselors?
2. Do you have a job description of the counselors I could read?
3. What sort of formal and informal training do counselors receive?
4. What role do you have in the formal and informal training of counselors? Especially in regards to interacting with students and parents?
5. Is there a school counselor manual, either at the school or for the district as a whole? If so, can you provide me a copy and/or tell me about it?
6. Is this a living document, accessible to counselors and principals?
7. What are your thoughts on the training and oversight of counselors as a principal?
8. How are counselors integrated into the school staff?
9. Before becoming a principal, how did you interact with counselors (possibly in role as assistant principal and/or teacher)?
10. Do counselors have a role in leading the school? If so, how?

Now I have some specific questions that have come up in my time here.

11. Can you tell me about the integrated math class, how it came about, and how it should and is being used?
12. Please explain how the school approaches the school’s rating, and how the rating impacts the school.
13. What is the role of state testing in the school? What is its role for the students?
14. How do you approach all testing in the school?
15. What do you believe is the future of testing in the schools?
16. Could I receive the grades, rank and possibly parent occupation information of the students I am interviewing to ensure they are reporting accurate information?

Administrator over High Schools

1. Do you have a job description of the counselors I could read?
2. Can you speak to the evolution of the school district and the high schools in the area?
3. Can you share with me the job descriptions and personnel evaluation forms for counselors?
4. Is there a school counselor manual, either at the school or for the district as a whole? If so, can you provide me a copy and/or tell me about it?
5. Is this a living document, accessible to counselors and principals?
6. Please tell me a little about the 8th grade scheduling process.
7. Is there any formal or informal relationship with local colleges?
8. Can you tell me about the person who used to oversee the counselors?

Career Guidance Specialists

1. How is your role different from the role of the high school counselors?

Social Workers

1. How is your role different from the role of the high school counselors?
APPENDIX C:

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SCHOOL COUNSELING GRADUATE PROGRAM

FACULTY MEMBERS

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this study! You were chosen to participate based on your position as a professor in a school counselor graduate program. The purpose of this interview is to obtain candid and accurate information about your program and your students. I am particularly interested in the perspective of professors who train future high school counselors to understand the framing counselors bring into the schools, and how the schools (and students) may support or challenge these frames. The information I gather from this interview will be used for my dissertation on the role school counselors play in students’ lives. There are no foreseeable significant direct benefits to you by participating in this research.

I expect the interview may last approximately one hour, but you may end the interview at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you.

During this interview, I will audio record and take notes. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide, and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you feel uncomfortable being recorded, you may decline being recorded.
Consent Section:

“Do you wish to participate?”

“Do you agree to be audio-taped?”

Questions:

I’d like to start by asking some questions about you, your educational and work paths, and how you become a professor in this program.

1. Ask them questions to fill in what could not be gathered from the website, such as graduate training, work experience, etc.
2. What encouraged you to become a faculty member in a school-counseling program?
   a. Prompt: Do any particular experiences stand out?
3. What was the major focus in class work in your master’s program?
4. What was your internship experience in your master’s program?
5. What did you enjoy most about your master’s program?
6. What would you change about your master’s training?

Now I am going to ask some questions regarding the content of your program.

7. What are the major goals of the master’s program?
8. What do you hope students take away from their education?
9. I had a chance to review the courses your students typically take throughout the program. How was the coursework designed?
10. If they don’t mention it, what role did CACREP accreditation play in the way the program was designed?
11. The ASCA model has the three focus areas – social/emotional, career, and academic. What is the balance of coursework among these three focus areas?
   a. In particular, how much focus is there on training counselors in college and career readiness?
12. Is there any formal or informal relationship with the department of psychology at your school? If so, what is the nature of this relationship?
13. I also had a chance to view your internship and practicum requirements. Can you tell me a little more about these experiences for students?
   a. Are students assigned or do they choose where to go? Why?
   b. Do the students get to choose the nature of the internship, such as behavioral counseling or drug and alcohol abuse?
14. How is your program similar or different from other programs in the state?
   a. i.e. What are the strengths of your program?
15. What are the weaknesses, or areas for improvement?
16. Do you receive feedback from recent alums regarding your program and how it has trained them, whether in alumni surveys or anecdotally?
   a. If so, what do they say?
17. Organizations like the College Board have conducted surveys of counselors regarding their thoughts on their graduate school training. Are you aware of this work?
   a. If they are not familiar, give a summary.
   b. What are your thoughts on these surveys? Does this information impact the education you give your students?
   c. If so, how?
   d. Why or why not?
18. Do you belong to any professional organizations, whether at the state, regional or national level? If so, which ones?
   a. Prompt: If they don’t mention Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACSE) or its regional version, mention those. If they mention unfamiliar organizations, ask for more information on those.
   b. Also ask about ASCA and the role it plays in structuring the program
19. If they belong to organizations, why do you belong to these organizations?
20. If they belong to organizations, how often do you go to the national/regional/state conferences?
21. If so, what is the major benefit from attendance at these conferences?

Now I’d like to ask some questions about your students in the master’s program.

22. What background do these students typically have?
   a. Do they have experience in counseling, whether in schools or not?
   b. Are they former teachers?
23. Think about your best students. What are their qualities?
24. Think about your worst students. What are they not doing well?
25. What types of jobs do your students typically take on after graduation?
26. How many of your graduates stay in the state?

Now I’d like to ask you some questions regarding your thoughts on the state of the field.

27. What roles do you believe counselors should take on in high schools today?
   a. Do you see a role for counselors in college counseling? If so, how much of a role?
28. What roles do you see counselors actually taking in high schools?
29. What roles do you see your students take on in their jobs after graduation?
30. What are the vital skills you believe school counselors must have when they leave graduate training?
31. What are the biggest challenges facing counselors in high schools?
32. How is your program preparing students to face these challenges?
33. What else could your program do to help students prepare for work in high schools?
34. What suggestions would you give to counselors-in-training regarding job expectations that might not be covered in the program?

Lastly, I would like to end on some questions to get your general impression of your work.

35. What do you like most about being a faculty member of school counseling?
36. What do you like most about this program in particular?
37. What is the most important piece of advice that you give to graduates of your program when they enter the workforce?


