THE INFLUENCE OF COUNSELOR CASELOAD ASSIGNMENT MODELS ON THE JOB SATISFACTION OF HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Education Department

Carson-Newman University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By

Constance B. Certion

August 2018
Dissertation Approval

Student Name: Constance Baugh Cертон

Dissertation Title: The Influence of Counselor Caseload Assignment Models on the Job Satisfaction of High School Counselors

This dissertation has been approved and accepted by the faculty of the Education Department, Carson-Newman University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education.

Dissertation Committee:

Signatures:

Brenda P. Dean, Ed. D., Dissertation Chair

P. Mark Taylor, Ph. D., Methodologist Member

Michael Sobiech, Ph. D., Content Member

Approved by the Dissertation Committee  Date: August 8, 2018
Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the concept of high school counselor caseload assignment models and how they influence the job satisfaction of high school counselors. This study explored how the work values of counselors are fulfilled or neglected by the caseload assignment model used at their school. There is a limited amount of research available on counselor caseload assignment models, and this study aimed to fill some of the gaps to enhance the understanding of this phenomenon in hopes that it will inform the decision-making process when selecting a model for implementation. This study consisted of data collected from interviews conducted individually with eight high school counselors representing three different high schools, three surveys completed by each participants, and a focus group comprised of four of the eight original participants. The data collected and analyzed enhanced the understanding of what school counselors value about their role, and how the mechanism for assigning students to counselors interacts with these values and influences counselors’ level of job satisfaction. The study’s findings illuminated the significance of the values of the following: belongingness; respect, trust, and autonomy; rest and quality of life; mastery and feeling accomplished; and security. Lastly, the findings were used to develop recommendations to improve best practices for high school counselors and administrators.
Dedication

I dedicate this labor of love to my two children, Noah and Farrah. You all have served as my inspiration countless times when I thought that I had nothing left to give. I hope that the example that I strive to set for you each day has a positive lifelong impact on you both.
Acknowledgements

I am eternally grateful to my village that has supported me throughout this journey. To my husband Patrick, your support has made this dream possible. I am also grateful for my mother stepping in to help with babysitting when I needed time to focus and write. I am so blessed to have supportive family and friends who never stopped encouraging me to continue working towards my goal.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the participants for sharing their time and stories with me. A very special thank you to my dissertation committee for your commitment to me throughout this process. To my dissertation chair, Dr. Brenda Dean, your words of encouragement have kept me motivated during moments of frustration and doubt. To my committee members, Dr. P. Mark Taylor and Dr. Michael Sobiech, your feedback and guidance have challenged me and allowed me to grow as a writer and researcher.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge a special woman who has served as my lifelong inspiration—my grandmother, the late Mrs. Clara K. Baugh. Your desire to pursue a bachelor’s degree after raising ten children not only amazes me, but it also challenges me to persevere through difficult moments. After successfully raising a family, you dedicated your remaining years to teaching other children as an elementary school teacher. You established a legacy founded on family, education, and excellence and I am honored to continue carrying the torch.
# Table of Contents

Dissertation Approval Form.............................................. Error! Bookmark not defined.
Abstract........................................................................... iii
Dedication........................................................................... v
Acknowledgments ............................................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
Table of Contents ................................................................ vii

CHAPTER 1 ............................................................................. 1

INTRODUCTION ...................................................................... 1
Research Problem ................................................................. 2
Purpose of the Study .............................................................. 3
Research Question(s) ............................................................... 4
The Researcher ....................................................................... 5
Definition of Terms .................................................................. 6
Summary................................................................................. 8

CHAPTER 2 ............................................................................. 9

LITERATURE REVIEW ......................................................... 9
History and Role of School Counselors ................................. 9
Job Satisfaction ................................................................. 13
Counselor Caseload Assignment Models .............................. 19
Theoretical Framework ......................................................... 31
Summary................................................................................. 34

CHAPTER 3 ............................................................................. 35

METHODOLOGY ................................................................... 35
Research Questions ............................................................... 35
Qualitative Research ............................................................. 35
Research Approach .............................................................. 36
Description of the Study Participants and Setting ................. 36
Data Collection Procedures .................................................. 37
Ethical Considerations .......................................................... 39
Data Analysis Procedures ..................................................... 40
Summary................................................................................. 41

CHAPTER 4 ............................................................................. 42

ANALYSIS OF DATA .......................................................... 42
Description of Participants ..................................................... 42
Research Questions ............................................................. 44
  Belongingness .................................................................. 47
  Respect, Trust, and Autonomy .............................................. 54
  Rest and Quality of Life ..................................................... 58
  Mastery and Feeling Accomplished .................................... 64
  Security ............................................................................ 74
Summary................................................................................. 75

CHAPTER 5 ............................................................................. 42
CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................................. 80
Findings ........................................................................................................................................ 81
Belongingness ................................................................................................................................. 81
Respect, Trust, and Autonomy ........................................................................................................ 83
Rest and Quality of Life .................................................................................................................. 83
Mastery and Feeling Accomplished ............................................................................................... 84
Security .......................................................................................................................................... 87
Implications ................................................................................................................................... 88
Recommendations for Future Research ......................................................................................... 91
Limitations ...................................................................................................................................... 93
Summary ......................................................................................................................................... 93
References ...................................................................................................................................... 95
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

High school counselors are one of the pillars of the school due to the supportive nature of their role, and it is inevitable for their role to evolve in order to accommodate the growing needs of students. Historically, school counselors were referred to as guidance counselors because they helped “guide” students throughout their years in school and assisted students with academic and post-secondary decisions. It can be argued that the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) and educational reforms such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have been equally influential in the transformation of the role of school counselors over the past twenty years. The guidelines set forth in these acts, as well as those established by the ASCA National Model, further shape the work of school counselors by expanding their role and shunning the traditional notion of a guidance counselor. ASCA (2012) acknowledges educational and societal trends as catalysts for the changing role of school counselors. The complexity of the school counselor’s role stems from an increased focus on post-secondary planning and preparation, an increasing awareness of mental health issues affecting school-age children and adolescents, and the rigorous academic standards that states across the nation have adopted. Counselors no longer focus on student needs compartmentally and refrain from addressing the personal-social domain and mental health issues. Instead, they now work towards meeting the needs of the whole child with a holistic, multi-system approach. School counselors now serve as advocates for all
students and collaborative partners with stakeholders to promote mental health and academic achievement (ASCA, 2012).

Tang and Erford (2004) argued that school counselors must now offer a comprehensive school counseling model that is proactive rather than reactive. They referenced the student services model that shaped school counseling programs in the past. Under this model, the emphasis was on career planning, problem solving, class scheduling, and addressing crises related to personal or school matters. In contrast, counselors are now required to provide a significantly larger number of direct services, demonstrate how their program has been effective, and collaborate with stakeholders to address not only the academic, but also the personal-social domains. Some believe that this holistic form of counseling calls for a specific method of managing the manpower in counseling offices. There are diverse opinions about which method is most beneficial for students, and that method is not always congruent with what the practitioner, specifically, the school counselor, believes is most effective. This study will examine two models of counselor caseload assignment to further explore how counselor caseload assignment models influence the job satisfaction of high school counselors. By doing so, this study will contribute to the overall understanding of the effects of counseling caseload assignment models utilized in the high school setting.

**Research Problem**

As the demands of the role of school counselors continue to foster a trend in schools considering new approaches to counseling caseload model assignments, several questions also emerge about how these models influence the job satisfaction of counselors, how these models interact with job values, and ultimately, if the chosen
model actually improves student outcomes. Job burnout is common in the field of education, and prior research has shown that this trend is also occurring in the field of counseling. Cunningham & Sandhu (2010), Gysbers, Lapan, & Blair (1999), and Herr (2001) posited that the increasing demands on school counselors have been a major cause for job-related stress in this field, lower levels of job satisfaction, and many school counselors resigning or leaving the profession prematurely. Exploring the relationship between these variables may provide insight to better understand how counseling caseload assignment may influence the job satisfaction of counselors and the likelihood of burnout.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore how the work values of high school counselors influence their job satisfaction and how the counselor caseload assignment model influences the job satisfaction of high school counselors. There are many different approaches to assigning counseling caseloads in the high school setting, and counselors are not always involved in deciding how students will be assigned to them. This practice can likely contribute to counselors feeling frustrated and powerless in their professional role. As the frustration and stress levels of counselors escalate and they experience lower levels of job satisfaction, the likelihood of job burnout and premature departure from the profession increases.

According to Ross, Altmaier, and Russell (1989), employees in service-oriented roles are at risk of experiencing more job-related stress and burnout compared to other professions when faced with multiple professional role and organizational stressors. School counselors fall into this category as a high-touch profession where the role is
multi-dimensional and there is an elevated level of stress. It is highly probably that multiple variables contribute to the stress that high school counselor’s experience, and the organization of the work that counselors perform is likely a source due to its impact on the how counselors function within schools. Hamermesh (2001) asserted that employees with higher job satisfaction are more likely to have a higher level of commitment toward their employer. This is important to the profession of school counseling due to the rising demand for master’s level school counselors and the projected school counselor shortages. Since job satisfaction influences retention, it is worthwhile to examine factors that inhibit self-actualization and job satisfaction of high school counselors. Therefore, the primary goal of this study is to examine this specific factor of counselor caseload assignment models and its influence on high school counselors’ job satisfaction.

**Research Question(s)**

This qualitative study explores these questions:

- How does the counselor caseload assignment model affect job satisfaction among high school counselors?
- Which counselor caseload assignment models are best matched with the work values of high school counselors?

Finding fulfillment and a sense of accomplishment in the work setting is likely to contribute positively to job satisfaction. Job satisfaction matters not only because it can lead to longevity in the commitment to the profession, but also because it impacts the quality of the work output. Rayle (2006) stated that “the continuous high-quality services” that school counselors provide to students and stakeholders are contingent upon their job satisfaction (p. 207). A disgruntled or unhappy employee is not likely to provide
high-quality services oftentimes because they disagree with some aspect of their job
duties, they feel overburdened by job-related stress, or they may perceive that their work
is unimportant to others. The findings in a study by Rayle (2006) demonstrated that a
school counselor’s job satisfaction could be predicted by job-related stress and their sense
of mattering to those they serve.

School counselors enter the profession hoping to positively impact the lives of
students using the knowledge and skills obtained in their counselor preparation programs.
When asked to reflect on what makes them effective, school counselors largely agreed
that relationship building is key (Hopkins, 2005). Relationship building between students
and counselors often requires time and trust before they can establish genuine rapport.
There are some counseling caseload assignment models that, by design, do not support
this notion of relationship building, which is likely to have a negative impact on how
counselors perceive their effectiveness and their level of job satisfaction. This study
explores these concepts to gain a better understanding of the relationship between these
variables and the implications for high school counselors. Previous research has shown
that high school counselors report higher levels of stress and dissatisfaction compared to
elementary and middle school counselors. Additionally, they also report the highest level
of role ambiguity, role conflict scores, and the second highest negative mental health
scores of other school-based helping professionals (Pierson-Hubeny and Archambault,
1987).

The Researcher

Interest in this topic was spurred by a personal connection to this study’s problem.
The catalytic event was witnessing firsthand the changing dynamics of the role of the
high school counselor and how it necessitated a closer examination of the approach of assigning counseling caseloads in high schools. As school leaders grappled with meeting the demands of the changing times, many found that the most obvious solution was that the role of the primary figure of support for students within the school needed to shift in response to these demands. These ideas are rooted in the experiences of a counselor working in three high schools, where each one followed a different counselor caseload assignment model. The first high school used a hybrid model that consisted of counselors looping in grades 9-11 and a stationary senior counselor. The second high school also utilized a hybrid model with a stationary 9th grade counselor and looping counselors for grades 10-12. The third high school utilized a complete looping model with counselors moving up with their students each year for four years. However, after many years of following this model, the third high school migrated to the stationary model with counselors being assigned to one particular grade level and no longer rotating with their students. These experiences shaped ideas and perceptions about the types of models, which prompted more reflective thinking about how the changing models aligned with counselors’ job satisfaction, job values, and student outcomes.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms will appear throughout this study as central themes to the research questions posed.

1. **Counseling caseload assignment model**: This is a term used to describe the method used to assign students to a counselor. This is a key part of the leadership design within a school because it informs the structure of the school counseling program. School leaders pick one of the following methods of assigning counselor
assigning: looping models, fixed/static models, or hybrid models (Akos et al., 2009).

2. **Looping model:** This model allows counselors to work with the same group of students throughout high school. As the students move up to the next grade level, the counselor’s assigned grade level changes until that cohort of students graduate from high school (Akos et al., 2009).

3. **Fixed/static model:** Adopters of this model assign counselors to a specific grade level, and the assigned group of students that the counselor serves changes each year as the students in that group transition to the next grade level. There are variations of this model where the counselor may be assigned permanently to a particular focus area/academic program and students rotate in and out of the program depending on their interests or academic program of study (Akos et al., 2009).

4. **Hybrid model:** This model incorporates a blend of a fixed and a looping model to assign caseloads to counselors (Mackey, 2013). For example, one counselor may be assigned permanently as the 9th grade counselor and all other grade levels may loop with their assigned group of students from grades 10-12. This practice may be more common in schools with a Freshman or Ninth Grade Academy that exists to support students in their transition to high school.

5. **Job satisfaction:** Locke (1976) defines job satisfaction as "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences" (p. 1304). This is known as the Range of Affect Theory.
6. **Job values**: Dawes and Lofquist (1984) define job values as “global aspects of work that are important to a person's job satisfaction.”

Changes in the landscape of education have affected school counselors drastically over the past decade. One of those changes is the perceived need to shift the method of assigning counseling caseloads in high schools. This study will examine how the fulfillment of job values influences the job satisfaction of high school counselors and how caseload assignment practices influence counselors’ job satisfaction.

**Summary**

The findings of this study contribute to the field of education, and specifically school counseling, by examining the relationship of school counselor caseload assignment models and job satisfaction among high school counselors. The study explores the perspectives of high school counselors at two schools that utilize different counselor caseload assignment models. The goal is to look for the influence of a particular counselor caseload assignment model on the reported levels of job satisfaction.

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 discussed the evolving roles of school counselors and the purpose and rationale of the study. The remaining chapters provide more insight into the design of this study. Chapter 2 reviews literature that is relevant to this topic and is organized into four major sections: the history and role of school counselors, job satisfaction, counselor caseload assignment models, and the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 explains the research approach, selection of the participants, data collection procedures, and the methods of data analysis used for this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, and Chapter 5 culminates with conclusions drawn from this study along with implications for future studies.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

History and Role of School Counselors

School counseling as a profession emerged in the early 20th century in response to the growing need for vocational guidance in American schools. Historical accounts identify Jesse Buttrick Davis as the first school counselor (Pope, 2009), a role that emerged during his years of teaching and serving as a principal in Michigan Public Schools. As a college student, Davis experienced life-changing conversations with one of his professors that mirrored what he would later embrace as vocational or guidance counseling. These conversations embodied the basic elements of career counseling which include self-knowledge, gathering occupational information, and personal accountability for career choice. As the principal of Grand Rapids Central High School, Davis developed a school counseling program in 1907 that was grounded in many of the fundamental components seen in school counseling programs today: character building, vocational/occupational training, self-awareness, and service. Davis’ guidance program, which spanned junior high through high school grade levels, was recognized as the first known systematic guidance program and established a blueprint for other school leaders to follow (Pope, 2009).

Jesse Davis’ groundbreaking ideas about vocational guidance continued to flourish when Frank Parsons, who many herald as the “father of guidance,” issued a report on vocational guidance that called for vocational advising in all public schools (Dollarhide and Saginak, 2003). This call for transformation resulted in Boston schools assigning members of their faculty to serve as vocational counselors in elementary and
secondary schools (Gysbers and Henderson, 2000). As executors of this new role, vocational counselors researched various occupations and presented lessons to students on these occupations, advised students who were failing in an effort to improve grades, and met with parents to provide additional academic support. Not only did Frank Parsons’ efforts aid in the development of vocational guidance counseling as a concept, but he also offered solid ideas on methods that could be used by vocational guidance counselors (Jones, 1994). His involvement did not end at that point; instead, he was instrumental in training vocational counselors and established the Boston Vocation Bureau.

The initial focus of counseling programs was primarily vocational guidance and with a small emphasis placed on developmental support, but a shift occurred in the 1940’s and 1950’s as the National Mental Health Act passed in 1946 (Dollarhide and Saginak, 2003). Mental health emerged as a focal point for society in general, and its impact trickled into the schools. The revolutionary work of Carl Rogers heavily influenced the transformation in the approach to counseling in the sector of private practice and ultimately the school setting. His most notable work revolves around his theory of person-centered therapy and learner-centered teaching. Rogers’ approaches to counseling and learning reshaped the lens through which counselors and educators viewed students. The lens expanded to encompass a developmental approach to counseling in schools that included social, emotional, educational, and also vocational needs (Dollarhide and Saginak, 2003). Schmidt (1999) cited the realization that therapeutic counseling services were underutilized in the school setting as the primary cause for the swift passing of this trend by the mid-1960’s and the ushering of the new
era of structured school counseling programs in the 1970’s and 1980’s that emphasized the counselor’s role in supporting student academic success.

In 1997, the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) introduced the ASCA National Standards for School Counseling, an action that fulfilled the need to clearly shape and define the professional role of school counselors, their roles within schools, and their abilities as it related to establishing programs to address the needs of students across the three core domains (academic, personal/social, and career). The standards provided competencies and indicators, but there was a need for more transparency of the counselor’s role and identity, which was the impetus for the development of ASCA National Model (Williamson, 2011). Many educational leaders and individuals leading the call for educational reform cited the importance of evidence-based practices, and it was this call for increased accountability that sustains the implementation of the current framework for school counseling, the National Model. Isaacs (2003) and Wong (2002) discussed the call for increased accountability that school counselors currently face. Counselors are now expected to demonstrate how students are different as a result of what counselors do. ASCA currently offers a special recognition for schools that successfully demonstrate how counselors make a difference in schools and with students using data to provide evidence of their effectiveness. This recognition is referred to as the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) designation, and currently, over 400 schools have earned this special designation (Wilkerson et al., 2013). Schools that pursue the RAMP designation commit to an arduous application process that requires narratives and a clear demonstration of the impact of the counseling program via process, perception and outcome data collection.
The role of school counselors has changed significantly over the past century to adapt to the evolving needs and demands in education. With an increasing focus on demonstrating the effectiveness of programs and practices, counselors are now more involved with tracking data concerning student achievement and behavior, collaborating with other faculty to implement interventions based on this data, providing services to address students social/emotional needs, and assisting students with post-secondary preparation and planning. With a much larger scope of services to deliver, school leaders and counselors have been compelled to rethink the “what” and “how” of school counseling programs. It is no longer enough for school counseling programs to arbitrarily function based off precedence or convenience or to ingenuously operate with a single focus in mind. Instead, Camelford and Ebrahim (2017) argued that comprehensive school counseling programs, which are all-encompassing and evidence-based, should be the standard in schools across America.

Camelford and Ebrahim (2017) defined comprehensive school counseling programs as an approach that is “proactive, preventative, and aimed at helping all students acquire the knowledge, skills, self-awareness and attitudes necessary for normal development (p. 3).” The authors further explained that this approach encompasses counseling, making appropriate referrals, consulting with others, providing relevant information, administering and interpreting assessments, and implementing the established curriculum. The day-to-day duties of a school counselor implementing a comprehensive school counseling program should entail providing classroom guidance lessons, individual student planning, responsive services, and support services. These enhanced roles and duties for school counselors highlight the ways that counselors can
work independently as well as collaboratively to meet the needs of all students. As a former principal stated:

Just as teachers and departments within a school can no longer act as silos, neither can school counseling programs. Counselors must now be directly involved across all departments, all disciplines, and all school initiatives (Riddle, 2009, p.5).

As a framework, the ASCA National Model answers the question of what a school counseling program should entail to be effective in today’s educational landscape.

**Job Satisfaction**

Job satisfaction is a broad construct, and there are several elements that impact this feeling of contentment with one’s professional role within an organization. Some of those elements include the actual work itself, salary or wages, opportunities for promotion, supervision, and the other people at work (Gambrell et al., 2011). As the prior research has demonstrated, there are several factors that impact the job satisfaction of counselors, and counseling caseload assignment models is one of the most meaningful because it dictates many aspects of how school counselors function in their role within the school. In a Malaysian study that examined the job satisfaction of school counselors, the researchers found that “mastery experience was positively related to job satisfaction” (Boon et al., 2015). The authors tied this finding to the concept of counselor self-efficacy. Albert Bandura defined self-efficacy as one's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task. Therefore, it can be concluded that school counselors should be able to increase their level of job satisfaction through positive and successful professional experiences. A notable finding in the same study was that social persuasion,
which includes positive and negative communication such as praise or compliments, 
could not solely foster an increased sense of job satisfaction.

According to Bodenhorn et al. (2010), “people with higher levels of self-efficacy. 
. . . set higher goals, exhibit stronger commitment, motivation, resilience, and 
perseverance (p. 166),” and in the school setting, students can reap the benefits. As the 
authors indicated in this study, students perform better when the teacher has high self-
efficacy, and they perform much worse when the teacher has a low self-efficacy. Thus, 
they posited that the application of the self-efficacy theory could apply in the school 
counselor-student relationship in which a counselor who has high self-efficacy is likely to 
have a positive impact on student outcomes. For example, counselors who regard 
themselves as competent and highly skilled in their role in advising students about post-
secondary opportunities are more likely to produce positive outcomes such as a higher 
rate of students being accepted to colleges, universities, vocational/trade schools, and 
enlisting in the military.

A second Malaysian study found that there was a significant positive relationship 
between counseling self-efficacy and job satisfaction. These findings are noteworthy 
because they demonstrate that enhancing school counselors’ efficacy or mastery of skills 
can increase their job satisfaction (Boon, Jaafar, & Baba, 2015). It can be argued that 
certain counseling caseload assignment models support counselor’s mastery of skills on a 
deeper level than other models. For example, a static counseling caseload model in which 
counselors remain with a specific grade level each year is more likely to support a 
counselor’s understanding and knowledge of the unique developmental and 
programmatic needs for that grade level. An example of this would be a 9th grade
counselor who maintains this assignment year after year. This counselor would most likely be highly skilled in the supporting students through the transition to high school in a manner that encompasses the academic, personal/social, and career development needs while also providing parental support and resources to aid in the high school transition. As the counselors’ belief in their ability to perform at an exemplary level in their role increases, it is expected that their job satisfaction will also increase.

Researchers have determined that there is a relationship between job satisfaction and work values (Dose, 1997; Knoop, 1994; Meglino and Ravlin, 1987). More specifically, they found that work values are related to job satisfaction, motivation, commitment, and job performance. The term “work values” has been defined in many ways in the related literature. Elizur (1984) stated “work values refer to what a person wants out of work in general and what components of a job are important for their work satisfaction.” Judge and Bretz (1992) asserted that work values are shaped and influenced by the personal values that an individual holds. Despite the slight nuances of each definition of this concept, many of them seem to delineate a common component—the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic values (Bakar et al., 2011), with the extrinsic work values focusing on the outcomes of the work and the intrinsic work values focusing on the process of the work (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Both the outcomes of the work and the processes associated with the work can impact the level of job satisfaction. In essence, job satisfaction is inherently tied to finding one’s “fit” (Cable & DeRue, 2002), a claim that is supported by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943).

Clemens et al. (2009) identified two factors that positively impact counselors’ job satisfaction—strong relationships between the principal and school counselor and
congruence between how counselors ideally define their role and the actual structure and nature of their school counseling program. Rayle (2006) posited that high school counselors could experience higher levels of job satisfaction and feelings of mattering if their roles were designed to allow more direct interaction with students in counseling-related activities.

Several causes for job dissatisfaction among school counselors have been identified and closely examined in related studies. According to Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack (2011), the structure of counseling programs that is followed by schools and the expectations for school counselors that are expressed by school leaders sometimes foster role ambiguity, confusion, conflict, and ultimately, counselor burnout. The unclear expectations can potentially have a negative impact on counselors’ personal wellbeing and increase stress levels, creating a sense of job dissatisfaction (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011). According to Falls and Nichter (2007) and Clemens et al. (2009), a leading cause for role ambiguity is the dissonance between the counselor’s idealized concept of what their role is and the actual daily tasks that administrators expect them to complete. Clemens et al. (2009) further examined the function of role definition in a study and determined that there was a “discrepancy” between the current and ideal roles for the counselors and also between their current roles and best practice models. In other words, counselors often feel as though their ideal role is vastly different from their actual role, and it is also in stark contrast with the best practice models of their profession. Baggerly and Osborn (2006) found similar results in their research. These authors noted positive correlation between counselors who were assigned appropriate duties and their job satisfaction and future employment plans. The danger of role ambiguity is universal
as cited by Chu (2007) who argued that “a clear understanding of employee work structure (p. 459)” helps both employers and employees. When employees have transparency and a clear understanding of their role and the expectations of their role within an organization, then they are more capable of producing satisfactory work outcomes.

ASCA (2012) provides a blueprint for school leaders by outlining the appropriate job duties for school counselors in K-12 schools. However, this blueprint is not always followed due to the operational and administrative needs of schools that are sometimes inadequately staffed and improperly managed. Counselors are often relegated to tasks such as providing classroom coverage when a teacher is absent or unavailable, scheduling students and entering data for new students, assisting with discipline, serving cafeteria duty, and completing other clerical duties. Recent studies on job satisfaction among school counselors revealed a correlation between time spent on inappropriate counseling duties and lower levels of job satisfaction (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017; Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Moyer, 2011). Furthermore, time spent on inappropriate duties was identified as the best predictor of job dissatisfaction among school counselors (Cervoni and DeLuccia-Waack, 2011). When counselors are asked to complete tasks that are inappropriate or fall outside of the reasonable expectations for the role of a school counselor, it fosters animosity, discontent, and job burnout. It is imperative that principals and other school leaders recognize the contributing factors to job dissatisfaction and school counselor burnout to avoid counselors prematurely leaving the profession.
Another source of role ambiguity is the complexity of counselor’s role due to their involvement with an increased number of stakeholders. Since each stakeholder is viewed as equally important and valued, prioritizing the duties and roles becomes confounding (Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson & Solomon, 2005). While the principal is not always considered as a stakeholder, but instead more of a gatekeeper (Richardson, 1987), their relationship with counselors has a profound impact on the job satisfaction and turnover rate among this group of professionals. In fact, Rayle (2006) found a positive correlation between mattering and the job satisfaction of school counselors. Conversely, high levels of job-related stress and perceptions of unimportance at work are associated with increased levels of job dissatisfaction. Rayle (2006) defined mattering as an “individual’s personal, intrapersonal perceptions that they are important to others and make a difference in others’ lives (p. 207).” When interpreted in this context, mattering can be understood as an integral part of finding fulfillment in the work environment and in achieving personal growth or self-actualization. Feller (2003) echoed these views in his study on school counseling programs. The author established that counselors must perceive that their work is meaningful and “will affect the development of the entire nation” in order to positively shape their expected outcomes and work values. Essentially, counselors need to feel affirmed that their role is meaningful, and they need to perceive the positive impact of their efforts in order for them to feel a sense of satisfaction regarding their work. The importance of this basic need is reflected in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs as the fourth level, Esteem Needs. Since the supporting theory related research have indicated the significant impact that mattering has on
individual growth and job satisfaction, the focus should shift to reflecting on how to foster a sense of mattering among school counselors.

Counselor caseload size has also been identified in related literature as a source of job dissatisfaction for school counselors. ASCA provides recommended ratios for schools, but that expectation is not viewed realistically from a human resources and budgetary standpoint in many districts. More specifically, ASCA recommends a counselor-to-student ratio of 1:250, but the national average is closer to 1:459 (Camelford & Ebrahim, 2017). Researchers have documented the link between large caseloads and counselor frustration or emotional exhaustion (Gunduz, 2012; McCarthy et al., 2010). When counselor-to-student ratios exceed the recommended average, the negative effects can impact the counselor as well as the student. Student needs are left unmet because of the excessive demands that large caseloads place on school counselors.

**Counselor Caseload Assignment Models**

The American School Counseling Association identifies four key components of a comprehensive school counseling program. These components are the foundation, the delivery system, the management system, and the accountability component (Akos et al., 2009). The foundation is the basis for the counseling program and it encompasses the program focus, student standards, and professional competencies. The management system is the organizational work to implement the counseling program. The delivery system addresses the services provided to students. Finally, the accountability component addresses the responsibilities of the school counselor. The counselor caseload assignment model is considered to be a part of the management system for school counseling programs and ASCA’s National Model recommends that school counselors
and principals share in the decision-making process when determining the organization and assignment of school counselors. The options that ASCA mentions regarding counselor caseload assignment models include grade level assignments, alphabetical (by surname) assignments, standards domain, academy or pathway, or a combination of these strategies (Akos et al., 2009). ASCA does not endorse a specific caseload assignment model, but as stated by Gysbers and Henderson (2006), ASCA acknowledges that a particular model may be utilized for a reason specific to that particular school. However, the needs of the school represent only one out of many crucial factors that should be considered when selecting a counselor caseload assignment model. The next section will identify the different types of counselor caseload assignment models.

**Caseload by grade level assignments.** Counselors may be assigned to a specific grade level of students and that assignment can be permanent (static) or rotating (looping). When the grade level assignment is static, counselors consistently work with the same grade level and can potentially gain a higher level of expertise in working developmentally with that particular grade level. For example, the 12th grade counselor may develop a strong understanding of the timeline and procedures that are critical to seniors as they begin making post-secondary plans. They are less likely to feel incompetent or uncertain about their role because they have likely grown accustomed to the routines associated with working with a specific grade level. While the counselors have consistency in providing services under this model, the students are deprived of the opportunity to build a long-lasting counseling relationship with their counselor due to the structure of the counseling program. Parents may also be frustrated by this structure of counseling programs because they will also have to adapt to a new counselor each year.
Counselors may also view the lack of previous knowledge of a student’s personal and academic background as a disadvantage when working with students in a static grade level assignment model. Contrastingly, when the grade level assignment is rotating, counselors are assigned to a grade level, but that assignment changes by rotating up with the cohort of students each year until that group of students graduate. At that point, the counselor would return to the point of entry grade level assignment (typically 9th grade) and begin working with a new cohort until that group graduates. This model provides consistency for counselors, students, and parents. It also requires the counselor to remain knowledgeable of the developmental needs of students across all grade levels. Some counselors may view this as a disadvantage because they will have to constantly refresh their working knowledge due to changes that may have occurred since the last time they worked with a particular grade level. This model also poses a challenge when there are fewer than four counselors available to take on the responsibility for each grade level in the high school setting.

**Caseload by alphabetical assignments.** Students may be assigned to counselors based on their surname and this assignment is likely to remain stable for four years fostering continuity in the counselor-student relationship. This practice is viewed favorably for many reasons. First, it allows the counselor to work with sibling groups, which eases the communication between home and school when the parent/guardian works primarily with one counselor. It also enables the counselor to work from a family-centered frame of reference based on prior knowledge of the family, which may prove to be most beneficial when providing responsive counseling services. Under this model, counselors are responsible for working with students in all grade levels, a practice that supports
continuous growth and learning of how to best meet the developmental needs of students in all high school grade levels (9-12).

**Caseload by pathway, focus area, or academy.** Students may be assigned to counselors based on the academic focus area or specialization that they select upon entering high school. This practice is not very common, but some schools have implemented this model to streamline the support for students and teachers. Under this model, a counselor may be permanently assigned to an academy (i.e., Freshman Academy) or focus area (i.e., Career and Technical Education Focus Areas). The benefits of this model are that students and counselors can build strong relationships and the counselor is more likely to gain a higher sense of self-efficacy because they are consistently working with a program that is familiar to them. A drawback of using this model is that students may not be required to remain on a particular pathway or focus area, and deviating from the original path can result in the student being assigned to a new counselor.

**Looping vs. static counselor caseload assignment models.** The question of how school counseling programs should be structured is timely and critical as roles and expectations for school counselors begin to shift inside the walls of schools across America and the demand for counselors increases. Many schools have taken steps to restructure their method of assigning counseling caseloads with the expectation that it will allow counselors to meet the growing needs within the school while maximizing their efficiency. Counseling caseload assignment models often adhere to one of two basic models (looping or static models) with a smaller minority utilizing a hybrid of the two identified models (e.g., one grade level assignment that is static with the remaining grade
levels looping). The defining characteristic of the looping model is that counselors are assigned to a particular cohort that they remain with throughout high school. In a looping caseload assignment model, counselors may be assigned alphabetically to a specific range based on the student’s surname. Therefore, the composition of the counselor’s caseload would be highly diversified with students ranging from grades 9-12 and the caseload would likely contain sibling groups. These students would remain with the same counselor for all four years of high school providing a sense of continuity for the students and the counselor regardless of the student’s grade level or focus of study.

According to Thompson et al. (2009), looping in the classroom setting provides a stable learning environment that supports students' developmental changes and responds to their individual needs. The authors cited time, relationships, and student support and engagement as advantages of looping in the classroom setting, and it can be deduced that those same advantages could exist within the student-counselor relationship when a looping caseload assignment model is employed within the school. Kerr (2002) studied looping in the middle school setting among a group of eighth grade students who looped for two years. One of the benefits that these findings highlighted was the ease of transition. Easier transitions are extremely desirable in the high school setting as students strive to adjust to the high school setting and again as they prepare for life beyond high school.

Gysbers and Henderson (2006) were proponents of the consistency in counselor-student relationships that the looping models provide. Regardless of whether counselors are assigned to a grade level or a group of students alphabetically, the authors believe that multi-year assignments with the same counselor and students are more beneficial to
counselors and students and are more likely to produce favorable outcomes for both counselors and students. Similarly, Akos et al. (2009) asserted that from a developmental standpoint, having the stable presence of one supportive figure in the school setting can be valuable during the oftentimes turbulent transitional period of adolescence that students encounter during the middle school and early high school years.

Conversely, static counseling caseload assignments place counselors in permanent roles, typically in which the counselor is appointed to one specific grade level or specialty, and student caseloads change yearly based on the assignment. According to Akos, Schuldt and Walendin (2009), static assignments “allow counselors to design, continually evaluate, and refine a variety of developmentally appropriate programs over time, including groups and classroom guidance lessons (p. 27).” As counselors develop “expertise in the particular developmental level of the students and the grade level curriculum and requirements, [they] can increase their effectiveness and efficiency in programming tasks (p. 27).” These advantages can be viewed as a strong argument for a static caseload assignment model in the current landscape of school counseling where efficiency and program management are viewed as priorities.

Counseling caseload assignment models drive the structure of the school counseling program and determine the roles of the school counseling personnel. The recommended best practices, according to College Board (2009), ASCA (2012), and the Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Clemens et al., 2009), call for collaborative decision-making between principals and school counselors. If executed in this manner, counselors would be able to voice an opinion about the caseload assignment model that they believe best fits their skills, work values, and the needs of the students. Likewise, principals
would have the opportunity to share their vision for the school, particularly the school counseling program, along with the overall “big picture” of the school’s needs to foster transparency in the decision-making process and support a culture of shared decision-making. Gambrell et al. (2011) stated that when counselors feel empowered to self-author their careers, it can enhance their sense of job satisfaction.

School counselor empowerment does not occur without deliberate and purposeful actions on the part of the counselor and those functioning in leadership roles around the counselor. In 2008, The College Board and the National Office for School Counselor Advocacy, the American School Counselor Association, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals coordinated an effort to examine the relationship between principals and counselors. In doing so, they specifically sought to determine the most notable barriers to successful principal-counselor relationships, perceptions of these relationships from both groups, their views on counselor activities, along with other topics related to challenges for equity and education reform (Finkelstein, 2009). The researchers administered online surveys to almost 2,400 counselors and principals to gain insight on the dynamic relationship between counselors and principals. Their findings revealed many commonalities in views and perceptions between these two groups, but there are also significant differences that could potentially hinder the development of strong principal-counselor relationships. For example, when asked about the most important elements in the principal-counselor relationship, both principals and counselors ranked communication and respect as the two most essential elements in that relationship. Likewise, both principals and counselors agreed on the most important activities for counselors to focus their efforts in order to improve student outcomes. Both groups were
in concurrence that it is most vital for counselors to help promote student personal growth and social development and assist with career planning (Finkelstein, 2009).

One of the noteworthy points of dissention between the views of counselors and principals occurred when both groups were asked to rate the extent to which elements of an effective principal-counselor relationship was present in their own school. The researchers found that principals were more likely to believe these elements were present than the counselors. Additionally, the groups perceived strikingly different areas for the elements with the most significant gaps in the principal-counselor relationship.

Principals believed that the largest gaps were “a shared vision on what is meant by student success” and “a shared vision on what is meant by equity.” Contrastingly, counselors perceived that “mutual trust between the principal and counselors” and “shared decision making on initiatives that impact student success” were the two elements with the largest gaps between what is essential in strong counselor-principal relationships and what actually exists in their school. The key impression that this study provides is that counselors and principals disagree on how much influence and involvement counselors have on the issues of importance and relevance within the school.

Advocacy skills are deeply rooted in the concept of school counselors being a self-author of their career, and ASCA’s National Model (2005) speaks to the importance of counselors advocating for their role and the needs of their students. Akos et al. (2009) examined school counseling caseload assignments in a large Southeastern school district where they found that 45% of the counselors surveyed indicated that the counseling department determined the school counselor caseload assignment model that would be
used compared with 40% of the respondents who indicated that the school administration made the decision. A very small percentage (3%) stated that leaders at the district office were responsible for making this decision. These findings are slightly reassuring because they affirm that most schools’ practices are in alignment with ASCA’s recommendation that school counselors and administrators work collaboratively to make the important decision about how counselors will be assigned to students within the school.

Unfortunately, the findings also indicated that a considerably large number of schools have administrators who unilaterally decide which caseload assignment model will be implemented in their counseling department. A likely cause for the counselor being excluded in the decision-making process concerning their role and job duties is that the quality of the principal-counselor relationship is diminished. Another possible cause for this outcome is that the principal’s leadership style is one that does not welcome or invite feedback or insight from others regarding certain decisions. In these situations, Clemens et al. (2009) recommended that counselors employ their counseling skills (e.g., active listening skills, dialogue, transparency, and understanding) to foster a better quality relationship with the principal and their ability to advocate for their role and the school counseling program as a whole.

If given the opportunity to advocate and share the role of making meaningful decisions about the structure and organization of the school counseling program, there should be solid evidence for counselors to use to support the decision for the implementation of a particular counseling caseload assignment model. Carey and Dimmitt (2014) summarized the six statewide research studies that examined school counseling program organization and student outcomes. From this multi-source study, the
authors concluded that there was substantial proof across all six states that implementing organized school counseling programs that are aligned with ASCA’s National Model and with the comprehensive school counseling framework contributed greatly to producing positive student outcomes. Specifically, the authors highlighted the value of maintaining the recommended counselor-to-student ratios and the appropriate delivery of services as being beneficial to favorable student outcomes. In light of the beneficial best practices that this study produced, decision-makers should reflect on which models would support the implementation of these best practices. For example, a counseling caseload model based on alphabetical ranges might render unfavorable counselor-to-student ratios. Yearly adjustments in the alphabetical range might become necessary in order to stabilize the ratios, which could disrupt the desired continuity of the looping caseload model. These are just a few important factors that must be considered when making determinations about the best counseling caseload assignment model to fit the needs of the school.

Boon et al.’s (2015) finding that mastery produced job satisfaction begs the question: Which counseling caseload assignment model best supports a sense of mastery for school counselors? One of the hallmarks of the static counseling assignment model is that counselors are permanently assigned to a specific grade level or specialty and are therefore enabled to “master” the intricacies of working with that specialty or developmental stage (grade level) of students. Akos et al. (2009) noted that the static counseling caseload assignment model fostered a greater sense of competence for the school counselors in schools that utilized this type of model. This form of sustained
assignment can potentially increase efficiency as well as effectiveness in comprehensive school counseling programs.

In a survey conducted among elementary and secondary school counselors, one of the key findings that emerged was that most counselors considered the key to being a successful school counselor as having the ability to build trusting relationships with students and stakeholders (Hopkins, 2005). Gysbers and Henderson (2006) identified the looping caseload model as the choice that will best support the consistency of the counselor-student relationship that is desired by stakeholders to foster trusting relationships. A static model would seemingly detract from the ability of students to establish a trusting relationship with the counselor due to the lack of stability or permanence in the counseling relationship. Each year the student would be assigned to a new counselor and the knowledge that a transition is inevitable could hinder students from investing in the counseling relationship. Additionally, the yearly transitions that static models impose would require students to establish a new relationship with a different counselor each year while seeking assistance from them during potentially emotionally charged times when a trusting relationship with a familiar face in the counseling office could be helpful.

Akos et al. (2009) conducted a study via a mailed questionnaire to examine school counselor assignment in secondary schools. Participants in this study were middle and high school counselors in a large Southeastern district. While the researchers reported a participation rate of 74%, the responses were still insightful and useful in adding to the literature related to counseling caseload assignment models. The authors wrote that the most common model used in the high school setting (57%) was the looping alphabetical...
assignment model. The models that the remaining counselors reportedly used were significantly varied: grade-level looping (7%), blend (6%), grade-level static (4%), and domain specific (4%). When asked about the advantages of the looping alphabetical model, the counselors indicated that relationship building was a significant advantage to looping with students. Another perceived advantage to looping was collaboration with other counselors and functioning as a team. Finally, the counselors in this study maintained that exposure to multiple grade levels when looping was an asset to counselors because it provided variety in duties and focus and allowed counselors to continue to be knowledgeable of the unique developmental needs of high school students at all grade levels instead of specializing in one specific grade level.

In the Akos et al. (2009) study, the high school counselors also provided feedback that revealed the disadvantages of the looping caseload assignment model. While there were no dominantly recurring themes concerning disadvantages, a few respondents stated that looping models did not allow counselors to capitalize on their individual strengths. Additionally, some respondents deemed that this model also prohibited counselors from getting to know other students outside of their alphabetical range. Another respondent shared that the variance of the needs of each grade level could be a drawback because some grade levels required more time and attention than others, which created an imbalance of access to the counselor and the direct services that they could provide.

The extant literature on counselor caseload assignment models (Akos et al., 2009; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006) outlined the advantages and disadvantages of these models as perceived by stakeholders including the school counselors themselves. While the number of related studies is exceptionally limited, the evidence that is available is
consistent and insightful. The advantages associated with the chosen model can positively impact job satisfaction by supporting the work values of counselors, enhancing self-efficacy, and fulfilling the needs of self-esteem and self-actualization. Conversely, the disadvantages of certain models can diminish these elements, thus reducing the job satisfaction of school counselors. Akos et al. (2009) suggested utilizing blended assignments to accentuate “the strengths and capacities of each school counselor” and enhance job satisfaction (p. 28). While this approach may not be the most practical solution, it does reflect an attempt at honoring the unique strengths and work values that each counselor brings to their role and allows for the management system of the counseling program to take on a more customized approach to meet the needs of the students.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943), and more specifically, the self-actualization theory. This theory supports the idea behind what motivates school counselors to do their job. According to Maslow, self-actualization occurs when a person discovers that which is meaningful and purposeful in their life. Maslow (1969) supported the belief that self-actualization is typical for most people, and it can be developed under certain influences of social conditions. This theory informs the research questions posed because self-actualization is linked to individuals doing purposeful work in their daily lives. In terms of a career, self-actualization involves having a genuine interest in the job, feeling fulfilled in the job, the job meeting the individual’s expectations, and the individual having opportunities for growth. Those who find purpose in their work and jobs, where the aforementioned needs
are met, are more likely to be satisfied on their jobs. Bluestein (2008) described the need for individuals to derive meaning from their work and how work itself serves as a means of self-determination. When counselors feel empowered in their career, they have more energy and motivation to devote to even the most challenging tasks.

This particular study focuses on high school counselors because recent studies have indicated that high school counselors have higher levels of dissatisfaction or burnout compared to elementary or middle school counselors (Baggerly & Osborn, 2006; Rayle, 2006). In fact, high school counselors also reported the lowest levels of perceived mattering to others at work and the highest levels of job-related stress (Rayle, 2006). There are significant gaps in the current literature on this topic, and there are minimal related studies to enhance the current understanding of the relationship between these variables. Counseling caseload assignment models have not been studied extensively in the field of counseling or education, and this study has been designed to provide insight on how the model used within schools may impact job satisfaction among high school counselors.

While the need for a fresh approach to organizing school counseling programs is clear and the framework is available for schools to adopt, what remains to be answered is which practices of managing and assigning caseloads will meet the esteem needs of school counselors while simultaneously producing positive outcomes for the students they serve. Pyne (2011) stated that studies have demonstrated that comprehensive school counseling programs can reduce levels of job dissatisfaction and reduce counselor burnout. However, there are no existing studies that address how the assignment of students to counselors, or caseload management, impacts the job satisfaction of
counselors and contributes to counselor burnout. The existing research on counseling caseload assignment models, which is also quite limited, focuses on student outcomes and stakeholders’ perceptions or satisfaction, but they stop short of examining the satisfaction of the school counselors serving in these roles.

In this data-driven educational landscape, it is desirable to see data and evidence that demonstrate how the school counseling program and the counseling caseload assignment model that is implemented at each school impact important elements such as equity and access, student performance, and the measurable impact of services. However, there is a limited amount of research available to develop informed conclusions about the impact of these variables. In addition to having a limited source of research on this topic, the existing studies relied on small and homogenous sampling populations and did not expand the scope of the research to explore student outcomes or job satisfaction based on the counseling caseload assignment model.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018) projected that the demand for school counselors is expected to increase 13% from 2016 to 2026, which is faster than the current average rate of growth for occupations. The explanation for this increase in demand is the increase in school enrollments. Clemens et al. (2009) discussed a perceived shortage of school counselors and the exacerbation of this shortage by school counselors who leave the profession prematurely because they are dissatisfied. The authors asserted that there is value in exploring the construct of mattering as it is a strong predictor of job satisfaction. The method of assigning counselors to students plays a large role in how counselors view themselves and the impact that they make in their role, both factors that construct counselors’ sense of mattering.
Summary

The review of literature examines the history and role of school counselors as it has evolved over the past decade in response to societal needs, emerging trends, and legislation. Background information is presented on the development of ASCA’s National Model, a tool that attempted to clearly delineate the appropriate duties and responsibilities for school counselors. The connection between duties and job satisfaction is established, and evidence is presented from the research that demonstrates how self-efficacy and work values can also influence job satisfaction.

The literature review shifts its focus slightly to examine the phenomenon of counselor caseload management and examines the various models for assigning students to counselors in the high school setting. The benefits and barriers of these models are discussed and the key differences between looping and static counseling models are outlined. This topic has not been researched extensively; therefore, the amount of literature that addresses counselor caseload assignment models is limited. The research, findings, and implications of Akos et al. (2009), Mackey (2013), and Williamson (2011) are foundational to this study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to learn about the influence of the counselor caseload assignment model on the job satisfaction of high school counselors. Each type of caseload assignment model has defining characteristics that can be perceived as beneficial or detrimental. This perception is often dependent upon the personal values of the individual. This study explored how the work values of high school counselors interacted with job satisfaction when a specific counselor caseload assignment model was utilized.

Research Questions

This qualitative study explored the questions:

- How does the method of counselor caseload assignment influence job satisfaction among high school counselors?
- Which methods of counselor caseload assignment are best matched with the job values of high school counselors?

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research provides a descriptive method of understanding an area of study through observations, interviews, and reflections as they occur in their natural setting. It is grounded in the richness of the perspectives of the participants, and the interactions with the researcher are the vehicle that helps tell the story so that the themes emerge naturally. According to Patton (2002), the qualitative approach to research is preferable when exploring areas of study that are fairly new and very little is known
about the topic. Thus, qualitative research is the best fit for studying counselor caseload assignment models because the amount of literature covering this topic is minimal and the implications for future research are plentiful. Through this approach, the anticipated outcome is to listen to the experiences of the counselors, explore the implications of their experiences, and to discover the meaningfulness of job satisfaction as it relates to specific work conditions for high school counselors.

**Research Approach**

This qualitative study used the case study approach. This choice is most appropriate for gaining an in-depth understanding of how the counseling caseload assignment model shapes the work performance of school counselors and their level of job satisfaction in the natural setting of high school counselors at multiple school sites. The desired outcome was to understand how the level of job satisfaction is influenced based on the caseload assignment model used; therefore, it was necessary to include counselors from multiple school sites in the sample for this study. Additionally, several sources of data are collected in this study, a step that aligns with the data collection procedures that are characteristic of a case study.

**Description of the Study Participants and Setting**

The participants for this study were selected using purposeful sampling. The participants selected for this study are high school grade level counselors from three public high schools in an urban Southern school district. Both high schools are located in large, thriving communities with innovative academic programs such as a STEM Academy and the International Baccalaureate Program. There are five counselors at two of the schools; however, only four counselors are assigned to a specific grade level. The
fifth counselor at one school is the College & Career Counselor who works with any student who seeks information about post-secondary planning, regardless of their grade classification or surname. However, due to the priority status of seniors, the College and Career Counselor tends to devote the majority of their time to meeting the needs of graduating seniors. The fifth counselor at the other school handles academic concerns, course planning, scheduling, and college advisement for any student enrolled in the International Baccalaureate Program. For the purpose of this study, neither the College & Career Counselors nor International Baccalaureate Counselor were involved in the data collection process. The third school included in this study employed three grade level counselors, and all counselors were invited to participate in the study.

Because this study focused on highlighting how differing counselor caseload assignment models influence counselors’ job satisfaction, it was important to identify schools based on the counseling models used to assign students. Therefore, criterion sampling was utilized to identify the school counselor participants in this study. Counselors from one of the selected schools followed a caseload assignment model that supported looping while the counselors from the other two schools utilized a model that supported static counseling assignments. The average enrollment at two of the selected schools was approximately 2,100 students, and the average caseload of each counselor was 515 students. The third school had a significantly smaller enrollment of 900 students, and the average caseload for each counselor was approximately 290 students.

Data Collection Procedures

Before collecting data, permission was obtained from the principal of each school and also at the district level. The counselors accepted the invitation and agreed to
participate in this study on a voluntary basis; however, only one school had a 100% counselor participation rate. Three counselors were unable to participate due to conflicting schedules. The counselors all reviewed and signed the Informed Consent (Appendix A). The data collection process began with the participants completing the School Counselor Assignment Questionnaire (Appendix B) (Akos, 2009), an online individual survey that elicited responses related to the counseling model (type of model used at their school, their opinion of perceived benefits and disadvantages of the model, and the timeframe of implementation for this model), current school-wide enrollment and size of current caseload, and counselor’s years of experience. This questionnaire featured a five point Likert Scale with responses ranging from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree as forced choice options for certain questions.

Additionally, the participants were asked to complete Maslach’s Burnout Inventory: Educators Survey and the Areas of Worklife Survey (Maslach et al., 1986) to garner responses about each counselor’s level of burnout in the worklife context and their overall job satisfaction. These surveys assessed each participant’s level of burnout in the following three areas: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. The results of this survey contained each participant’s raw data and raw scale scores that were used as a triangulation method to better understand the views of the participants. All surveys were completed on the same day at the school to ensure a high participation and return rate.

The counselors in this study were interviewed individually to provide more in-depth insight on the factors that impact their level of job satisfaction. The individual interviews were designed to explore how each counselor perceived that the caseload
model influenced their ability to find satisfaction with their work and how their values interacted with their daily work. The interview consisted of 16 open-ended questions (See Appendix C). The responses were recorded and later transcribed to begin the data analysis process. Finally, four of the counselors from all three schools collectively participated in a focus group to share their reflections and experiences in their role as a high school counselor. This session provided opportunities to share perspectives, discuss common issues, as well as explore best practices regarding the overall management of the high school counseling program. The interviews and focus groups were rich data sources for field notes and transcripts that were later analyzed for recurring themes.

**Ethical Considerations**

The ethical considerations in this study were addressed and specific actions were taken to ensure that all participants were treated ethically throughout this process. First, consent was obtained from all participants, and they were informed of any risks associated with participating in this study. Informed consent is a major consideration; therefore, the data that was collected and ways that the information will be used in the future were carefully explained to the participants. While there were no physical risks associated with participating in this study, there could have been some potential emotional risks involved due to the types of questions posed and the expectation that all participants be genuine and truthful with their responses. The primary concern was maintaining the anonymity of the participants. All data was carefully coded to protect the identity of each participant and their school. Considering the interpretive nature of qualitative research, there was a unique challenge to ensure that information was not misrepresented after the data from each participant was analyzed. To avoid this unwanted
effect, member checks were conducted to allow the participants the opportunity to validate information for accuracy. The focus group provided the opportunity for multiple participants to confirm the interpretations and findings of this study.

Finally, it was important to acknowledge that researcher bias had to be addressed due to the professional background of the researcher. As Farber (2006) stated, “qualitative researchers must deal with the fact that their own values cannot be kept of the experience by admitting the value-laden nature of the experience and discussing their own biases and the implications for findings” (p. 368). This requires an honest evaluation of the biases and values of the researcher before the onset of data collection. One method of ensuring objectivity and minimizing the risk of bias that was employed was the use of a peer debriefing to help identify themes and discuss the findings with an impartial colleague. Peer debriefing further established the credibility and trustworthiness of the identified themes and findings of this study while also protecting against researcher bias.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

The interviews conducted throughout this study were transcribed to provide a more detailed analysis of the perspectives shared by the counselors. Initially, a list of expected themes were developed prior to conducting the interviews. After the interviews were transcribed, emergent themes were identified based on the perspectives and information that the participants shared. Keywords and sentiments that appeared consistently in the dialogue were highlighted and grouped as themes. The emergent themes provided an extensive list of ideas that had to be reduced to a smaller number of key themes. One of the crucial steps in this process was to interpret the interviews through the lens of the theoretical framework of the study. By doing this, the emergent
themes could be reduced into broader yet more precise themes that aligned with the theoretical framework of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. The questions and topics addressed throughout the data collection process illuminated the thoughts of the counselors on job satisfaction and their overall experiences with following their school’s caseload assignment model. The other critical source of data was the surveys that were administered to the counselors at each school. Maslach’s Burnout Inventory and Areas of Worklife Survey produced raw data and raw scale scores that could be easily interpreted. The School Counselor Assignment Questionnaire yielded key information that enhanced the understanding the organization of each school’s counseling program and the perceptions and attitudes of the counselors towards the counseling caseload assignment model. Once the surveys were completed, data was reviewed and analyzed through the lens provided by the framework as well as the information conveyed by each of the participants during the interviews.

**Summary**

The goal of this study was to explore the levels of job satisfaction of high school counselors who adhered to two different models of assigning students to counselors. The qualitative approach was the best fit for this study because this topic has not been widely studied and the experiences of the counselors working in each setting would inform the findings of the study. Participants in this study provided data for this study via survey responses, interviews, and a focus group comprised of four high school counselors. Each of the data sources provided useful information to shape the understanding of how certain values align with counselor caseload assignment models and how those models influence the job satisfaction of high school counselors.
CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this study was to explore how the counselor caseload assignment model influences the job satisfaction of high school counselors. This qualitative study utilized the case study approach, and the findings consisted of data collected from interviews with eight high school counselors and with a focus group with four of the eight participants. Maslach’s Burnout Inventory, the Areas of Worklife Survey, and the School Counselor Assignment Questionnaire were administered to each counselor to triangulate the data and establish validity of the research findings. A link to each of the surveys was emailed to the participants, which allowed them to complete the survey at a convenient time.

The participants for this study were selected using purposeful sampling. The participants are all high school grade level counselors representing three public high schools in two suburban Southern school districts. The campuses of these three schools are described briefly in the next section. Criterion sampling was used to ensure that the role of each participant and the counseling model used at the school aligned with the focus of the study. Two of the schools selected for this study used the static model and the third school used a looping model. The names of each counselor and their respective schools were removed and replaced with descriptors that are used with consistency throughout the analysis and discussion of the findings.

Description of Participants

The eight high school counselors were interviewed individually over a two-week period. Seven counselors were female, and one was a male. The years of experience of
the counselors ranged from five to twenty-four years, with an average of 14 years of experience. All counselors hold master’s degrees in counseling, and three of the counselors also have earned credentials and have practiced as mental health counselors. Additionally, three of the counselors have ten or more years of classroom teaching experience at the K-12 level or college/university level.

Counselors 1-4 are employed at School A. School A is a Title I public high school located in a suburban community. The school once had a sizable population of more than 2,000 students, but with the establishment of municipal school systems in the bordering communities, it now has approximately 1,100 students. There are five counselors employed at this school with four grade-level counselors and one College & Career Counselor. Combined, they average a total of 17 years of experience as school counselors. The counselors are assigned by grade level to a cohort of students with whom they loop with for four years, and one of the grade level counselors is also responsible for the International Baccalaureate Program students.

Counselors 5 and 6 are employed at School B. School B is also a public high located in a suburban community, but unlike School A, it is not a Title I school. While this community is more affluent, the students and families tend to be more transient than those at School A. This is one of the most sought-after schools in the district, and their current enrollment is approximately 2,100 students. There are five counselors employed at this school with four grade-level counselors and one International Baccalaureate Program counselor. For the past four years, the senior counselor also functioned as the College & Career Counselor, but beginning with the 2018-19 school year, School B will have six counselors on staff with no counselor in a dual role. The grade level counselors
at this school are static, and they do not loop with students; instead, they remain with the assigned grade level each year. Collectively, they average a total of 16 years of experience as school counselors.

Counselors 7 and 8 are employed at School C. School C is a small Title I public high school located in a suburban community. Issues such as poverty and transiency plague the community, and there is struggle to retain the most promising students due to the elimination of several honors and AP courses, which were eliminated to accommodate the loss of several teaching positions due to declining enrollment. There are three counselors employed at this school, and they do not loop with their students. As a result of having fewer than four counselors on staff, the counselors at this school are each assigned one grade level, and they split the fourth grade level caseload into thirds, alphabetically. They average a total of seven years of school counseling experience.

Research Questions

The interview questions for this study were designed to facilitate dialogue that would allow an in-depth analysis of the study’s two foundational questions:

- **How does the counselor caseload assignment model affect job satisfaction among high school counselors?**
- **Which counselor caseload assignment models are best matched with the work values of high school counselors?**

The 16 questions posed in the interview guide addressed key areas that have been identified as influencers of job satisfaction in the review of literature, while also providing insight into the organization of the leadership structure and the counseling staff of each school.
The participants were asked the following questions to answer the two research questions:

1. Can you provide an example of how the administrative team influences decisions about the operations within the Counseling Department?

2. Describe the counselor caseload assignment model that your school uses and the size of each counselor’s current caseload.

3. Tell me more about the process of selecting a counseling caseload assignment model at your school and your thoughts on the process.

4. How does the department approach the task of reviewing the counseling caseload model? What prompts the decision to review the model?

5. What do you perceive are advantages/disadvantages of your caseload assignment model in developing relationships with students and their families?

6. What do you perceive are advantages/disadvantages of your caseload assignment model in developing relationships with teachers?

7. How does your caseload assignment model influence your ability to equitably serve the needs of all students on your caseload?

8. How is the current caseload assignment model personally and professionally beneficial you? In what ways is the current model detrimental to you?

9. If you have worked under a different counselor caseload assignment model before, what do you perceive to be the advantages and disadvantages of the other assignment model?
10. What caseload assignment model do you believe best suits the needs of students? Why?

11. What are the current areas of focus for your school’s counseling department? How satisfied are you with the current focus of your counseling program?

12. How does your current role support your need to feel a sense of mattering?

13. Which aspect of your job gives you the most personal satisfaction? What prevents you from doing your best work now?

The following questions were asked of each participant to enhance the understanding of the counselor’s experience for the benefit of this study:

14. What is your background as a school counselor? (Years and type of experience, highest level of education earned, and any specialized training)

15. How is your school counseling office structured in terms of staffing?

16. Describe for me the organization of the leadership team at your school and which administrator is responsible for your department.

Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943) provided a framework for understanding the themes that emerged from the counselors’ interviews. Physiological needs and safety needs are considered the most basic human needs, and they encompass physiological needs such as food, water, air, shelter, and sleep/rest, but they also include safety needs such as security, employment, and health. The fulfillment of these needs are positively linked to the attainment of self-actualization and, consequently, satisfaction. Likewise, the psychological needs of love and belonging and esteem play a critical role in moving towards self-actualization and achieving optimal levels of satisfaction. Friendship and a sense of connection positively contribute to developing a sense of belonging.
Mastery, respect, recognition, and autonomy are important elements of the esteem needs. The responses from the counselors illuminated the role that basic and psychological needs play in increasing or decreasing job satisfaction, and in turn revealed what they value most about their role as a counselor.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs served as a guide during the coding process. After reviewing the transcribed interviews and detecting the recurring words, phrases, and themes, these frequently occurring ideas were reduced to simple concepts or keywords. These keywords were then categorized as a basic or psychological need. The final step was to identify specific levels and needs within the hierarchy that correlated with the newly classified concepts in order to generate the final themes.

Belongingness

Relationships. Each counselor indicated during his or her interview that relationships are a desirable element in the counseling relationship. When that element is missing, its absence is palpable. The looping model supports the establishment and growth of strong counselor-student-family relationships. Throughout the four years of high school, all parties have opportunities to establish rapport, give and receive assistance, and become better acquainted with one another. Counselors at School A, where the counselors currently loop with their students for four years, were vocal about how establishing relationships with students enables them to more effectively serve them. Counselor 2 stated:

Personally, the looping model meets the goals of really getting to know students—not just on the surface. One of the hardest things is when you walk in my office and I have to say, ‘Remind me of your name.’ I hate that.
She explains that her knowledge of students, gained over the course of four years, enables her to recommend students for programs, internship opportunities, and scholarships based on her thorough knowledge of the students and her awareness of their interests, goals, accomplishments, and skills. Counselor 7 does not have this advantage at School C, which has stationary counseling assignments. In her role as the senior and College and Career Counselor, she is crippled by this lack of knowledge and has to ask each student and his or her parent to complete a Brag Sheet. This informal résumé allows her to write letters of recommendation under the pretense that she is intimately knowledgeable of the students. Counselor 7 acknowledged that this arrangement is less than ideal and reflects on what she yearns to experience as a counselor:

A counselor per grade level [is preferred], and then you loop with that all the way to their senior year. . . . There’s no doubt, I could write a letter of recommendation for you with my eyes closed.

She elaborated, “I get satisfaction from building relationships because I can’t do anything for you to help you if I don’t have a relationship with you.” Her sentiments are echoed in the words of other counselors who also shared the belief that it’s challenging to truly make an impact in the absence of a relationship. Students will rarely seek out assistance from a counselor on personal matters when there is a question about the counselor’s regard for them as a person and the counselor’s ability to be empathic and responsive to a student’s needs.

Relationships produce satisfaction for these counselors because it makes certain aspects of their job easier and because it is a reflection of their dedication to the students they are entrusted to support—even when the students give them countless reasons to
withdraw that support. Counselor 6 from School B does not loop with students, but she acknowledged the power of relationships and its influence on her level of job satisfaction:

I get the most satisfaction from having positive relationships with difficult kids.

It's easy to have a good relationship with an easy kid, but those relationships you have to work for, where you have to earn somebody's trust and—those are not easy days, but coming out on the other side and having a kid that you have fought with and fought with and fought with to see them be successful. I think it's those instances—those are the kids who're going to remember you for the rest of their lives because they’re going to know that's somebody who really invested in me. They dug in their heels and they worked with me even when I was not easy to deal with.

In the absence of relationships, the counseling relationship between students and counselors is diminished in quality and effectiveness. Several counselors alluded to this during their interviews, pointing out drawbacks including: “you’re only getting a snapshot” and “the relationship is not quite as solid.” Counselor 8 pointed out that it is problematic when you receive a caseload of students and do not have any prior knowledge about them. She added, “Their issues and concerns don’t go with that [new] counselor.” Counselor 4, who currently loops with her assigned group of students, has experience with the static model and reflected on her time with that model: “That was the worst one because you are constantly getting new students. As soon as they get to know you, you have to pass them on.” It is noteworthy that Counselors 5 and 6 from School B with static counseling assignments had significantly higher Depersonalization scores than the other six counselors on Maslach’s Burnout Inventory.
Family connections. Students are not the only ones who benefit from the services and expertise of the school counselor. In fact, the connections that are established between counselors and parents can span several years when siblings attend the same school. This can be particularly helpful at a school that loops and assigns counselors alphabetically. Counselor 1 stated, “You’re with them for four years, they know you and you get to know them. . . . In a counseling relationship, that’s what you want.” The knowledge of family history, dynamics, personalities, and preferences can be instrumental in efficiently and effectively meeting the needs of the students. It can also minimize the potential for opposition when the counselor has established positive rapport with the family while working with sibling groups. Looping and working with siblings allows counselors the opportunity to prove who they are, albeit positive or negative, through their words and actions when serving students and families. Counselor 2 expressed, “I also feel like over the years, parents know that they can count on me. We figured it out in 9th and 10th grade. Here we go to the 11th and 12th. I try to be responsive to parents. I can’t always give you the answer that you want, but it is not adversarial.”

Personality. Counselors bring a unique approach to their role based on many factors, one of which is their personality. Personality defines who we are, how we respond, and how we engage or interact with others. In a counseling relationship, counselors and clients (students) are sometimes perfectly matched; however, there is also a possibility for a poor fit between a counselor and the client (student) based on opposing or incompatible personalities. In schools where counselors loop or remain with students for four years, this can be problematic especially if reassignments are unlikely. If the counselor perceives the dissonance in the student-counselor relationship, they are likely
to feel detached when working with the student, which may present as a lack of interest in meeting the student’s needs, lack of patience and understanding, and avoidance of regular contact. Any of these behaviors would be detrimental to the success and well-being of the student. Similarly, if students perceive a personality conflict with their counselors or find them off-putting, they may also avoid contact and communication with the counselor and will either internalize the issues or challenges they are facing, seek advice or assistance from peers or another trusted adult, or attempt to navigate the situation independently. While some of these options are acceptable, others are not and can be potentially harmful.

Counselor 5 expressed this is one compelling argument for a caseload assignment model that does not force a long-term counseling relationship on either party:

Once Counselor 6 is like, ‘Ok, I’m done [with this student]. I have done everything to help this person.’ By the time she gets to the point of being done, they start over with me. And I’m not done. I’m starting over. And it takes a whole lot for both of us to be done.”

The emotional distress of being “done” with a student and his or her situation is what Counselor 5 shared contributes to her feeling burned out:

Part of the burning out to me is dealing with some of those same situations over and over and over. . . . We see that even with siblings, so it’s nice to. . . have a break. You can get a different one, but then you can pass it off.

The incongruence of personalities can also extend itself to the parent-counselor relationship. Parents can develop an affinity for a counselor, especially if they have a pre-existing connection with the counselor or were highly satisfied with the way a particular
counselor met their needs. Counselor 7 explained, “Some parents may be like, ‘Oh, I want to know this [information], but I prefer to talk to you.’ Because we all do have different personalities.” The apprehension in her tone stemmed from her reflecting on the impending changes with their counselor caseload assignment model for the 2018-19 school year. They were previously static but will begin looping alphabetically. She stated, “I’m nervous about splitting the alphabet because there could be a lot of difference between ‘I do a good job or I may do a bad job,’” or this parent may prefer this other counselor.” All counselors indicated that they do value feeling respected and appreciated for their work. Feeling shunned or unwanted by a student or a parent is likely to negatively support the development of these values.

Personality also plays an important role in the congruence between a counselor and their role. This is particularly true in schools where counselors remain with their grade level assignment for multiple years. Most of the counselors at schools with static assignments indicated that the counselor’s personality was taken into consideration when determining their grade level assignment. According to Counselor 5:

We just decided—we and [our vice principal at the time], we kind of made the decision on [static] grade levels based on personalities. And, I mean, really and truly, it is very fitting like our grade levels are very fitting to our personalities because Counselor X is very good at talking and listening to how you feel, and she'll pat you on the back and she'll sit with you...because freshman are just a different breed. They're not really my strong suit. And then Counselor Y is a little bit tougher, but still a lot nicer than when you get to Counselor 6. You've got to have your stuff together. . . .We get progressively meaner.
Counselor 6 added her own thoughts to assigning counselors to caseloads based on personality:

The ninth grade counselor—they’re just trying to find their feet so by the time they get to me, I can be a little more of a realist about 'It's time. We don't have more time.' The 10th grade counselor deals with a lot of emotional garbage. Emotional girl mess, and by the time they get to me, a lot of it’s gone. I don't do girl drama so the good thing is our personalities fit the grade level.

Developmentally, each grade level can be markedly different. There are specific tasks and common challenges associated with each grade level. Taking the natural tendencies of the counselor’s personality under consideration when assigning them to a grade level minimizes the likelihood that the counselor will be unhappy or uncomfortable handling these responsibilities and situations on a daily basis.

**Collaboration and communication among colleagues.** High school counselors rarely work in isolation, and working as a team not only enhances the quality of the output of their work, but it also supports the need to feel a sense of belonging. Regardless of the model used, the need to collaborate and communicate still exists. Notably, the four counselors at schools with static counselor assignments were the most emphatic about the need for collaboration, communication, and transparency. Counselor 6 stated, “We’re transparent with each other about ‘This is what’s going on’ because we don’t—there doesn’t need to be any going behind anybody’s back ever because that creates huge problems and we don’t have a lot of that.” Although each counselor has his or her own specific grade level for which they are responsible, they will ultimately share the same students. It is vital that they not withhold information, and instead, freely share necessary
information with fellow counselors in order to effectively meet the needs of students. Counselor 4, who previously worked in a school with static assignments added:

You have to be able to communicate with your co-workers. Because if each of you have 12th graders and . . . We’re working on FAFSA, we have to communicate and work together to get this accomplished and make sure all of these 12th graders complete their FAFSA.

Resisting the urge to operate in silos fosters a sense of connectedness and belonging while improving job performance and effectiveness. When a group works cohesively together, even those who are less familiar with job-related content or how to complete tasks, will feel more comfortable with approaching their fellow counselor for assistance. Self-efficacy and job satisfaction both appear to improve when the group collaborates and communicates to support the professional growth, practices, and learning of each team member.

Respect, Trust, and Autonomy

Trust and respect. School leaders have a variety of leadership styles, and counselors rarely desire to be led by a micromanager. Most employees thrive in a setting where there is freedom, trust, and respect. Oftentimes, those elements are gained with time and experience. The intersection of the years of experience and the leadership style of school leaders can greatly affect the decision-making process involving school counselors and their activities. All counselors interviewed in this study indicated that the vice principal is their immediate supervisor and they work closely with the person carrying out this role. Counselor 4 shared:
The vice principal is the main person that we go to, but she's not like a dictator saying 'Do this, do this, do this'. She's always very open. All of them [the administrators] have been very open and ask our opinion about what we think because—I don’t know if you noticed, but there are not any spring chicks around here. You have some veteran counselors. So I'm glad that they do ask our opinion about things, and then we'll give them our suggestions, and then they'll give us some feedback, and we just—I think we work well together.

She is not alone in feeling as though the number of years of experience affects the amount of trust that administrators have for their counselors. For instance, Counselor 6 stated:

I feel like the counselors influence what the administrators do more than the other way around. Part of that is because the principal worked in this office before she was principal and so she has a lot of faith in what we do in terms of scheduling, graduation rate, the things that go out into the media.

When given the opportunity to have a voice, counselors feel respected and valued. Counselor 1 discussed this during his interview and stated:

With our administration that we have, I feel like they value us. We're not just people sitting up here at a desk. . . . When they see issues, they call us and they refer kids to us. So, I like that. I like that they feel like, 'Hey, we've got a really top notch counseling staff here.

Counselor 5 addressed the effect of not having a voice or the ability to control what takes place within the counseling department, but she aimed her frustration with being stifled at legislators and politicians who create laws and programs that impact the
work of school counselors: "The people that get to make a lot of the decisions that affect schools have never stepped foot in a public school, that is sometimes a little debilitating for me." She explained how the development of new programs and a shifting focus in public education sometimes creates hardships for school counselors. For example, the development of new statewide diploma requirements, fluctuating career clusters, course names, and programs of study for career and technical education programs, and now the current focus on increasing the number of early post-secondary opportunities all required counselors to allocate more time to completing paperwork and providing fewer direct services to students. In the Areas of Worklife Survey, the counselors all indicated that the goals of the organization influence their work on a daily basis, but only 50% agreed that their personal career goals were consistent with the organization’s goals. When asked if there are effective appeal procedures available when the fairness of decision is in question, only 25% of the counselors were able to agree that there is a procedure in place. The remaining six counselors either stated that it was hard to decide or they strongly disagreed.

**Autonomy and shared decision-making.** An important element of allowing counselors to advocate for themselves and the work they do for students involves including them in the decision-making process. At times, it can also mean entrusting them to be the sole decision-maker and having confidence that they have the knowledge, insight, and foresight to make the best choice. In the Areas of Worklife Survey, 63% of the counselors indicated that they strongly agree that they have professional autonomy/independence in their work setting. When asked about who was involved with the decision on the counselor caseload assignment model, the schools with more
experienced counselors (Schools A and B) had a strikingly different response from the school with less experienced counselors (School C). Counselor 2 from School A shared that they “decided collectively, as a team, to move with our students.” Counselor 1 from the same school added:

They pretty much let us decide. Our vice principal who is directly over us-- I don't think that she's going to say, 'This is how I want it done.' She knows the number of years of experience we all have doing this and she's kind of leaving us to decide that and just have some control over those decisions.

This indicates once again that the number of years of experience helps foster the trust that the vice principal has in their ability to make important decisions. Counselor 5 at School B admittedly takes on the role of the spokesperson for her department: “Changing the model—I guess I was kind of the one that decided it.” When probed for further explanation, she explained that the idea to change initiated with her, and she presented the idea to the vice principal who approved the change. Coincidentally, the counselors at Schools A and B had a voice in selecting a counselor caseload assignment model, and they all responded favorably when asked how satisfied they are with the model. While there are admittedly some flaws or drawbacks to the model that their school uses, their level of satisfaction appeared to be heavily influenced by their ownership of the selection of the counseling model.

The counselors at School C had a different experience with the decision-making process for selecting a caseload assignment model. Counselor 8 indicated that the decision was “prompted by the administrators.” The counselors have maintained a static counseling assignment, but the organization of the assignments has changed nearly every
year over the past four years, and each time, the vice principal initiated the change. Most recently, they had a static 10th, 11th, and 12th/College and Career Counselor, and they divided the 9th grade students into three groups, split alphabetically. A new vice principal recently joined their administrative team. The counselors shared that she was vocal about being a proponent of the looping model, and decided that for the 2018-19 school year, the counselors will be assigned a new caseload divided alphabetically, and they will loop with their students for four years. Counselor 7 added, “I don’t think we had a voice in it at all, but I also feel that at the end of the day, you have to figure out what works, and if you never try, we’ll never be comfortable. We have to try something that is going to sustain us or we are going to always be confused.” Listening to these two counselors speak, it was evident that there was some discontent about being excluded from the decision-making process and some apprehension about trying a new model that would force them to be work with all four grade levels at the same time. They both repeatedly addressed the topics of making errors, feeling confused, and learning their role. As a relatively young counseling staff with an average of six years of counseling experience, being thrust into a new challenging model feels like a professional challenge of “sink or swim.” If the counselors experience success with the new model, it will be a positive learning experience that will enhance their self-efficacy. However, if they struggle to adapt to the role of counseling all four grade levels at the same time, it may contribute to their leaving the school or the profession.

Rest and Quality of Life

*Excessive duties.* All of the counselors who participated in the focus group agreed that the job description for school counselors does not begin to scratch the surface of
what they are required to do on a regular basis. Each counselor could easily share stories about instances where they drove students in their personal car for a scholarship interview, worked over holidays and breaks to write over fifty letters of recommendation, waited with a student in crisis for several hours after school until a parent was able to pick them up and take them for a psychological assessment, and more. In the Areas of Worklife Survey, 50% of the counselors either agree or strongly agree that they do not have enough time to do the work that must be done, and 50% agree that they do not leave work behind when they go home. 63% of the counselors agree or strongly agree that they work intensely for prolonged periods of time. Counselor 5 stated, “When you spend the amount of time and energy that we do, it’s debilitating. The amount of work, and the exhaustion, and the level of concentration that this requires to not make errors or mistakes.” In fact, during the interview, Counselor 5 was busy multi-tasking in an effort to make up for lost time resulting from a technical glitch that occurred earlier in the week and erased several hours of work that she had completed on transcripts. When pressed to say more, she shared:

It's not the model; it's the job [that is detrimental to me personally]. It's more stuff every single year. It's every year; it's bigger. It's huge and people don't realize just the little bitty things like checking transcripts. So we went through all of these transcripts because the years didn't average out. And so we went through to check all of those and [the registrar] updated it. Well, now the credit total at the bottom isn't right.

The frustration was evident in her voice and in her body language. She added that in addition to being overwhelmed by the complexity of the role of high school counselors,
new initiatives passed down from the state created more chaos for her and the members of her department. Specifically, she explained that the emphasis on Early Post-Secondary Opportunities (EPSOs) has created more work because classes have to be created, programs have to be marketed to students and parents, and paperwork has to be maintained in partnership with local colleges/universities to support the successful implementation of these programs. She stated with exasperation, “Our plates are more than full, they are overflowing.” Counselor 7 has been fulfilling the dual role of 12th grade/College and Career Counselor for five years, but she is excited that she will no longer have to do both because they have hired a sixth counselor.

Counselors, like teachers, are often asked to fulfill roles that are completely unrelated to the job listed on their contract. Coaching teams and sponsoring clubs are two areas of need that administrators sometimes have to appoint reliable, hard workers to cover in order to provide students with a well-rounded high school experience. Counselor 7 experienced this at her school and shared her frustration:

I do prom. I put on the whole graduation. I put on senior week activities. I put on senior picnic. I pick the senior sponsors. I do honors banquet. I'll do anything that has to do with my kids, and I felt myself drowning because there was no help. So in my professional evaluation this year, I declined everything but graduation. I said 'I don't care if it doesn't happen, if it never appeared, if the kids don't do anything, I'm only doing graduation. They will walk across the stage with me, but anything else—they're going to have to figure it out.

This counselor, who was once incredibly passionate about working with high school students, has now entered a stage of burnout in four short years of being in this role as a
result of the excessive duties placed upon her shoulders. She stated that her stress level would not be as high if she had been rotating each year instead of being permanently assigned in the cumbersome role of 12th grade/College and Career Counselor.

When work becomes overwhelming, the counselors agreed that they relegate themselves to the mode that most people would in a similar situation: self-preservation. Self-preservation mode for them means cutting corners and not giving 100% in all areas in exchange for being able to “put a check in the box. Done!” Counselor 5 asserted:

I'm not a halfway person and I felt like I was getting to a point where I was halfway doing some stuff. So I'm real excited to kind of reframe that job. And too, the letters, I mean the amount of time I was spending writing letters and doing Common App and SendEdu and then I had to also be calling kids down here who weren't passing and talking to somebody because they're having a bad day or they're suicidal. You just couldn't devote what we needed to devote.

One of the surprising findings from Maslach’s Burnout Inventory was that 63% of the counselors feel depressed and emotionally drained at work as often as a few times a week and as seldom as a few times a month. The results also indicated that 63% of the counselors also responded that they feel used up at the end of the workday and fatigued when they get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job. They report feeling this way as frequently as a few times a week and as seldom as a few times a month. During the focus group, they all agreed that counselors have to practice self-care and make adjustments so that their personal lives do not suffer. Counselor 7 has struggled with pregnancy loss within the past year: “My new line for everybody is ‘Y’all, I'm just trying to make babies and being stressed does not make babies.’” She added that she
realized how detrimental this model was for her health after suffering a miscarriage during the second trimester of her pregnancy.

**Life challenges.** The caseload assignment model determines which population of students that counselors will be serving. At times, situations outside of work can make the job-related tasks feel more unbearable. Counselor 4 discussed how working with teens on her job while raising teens had been problematic for her:

> When I had younger children, I thought it would be more beneficial to work with older children. Well now that my children are older, I considered going back to younger children. . . . The fact that I have a 17 year old and an 18 year old, and dealing with my own teenagers, it can make you not be as effective at work because like the night before, I may have had to discipline my own teenager, then I come back to work here and one of my students is misbehaving. And it's like, 'Ok, I can only deal with so much with teenagers today.'

For her, feeling unable to escape the emotional and complex world of teenagers at home or at work has created a sense of enmeshment that makes work less enjoyable.

Counselor 7 experienced multiple personal tragedies within the span of a few months and had to take a personal leave of absence from work. As the 12th grade/College and Career Counselor, she experienced a significant amount of guilt over being unable to work during that time:

> Last year, I truly apologized to my kids over and over because life happened and it's not their fault, but I felt guilty that life was happening to me and I was not able to be—I couldn't give it. I could not physically, mentally give them what they
needed because life happened to me. When you miss 30 + days of work and
there's families that are—it’s horrible and so I do think it's detrimental.

It is a huge responsibility to have a caseload of seniors counting on you to help them
navigate the decisions and deadlines they will face as they prepare to embark upon their
post-secondary journey. It is understandable for counselors to feel that they have
disappointed others, regardless of the caseload assignment model, when health or
personal circumstances cause them to be unable to fulfill their professional duties.
However, there is an intense amount of pressure on the individual charged with guiding
seniors to be present and prepared to meet the needs of students while providing an
optimal level of service.

One theme that emerged in the interviews that was also supported by Maslach’s
Burnout Inventory was that the counselors feel less burned out when they can spend more
time with students performing appropriate duties. Counselor 3 stated:

It is just the way it is with scheduling, testing, and making sure they are on track
to graduate. A lot of times, that takes precedence over working with kids. . . . It
takes a lot of time when you could be spending more time with them.

When asked to explain further, she added:

The school delegates things that are not necessary to the program. There are a lot
of initiatives and things that come into play that may sound like a good idea, but it
gets in the way of what you are trying to get done. I think a lot of times you do
not realize what is impacting or keeping you from doing things that you should be
doing.
Eighty-eight percent of the counselors reported that they feel exhilarated after working closely with their students. If the caseload assignment model supported time for counselors to provide more direct services equitably to all students, it is likely that their level of job satisfaction would increase.

**Mastery and Feeling Accomplished**

*Power of expertise.* The counselors interviewed for this study reflected that it is empowering to feel knowledgeable and competent in a professional sense. Certain caseload assignment models truly highlight this opportunity for counselors to develop mastery of a specific area or domain, while others seemingly detract from this desired need. When counselors loop with their students, they focus on one grade level at a time, but at the conclusion of that year, they are thrust into functioning as a new grade level counselor—one that they may not have had in four years. In a changing educational landscape, this can be intimidating to a counselor. Counselor 5 shared her thoughts on looping and how it detracts from developing self-efficacy:

> What I realized with looping was that every year, you have to kind of relearn—like ok, this year I'm 11th grade. That means I have Governor's School, that means I have ACT, that means I have all this. Then when we get to seniors, well, it's been four years since you were senior counselor and everything's different, everything's changed. Plus with the new diploma tracks beginning with the Class of 2009, everything just had to be a lot more stringent as far as the transcripts and the credit checks and things like that.

She argued that the changes at the state level necessitated the development of counselors who were specialists in a particular area to ensure that tiny yet important details were not
overlooked and counselors could focus on just one grade level. The results at School B were exactly what Counselor 5 and the vice principal envisioned. Counselor 6, who joined the staff after the static caseload assignment model was in place, has thrived in her role:

I think the main thing is I know what to do with 11th graders. I can do a credit check in my sleep. I know what to look for in my sleep. I can identify things—when I first started this job, I was so terrified I was going to mess things up and Counselor 5 would always say, ‘Don't worry about it. You'll get there. You'll learn it.

She provided an example of the counseling approach she took with students who are not on grade level. Because she is familiar with this group of students, she is aware of the resources and opportunities that are available to support these students getting back on track to graduate. She asserted, “I know that when it comes to kids who are not on grade level, I have virtual school, I have credit recovery, I have project graduation, I have summer school, and I utilize those resources extremely well.” She gave the impression that a counselor who does not work with this population regularly would not feel as confident or competent in meeting the needs of these at-risk students.

Counselor 7 had an opposing view regarding caseload assignment models and counselor efficacy. She expressed that looping supports the development of mastery among school counselors because it provides counselors with experience at all levels:

I also believe that you as a counselor should experience it all—grade levels. So you can begin to learn your craft. So it's not just me who does this. So I know everything. I know what graduation looks like. I know what senior picnic looks
like. I know what to look forward to because I've been there for at least one time.

According to Counselors 6 and 7, it is more beneficial for counselors to understand the big picture, which is supported by the practice of allowing counselors to work with all four grade levels. Each counselor will have their own ideas about the type of experiences that will allow them to feel a sense of mastery, but it is obvious that the caseload does play a role in how fulfilled the counselor feels in their role.

**Singular focus.** Six out of the eight counselors interviewed in this study expressed disdain for the alphabetical looping model. Although many of them do not have personal experience with this model, the idea of having to provide counseling services that cover academics, personal/social needs, and career development/college planning was overwhelming. Counselor 4 worked in a school that utilized this model and stated:

> It is really difficult when you're trying to handle all grades at the same time. It's like you have to be an expert in handling each grade level, what each grade level needs. So I felt like I was running around a whole lot more and more exhausted in trying to service my students and giving them what they needed. Especially—and just being totally honest, when you have 12th grade, they just take priority.

Counselor 5 envisioned that this model would be tantamount to a professional juggling act of duties. She maintained:

> I like to stay with the grade level. The alphabet (assignment) is atrocious. I don't like it. I don't think my brain could do it. The thought of sitting and talking to a freshman parent, and then the next five seconds, I'm talking about a college
application, and then the next five seconds, I'm talking about a scholarship, and then the kid is missing two credits to graduate. I mean—I don’t know how you could do it.

For many of the counselors, counseling four grade levels at the same time inhibits their ability to focus or specialize in one grade level and detracts from the efficiency that they strongly desire. Counselor 5 stated, “A big positive to staying with your grade level is that you know your area so you're confident in that—and not spending part of your time trying to figure out how to do your job.” Time is a factor that most people value, and it came as no surprise that this emerged as a reason why the counselors find this model unappealing.

The most experienced counselors unanimously agree that although the alphabetical model allows relationship building with looping, they find it exhausting to have to be simultaneously knowledgeable of the nuances of each grade level. Counselors 7 and 8 indicated that they did not have strong feelings about this model, primarily because they are relatively new counselors and strongly desire to have more experience about the role of a high school counselor. They admittedly have shortcomings and blind spots when it comes to counseling at a high school, but they have expressed a strong determination to learn their craft even if it means going through trial by fire.

Making a difference. A common theme that emerged almost as frequently as the importance of relationships was the importance of making a difference. The counselors all agree that it is essential that the work that they do in the school setting make a positive impact in the lives of students. Counselor 1 described how this concept provided motivation: “If I didn't feel like I was making a difference, what would be the point of
getting up every day? . . . But knowing that every day is a chance to make a difference, that's what gets me up every morning.” Most counselors expressed a desire to witness the outcomes. For instance, Counselor 7 stated:

I love to see my kids after high school and I don't care what they may tell me. I don't care if they stop me at Wal-Mart, I don't care if they serve me food. I want to go eat there if they want me to. I love to hear the story. I love to know what's your next move. I love to know if you come back and visit. If they went to college. If they tell me ‘I work at Micro-Ingram’, I'm proud of you.

In the Areas of Worklife Survey, 100% of the counselors agreed or strongly agreed that they receive recognition for their work. Counselor 3 described how gratitude expressed in the form of notes and emails from former students and families can be a sentimental reminder that her efforts mattered in the lives of those she served:

I have kept every letter, every thank you note, every email that a parent sent thanking me. That is what you remember. That is what you take with you with all the bad things that go on. The ones that remember to thank you or come back later and visit you and tell you how they are doing. That just makes it worth it.

However, Counselor 2 expressed that it is not necessary for students to convey their appreciation nor does she need any recognition for what she does:

Every day, I want to help someone and when I do that, I try to have just an intrinsic sense of 'Today, I made a contribution.' There may never be feedback about that. I may not get acknowledgement from the family, the board, or the faculty, but intrinsically—inside, I've gotten up that morning and stated that I want to help someone today and please make me sensitive to a spoken or
unspoken need. I get that satisfaction because I'm not looking for recognition. I'm looking for just the assurance that day that I didn't harm and that my heart and mind were intent in helping.

Regardless of how students are assigned to a counselor, each counselor reported that they have an underlying need or desire to touch or positively shape lives. Counselor 5 noted that she is most passionate about helping a student who may have limited opportunities in the future achieve a goal of graduating high school. As a static senior counselor, this passion keeps her motivated and dedicated to helping students despite the exhaustion she often feels.

**Inequity of caseload needs.** The counselors all agreed that certain grade levels require more time and attention. Seniors were consistently labeled as the neediest group. Counselor 3 stated that, “Anytime you have got that group, they usually take precedence.” Realizing that there is inequity in the needs of 12th grade students compared to other grade levels, it seems reasonable to assume that a counselor who always has 12th grade students will likely burn out much faster than a counselor who has a grade level that is not as demanding. Additionally, if a counselor is assigned to multiple grade levels, any other grade level paired with seniors is likely to feel shortchanged because the counselor will most likely have to devote most of his or her energy to working with the seniors. Counselor 1 cautioned against the practice of grouping seniors with another grade level when selecting caseload assignment models:

You don't ever want to put 9th and 12th together because, you know, those are the two most demanding. Getting the 9th graders in, getting them settled in, getting them acclimated to the school and how high school works. And then of
course, with seniors, that's a whole other ball game there. Making sure they get what they need and get out successfully

Counselor 4 echoed the sentiment that it would be prudent to avoid combining 9th and 12th grade. The end result of assigning these grade levels to the same counselor is that the needs of many students will likely go unmet. Counselor 7 shared her experience:

So truthfully, 9th grade fell by the wayside. If I felt like it was something crucial, I could've handled it, but if not—Look, I'll catch you on the back end. Because it's hard to communicate scholarships. . . . So being just one counselor and being good at it is totally hard. Being the 12th grade counselor, and ‘I need to do your career and college,’ and ‘Everybody don't go to college so let me figure out where you're going' or ‘Are you going to get a job?’ . . . So somebody's going to fall short because it's one of me and it's 50,000 responsibilities that you have to do.

Based on these responses, it appears that the best model would be one that allowed one counselor per grade level. However, it is important to note that inequity of needs can exist even when working with the same grade level. This is due to the fact that there are certain populations of students who will require more time and energy. For example, students who are chronically absent, struggle academically, or struggle with behavioral or mental health challenges may require more direct services from their school counselor.

Counselor 6 acknowledged the reality of this problem and stated:

I don't serve the students equitably. Part of that is on them, most of it is on me. Because the state is so focused on graduation rate and handing out diplomas, I spend a lot of my time dealing with nonsense and so my kids that need a little attention don't get much since my kids that don't need at all, I don't see at all, and
the kids who—unless they make a point to get in my face, the kids who are getting 95% of my attention are knuckleheads.

Her colleague and co-counselor, Counselor 5, agreed with this and added:

I think the squeaky wheel gets the worm, the oil, or whatever. So the majority of my time is probably spent with the 'weebles' (students not on grade level) and those who aren't passing. . . . But how I countered that was I was also College and Career" so I was meeting with a lot of the upper level students to give them [recommendation] letters. The problem of me doing College and Career and senior is I wasn't able to give anybody enough attention. The squeaky wheels got the most attention and I don't know that that's any different when you loop.

While Counselor 5 believed that this would be an issue regardless of the model used, Counselor 7, who is also at a school with static counseling assignments, disagreed slightly:

I think some kids get more attention than others, but I do believe the model that we use gives you to have any attention that you would choose as long as you choose it. In my mind, it's the difference between what you want to know. Are you trying to get to know me and the information that I'm giving out there?

She added:

A disadvantage of what we do (being static). . . We know the high kids, the kids that are willing to go the extra mile to get good grades and then we know low kids and the behavior kids. I think we miss dealing with those average, those quiet, those who'll get left behind because I really don't know you.
So while she agreed that effort is an important factor, she also realized that a looping caseload assignment model might provide more time to get to know all students—not just those with high needs. Coincidentally, when posed the same question about inequity of needs, none of the counselors at School A (where they utilize a looping model) had any major concerns or frustration about equitably meeting the needs of their students.

**Accountability.** High school counselors carry a great burden of responsibility for successfully graduating students each year. Additional reports, which must be completed annually, increase the level of accountability for counselors, specifically those charged with handling seniors. Extensive documentation and meticulous record keeping are necessary components for successfully submitting the cohort report at the end of each year and maintaining an acceptable graduation rate according to the guidelines established by the State of Tennessee. This process does not begin at the start of the 12th grade year; instead, it begins when the student enters high school. The caseload assignment model factors into the record-keeping process because if a counselor loops with his or her students, that counselor is the only one checking the transcript and maintaining accurate records for all four years. However, if the student is assigned to a new counselor each year with the static model, multiple sets of eyes have the opportunity to review the transcript and related documents, thereby strengthening the integrity of the record.

Counselor 1 described how it could be beneficial to pass the students along to a new counselor each year for accountability purposes:

You've got one counselor who has done all four and goes all out and does the thing. You may have that other counselor that's not as familiar, and quite
honestly, they just may not be as good at is as somebody else. That's where you get into human error, and I would say that would be one advantage of not looping. Every year, somebody different is looking at that transcript or that credit check. You've got a different set of eyes. It's passed on from year to year and they get to look at it and say, ‘This person needs so and so.’

This counselor made an excellent point about how professional knowledge and personal strengths and weaknesses can weaken the integrity of a counselor’s work. Counselor 5 confirmed that this is exactly why School B embraces this model:

It's a different set of eyes. I think that's a huge, huge point of…Counselor X starts a credit check, Counselor Y adds to the credit check, and then when it gets to Counselor Z, she restarts the credit check. And then when it gets to me, I mean, you wouldn't believe how many—That’s four sets of eyes not to mention [the registrar] going through them, and that, to me, makes a huge difference and is very, very important.

While it is stress-inducing to deal with the minutiae of completing credit checks each semester, entering transcript history, and evaluating transcripts for completion, Counselor 5 stated that it is also the area of her job that brings her the most personal satisfaction:

Graduation rate. Because, I mean, it feels good. This is so much work. It is so much work. It's not just about getting the kids across the stage, it's the documentation for those that left here that you have to provide to show that they're somewhere else and it's that and then to the ones that come to me and you're like 'There's no way they're going to make it. They're not going to graduate. There's no way' and then they do...It's an adrenaline rush for me.
Not every counselor agreed that there is value in sharing the accountability when it comes to record keeping and successfully graduating students. Counselor 7 expressed apprehension about having to share seniors with her two co-counselors next year:

I'm kind of—I have OCD, and so for me to give up a third to somebody else, it really has me on edge because I'm so used to—I’m looking over a letter a day saying, 'Hey, you got the right classes. So I take full responsibility when something goes wrong with my kids, and to share the responsibility with someone else—I think is going to be hard. We all are not alike; me and the other counselors are not alike.

Her fear appeared to be rooted in her awareness that the other counselors may not be as detail-oriented as she is, and they may overlook the need for a student to take a required course. One of the biggest fears of high school counselors is that a student will discover that they are missing a required credit during their last year or semester of school, and the counselor was unable to catch it. This is a legitimate fear because parents have successfully sued school districts over this type of negligence. A counselor who feels confident in trusting his or her abilities over others and values the administrators trusting their accuracy, will likely favor a looping model over a static caseload assignment model. However, a static model will require all counselors to work as a team to ensure the accuracy of records so that there are no surprises at the end of a student’s high school journey.

Security

Multi-faceted impact of decreasing enrollment. Enrollment has major implications on staffing within a school, and that impact trickles down to the counseling
department. When the number of enrolled students decreases, reductions must be made in staffing, including the counseling department. School A was once a large public high school serving students in a large suburban area. In 2014, many schools in the area surrounding School A created municipal school systems, which significantly affected enrollment. The counseling department once consisted of six full-time counselors and a social worker, but after the formation of the municipal systems, their staff was reduced to five full-time counselors. Naturally, the reduction in staff precipitated the reassignment of duties. The counselors collectively decided to continue looping, but some counselors had to function in dual roles to ensure that the needs of the students were met. Counselors 1 and 4 discussed the recent news that they would be losing another counselor for the 2018-19 school year and what that means for the caseload assignment model. According to Counselor 1, “I think we’ll stay looping for now, but our number of students is steadily decreasing, and of course, with that comes counselor positions. So we’re no longer going to have a counselor per grade level after this year.” Counselors 1 and 4 also expressed the fear and anxiety that loomed over them while waiting to hear which counselor would be leaving. Counselor 4, who has experienced the challenges of decreasing enrollment at previous schools, stated that it sometimes feels “like you’re on a sinking ship.” The counselors, like most educators, rely on steady income and desire job security. Consistently living in fear of the “what ifs” in a school with steadily declining enrollment fosters distress and discontent concerning the work environment.

**Summary**

During this qualitative study, various counselor caseload assignment models were discussed with a specific focus on how each one contributed to the level of job
satisfaction for high school counselors. These discussions revealed what each of these counselors value most about their professional role. The common values, or the themes, that emerged throughout the interviews were: (1) belongingness; (2) respect, trust, and autonomy; (3) rest and quality of life; (4) mastery and feeling accomplished; and (5) security.

Throughout the interviews, the participants provided detailed descriptions about their previous and current work experiences as high school counselors. Their stories and reflections illuminated the aspects of their job that provide the most fulfillment or satisfaction. The responses to the interview questions were unanimous on certain topics such as the significance of mattering to others or making a difference. The participants also discussed their greatest frustrations that arise often as a result of the caseload assignment model implemented at their school. Their views lent a voice to an issue that school counselors and school leaders acknowledge, but may not fully understand. One of the goals of this study was to explore this aspect of the high school counselor’s work experience and promote a more thoughtful approach to navigating the task of assigning caseloads of students to counselors.

The interviewees unanimously agreed that relationships are one of the most important variables in the role of a school counselor, and the model does influence and shape the development of the relationships between counselors, families, and students. The static model notably does not support the development of the relationships that counselors prefer to establish with students and families, and in schools where this model is enforced, the absence of those relationships is recognized. The counselors in schools
following a static caseload assignment model had higher depersonalization scores than schools where the counselors loop with their students.

The counselors also revealed how their personalities can aid in their satisfaction with the caseload assignment model implemented at their school. At schools where counselors have a static assignment based on grade level, it is preferable by the counselors that the assignment reflect an alignment between their personality, or counseling approach, and the developmental stage and tasks associated with the grade level. Additionally, the counselors acknowledged that there are times when students’ and counselors’ personalities are misaligned, and expressed that it is unproductive when both parties have to endure the incompatibility for four years.

Some of the counselors also shared that the model followed at a school may require more frequent collaboration and communication between counselors. Counselors working in a school with an alphabetical looping model may be expected to collaborate more frequently to ensure that grade level activities are developed and orchestrated in tandem and that grade level information disseminated to students and other stakeholders is accurate and consistent. When counselors fail to collaborate and communicate, members in the department may feel unsupported and isolated, which has a negative impact on their job satisfaction.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed the importance of counselors feeling respected by administrators for their knowledge, competence, and skills. When administrators trust and respect their counselors, they tend to give them more autonomy and allow them to make decisions or share in the decision-making process. This is a critical point for counselors when it relates to selecting the caseload assignment model.
because this decision shapes nearly every facet of how they are expected to perform their job.

Several counselors spoke most passionately about how their role as a counselor has evolved to a point where the job and the expectations have reduced their happiness and quality of life. The Emotional Exhaustion scores for over half of the counselors on Maslach’s Burnout Inventory corroborated these views. The caseload assignment model appeared to be a contributing factor as the counselors with the highest Emotional Exhaustion scores primarily work at a school with a static counseling model.

The counselors’ interviews highlighted the importance or value of mastering skills and fulfilling accomplishments. The counselors expressed the benefit of having expertise in their assigned role and feeling confident in their ability to effectively meet the needs of students and families. For some counselors, they believed that the static model provided the best opportunity to gain mastery in their role. By focusing on a single grade level, they were able to focus solely on gaining in-depth knowledge and becoming well versed in the needs of counseling students in that particular grade level. However, other counselors believed that being knowledgeable of the intricacies of counseling all four high school grade levels, or looping, best supports the mastery and growth of skills and competence because there are no blind spots or gaps in knowledge.

Accountability also emerged as an important value that counselors seek to satisfy in their role within the school. School counselors work collaboratively with the registrar to maintain accurate records of students’ grades and credits to determine their eligibility for graduation. When counselors loop, they independently maintain and review the records for four years. However, when counselors are statically assigned, they must
review and maintain these records for a full academic year and before passing them along to the next counselor. This method promotes a strong sense of accountability because multiple individuals are reviewing the record to check for errors and missing credits. When handling historical grades for a sizeable group of students, human error may create an unfortunate situation where errors are not caught until a later time, potentially jeopardizing the student’s ability to graduate.

Most notably, all counselors expressed how meaningful it is to know that their work made a difference in the lives of students. The examples and stories they shared highlighted the strengths of the models used at their schools. They also conveyed how the model influenced their ability to serve students equitably. These conversations often indicated how students play a vital role in determining the services and attention they receive from the counselor, which sometimes produces feelings of guilt for counselors who desire stronger relationships with all students—not just those who are failing or presenting behavioral challenges.

The conversations with the counselors also shed light on how declining enrollment or persistently low enrollment at the school can influence staffing decisions, and consequently, counseling caseload assignment models. The threat of job security was notably higher at Schools A and C, and this fear was detected in their scores on Maslach’s Burnout Inventory. When schools begin to lose counselors, administrators and counselors are often forced to reevaluate their caseload assignment model and are sometimes forced to choose a model that does not support the values of school counselors. Chapter 5 will discuss the findings of this study, implications of this study, as well as recommendations for further study.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how the work values of high school counselors influence their job satisfaction and how the counselor caseload assignment model influences the job satisfaction of high school counselors. The data collected and analyzed from this study offer an enhanced understanding of school counselors’ perspectives on the execution of their role in the school setting. The data collected from this study was derived from interviews conducted with eight high school counselors, responses from these eight counselors on Maslach’s Burnout Inventory, the Areas of Worklife Survey, and the School Counselor Assignment Questionnaire, and a focus group consisting of four out of the eight school counselor participants.

This chapter contains a summary of the major findings and implications from this study as well as recommendations for future areas of study. There is a limited amount of research available that addresses counselor caseload assignment models, and this study contributes to the general understanding of the various models for assigning students to school counselors and the implications for their usage. This study establishes connections between caseload assignment models and the values that they detract from as well as those that they support. Additionally, this study sheds light on the values of school counselors and how the fulfillment of those values can influence their levels of job satisfaction.
Findings

The questions that this qualitative study explored were:

- How does the counselor caseload assignment model influence job satisfaction among high school counselors?
- Which counselor caseload assignment models are best matched with the work values of high school counselors?

The data collected in this study revealed several key elements that counselors value in their professional role. These elements can each be grouped and classified as either basic or psychological needs. This study utilizes Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs to establish a framework for understanding the values of school counselors and how they influence job satisfaction. In the next section, each of the values will be discussed with a brief summary of the findings. The counselors primarily discussed three different types of counselor caseload assignment models throughout the interviews and focus group. Each model had distinct advantages and disadvantages. These advantages and disadvantages have been reframed to demonstrate how they support or fail to support the ideals that counselors value in the sections that follow.

Belongingness

Belongingness encompasses the need to feel accepted or viewed as essential by a person or group. The views shared by the counselors revealed how meaningful it is for counselors to develop relationships and connections with students and families, and how the counselor caseload model does greatly impact their ability to nurture the desired value of belongingness. The four-year looping models are most supportive of the development of a sense of belonging for school counselors because they allow the counselor several
years of fostering a working relationship with the student and their family. However, the counselors at Schools B and C also reported that they were able to develop relationships with students, but they acknowledged that the connection was not nearly as secure as the ones made with students over a four-year period and there were information gaps due to their lack of knowledge and familiarity of the students, families, family history, and home environment.

Counselors also desire to be perceived as an essential member of the counseling team. This value is fostered through collaboration and communication with colleagues. While it can be argued that all counselors within a school must work collaboratively, some models require more collaboration and communication than others in order to be maximally effective in meeting the needs of students. Specifically, the alphabetical looping model perhaps requires the most collaboration and communication because counselors are working with students assigned to the same grade level and will most likely need to agree on programming, procedures, and information that is disseminated from the counseling department. If all team members are committed to the vision of working as a team, this model can strengthen the sense of belonging.

Contrastingly, counselors who work in a static grade level model may feel more isolation than their colleagues who implement a different model. This is largely due to these counselors having a singular focus and not having a strong need to be preoccupied with the professional duties of their colleagues. Counselors 7 and 8, who most recently used the static model, argued that this is a detrimental practice because counselors are uninformed and fail to see the big picture about the work taking place within the department. Not only does it detract from a sense of belonging, but it also inhibits self-
efficacy because the counselors lack knowledge of the intricacies of other grade levels because they have grown accustomed to operating in silos.

**Respect, Trust, and Autonomy**

The participants indicated the great significance of having respect, trust, and autonomy in their role as a counselor. While the model itself did not appear to have a direct impact on the achievement of respect, trust, and autonomy, the manner in which the caseload was selected did appear to significantly contribute to the counselors’ views on these values. This study revealed that shared decision-making is essential to counselors feeling that they are trusted and respected by school leaders. Including counselors in making leadership decisions that directly impact the school counseling program not only empowers the counselors, but it also strengthens the accountability of the decisions made within the school. School counselors are a vital part of the support system designed to assist students throughout their years in school. They are involved in academic support, behavioral interventions, and career and post-secondary planning while navigating personal and mental health situations that may occur during a student’s years in school. They have a uniquely wide arc of a perspective that can be greatly beneficial to the team entrusted to make decisions involving student management.

**Rest and Quality of Life**

Rest and reduced levels of stress are physiological needs that the participants in this study consider as lacking at times due to their role as school counselors. Far too often, tasks that are unrelated to counseling are placed on the desks of school counselors. ASCA outlines the appropriate duties for school counselors; however, the immediate needs of a school often supersede the recommendations and counselors are required to
absorb the extra duties. The participants discussed how the excessive duties that accompany certain grade level assignments can be physically and mentally exhausting, leading to counselor burnout and loss of job satisfaction. The participants most frequently discussed the pitfalls of being assigned as senior counselor because of the special focus and attention this group requires. Senior counselors from Schools B and C where the school follows a static model described how serving in this role for consecutive years has negatively impacted their personal lives and health. Their high Emotional Exhaustion scores as reported on Maslach’s Burnout Inventory supported the words conveyed during their interviews.

**Mastery and Feeling Accomplished**

The counselor caseload assignment models discussed in this study contribute to the concept of mastery in different ways. For example, counselors assigned to a static caseload assignment model possess strong confidence in their knowledge of their assigned grade level and the intricacies of meeting the academic, personal/social, and career development needs of a student in that particular grade level. In fact, many deem this as the greatest benefit of the static model because it allows counselor to focus on one single grade level and expand their knowledge base in that specific grade level to better serve students. However, counselors at School A also conveyed that they value mastery, although how this occurs at School A is significantly different from Schools B and C. For counselors at School A, they believe that learning how each grade level operates is a true sign of mastery. They see the broader picture and desire to be useful to their students for multiple years, although it requires the counselor to constantly be in a “learning” mindset due to regular changes and improvements in how things operate at a school. They also
expressed valuing the fact that they truly know their students, which may be viewed as a form of mastery. Both models enable counselor to achieve mastery in their roles; however, the definition of mastery and how it is achieved can differ based on the model implemented in the school. Both paths towards mastery ultimately allow the counselors to feel a sense of accomplishment with their work.

Many view working in education as a public service, and school counselors are no exception. School counselors are employed to positively impact the lives of the students they serve, and because they enter the field with this understanding, it is understandable why each counselor that participated in this study cited making a difference as one of their values. Not only did they indicate that it is a high priority value for them, but most identified this as the driving force or primary source of motivating them to continue with the work that they do. Despite the differences in each counselor caseload assignment model, each of the counselors were able to reflect on how they are currently contributing in a positive way in the lives of the students they serve. Notably, two of the counselors at School B, which has static assignments, shared that they make the greatest impact in the lives of students deemed as “at-risk” or “difficult to work with.” The fact that they invest the most time in making a difference with this group is attributed to the fact that their goal is to move students from one grade level to the next, and they are aware that this special group of students may require more hands-on assistance to reach that goal. The feedback from the counselors collectively supported the assertions of Rayle (2006), who stated that high school counselors experienced higher levels of job satisfaction and feelings of mattering when their roles were designed to allow more direct interaction with students in counseling-related activities.
Dual assignment caseloads tend to detract from the self-efficacy of counselors as they are admittedly often overwhelmed with the needs of one of the two grade levels assigned to them. Being overwhelmed sometimes leads to one group being underserved while the other group gets disproportionately more attention from the counselor. Dual assignment caseloads are most commonly seen in schools with a static counseling assignment. For example, the counselors at School C in this study had static assignments as either the 10th, 11th, or 12th grade counselor. They equally divided the 9th grade caseload into one-thirds and the senior counselor was also responsible for College & Career counseling. Another pitfall with the static model that was identified in this study is that in the time-constrained one-year counseling relationship that is characteristic of the static model, the counselor tends to only get to know problematic students. They quickly become familiar with the students having academic, behavioral/emotional, or attendance issues or those students who make a concerted effort to get to know the counselor. The inequity of caseloads can prevent counselors from meeting the needs of all students and seeing the progress in their work as regularly and as efficiently as they may desire.

Lastly, the participants discussed the importance of having integrity regarding their work or accountability. High school counselors are responsible for a vast amount of data and often responsible for converting grade averages and entering historical data consisting of students’ grades and conduct. If there is a high level of errors, it is often attributed to human error. To combat this, proponents of the static model argue that rotating the historical data for each student to a new counselor each year promotes a stronger sense of accountability because it allows a new person to review the record each year. Counselors who loop with their students for four years may not be as cautious and
meticulous when reviewing records because they do not anticipate finding errors in their own work. Having a stronger sense of accountability likely lowers the level of stress and anxiety for some counselors because there is less fear that a mistake will be caught too far down the road for a correction to be made. Mistakes that are not caught in a timely manner may prevent a student from graduating on time, and the culpability for that administrative error will likely rest on the shoulders of the counselor(s) responsible for maintaining and reviewing that student’s records. By sharing the responsibility of reviewing and maintaining accurate student records, counselors are able to experience more job satisfaction through the accountability that the model provides.

Security

Job security is more than just a perceived threat for educators; it is a reality. When enrollment declines at a school, a reduction in force must occur to balance the number of students with the number of faculty members to ensure a balanced budget. To balance school budgets, often personnel must be reduced, including counselor positions. This impacts the counseling caseload assignment model because losing a counselor increases the likelihood of dual role assignments. School A has suffered through this experience over the past three years, and the negative results of the lack of job security is reflected in their scores on Maslach’s Burnout Inventory and the Areas of Worklife Survey. When the values discussed in this section are acknowledged and fulfilled through the organization of the school counseling program, counselors are more apt to experience increased levels of satisfaction in their work.
Implications

The desired outcome of this study was to provide a clearer understanding of how the counselor caseload assignment model influences the job satisfaction of high school counselors and to determine which models best align with certain values. School counselors in this study were able to convey with clarity the advantages and disadvantages of the models and what they envision for improvements in selecting models in the future.

One of the most obvious recommendations that emerged after reviewing the data collected for this study was that school leaders should embrace shared decision-making practices for matters involving or related to the work of school counselors. This aligns with College Board’s findings in their study that collaborative decision-making between principals and school counselors not only empowers school counselors, but it also strengthens their job satisfaction. School counselors are expected to advocate for the students they serve, and by joining the conversations regarding decisions about the caseload assignment model, not only are they advocating for the needs of students, but they are also advocating for their profession. Having a voice in the decision-making process will allow counselors to push for appropriate duties, equitable caseloads, and an effective organizational system for their school counseling program.

Another possible recommendation for school leadership teams would be to assess the work values of counselors and consider what matters to them when selecting a model. There are formal tools to assess work values, but this may also be carried out informally with individual conversations or an end of the year collaborative meeting with counselors. For many counselors, this was a critical area that was admittedly overlooked
by counselors as well as administrators when considering caseload assignment models. The benefit of having this information is that aligning the model closely with the counselors’ values will have a positive effect on their level of job satisfaction, and in turn, increase the likelihood of reducing the counselor turnover rate and early departure from the field.

The participants revealed that none of the schools had a formal process or timeline in place for reviewing the counselor caseload assignment model. It would be beneficial for counseling teams and school administrators to periodically review the effectiveness and appropriateness of the caseload assignment model used. The purpose of reviewing the model regularly would be to ensure that the model is aligned with the goals of the school and that it is student-centered. Additionally, the model should align with the program management agreement and the annual goals identified by the counselors and administrators. In most schools, the program management agreement and goals are updated annually. While the model does not have to be reviewed annually, it would be advantageous to incorporate the rationale for the model into the stated goals and agreement each year as a reminder of the purpose that it serves in the overall plan for meeting school and student needs.

Throughout the interviews with the participants in this study, self-efficacy and mastery of skills emerged as two areas that are valued by high school counselors. Many of them expressed that that favored a model that allowed them to master the knowledge related to a specific grade level to gain a sense of accomplishment and pride in their skills as a counselor. Another way that school leaders can foster the growth of this value among their counseling team is to provide meaningful, relevant development opportunities for
counselors and encourage the establishment of counseling professional learning networks so that counselor can share ideas and best practices. Numerous organizations such as the American School Counseling Association, College Board, and ACT offer training and workshops designed for high school counselors. These opportunities should be presented to counselors and the necessary supports (i.e., funding to cover the registration and travel expenses, coverage in the office, and paid leave) should be provided to minimize any obstacles that might prevent counselors from attending these workshops or trainings.

When schools face the challenge of declining enrollment and have to make tough decisions about staffing, the counselor caseload assignment model is often affected. The end result is that sometimes counselors are assigned multiple grade levels, which often perpetuates counselor burnout, decreased task efficiency, and weakening of the student-counselor relationship. To avoid these unwanted effects, school administrators and counselors should consider the pitfalls of combining certain grade levels when assigning a caseload. To avoid the most obvious imbalances in equity of services, a counselor should not be assigned to two grade levels that require a significant amount of individualized attention (e.g., 9th and 12th grade). It is also recommended that these decision-makers consider creative alternatives to accommodate the reduction in counseling staff. One possibility might be utilizing non-profit organizations in the community that specialize in post-secondary planning such as EdSouth’s Student Outreach Services to provide college information to students and families. Schools could opt to outsource for programming needs by having organizations such as the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation provide a guest speaker for financial aid events to educate families about financial aid and the application process.
The participants often discussed how their duties at work often negatively influenced their job satisfaction. The duties were described as debilitating and unnecessary. They were viewed as time fillers that took the focus off of more important areas that needed to be addressed. A final recommendation for school administrators and district leaders would be to ensure that counselors are assigned appropriate duties. For example, a senior counselor should not be held solely responsible for coordinating and organizing all of the senior activities without the assistance or support of a team consisting of teachers and an administrator. Static counselors who are assigned to seniors for multiple years can easily grow weary in their role when assigned these responsibilities for several consecutive years. Additionally, school leaders may want to consider technological solutions to provide the administrative support that will reduce the frustration that counselors encounter with scheduling and maintaining credit checks on students. A computer program or efficient system of managing data could greatly reduce the amount of time that counselors spend on indirect services to allow the relationship building that is greatly desired by counselors regardless of the model implemented at the school.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study sought to provide a deeper understanding of counselor caseload assignment models, a topic that had been minimally covered in educational and counseling research at the time of this study. The interviews, surveys, and focus groups all contributed to uncovering the aspects of their job that school counselors value as well as the intersection of job satisfaction and the counselor caseload assignment model. The discussions for the focus group stimulated conversations about best practices and
considerations for counselors and school leaders that were outlined in the previous
section. While this study added to the existing research from Akos et al. (2009), Mackey
(2013), and Williamson (2011) that addresses counselor caseload assignment models,
there are additional prospective areas for further study.

One of the recommended areas for further research would be to explore parent
and student perspectives based on models. While it is useful to understand how the model
influences counselor’s job satisfaction, it is equally as important to consider how the
counseling experience may vary for students and parents with each of the different
models. Another area that this study did not fully explore that could be covered in future
research is a closer examination of the alphabetical looping caseload assignment model.
Several of the participants in this study expressed their apprehension about this model,
but none of the counselor had extensive experience with it. It would be useful to examine
the perspectives of counselor currently using the alphabetical looping model to have a
more balanced understanding of each of the models.

In the current data-driven climate of education, measurable outcomes are greatly
desired. Another potential area for future research would be to study outcomes such as
the graduation rate, disciplinary referrals/actions, and truancy rates based on the
counseling caseload assignment model used at each school. Another recommended area
for future research would be to explore daily counseling activities based on the different
caseload assignment models. Many counselors use software such as School Counselor
Use of Time Analysis (SCUTA) or a spreadsheet to record how their time is spent. Since
appropriate duties have an impact on job satisfaction and efficiency, it would be useful to
examine how the use of time varies based on the model implemented.
Limitations

There were limitations with this qualitative study that could have impacted the findings. The sample size was relatively small and only used three schools as the source for participants. The counselor participants all agreed to participate on a voluntary basis. Only one of the three schools had a 100% participation rate of all of their grade level counselors. The counselors from the other two schools declined participating due to time constraints. Another limitation in this study was that each of the schools where the counselors were employed was located in the same city or one of the neighboring suburban areas. Including different geographical areas in the sample could have yielded different results.

Summary

This study identified the values of a group of high school counselors in suburban high schools in Tennessee and explored how the counselor caseload assignment model used in each school aligned with their work values and influenced their level of job satisfaction. This study found that some of the most commonly agreed upon values include (1) belongingness; (2) respect, trust, and autonomy; (3) rest and quality of life; (4) mastery and feeling accomplished; and (5) security. Furthermore, this study found that certain models do in fact support the attainment of these values to a greater degree than others. School leaders and counselors can take steps to be more thoughtful about the selection and implementation of counselor caseload assignment models, a step that could positively impact the job satisfaction of school counselors, the quality of the services provided by the school counseling program, and the retention rate of high school counselors. The counselor caseload assignment model is just one aspect of the job and
there are likely other contributing factors that influence their level of job satisfaction. This study contributed to the existing body of knowledge about counselor caseload assignment models by exploring its congruence with specific job values and demonstrating its powerful impact on the job satisfaction of high school counselors.
References


APPENDIX A
TITLE OF STUDY
The Influence of Counselor Caseload Assignment Models on the Job Satisfaction of High School Counselors

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Constance Certion
Carson-Newman University
(901)210-2218
cbcertion@cn.edu

PURPOSE OF STUDY
You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

The purpose of this study is to explore how the work values of high school counselors aligns with counseling caseload assignment models and how the counselor caseload assignment model influences the job satisfaction of high school counselors.

STUDY PROCEDURES
You will be asked to complete the School Counselor Assignment Questionnaire, Areas of Worklife Survey, and Maslach’s Burnout Inventory for this study. The School Counselor Assignment Questionnaire, Maslach’s Burnout Inventory, and the Areas of Worklife Survey will all be administered online.

Thirty to forty-five minutes will be allotted for each interview and thirty minutes will be allotted for the focus group.

Interviews and focus groups will be audiotaped to aid in transcribing the data for this study. The audio tapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

RISKS
There is a limited amount of potential risk in this study. Due to the nature of the study, the only stress that you might feel is from answering the questions during the interview or survey because the questions are designed to elicit personal views and information. Measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality, and those assurances are outlined in the Confidentiality section below. You may decline to answer any or all questions, and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.
BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, I hope that the information obtained from this study may contribute to the understanding of counseling caseload assignment models in the school setting. This study holds great value due to the benefits it can offer for students, school counselors, and other stakeholders in education. Determining how the caseload assignment model influences the job satisfaction of counselors can contribute to higher levels of productivity, efficiency, and improve the retention rate of high school counselors.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your responses to this survey and any interview questions will be anonymous. Please do not include any personal identifying information on your surveys. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents.
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher.

Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided on the first page. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the Primary Investigator, please contact the Institutional Review Board at (865) 354-3000, ext. 4822.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.
CONSENT

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature ______________________________ Date __________

Investigator's signature _____________________________ Date __________
APPENDIX B
School Counselor Assignment Questionnaire

1. How many core school counselors (full time with caseloads) are at your school? (Please do not include other support personnel)

2. Approximately how many students attend your school?

3. Approximately how many students are in your caseload?

4. What grade levels are represented in your caseload? (List all that apply)

5. Does your school counseling department adhere to the ASCA National Model?

6. What method is used to assign counselors to students in your school?
   - Grade level – static (counselors remain with the same grade level each year)
   - Grade level – looping (counselors move with their students to the next grade level each year)
   - Alphabetical
   - Domain Specific
   - Academy/Track
   - Blend
   - Other

7. If you answered OTHER for caseload assignment, please describe:

8. Please rate the following questions based on your experience under your current form of school counselor caseload assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment is effective.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment encourages developing helping relationships with the students in our caseloads.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment allows us to develop relationships with parents.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment is helpful in delivering a well-coordinated guidance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment allows for individual student planning.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment is helpful in delivering responsive services.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment is conducive to utilizing system supports.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment allows us to be at or below 20% in system support.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment allows us to serve all students equitably.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment is effective for supporting school transitions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment is clear, e.g. students and parents always know which counselor they need to speak with.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment allows for frequent collaboration.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment takes advantage of our strengths.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment creates a problem when one of our counselors is not present.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Our school counselor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>109</td>
<td>assignment allows us to plan and use our time efficiently.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment allows us to function as a cohesive unit.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment is conducive to using data to plan and evaluate school counseling services.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Our school counselor assignment allows us to be leaders and advocates.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C
Interview Questions

1. What is your background as a school counselor? (Years and type of experience, highest level of education earned, and any specialized training)
2. How is your school counseling office structured in terms of staffing?
3. Describe for me the organization of the leadership team at your school and which administrator is responsible for your department.
4. Can you provide an example of how the administrative team influences decisions about the operations within the Counseling Department?
5. Describe the counselor caseload assignment model that your school uses and the size of each counselor’s current caseload.
6. Tell me more about the process of selecting a counseling caseload assignment model at your school and your thoughts are on the process.
7. How does the department approach the task of reviewing the counseling caseload model? What prompts the decision to review the model?
8. What do you perceive are advantages/disadvantages of your caseload assignment model in developing relationships with students and their families?
9. What do you perceive are advantages/disadvantages of your caseload assignment model in developing relationships with teachers?
10. How does your caseload assignment model influence your ability to equitably serve the needs of all students on your caseload?
11. How is the current caseload assignment model personally and professionally beneficial you? In what ways is the current model detrimental to you?
12. If you have worked under a different counselor caseload assignment model before, what do you perceive to be the advantages and disadvantages of the other assignment model?
13. What caseload assignment model do you believe best suits the needs of students? Why?
14. What are the current areas of focus for your school’s counseling department? How satisfied are you with the current focus of your counseling program?
15. How does your current role support your need to feel a sense of mattering?
16. Which aspect of your job gives you the most personal satisfaction? What prevents you from doing your best work now?