

Role and Function: "Counselors Caught Up in Other Responsibilities"

CRITICAL INCIDENT

Background

As a 2nd-year high school counselor, I am distressed by the nature and function of my job as determined by the principal of my school. It was my intention, indeed it was my training, to be a counselor who would be instrumental in helping students with career and educational plans. However, I am caught up in administrative tasks that have little to do with my role as supporter of students' academic achievement.

My school, Brandon High, is one of 22 high schools located in a large urban school district. This

school has many superlatives attached to it, and unfortunately they are these negative superlatives: the highest dropout rate (22%), the largest percentage of students on free or reduced lunch (85%), the smallest number of students pursuing a higher education (12%), and the least percentage of enrollees in higher level mathematics and science (8%).

I see no effort in the way of programs or services to give the students of this school knowledge about higher education. The majority of these students' parents do not have a higher education, and a recurring theme is being voiced by parents, teachers, and administration: "a high school education is as far as anyone needs to go." It is my observation that the students of Brandon High wear their "we don't have time for the prissy airs of higher education" label rather proudly. Dead-end jobs and dead-end courses seem to be a rite of passage in this community.

It is precisely because of the limited experience this community has had with postsecondary education that I feel the students of this school need a counselor to aggressively seek to supply them with information that will increase their knowledge and understanding of how the curriculum can widen their options. They need to know how higher education can raise their standard of living. It is unacceptable to me that the demographics and backgrounds for these students should limit their motivation to seek higher education. I contend that, if made aware of the salary scales that correspond to postsecondary training, many of Brandon's students will develop a commitment to achieve beyond General Mathematics II and anatomy and physiology.

Unfortunately, this guidance program will not be fostering conditions that ensure Brandon's 1,956 students are prepared to choose from a wide range of postsecondary options, including college. My colleagues and I can continually try to wrestle ourselves free of many of the administrative duties we have been assigned. In addition to doing all we can for the 1,956 students in our charge, the principal has assigned our counseling staff of three the following duties: all the standardized testing for this school; the patrolling of halls in the morning, afternoon, and during class changes; lunch duty for each counselor once a week; crowd control during all

assemblies, pep rallies, and events that happen during the school day; many administrative tasks that require report writing such as the special education incident report, which took a week of data gathering; and the wearing of a two-way radio so that one of us is on duty each day for emergencies, such as reporting to the scene of a fight or intercepting an intruder on campus. Some days we do little beyond patrolling halls, responding to fights, and monitoring assemblies.

My two colleagues are not nearly as distressed by these assignments as I am. They maintain that it is all part of the job, will not change, and is not worth getting worked up over. They point out that the students do not want the services I want to put into place anyway. Because I talked incessantly about the need for change, my colleagues grew weary and decided to appoint me department chairman so that I would become the spokesperson for the counseling department. They told me to go ahead and make whatever changes I wanted, and they will try to support me if it does not require any after-school work.

They told me they like me as a person, but I am terribly naive. They good-naturedly harass me about my inability to recognize how deeply rooted the beliefs of this community are and how resistant these beliefs are to change. They assure me over and over that I am expending a great deal of emotional energy for naught, as I am fighting a losing battle. However, they are quick to tell me that if I insist on pursuing this crazy notion of changing things, they will lend their signature or voice to most of my idealistic notions.

Incident

Having secured the endorsement of my colleagues, albeit an unenthusiastic endorsement, I used this first year to seize every opportunity to try to win the administration over to my point of view and to gradually be relieved of many of our administrative obligations. I started the campaign by designing a program aimed at helping our ninth graders understand the impact financial aid could have on their future.

I developed a program in which I would train volunteers to walk each ninth grader through the financial aid process for

higher education. My thoughts were that if these students understood that higher education was a financial possibility, it may increase their commitment to achievement and more students would enroll in the higher level classes. I mapped out the time it would take to train the volunteers and put the program into place and explained that we could do this program in the same amount of time it takes us to monitor halls each day. My administrator's reply was, "We are short-handed in administration. We all have to be team players and be willing to pitch in to do our part. This is not really a needed service as these kids aren't interested in college." I then asked him if we could negotiate shifting something else out of guidance so that we could put this program into place. His reply was, "I don't know what that could be." I asked him to consider a workable plan for hall monitoring that did not use the counselors. He appeared exasperated with me and said, "Why do you have to push so hard?" and turned and walked away. Several similar incidents followed during the first year.

At the close of the first year, the guidance staff did not have a single new program in place and ended the year with as many administrative duties as they had at the beginning of the year. I decided I needed to present my case in writing. During the summer I carefully outlined the activities the guidance office would like implemented during the year. The activities involved many broad-based programs designed to develop in the students a commitment to achievement and an understanding of career and educational opportunities beyond high school. I listed programs, activities, and tasks and included a detailed time line of when and how to accomplish each. The report, signed by all three counselors, was submitted to the principal with a cover letter requesting a meeting to discuss the goals of the guidance program and expressing our desire to problem solve with him about how the administrative duties could be handled. Two weeks passed and we heard nothing.

Discussion

After 2 weeks and still no word from the principal on our proposal to transform Brandon's guidance program, I decided to drop

by his office and try to get him to discuss the proposal. He said he had not had an opportunity to even take the report out of the envelope as he was busy revamping the physical education/athletic program. "You know we had a miserable football season last year, and I can't see standing by and letting that happen this year," he said. I was able to shift his attention to the guidance program (after 20 minutes of hearing about the problems of the athletic department). I explained that because school was starting in 3 weeks, we needed him to read and react to our plan, so we could agree on changes and have time to implement the approved programs. His reply was, "Things are just fine like they are." He went on to express that this low-socioeconomic community embraced their future in menial, low-paying jobs and that I should "respect the rights of these parents to guide their children and quit imposing your values on these children." He went on to say, "By harping on higher education you are making these people feel lesser than those who have college degrees." It was obvious he had no intention of discussing or listening to our proposal for change and that his basic beliefs about the students in this community would prohibit any changes in the near future.

I was angry at the inconsequential way he was disregarding my views and my proposal, which had taken hours to put together. My reaction shocked even myself. I asked him if he would help me get a transfer to another school where I could do the job for which I was trained. He curtly replied it was past the transfer request deadline but that I was welcome to find another job in another district and angrily added, "As a matter of fact it would be best for you to find another job, as you have snubbed your nose at the people of this community and their values since you got here. You think you know what is best for them and you haven't tried to understand why they don't want what you want for their children."

QUESTIONS

1. What steps should I have taken to present the proposal so that it would be considered by the principal?
2. Was I insensitive to the community standards, and should I

have been more accepting of the status quo for these students and their future?

3. What strategies could I have used to better identify with the community and eliminate the impression that I did not respect and value the parents' rights to guide their children?
4. Should I have tried to make changes more slowly? Should I have started my campaign with someone other than the principal?
5. Should I abandon this fight and seek a job elsewhere?

RESPONSES TO THE INCIDENT

Jim Whitledge

The counselor at Brandon High School is to be commended for having the desire to do the job for which he or she was trained and educated. There are other factors that must be considered, however, in the above scenario. Prior to his or her interview, for example, the counselor had an obligation to find out what the position was all about. Finding out what he or she knows now may have determined whether to take the position in the first place.

Once in the counseling position, the counselor perceived himself to be proactive in providing a positive counseling program for students and attempted to work with the principal and colleagues toward that end. According to Section D.1.a of the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics in reference to role definition, "Counselors define and describe for their employers and employees the parameters and levels of their professional roles" (American Counseling Association, 1995). Sections C and D of the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) Ethical Standards for School Counselors also support this premise in referencing the school counselor's responsibility to colleagues and professional associates as well as to school and community (American School Counselor Association, 1992).

The counselor must consider that there is some conflict with the above and Section D.1.1 of the ACA Code, which states that "The acceptance of employment in an agency or institution implies that counselors are in agreement with its general policies and princi-

ples." This same section indicates that counselors work with employers toward professional standards and bringing about institutional policy changes that are conducive to students' developmental growth (American Counseling Association, 1995).

Another factor to consider is that the counselor appeared to impose his or her values on the students (and community) in terms of emphasizing solely the need for a college education and suggesting a guidance program that would bring this to fruition. The ACA Code of Ethics, Section A.5.b (supported in Section A of the ASCA Standards) provides that "Counselors are aware of their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and how these apply in a diverse society and avoid imposing their values on clients" (American Counseling Association, 1995).

The counselor may have used a slightly different approach in working with the principal. The counselor could have enlisted the principal's support to provide a counseling program that would better meet the developmental needs of the students in the school. There are many resources the counselor could use in working with the principal. The state may have a comprehensive guidance and counseling model that would call for implementing a developmental counseling program in all schools. The National Career Development Association (1999) guidelines and ASCA's national standards for school counseling programs could be referenced and used in working with the principal, colleagues, and community members. Consulting with professional counseling associations, such as ASCA and ACA, and their codes of ethics, could also prove helpful.

The counseling colleagues did not appear to be that supportive of change, so the counselor really had to work to get their support as well as the principal's support. In addition, the counselor could work to form a guidance advisory group that might consist of teachers, parents, administrators, community members, counselors, and others who may have a vested interest in the students of the school. The advisory group could work to conduct a needs assessment and implement a comprehensive guidance and counseling program.

Overall, perhaps it would have been in the counselor's best interest to emphasize the importance of a comprehensive guidance program for students as opposed to how the counselor's values being reached might provide a better future for the students. This approach may have prevented the counselor from being viewed as attempting to impose his or her values on the community and the school.

Change is something that can take some time to occur. People in the school may have been reluctant to change if they felt comfortable in what they were doing and did not see the benefits that would result from change. The counselor in this scenario does have the option to seek employment elsewhere if he or she feels that students' needs are not being met and the school district, through its employees, is unwilling to work to bring about needed change.

Lawrence E. Tyson

One of the most important tools to obtain support and ownership of a school counseling program is through the creation of a guidance committee. Guidance committees are often overlooked by counselors who see the creation, approval, and delivery of services as a territorial issue. That is, they see ideas for programs, services, and maintenance of those services as the responsibility of those working as counselors. This mentality could not be further from the truth. Guidance committees, when properly created and functioning, can be the best way for discussing and initiating ideas regarding the delivery of services. Guidance committees operate on the premise that the school counseling program is comprehensive in the sense that it is interdisciplinary. Therefore, because the counseling program permeates across and through disciplines, the leaders in those disciplines also have a stake in the quality and delivery of guidance and counseling services. The counselor in this scenario should have created and nurtured a committee comprising essential personnel who would be supportive of his or her efforts, contribute new ideas, and act as a "sounding board" regarding future plans. A guidance committee should comprise leaders within the school community. These members might include representatives from the

faculty, administration, as well as parents, possible business leaders, and students. In response to Question 3, the inclusion of parent leaders on the guidance committee would allow the counselor to "get a feel" for the community's feelings and thoughts about some of the initiatives being considered. The counselor would have had a much easier time "selling" his or her ideas if the counselor were not alone in his or her efforts. A guidance committee would be able to give support and offer suggestions for program initiatives and implementation. However, most of all, the committee would feel a sense of ownership that would transfer to the remaining faculty members and administration. A school's counseling and guidance program should be a shared ownership by the entire faculty and administration. The development of a guidance committee is a good start to achieving that goal.

School counselors, especially counselors new to their jobs, should always be sensitive to community standards, morals, and values. It is imperative that school counselors who are new to their school become acquainted with their parent and community population. Community profiles are essential to understanding the "climate" within which the counselor will be working. School counselors should always ethically advocate for positive growth and the attainment of healthy goals of their students. However, in this case, it appears this counselor does not understand the community within which he or she is working. One's values can become very much the issue in being accepted in the school and home community. It is imperative for school counselors to examine their rationale for actions being considered. Our personal values always play a role in our personal decision-making process.

Often, one of the necessary ingredients for successful employment is often ambiguous. This ingredient is "a good fit." This is sometimes hard to define, as the parts of "a good fit" are hard to quantify. However, some tangible ingredients regarding relationships may be how one observes interactions between them and others, or the quality of conversations between colleagues (i.e., other counselors, faculty members, administration). Some questions asked might be, "How do I think I'm perceived by others?" "Do I feel like I have the support of my principal?" "Do I feel like I have

the support of my coworkers?" "Do I seem to be running into walls at every turn?" and "Am I valued in my opinion and as a professional?" In this scenario, the counselor does not seem to be in a situation that is a "good fit." This might be an opportunity to reflect on mistakes made that would contribute to future success and look for another placement.

REFERENCES

American Counseling Association. (1995). *Code of ethics and standards of practice*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

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