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Article 1

2024

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Recommended Citation

Cook, T.J., Powers, J.J., & Kim, J. (2024). Providing specialized preparation for counselors in Catholic schools. *Journal of Catholic Education*. 27(1), 1–23. www.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2701012024

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Providing Specialized Preparation for Counselors in Catholic Schools

Timothy J. Cook¹, Jan J. Powers¹ and Jiwon Kim¹

Abstract: School counselors are needed now more than ever. Providing Catholic school counselors the specialized formation they need to be effective in the Catholic school context is essential. This study addressed two research questions in this regard: (1) What competencies (e.g., understanding, incorporating) and topics do Catholic school principals and school counselors believe are important for school counselors to fully contribute to the educational and faith-based mission of Catholic schools; and (2) How might the research findings inform pre-service education and/or continuing education and formation of school counselors for the Catholic school context? Online surveys were developed using the “Defining Characteristics of Catholic Schools” from NSBECS and research-based, mission-centered competencies and topics. The surveys were sent to the 40 principals and 54 school counselors at the schools in one mid-size U.S. diocese that employ school counselors. The survey response rates were 87.5% for principals and 91% for school counselors. Findings confirmed high levels of support from both groups for school counselors understanding mission-related topics and incorporating these competencies into counseling practices and activities, although principals often rated the importance higher than did school counselors. Some between group differences were statistically significant on items such as the importance of incorporating Catholic teaching with current student and school issues. To reduce differences in perceptions, the authors recommend increased collaboration between principals and counselors to achieve unity of vision. Other recommendations to help school counselors contribute to mission include embedding mission-related topics or adding specialized courses to school counseling programs at Catholic universities, designing mission-centered professional development opportunities, and building networks of school counselors to support them in their complex and evolving role in support of Catholic school mission.

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Keywords: Catholic schools, Catholic identity, mission, school counselors, preparation, formation, professional development

In 2005, the U.S. bishops appealed to Catholic universities to help meet the staffing needs of Catholic schools. Over the years, several Catholic universities have responded by creating specialized programs to help aspiring Catholic school teachers and leaders learn how to contribute to the educational and faith-based mission of Catholic schools. More recently, in her closing remarks at the annual national meeting of Catholic school superintendents, the host diocesan superintendent voiced that one critical issue in American Catholic education is the need for more school counselors, especially ones who are specially prepared for the Catholic school mission and context beyond what the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has promulgated for school counselors in all schools. This study is a direct response to that expressed need by providing research on what competencies, and therefore preparation, is needed for school counselors who serve in the Catholic school context.

Review of Relevant Literature

School counselors are critically important members of a school. Certified school counselors are trained as mental health professionals for the school setting to provide services for all students. Over the last two decades, the profession of school counseling has strengthened its focus on ethical, data-driven standards of practice focused on building equity and well-being for all students (ASCA, 2019; 2021; 2022). A growing body of research demonstrates the effectiveness of school counselors to improve student outcomes when empowered to support academic and career development and socioemotional growth (ASCA, 2021). The pandemic and societal trends have heightened the need for counselors to help school communities cope with mental health issues related to increasing rates of anxiety, depression, and trauma. They are often called to assist on crisis response teams while continuing to promote the personal growth and well-being of every student through classroom and small group instruction. In addition, a growing emphasis on social and emotional learning (SEL) in education often falls to the leadership of school counselors. Considering these growing needs, school counselors are more vital now than ever. Unfortunately, the United States Department of Education (USDOE) reported a shortage of school counselors in many states nationwide (USDOE, 2022).

School Counselor Standards and Competencies

School counselors are certified/licensed educators with a minimum of a master's degree in school counseling, making them uniquely qualified to address and enhance the success of all students' academic, career, and socioemotional development (ASCA, 2019). The ASCA National Model (2019) is the foundation for school counselors nationwide to build a schoolwide counseling program that improves outcomes for students. This model outlines the components for counselors

to build their skills in advocacy, leadership, and collaboration to effect systemic change that benefits all.

According to the “ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards and Competencies” (ASCA, 2019), the school counseling program must be aligned with the vision and mission of the school and district. School counselors provide services to schools that are preventive in nature for building a healthy school climate and address the needs of students through direct service in individual counseling sessions, small group interventions, and classroom lessons (ASCA, 2019). To advocate for the best outcomes for students, it is crucial for school counselors to collaborate with other leaders in the schools and align with their vision and overall outcome goals, such as improved attendance, academic achievement, and graduation rate. They provide a critical role in assessing student needs and mitigating issues within the school counseling program or advocating for referral to community resources when issues lie beyond the scope of school practice (ASCA, 2019). In addition, school counselors who are properly prepared under the ASCA national model are transformative leaders, working not only for the good of individual students, but also for the good of the system.

Transformative leadership is an emerging paradigm for school counselors to be leaders and advocates for systemic change that seeks to address complex societal issues (Shields et al., 2018; Strear et al., 2018). The research of Strear and colleagues (2018) indicated that “school counselor leadership is necessary for establishing more equitable, accessible, and emancipatory educational environments” (p. 1). Shields and colleagues (2018) connected transformative leadership to the ASCA national model (ASCA, 2019) for addressing many contemporary social issues, such as equity, multiculturalism, and social justice (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017).

Not only are school counselors trained to be transformative leaders, but it is also their ethical duty. According to the “ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counseling” (ASCA, 2022), it is the school counselors' ethical responsibility to be advocates, leaders, and collaborators who create systemic change to ensure all students have equitable access to success in school. For school counselors to accomplish what they are called and trained to do, they need principals who support this change towards collaborative leadership in alignment with the evidence-based effectiveness of the ASCA national model (ASCA, 2019, 2022).

Principal and Counselor Viewpoints about School Counselors

Before the first edition of the ASCA national model was published in 2003, a school counselor's role was less defined and often left to the discretion of the principal (Dahir et al., 2010). This led to school counselors being used in roles to fill duties needed by the school, such as, building the master schedule, covering classes for absent teachers, maintaining records, and managing disciplinary actions. All these duties are useful and therefore continue today in many schools but are not appropriate use of the skills for which school counselors are trained (ASCA, 2022). A study by Dahir and colleagues (2010) showed that when school principals and school

counselors develop a collaborative relationship, they may more effectively meet the needs of students and foster greater success in student achievement. This study revealed differences between principals' and school counselors' priorities and perceptions and recommended a greater focus on building the counselor and principal collaboration to support the common goal of student success.

[Leuwerke and colleagues \(2009\)](#) researched the differences in principal and school counselor perceptions of the role of school counselors. They found that when principals were provided with information on the ASCA model and its effectiveness in improving student outcomes, their perceptions on the role of school counselor were influenced. The results indicated that principals changed their perception on the amount of time counselors should be given for delivery and management of the counseling curriculum and program as well as the importance of reducing inappropriate tasks for their role ([Leuwerke et al., 2009](#)).

School Counselors in Catholic Schools

Catholic schools have a religious mission which informs and transcends their educational mission. Catholic schools fulfill their religious mission only to the degree that all school personnel participate and contribute. School counselors are key players in this regard. Murray and associates have contributed the most to the literature about Catholic school counselors and religious mission ([Murray, 2008, 2011](#); [Murray & Kane, 2010](#); [Murray et al., 2003](#)). In a survey research study, [Murray and Kane \(2010\)](#) set out to learn how knowledgeable school counselors were about how their school's counseling program reflected their school's Catholic identity and mission and whether they incorporated Catholic identity and mission into their practice. The most significant finding of their study was that school counselors need to do better incorporating Catholic identity and mission into their counseling practices ([Murray & Kane, 2010](#), p. 173).

Murray and colleagues have contended that school counselors in Catholic schools should approach their work as a ministry with a pastoral dimension in addition to its being an educational profession ([Murray, 2008; 2011](#); [Murray et al., 2003](#)). [Goodell and Robinson \(2008\)](#) proposed a paradigm shift for the role of school counselor in all schools that calls for an integrated psycho-spiritual approach to student development. Blending Parker Palmer's model of courage to teach/lead and the Ignatian model of spiritual discernment, the authors suggested that their psycho-spiritual approach might be best played out in the Catholic school setting because of its inherent religious mission.

Catholic School Identity and Formation of School Staff

In 2005, in *Renewing Our Commitment*, which is a document about the state of Catholic education in the United States, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) appealed to Catholic universities to help meet the staffing needs of Catholic schools through specialized preparation programs ([USCCB, 2005](#)). Scholarly research and publications invariably

talk about the paramount importance of including formation for mission in university preparation programs and continuing professional development for school personnel (Cook, 2001, 2015; Cook & Simonds, 2011; Engel et al., 2020; Fussell, 2021; James, 2019).

Need for and Purpose of this Study

Although providing specially trained school counselors for Catholic schools has been identified as a serious national staffing issue, there is a dearth of recent research about Catholic school counselors. Most research is over ten years old. Even published statistics on how many Catholic schools employ school counselors are not available (Smith & Huber, 2023). Furthermore, existing research does not identify specific mission-related competencies for Catholic school counselors that might inform university preparation and professional development opportunities. The purpose of the present study was to identify what Catholic school principals and Catholic school counselors believe are the competencies and preparation school counselors in Catholic schools need to contribute to the educational and religious mission of Catholic schools beyond what ASCA outlines for school counselors in all types of schools. This insight will enable Catholic universities and Catholic school systems to align degree programs and ongoing professional development with these needs.

Method

Research Questions

We developed these two research questions to guide our study:

1. What competencies and topics do Catholic school principals and school counselors believe are important for school counselors to fully contribute to the educational and faith-based mission of Catholic schools?
2. How might the research findings inform pre-service education and/or continuing education and formation of school counselors for the Catholic school context?

Participants and Procedure

Participants for this study were the principals and school counselors at the 65 Catholic elementary and secondary schools in a U.S. diocese. The contact information listed in the diocesan school directory for 2022–2023 was used to request participation from principals first. The principals were then asked to provide the names and email addresses for the school counselors, so that surveys could be distributed. Overall, three surveys were distributed for this study; the first one was sent to 65 principals about school demographics and recorded a 100% response rate; the second and third were about the role of school counselors in Catholic schools, and they were respectively responded to by 35 out of 40 principals and 49 out of 54 school counselors at the schools that employ school counselors, recording 87.5% and 91% response rates, respectively.

School Demographics

Table 1 depicts school demographics. The schools in this study were an excellent mix of schools in terms of location, grade configuration, enrollment size, coed and single gender, and sponsorship/governance. Out of 65 schools that responded, 43.1% were rural, 23.1% urban, 18.5% inner city, and 15.4% suburban. Most of the schools were coed, although single gender schools were well-represented among high schools. The study included schools that were parish-sponsored, inter-parish, diocesan, religious order/private, or members of urban school systems. The race/ethnicity of student population was mostly White (74.2%), and 12.4% were of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity. The racial/ethnic composition of the student body for schools in this study was within range of national averages in Catholic schools (White = 70.2%; Hispanic/Latino = 19.3%; [Smith & Huber, 2023](#)).

Table 1

Demographics of the Schools

	Schools (<i>n</i> = 65)
Location	
Rural	43.1% (<i>n</i> = 28)
Urban	23.1% (<i>n</i> = 15)
Inner City	18.5% (<i>n</i> = 12)
Suburban	15.4% (<i>n</i> = 10)
Coed or Single Gender	
Coed	90.8% (<i>n</i> = 59)
Single Gender	9.2% (<i>n</i> = 6)
All Boys	4.6% (<i>n</i> = 3)
All Girls	4.6% (<i>n</i> = 3)
Sponsorship/Governance	
Single Parish	56.9% (<i>n</i> = 37)
Inter-Parish	7.7% (<i>n</i> = 5)
Diocesan	10.8% (<i>n</i> = 7)
Religious Order/Private	9.2% (<i>n</i> = 6)
Two Different Urban School Systems	13.8% (<i>n</i> = 9)
CUES School System	4.6% (<i>n</i> = 3)
Omaha Catholic School Consortium	9.2% (<i>n</i> = 6)
Average Race/Ethnicity of Student Population	
White	74.2%
Hispanic/Latino	12.4%
Black	7.4%
Multiracial	2.7%
American Indian/Native Alaskan	2.1%
Asian	1.4%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.1%

Principal Demographics

The focus of this study was school counselors, so we only asked principals select background questions that may have had a bearing on how they responded to the questions about school counselor formation for mission. For example, 100% of the principals surveyed were Catholic. A very high percentage of principals graduated from a Catholic elementary school (74.3%) and/or high school (68.6%). Approximately half (48.6%) of the principals earned their state credential to be a principal at a Catholic university.

Counselor Demographics

Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of school counselors in this study. Nationwide, school counselor demographics tend not to represent their student body well in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender (ASCA, 2021); this study was no exception with most counselors identifying as White females. The percentage of White counselors (96%) in this study was much higher than

Table 2

Demographics of the School Counselor Participants

Demographic	School Counselors (<i>n</i> = 49)
Race	
White	95.9% (<i>n</i> = 47)
Black	2% (<i>n</i> = 1)
Hispanic/Latino (Ethnicity)	2% (<i>n</i> = 1)
Sex	
Female	79.6% (<i>n</i> = 39)
Male	18.4% (<i>n</i> = 9)
Religious Affiliation	
Catholic	87.8% (<i>n</i> = 43)
Other	12.2% (<i>n</i> = 6)
Catholic Education Graduation	
Elementary School	42.9% (<i>n</i> = 21)
High School	38.8% (<i>n</i> = 19)
Master's Program	32.7% (<i>n</i> = 16)
Certification	
School Counseling Certified	81.6% (<i>n</i> = 40)
No	6.1% (<i>n</i> = 3)
Other/Process of Being Certified	12.2% (<i>n</i> = 6)
Employment Status	
Full-time Employee and Full-time School Counselor	69.4% (<i>n</i> = 34)
Full-time Employee and Part-time School Counselor	14.3% (<i>n</i> = 7)
Part-time Employee at One School	10.2% (<i>n</i> = 5)
Serve More Than One School	4.1% (<i>n</i> = 2)

the 81.8% members of staff in Catholic school nationwide who are White (Smith & Huber, 2023). It was also much higher than the White student population in the diocese (74.2%).

Because this research was focused on Catholic schools, the survey asked relevant questions about religious affiliation as well as whether their educational background and certification were from Catholic institutions. In this study, 87.8 % of the counselors identified as Catholic, which is only slightly higher than the national average for members of staff in U.S. Catholic schools (83.3%) and the student body nationwide (78%; Smith & Huber, 2023). Regarding Catholic education background, 42.9% graduated from a Catholic elementary school and slightly fewer graduated from a Catholic high school. About one-third completed their master's degree in school counseling at a Catholic university. The overwhelming majority held school counseling certification from the state's Department of Education.

Another characteristic of interest to this study was the present employment status of the participants. Almost 70% were employed as full-time counselors in their school, and 14% were full-time employees but only served as a school counselor part-time in their position. Ten percent were part-time employees and 4% served as school counselor to more than one Catholic school.

Instrumentation¹

"The School Demographics" survey contained 15 questions that asked about school location, sponsorship/governance, single gender or coed, grade configuration, enrollment, etc. "The Role of School Counselors in Catholic Schools" survey had two versions, one for principals and one for school counselors. The surveys asked about their demographic characteristics and the role of school counselors in Catholic schools, such as the importance of the ASCA model to the role of school counselors in their schools, how school counselors understand/are comfortable/contribute to the characteristics of Catholic education, and which mission-related professional development topics they wanted for school counselors. The survey items used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Do Not Understand, Not Comfortable, Not Important, or Not Effective*) to 5 (*Fully Understand, Very Comfortable, Important, or Effective*).

Defining Characteristics of Catholic Schools

The first section of the principal and counselor surveys about the role of the school counselor in Catholic schools utilized the well-vetted and nationally accepted "Defining Characteristics of Catholic Schools" as outlined in the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Excellent Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (NSBECS; Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). Table 3 shows the definitions as they appeared in the surveys.

¹ Readers interested in reviewing survey instruments may contact the first author directly.

Table 3*Defining Characteristics of Catholic Schools*

Characteristics	Definitions
Centered in the Person of Jesus Christ	“In every aspect of programs, life, and activities, Catholic schools should foster personal relationship with Jesus Christ and communal witness to the Gospel message of love of God and neighbor and service to the world, especially the poor and marginalized.”
Contributing to the Evangelizing Mission of the Church	“As a (church) entity where faith, culture, and life are brought into harmony, the Catholic school should be a place of real and specified pastoral ministry in communion with the local Bishop. The environment in Catholic schools should express the signs of Catholic culture, physically, and visibly.”
Distinguished by Excellence	“. . . first and foremost a Catholic school is characterized by excellence . . . in every aspect of its programs, life, and activities.”
Committed to Educate the Whole Child	“Catholic school education is rooted in the conviction that human beings have a transcendent destiny, and that education for the whole person must form the spiritual, intellectual, physical, psychological, social, moral, aesthetic and religious capacities of each child.”
Steeped in a Catholic Worldview	“All curriculum and instruction in a Catholic school should foster: the desire to seek wisdom and truth, the preference for social justice, the discipline to become self-learners, the capacity to recognize ethical and moral grounding for behavior, and the responsibility to transform and enrich the world with Gospel values.”
Sustained by Gospel Witness	“A Catholic educator is a role model for students and gives testimony by his or her life and commitment to mission. As much as possible, Catholic schools should recruit teachers who can understand and accept the teachings of the Catholic Church and the moral demands of the Gospel, and who can contribute to the achievement of the school’s Catholic identity and apostolic goals, including participation in the school’s commitment to social justice and evangelization.”
Shaped by Communion and Community	“Catholic school education places an emphasis on the school as community—an educational community of persons and a genuine community of faith. Catholic schools should do everything they can to promote genuine trust and collaboration among teachers, with parents as the primary educators of their children. . . . The Catholic school should pay especially close attention to the quality of interpersonal relations”
Accessible to All Students	“By reason of their evangelizing mission, Catholic schools should be available to all people who desire a Catholic school education for their children.”

Note. The defining characteristics are part of the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Excellent Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (NSBECS)*. We did not include “Established by the Expressed Authority of the Bishop” because we did not believe this characteristic was germane to this study.

Competencies and Topics

For the second section of the principal and counselor surveys, we created two lists (see [Table 4](#)) that articulate religious mission-centered, research-based competencies for Catholic school counselors ([Goodell & Robinson, 2008](#); [Murray, 2008](#); [Murray & Kane, 2010](#); [Murray et al., 2003](#); [Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012](#); [Ponc & Muskin, 2007](#)). We worked with five principals and five school counselors to validate and finalize the lists. The lists are related but slightly different based on whether the topic is important to understand and/or important to incorporate into counseling practice.

Table 4

Selected Topics and Competencies for School Counselors in Catholic Schools to Understand and/or Incorporate into practice

Understand	Incorporate
Spirituality of School Counseling	
School Counseling as a Vocation and Pastoral Ministry	
Mission and History of Catholic Schools	
School Counselor's Roles in a Catholic School that Support Mission	
Spiritual/Faith Dimensions of Human Development	Spiritual/Faith Dimensions of Human Development
Moral Dimensions of Human Development and Decision Making	Moral Dimensions of Human Development and Decision Making
Prayer's Place in Catholic School Counseling Practices and Activities	Prayer in Meetings, Appointments, and Classroom Teaching
Catholic Faith and Values	
Catholic Church Teaching Related to Current School Issues and Student/Family Issues	Catholic Church Teaching Related to Current School Issues and Student/Family Issues
Catholic Resources and Collaboration with Catholic Agencies/Institutions for Counseling Programming and Student/Family Support	Catholic Resources and Collaboration with Catholic Agencies/Institutions for Counseling Programming and for Student/Family Support
	Spiritual Discernment as a Means to Help Students Navigate their Education, Figure Out their Vocation, and Plan for College and Career
	Strategies to Assist Students to Reflect on their Life Experiences and Struggles through the Lens of Faith

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were analyzed through SPSS (Version 29) to calculate frequencies and averages of items to compare among groups. Comparisons consisted of principals to school counselors, or school counselors who graduated from Catholic universities to those who graduated

from other universities. Independent samples *t*-test and Welch's test were both performed, regarding whether the sample means were normally distributed or not. Independent samples *t*-test can be used when two groups are not dependent on each other and the sample means are normally distributed (Gerald, 2018), and Welch's test is used when the assumption of equal variance is not satisfied (Glen, n. d.).

Results

Research Question 1

To address research question 1, the results of the data are organized and reported according to the design of the surveys, which included two major sections defined by three separate lists from which participants responded.

Defining Characteristics of Catholic Schools

For the first major section of the principal and counselor surveys, the results summarize the participants' responses regarding the school counselor's role in contributing to the identity and mission of the school in light of the "Defining Characteristics of Catholic Schools" (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). The results include their understanding of, their comfort with, and their perception of their current contribution to the identity and mission of the school.

Understanding the Role of School Counselor to Contribute. School counselors and their principals were asked how much the school counselors fully understand their role to contribute to the identity and mission of the school as outlined in the defining characteristics. Almost all respondents from both groups agreed that their school counselors understand their role to contribute to the school's mission. Approximately three-fourths of the school counselors believed they fully understand this, whereas a little over half the principals believed their school counselors fully understand.

Comfort in the Ability to Contribute. When asked about the degree to which school counselors are comfortable in their ability to contribute to the identity and mission of the school, 61% of the school counselors rated themselves as *very comfortable*, but less than half of the principals ranked their counselors' comfort level as *very comfortable*. Overall, almost all participants rated the school counselors' comfort in the high range with only one principal and two counselors rating their comfort level as *neutral*, *somewhat uncomfortable*, or *not comfortable*.

Perception of Current Contribution. Participants were asked about their perceptions of school counselors' current contributions to the identity and mission of the school for each of eight defining characteristics. There was a lot of agreement between principals and counselors. Both principals and school counselors gave high ratings to school counselors for how much they contribute to each of the defining characteristics of their Catholic school. For six of the eight characteristics, at least 88%

of both groups said the counselors contribute *much* or *very much*. For the two characteristics that were most directly related to the Catholic Church—evangelizing mission and Catholic worldview—the average of both groups was high but noticeably lower than for the other six characteristics (62.2% and 77.4%, respectively). An average of 37.4% of both groups were either *unsure* of the contribution that school counselors made to the evangelizing mission, or they did not think their counselors contributed *much*. The average for the topic of Catholic worldview for these low ratings was 22.7%. Counselors rated themselves higher than their principals for two characteristics related to general educational aspirations: educational excellence and educating the whole child. Counselors rated themselves much lower than their principals for gospel witness. Over one fourth (26.5%) of counselors were *unsure* of their contribution, or they did not think they contributed *much*.

Topics/Competencies

The second major section of the principal and counselor surveys, “Competencies/Topics,” was divided into two subsections, “Understanding” and “Incorporating,” following the two lists used in the survey (see [Table 4](#)). The results elucidate participants’ rankings on how much their school counselors understand the importance of each competency and how much they are incorporating each into their practice.

Understanding. Surveys for both school counselors and principals asked participants to rate how important it is for school counselors in general to understand each of the items related to Catholic school counseling listed in [Table 4](#). After rating the importance of these issues, the participants were then asked how well they (or their school counselors) understand each of these same items, as opposed to how important it is for school counselors in general to understand them. The results will be reported together and based on significance.

The overwhelming majority of both principals and school counselors responded that it is at least *somewhat important* for school counselors to understand all the items listed in [Table 4](#), but for every item the importance of understanding was rated higher by principals than by school counselors. [Table 5](#) shows the six topics which principals considered more important for school counselors to understand in a statistically significant way compared to school counselors. Moral dimensions was the topic for which the largest percentages of principals (88%) and school counselors (67%) agreed was *very important* for school counselors to understand. Although this placed first for both groups, the importance was higher for principals, and the difference was statistically significant. Less than 50% of principals and school counselors said that the school counselors in their school *fully understand* these moral dimensions. Understanding Catholic faith and values was important for both groups as was the spiritual/faith dimensions of human development, but the importance assigned was higher for principals for both items in a statistically significant way. Only about half of the school counselors responded that they *fully understand* Catholic faith and values. Only four in ten school counselors said they *fully understand* the

spiritual/faith dimensions; principals thought it was more like three in ten *understand* the spiritual/faith dimensions of human development. The item that received the lowest rankings of importance from both groups was the mission and history of Catholic schools both in terms of the degree of importance to understand and the actuality of understanding by these school counselors.

Table 5

Results of Welch t-test Comparing Importance of Topics for School Counselors in Catholic Schools to Understand

	Principals		Counselors		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Moral Dimensions of Human Development and Decision making	4.89	0.32	4.55	0.82	2.59*
Spiritual/Faith Dimensions of Human Development	4.83	0.39	4.47	0.87	2.57*
Prayer's Place in Catholic School Counseling Practices and Activities	4.83	0.45	4.47	0.82	2.57*
Catholic Faith and Values	4.83	0.38	4.49	0.87	2.42*
Catholic Church Teaching Related to Current Issues	4.83	0.38	4.29	1.12	3.15**
Catholic Resources and Collaboration with Catholic Agencies/Institutions for Counseling Programming and for Student / Family Support	4.77	0.43	4.41	0.79	2.22**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

A fourth topic that had statistically significant mean differences between principal and school counselor responses was Catholic Church teaching related to current issues. Following this item, the survey provided space for "other comments" in which some counselors expressed concern about an ethical dilemma they have experienced between following Catholic teaching on some political/cultural issues and meeting the needs of students.

Prayer's place in Catholic school counseling practices and activities was rated highly by both groups. The percentages in the highest importance category were higher for principals at 85% than for school counselors at 59%. When asked specifically about their school counselors' understanding of prayer's place in counseling, 20% of the principals selected *neutral/unsure* or *somewhat do not understand*, but only 8% of the school counselors ranked themselves in these lower categories.

The final topic for which there was a statistical difference was the importance of understanding Catholic resources and collaborating with Catholic agencies. Although the overwhelming majority of both groups said this was important to understand, principals found it more important than counselors. In terms of school counselors' actual understanding, this was the second lowest-rated item for both groups.

Incorporating. Understanding themes is one thing but incorporating them is another. Both surveys asked participants to rate how important it is for school counselors *in general* to incorporate the items listed in Table 4 into their practice. Next, school counselors and principals were asked, specifically, “How much do *you* (or *your* school counselors) incorporate each of the items into counseling practice,” as opposed to how important it is for school counselors *in general* to incorporate them. The overwhelming majority of both principals and counselors responded that it is at least *somewhat important* to incorporate all the items into counseling practices. When it comes to how much these Catholic school counselors actually incorporate them into their practice, the ratings for both groups were lower than their ratings for importance. At least one in four principals responded with *uncertain/neutral*, *not much*, or *not much at all* for four of seven items. Counselors rated themselves lower insofar as one quarter of school counselors, at minimum, placed themselves in these lower three categories for six of the seven items. For the five items for which importance was measured for both understanding and incorporating, it was slightly more important for both groups to have school counselors understand than it was for them to incorporate.

Principals rated the importance of incorporating into counseling practice higher than school counselors did for all seven items in Table 4. Table 6 reveals that for three items—(a) church teaching on current issues, (b) spiritual discernment, and (c) reflection through the lens of faith—the differences in importance ratings were statistically significant. The biggest differences between principals and counselors could be seen in whether they rated the item *somewhat important* or *important*. For five items, 20% more principals rated the item more important than counselors did. For two items—church teaching on current issues and reflection through the lens of faith—30% more principals assigned higher importance than counselors did. When it comes to actually

Table 6

Results of Welch t-test Comparing Importance of Topics for School Counselors in Catholic Schools to Incorporate

	Principals		Counselors		t-test
	M	SD	M	SD	
Catholic Church Teaching Related to Current School Issues (e.g., Bullying Prevention) and Student/Family Issues (e.g., LGBTQ Issues)	4.77	0.49	4.02	1.10	4.12*
Spiritual Discernment as a Means to Help Students Navigate their Education, Figure Out their Vocation, and Plan for College and Career	4.74	0.44	4.27	1.01	2.89*
Strategies to Assist Students to Reflect on their Life Experiences and Struggles through the Lens of Faith	4.80	0.41	4.33	0.93	3.10*

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed)

incorporating the seven items into counseling practices, principals thought school counselors did more than school counselors thought they did for five of the seven items, but in terms of doing *much* or *very much*, counselors rated themselves higher than their principals did on six out of seven items.

There was little agreement between the two groups in ranking the items *most important* and *least important* to incorporate. Two items that 80% of the principals gave the highest ranking of importance for school counselors to incorporate were church teaching on current issues and reflection through the lens of faith. By contrast, the topic of church teaching on current issues was ranked second to lowest in terms of the percentage of school counselors (42.9%) who rated it as *important*. Sizable percentages of principals (31%) and school counselors (41.7%) placed school counselors in the lowest 3 categories for how much they actually incorporate Catholic teaching into current issues. The topic of reflection through the lens of faith was fourth out of seven (51%) for school counselors. Around 40% of school counselors put themselves in the lowest three categories for how much they incorporate this item into their practice. The item with the highest percentage of school counselors rating as important (67%) was moral dimensions. The second highest ranked by school counselors was the topic of spiritual/faith development (57%). There was agreement between the groups in two regards. Both groups rated moral dimensions as high in importance for school counselors *in general*, but principals rated it higher. Utilizing Catholic resources and agencies/institutions received the lowest percentage of votes for being highly important by both groups.

Research Question 2

To address research question 2, “How might the research findings inform pre-service education and/or continuing education and formation of school counselors for the Catholic school context,” the participants were asked about school counselors’ consultation practices for issues related to Catholic school identity and mission, their perception of the effectiveness of professional development and University programs, and rankings of desired topics for future professional development.

Consultation

When school counselors need help understanding or incorporating Catholic identity and mission into their practice, most school counselors reported that they consult primarily with other school counselors (67.3%), principals (67.3%), and religion teachers (38.8%). Principals’ perceptions were in alignment with these, although at higher percentages (80%, 91.4%, and 42.9%, respectively). A much higher percentage of principals (91.4%) believed school counselors consult them on mission and identity matters than school counselors (67.3%) actually do. Other sources of consultation included assistant principals, pastors/priests, campus ministers, and coworkers, but to a lesser degree.

Professional Development Effectiveness

Counselors and principals were asked how effective they thought their school, school network, and/or diocese were in helping counselors understand and contribute to the religious mission and identity of their Catholic school. Two-thirds of the principals (62.9%) and an even higher percentage of school counselors (79.6%) rated professional development *somewhat effective* or *effective*. However, 1 in 5 counselors (20.3%) and almost 4 in 10 principals (37.1%) were either *unsure/neutral* or gave professional development low scores.

University Preparation Effectiveness

Regarding counselors' perceptions of their university preparing them to contribute to the religious mission of Catholic schools, only 27.1% of the school counselors rated the university school counseling program they completed as effective or somewhat effective, 22.4% were *neutral* or *unsure*, and half (50%) of the respondents rated their university preparation as *somewhat ineffective* or *ineffective*. Table 7 shows that the ratings for university school counseling preparation were statistically different between graduates of Catholic universities and graduates of other universities ($t(47)=8.67, p<.01$). Catholic university graduates rated their graduate school counseling program more effective in preparing them to contribute to the religious mission and identity of their Catholic school than did graduates of public and other private universities.

Table 7

Differences in Mean Perceptions of an Understanding of and Contributions to Catholic School Mission by Educational Background

	Catholic University Graduate ($n = 16$)		Other University Graduate ($n = 32$)		<i>t</i> -test
	M	SD	M	SD	
How effective was your university program in school counseling in preparing you to understand and contribute to the religious mission and identity of your Catholic school?	2.69 (2.31)	1.20	3.84 (1.16)	1.32	8.67**

** $p<.01$ (two-tailed)

Ranking of Desired Topics for Future Professional Development

Principals' and school counselors' rankings of professional development topics related to Catholic mission indicated considerable agreement on the topics and their order of importance (see Table 8). Church teaching on current issues was ranked the most beneficial topic for professional development by both groups. Other topics that ranked high for both groups were reflecting through the lens of faith, moral dimensions, school counselor roles that support

mission, and spirituality of school counseling. The only statistical difference centered on the issue of Catholic faith and values with principals ranking it much higher than school counselors ($t(11) = -2.22, p < .05$), but this topic was not in the top five selected by either group.

Table 8

A Comparison of Principals and Counselors Regarding Preferred Mission-Related Professional Development Topics for Catholic School Counselors

Principals		Counselors	
Topics	%	Topics	%
Catholic Church Teaching Related to Current School Issues (e.g., Bullying Prevention) and Student/Family Issues (e.g., LGBTQ Issues)	65.7	Catholic Church Teaching Related to Current School Issues (e.g., Bullying Prevention) and Student/Family Issues (e.g., LGBTQ Issues)	59.2
Strategies to Assist Students to Reflect on their Life Experiences and Struggles through the Lens of Faith	65.7	Strategies to Assist Students to Reflect on their Life Experiences and Struggles through the Lens of Faith	55.1
School Counselor's Roles in a Catholic School that Support Mission	48.6	Moral Dimensions of Human Development and Decision making	46.9
Moral Dimensions of Human Development and Decision making	48.6	School Counselor's Roles in a Catholic School that Support Mission	42.9
Spiritual/Faith Dimensions of Human Development	45.7	Catholic Resources and Collaboration with Catholic Agencies/Institutions for Counseling Programming and for Student/Family Support (e.g., Catholic Charities, Catholic Universities)	42.9
		Spiritual/Faith Dimensions of Human Development	40.8

In addition, topics of interest for professional development written in by multiple participants included (in order of votes) trauma-informed practices (30); mental health issues such as anxiety, grief, suicide and suicidal ideation (20); resilience and restorative practices (18); socioemotional learning (9); brain development and emotional regulation (8); effects of technology and social media (4); crisis response (3); diversity/equity/inclusion (2); and sexual identity/gender (2). Single responses included the topics of prayer, wellness, data, standardized tests, grading, discipline, and college acceptance.

Discussion

The purpose of this quantitative study was to discover what competencies school counselors need for the Catholic school context beyond what the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has promulgated for all school counselors. Using the NSBECS "Defining Characteristics

of Catholic Schools” and two lists of competencies influenced by [Murray \(2008\)](#) to guide the questions in the surveys, participants responded about the importance of these items for Catholic school counselors to both understand and incorporate into their practice as well as their perception of how well it is happening in their schools. It was beneficial to the purpose of the study to compare the results of principals’ attitudes with school counselors’ attitudes. The findings confirmed agreement between principals and school counselors on the importance of the role of Catholic school counselors with high ratings on importance, understanding, and incorporation of several items of Catholic identity and mission. Where mean differences were statistically significant between principals and counselors, we gained understanding about potential avenues for uniting the views of principals and school counselors and increasing effectiveness towards fulfilling the religious mission and identity of Catholic schools.

Findings of interest to this study showed some differences between the perceptions of principals and school counselors, with principals tending to view the school counselor’s role as more important for incorporating Catholic teaching and mission, moral/spiritual development, and application of Catholic teaching regarding current issues than did the school counselors. These findings indicate that there is work to be done to unite the vision of principals and school counselors on the role of school counselors and improve school counselors’ efficacy for contributing to their school’s religious mission. To explore the work towards these ends, the research team, which includes professors from both a school leadership program and a school counseling program, discuss our views on the implications from this study and then conclude with a summary of recommendations.

Collaboration between Principals and School Counselors

Many of the differences noted between principals’ and school counselors’ perceptions about counselor competencies may be reduced and even eliminated by increased collaboration. When unification of vision and respect for differing roles are honored, transformative leadership can flourish. One principal stated, “I hope that the reflection of this survey impacts Catholic school leadership and how they utilize their counselors in schools.” A counselor stated that counselors are not always “utilized in the correct ways; we are often assigned duties which take away our time working with students.” These two statements indicate a desire within both groups to refine and align the role of school counselor, and tools are available for this work. “Enhancing the Principal-School Counselor Relationship” ([ASCA, n.d.](#)) is a free, evidence-based toolkit providing templates, strategies, and protocols for articulating vision and mission; building effective communication; ensuring equity; cultivating trust and respect; and supporting a new principal or new school counselor. Another useful tool is a template to guide an annual administrative conference between school counselors and principals to promote consensus on the counselor’s yearly goals and duties ([ASCA, n.d.](#)).

In addition to the toolkit and annual agreement form, ASCA provides position papers and advocacy support for various issues that school counselors may encounter, however, some believe these may contradict Catholic teaching. For example, some respondents had conflicting views regarding how school counselors can best serve LGBTQ students, ranging from “showing them the love of God” to “not even mentioning this.” The researchers posit that if both principal and counselor agree on the importance of their differing roles, then Catholic mission goals do not have to conflict with the role of the school counselor, but rather the counselor may support the mission in unique ways. For example, although both roles support Catholic mission, they may agree that during individual counseling, a focus on deep listening, unconditional positive regard, and student empowerment may aid students in their own journey. This would not be contrary to ASCA ethical standards, which stress that counselors must “exercise great care to avoid imposing personal biases, beliefs or values rooted in one’s religion, culture or ethnicity” (ASCA, 2022, p. 2). Catholic school principals and counselors may agree on how this ethical standard is upheld by the school counselor when it is integrated with a Catholic approach of invitation to faith without coercion. Whether in public schools or Catholic schools, principals and school counselors must work together to define how their unique roles in schools support their school’s mission and vision.

Collaboration with Catholic Agencies and Universities

Most of the principals and school counselors rated the understanding of Catholic resources and collaboration with Catholic agencies to be important to the role of Catholic school counselors, with principals rating it significantly higher (Table 5). However, in terms of actual understanding by these counselors, this was the second lowest rated item for both groups. This indicates a need for Catholic institutions to make greater efforts to collaborate with Catholic schools for providing their services. These collaborations could include Catholic Charities for mental health therapy, Catholic universities for pre-service learning and professional development opportunities, and other community services for supporting families.

Clarifying Roles in Collaborating with Other Mental Health Services

One finding showed that some schools may contract with Catholic Charities or a licensed mental health therapist for individual mental health services in place of school counselors. This indicates a misunderstanding of the role of school counselors, who when trained with the ASCA model are an integral part of the school system as both preventive mental health experts and transformative leaders who advocate for all children; the focused role of community therapists is more for individual or small group counseling. Contracting with Catholic Charities is one way to provide extended mental health services to individuals, but these mental health services should not be viewed as a substitute for school counselors. School counselors, with their training on whole school processes and advocating for the academic, career, and socioemotional wellness of all

children, should collaborate with Catholic Charities and other mental health therapists for referral of students with mental health issues beyond the scope of the school counselor's role.

Catholic University Contributions

Another avenue for consideration is for school counseling master's degree programs to strengthen preparation specifically for positions in Catholic schools. Two examples of topics that both principals and counselors thought were important for school counselors to understand were moral dimensions and spiritual/faith dimensions of human development. The "Defining Characteristics of Catholic Schools" and the other lists of competencies developed for this research could serve as guides for other items to add to the curriculum. These topics could be infused into discussions in specific classes, or specialized electives could be developed for Catholic school counselors-in-training. Some topics in the survey were descriptors of personal and career counseling, which all school counselors would naturally embrace regardless of their training. However, these items were rated low for incorporating into counseling, perhaps because of the language "through the lens of faith." If this phrase were added to the discussion in Catholic university counseling classes, this may strengthen counselors' efficacy in counseling students through a lens of faith.

Building Supportive Networks of Catholic School Counselors

Some school counselor participants requested the creation of supportive networks of Catholic school counselors. This may be a useful avenue to address the complex and evolving role of school counselors in support of Catholic school mission. With increasingly complex social issues, providing avenues of support to address these issues is paramount. For example, according to some participants, Catholic teaching on current issues presents an ethical dilemma for some in their Catholic school counselor role. In the words of one participant, this is a "truly ethical and moral dilemma" regarding "not just the teaching but the tensions between Catholic teaching and current political/cultural/secular issues." Another participant wrote, "First and foremost are the needs of our students, but oftentimes these conflict with Catholic teaching." School counselors' articulation of these ethical concerns with no mention of it from any principal could indicate a difference in roles. Bringing Catholic school counselors together in support of one another for their unique roles could build a sense of community and a new avenue of collaboration to address more effectively the complex issues and ethical dilemmas they face.

A few participants stated that there was no difference between counseling in a Catholic school and a public school. A quantitative study cannot uncover the thought processes that led to these responses, but it does raise the question of the need for more positive instruction on the differences between public and Catholic schools. Most participants, in response to open-ended questions, expressed happiness and gratitude for their role as a Catholic school counselor, highlighting their freedom to openly discuss faith, increased ability to work with supportive parents, and freedom

to pray and worship together with students, which some believed they could not experience in a public school.

Creating Professional Development

Participants in this study identified salient topics for professional development. The nationally recognized “Defining Characteristics of Catholic Schools” were strongly endorsed by all participants, as was the list of research-based competencies created for this study, making them useful starting points for potential professional development. Since both principals and school counselors ranked the items “Current Teaching on Current Issues” and “Reflection in Light of Faith” as the most needed topics for professional development, these should be considered priorities. The most requested write-in topics were trauma-informed practice and resilience, mental health issues such as anxiety and suicidal ideation, restorative practices, socioemotional learning, emotional regulation, and brain development.

Summary of Major Recommendations

The findings of our study support the following recommendations to better equip school counselors for the role-specific ways they contribute to the religious identity and mission of Catholic schools:

- Energize collaboration between principals and school counselors for a unified vision of the school counselor’s role in contributing to Catholic school mission.
- Strengthen collaboration with Catholic agencies such as Catholic Charities to support but not replace school counselors.
- Embed Catholic teaching and mission-related topics within Catholic university school counseling courses or add specialized courses for Catholic school counselors-in-training.
- Build supportive networks of Catholic school counselors to address their complex and evolving role in support of Catholic school mission.
- Design professional development opportunities using the study findings reported and analyzed in this article.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The main limitation of the current study is that the data were only gathered through cross-sectional and self-report surveys. Thus, the analysis results cannot infer causality, and the possible influence of social desirability on responses should be considered. For future research, diversifying ways to gather data is recommended. Qualitative methodology, such as interviews or focus groups, could allow Catholic school counselors to elaborate on their perceptions of their role. Also, as noted in the sample description, study participants were of limited demographic diversity. It is suggested for future research to recruit a sample that is more diverse in race, ethnicity, and culture to reflect distinct experiences and expectations of principals and school counselors in and for Catholic schools.

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