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Falling in Love with Counseling: Sharing Reasons for Choosing the Profession

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In keeping with the tradition of devoting the first article of the Journal of Counseling Research and Practice to the theme of the state convention of Mississippi Counseling Association, this article has been dedicated to the 2025 theme of “Falling in Love with Counseling.” This means- reviewing the reasons that counselors chose the profession, re-examining reasons that counselors participate in professional associations related to the profession and revisiting reasons why counselors are committed to engaging in continuing education in the area. Some counselors have chosen the profession because of the various opportunities that the field offers. Phillips (2020) shared that some professions offer limited opportunities for their practitioners, but counseling can offer several options. Some of the opportunities can include working in agencies, community health centers or hospitals, starting a private practice, or running a clinic. Other considerations are working in schools, teaching or engaging consultant work, pursuing licensure and specialty certifications and using the counseling skills in business. Within the business community, counselors can apply reflective listening and empathy skills in working with technical workers and leaders by teaching and coaching them on people skills. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2025) addressed the option of flexibility to work either full-time or part-time.

In addition, the counseling profession offers the opportunity to select positions that have work hours during the day or evening. Besides the preferences for work hours, this profession

offers preferences for individual or group counseling, working with a specific population, providing counseling in a single or multiple locations, and offering services to clients in-person or via telemental health. Other choices can include becoming an expert in a specific area and serving as an expert witness. There are also opportunities to serve in leadership roles in professional associations (Phillips, 2020).

Selecting counseling as a profession may allow some counselors to experience a sense of satisfaction in serving clients who may be struggling to reach self-understanding and desiring to seek a healthier lifestyle (Corey, et al., 2022). In this role counselors demonstrate and promote respect, courtesy, encouragement and humility to those who seek their services. They share the message of hope, recovery and change. While working in the service delivery mode, counselors are attentive to ethical codes, laws, licensure board regulations, insurance requirements and decision-making models to ensure a quality of care.

Falling in love and showing your passion for the counseling profession can be as simple as participating in professional associations. Involvement can include participation in local, state and national associations. This can lead to opportunities for networking, locating mentors and connecting with supervisors or supervisees. In addition, counselors can get involved by volunteering to serve on committees, being a presenter and developing podcasts.

Finally, counselor commitment to the profession has been shown by participation in continuing education which is needed to renew licenses and certifications as well as to update knowledge and skills. The requirement to obtain continuing education to renew licenses and

certifications can be met by attending workshops presented at meetings sponsored by professional associations within the counseling field. In addition, some professional associations such as the American Counseling Association and Mississippi Counseling Association offer continuing education courses on their website, and opportunities via Zoom as well as continuing education workshops during their conferences (ACA, 2026). Continuing education workshops may be offered online, in-person, as recorded videos and online materials, readings and conferences. While Mississippi Counseling Association does not offer continuing education options online, many of its divisions and interest groups offer continuing education sessions in-person or via Zoom.

Most licensure and certification boards in counseling require that continuing education units be approved by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC, 2026). Approval by NBCC is essential in that it identifies providers who meet high standards and can assist in connecting counselors to appropriate continuing education training. There are requirements for continuing education providers and programs, program content, presenter qualifications, participant program evaluation requirements and continuing education requirements (NBCC, 2026). These standards are contained within the NBCC Continuing Education Provider Policy.

Counselors may be reminded of their reasons for choosing the profession as love for the work that they do. They may see it in their clients. They may see it while in service at professional associations. They may see it when attending continuing education sessions. They may see it in their colleagues. Keep the love alive.

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Summer Melt: The Role of School Counselors in Mitigation

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The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2025a) clearly articulated the role of the professional school counselor: to promote academic success, college and career readiness, and social/emotional development of all students. In conjunction with the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2025a), school counselors align their efforts with the ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success (ASCA, 2025b). School counselors work with students to foster and develop these skills; researchers suggest they are required for postsecondary success (Warren & Hale, 2020).

School personnel, including professional school counselors, support students as they transition from high school to college. Pheatt et al. (2016) described a high school transition course that focused on academic remediation to prepare students for college. Alternatively, Oreopoulos and Ford (2019) described a curriculum that required students to identify a field of study, apply to a college, and seek financial aid, which increased college-going rates by 5%. While interventions targeting academic challenges and practical tasks associated with the transition from high school to college are valuable, many students lack college preparedness or the “social capital and skills to navigate postsecondary education” (McGaughy & Venezia, 2015, p. 2).

A report by the National Consortium for School Counseling and Postsecondary Success (NCSCPS; Brown et al., 2017) emphasized the critical role school counselors should play in college and career readiness. School counselors assist students with college preparation, application submission, and the transition to college (Gilfillan, 2017). They also help students with college access concerns, such as college decision-making, application assistance, and financial support (Bettinger et al., 2012).

School counselors are positioned to facilitate the successful transition of students from high school to college (Warren & Goins, 2019). However, school counselors are ill-prepared to best meet students' needs during this time (Brown et al., 2017; Ricks & Warren, 2021; Warren et al., 2025). As a result, students, especially those from vulnerable populations, are susceptible to either attending college unprepared or *melting*, failing to pursue a college degree. Gaps persist between the number of students who graduate from high school with the intention of attending college and those who actually attend college; some apply to college, are admitted, and commit to attending, yet never do (Castleman & Page, 2014).

Summer Melt

Up to 40% of students each year experience summer melt: they intend to attend college in the fall after high school graduation but do not (Castleman & Page, 2014). After students are accepted to college and decide to attend, they have several required tasks to complete during the summer between high school and college. Support is a major obstacle during this transition time. According to Castleman et al. (2014),

Yet, even after students have been accepted to and decided to attend college, successful matriculation is contingent on students completing a number of tasks during the summer, at a time when they no longer have access to high school counselors and have yet to access support resources at their intended college (p. 320).

Without access to their high school counselor, along with a general lack of familiarity with support services at their chosen college, many students *melt*. Certain populations are more vulnerable to summer melt than others. For example, in North Carolina, a 5.3% difference in graduation rates existed between African American and White students (EducationNC, 2019). This difference stretched to 7.7% when considering college enrollment. Rural, low-income, and first-generation college students (FGCS) are especially susceptible to summer melt (Castleman & Page, 2013; Oliveri et al., 2018; Ryan, 2022). For FGCS, many are unaware of available resources or no longer have access to high school counselors; completing pre-college tasks are overwhelming (Castleman & Page, 2013). Additionally, high school graduates from rural areas often are hesitant to leave their homes. They have reservations about leaving family and friends behind, often internalize parental expectations, and become confused during the admissions process (Gibbons et al., 2016; Oliveri et al., 2018). Students with mental or physical disabilities are also vulnerable to summer melt, according to Burns and Routier (2018).

Few empirical studies explore summer melt programs. Preliminary results of a university-driven student ambassador program targeting accepted college students yielded favorable anecdotal results (Arnold et al., 2018). Additionally, Tackett et al. (2018) described a mentoring

program piloted by the College and Career Action Network (CACAN). Participants in this program were 1.4 and 3.4 times more likely to attend college immediately after high school than the comparison and disengaged groups, respectively. While the summer melt phenomenon is not new, there is relatively little research available, especially in counseling literature. School counselors are uniquely positioned to equip all students with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to overcome the challenges faced during the transition to college.

Rationale and Purpose of the Study

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model (ASCA, 2025a) calls for school counselors to provide academic, social/emotional, and college and career support to all K-12 students through comprehensive programming. Promoting college and career readiness is a central function of the role of school counselors, as evidenced by the ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success (ASCA, 2025b). The school counselors' role in promoting college and career readiness among K-12 students is clearly articulated, though research demonstrating positive outcomes is scarce. Also, researchers have not adequately explored the perceptions and experiences of recent high school graduates who experienced summer melt. A better understanding of the summer melt experience can inform strategies and drive programs that support students as they transition from high school to college. In this study, we aimed to answer the research question: What were the lived experiences of high school students who applied to college, were admitted, and intended to go, but did not? More

specifically, we hoped to better understand the transition period between high school and college, including how students made related decisions.

Method

Participants

Consistent with the recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2024) for phenomenological research, this study included six participants. Each participant graduated from an in-state high school, applied to the same minority-serving institution (MSI), was admitted, and intended to attend the following academic year, but did not. The total number of 4-year colleges and universities to which the participants applied ranged from 1 to 4 ($M = 3$); all were in-state. The distance between their high school and these colleges or universities ranged from 64 to 151.2 miles ($M = 115.6$).

The participants reported that they were employed and considering attending college soon. Of the six participants, 67% ($n = 4$) identified as female, and 33% ($n = 2$) as male. The participants were 18 or 19 years of age at the time of the interview and identified as White ($n = 3$) or African American ($n = 3$). Regarding urbanicity, participants attended high schools in an urban county with a population of one million or more ($n = 3$), a rural county with a population of more than 20,000 that is adjacent to a metro area ($n = 2$), and an urban county of 250,000 to 1 million residents ($n = 1$), according to the Economic Research Services' Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (United States Department of Agriculture, 2013). Regarding high school GPA, the range was

2.51 to 3.84 ($M = 2.85$). Finally, 67% ($n = 4$) of the participants would have been FGCS had they attended college. Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographics.

Procedures

At the outset of this investigation, we conducted a literature review to better understand the summer melt phenomenon. Interview questions were developed based on scant literature and our experiences related to summer melt. An application to conduct a qualitative study using phenomenological approaches to investigate summer melt was completed and submitted to the university's institutional review board (IRB) for review and approval. Phenomenological approaches are discovery-oriented and allow researchers to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Throughout the duration of the study, we adhered to ethical standards for conducting research.

We obtained from the university's Office of Institutional Research a list of high school graduates who applied and were admitted to the university for the following academic year (2016-2017) but did not attend. Of the 2,236 applicants admitted, 253 email addresses were invalid, and 52 did not provide contact information. A total of 1,931 individuals were emailed twice. One responded but was not interested in participating; 32 enrolled at another university; and one agreed to participate in the interview.

We then identified a group of applicants using a GPA range of 2.41 to 3.04. This range was used to filter for applicants whose GPA aligned with minimum admission requirements and, therefore, were less likely to have enrolled in another university. Twenty-four of these

individuals did not have a phone number listed. Three hundred-seventeen applicants were called twice. One hundred eleven did not answer the phone during either call. The wrong number was listed for 44 applicants, and 59 were not interested in participating in the interview. Ninety-eight of the applicants indicated they enrolled in another university. Of the applicants called, five agreed to participate. During the fall 2017 semester, a total of six participants were interviewed.

Research Team

The research team comprised two members: a 40-year-old White male school counselor educator and an American Indian professional school counseling graduate student in her mid-20s. The school counselor educator was a former teacher and school counselor. The graduate student earned an undergraduate degree in psychology and worked as an advisor for the College Advising Corps. Both researchers were interested in the summer melt phenomenon and the role school counselors play in helping students pursue postsecondary educational opportunities.

Data Collection

To understand the participants lived experiences, we developed an interview protocol comprising open- and closed-ended questions. A semi-structured interview was utilized; this culturally appropriate method relies on participants' voices and is common to phenomenological research. During the semi-structured interviews, focused questions were asked, yet the participants could provide relevant impromptu descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The interview protocol was reviewed and approved by both research team members. The final set of twenty interview questions aimed to answer the

research question and expand extant literature. Participants were encouraged to reflect upon their high school experiences and the summer after graduation to answer questions such as: Did you have a school counselor at your school? If so, did you work with your school counselor on your postsecondary plans? Did you complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)? If so, who helped you complete the application, and if not, what kept you from completing it? Did the university provide you with any assistance with enrollment? If so, how, and if not, what do you wish they had helped you with? What, if anything, could the university have done better to support your efforts to enroll and attend? One of the researchers (second author) conducted six unique phone-based interviews using the interview protocol. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes and was recorded with a digital recorder that lacked internet connectivity.

Data Analysis

We elected to utilize phenomenological approaches to analyze the data. These approaches are used to describe or examine participants' experiences within the context of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This study and subsequent analysis were informed by the recommendations of Anderson (2007) and Creswell and Poth (2024). Prior to the analysis, we organized the participant data. We transcribed all the recorded interviews into a protected Microsoft Word document. Then, we met to review and discuss the content, including the depth and breadth of the interviews as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2024). Finally, we conducted a detailed analysis of the data. Creswell and Poth (2024) described using a coding process to identify strings or chunks of text. Following Anderson's (2007) recommendations, the research

team electronically color-coded relevant text and noted specific “units of meaning” (p.2) for each participant. Then, we organized the units and developed initial themes that emerged organically and reflected participants’ responses. We regrouped units and relabeled themes until we reached consensus. This process occurred over several meetings across two weeks. Data from subsequent cases were analyzed individually in the same manner over a 4-week period. Once all the data were analyzed, units and themes were combined and organized across all cases. Over two weeks, we collapsed and relabeled categories until we reached consensus (Anderson, 2007). We revisited the categories and associated meaning units over the course of another week; no additional revisions to the categories were made. At that point, we deemed the coding procedure complete and moved forward to explore theme connections within the context of the phenomenon, as noted by Creswell and Poth (2024).

Trustworthiness

Guba (1981) describes trustworthy qualitative studies as objective, reliable, generalizable, and internally valid. In qualitative investigation, researchers frequently employ strategies to enhance trustworthiness. These strategies are designed to strengthen the quality of the research and legitimize the findings of the study. In this study, we implemented several strategies to facilitate trustworthiness.

First, the methodology of this study was informed by well-established protocols offered by Creswell and Poth (2024) and Anderson (2007). An audit trail documented the procedures implemented during the study, including notes from the interviews the second author conducted,

as well as notes and minutes from research meetings and the analysis. We held frequent debriefing sessions across all facets of the study. The first author also sought peer feedback during the development of the study and throughout the data analysis. We were familiar with the population under investigation through prior research and work experience. While not fully immersed in the sample, the researchers engaged in bracketing and openly discussed their biases before and throughout all aspects of the study.

The data were collected from a variety of participants from unique backgrounds, regions of the state, and schools. This heterogeneous sample afforded researchers the opportunity to triangulate and verify the extent to which the participants' experiences were similar for a wide range of students (Shenton, 2004). During the interview process, questions and probes were used to elicit details and clarify, promoting honest responses and avoiding misunderstandings. The data were horizontalized, or equally weighted, during the analysis process as suggested by Merriam (2016).

Finally, we aimed to offer rich descriptions of the participants' lived experiences. Detailed background information of participants was also provided to demonstrate external validity (Creswell & Poth, 2024). While sufficient data were provided to make informed decisions about the transferability of findings to similar groups or populations, researchers should exercise caution.

Findings

Five themes organically emerged from the data analysis that described the lived experiences of individuals who applied, were admitted, and committed to the same MSI, yet did not attend after graduating from high school. The themes: (a) college-going supports, (b) facilitators of summer melt, (c) alternative to college, (d) perceived protective factors are accompanied by several subthemes. The themes and subthemes are presented below.

College-Going Supports

When discussing their experiences, participants described several supports that were beneficial in their pursuit of college. We identified three subthemes that described the participants' experiences: (a) familial support, (b) high school efforts, and (c) college outreach.

Familial support. Five of the six participants described the support they received from family members during high school and the summer following graduation as they prepared to attend college. Participants most readily described support provided by their mother. For example, Participant 6 stated, "I talked to my mother about college and what I wanted to do after I graduated from high school." Participant 1 indicated that his mother, "helped most with my enrollment process; she basically took care of every component." Other participants described the support received from family in general. For example, Participant 5 stated, "I talked to my family about the decision" related to college and where to attend. She also shared, "I had to have my parent's tax information, so my family helped me."

High school efforts. Most participants described ways in which their high school supported their efforts to attend college. Participant 3 suggested the school “did the standard, what you have to give every student, talk to them about college and what it’s good for and stuff like that, but not above and beyond.” Participant 6 stated, “I attended a college fair at my school where I talked to different representatives from different schools... and got some information.” Many participants also described the specific efforts of their high school counselor. Participant 4 said, “My high school counselor was there if I needed her. I talked to my counselor about my college options; we met a few times” while Participant 5 shared,

Well, I talked to my counselor once or twice about college and my GPA, stuff like that. She didn’t help with much, though. There was a week when we all went into the library to apply to college, and that’s when I applied to [the university]. I did have a teacher I was close to that I talked to about college.

Participant 2 indicated, “The school counselor helped when it came down to questions about the application and the SAT, such as deadlines and where to go to sign up and submit things online. I also went to the school counselor for transcripts.”

College outreach. Several participants indicated that the university reached out to them to offer support. For example, Participant 3 indicated that she “received lots of email and I’ve actually gotten letters in the mail” referencing enrollment. Participant 4 responded similarly, declaring, “I got *A LOT* of emails from the college.” Participant 2 stated that the university was “helpful in sending out information concerning deadlines.”

Facilitators of Summer Melt

Participants described contributing factors that led them not to enroll in college following their admission and commitment to attend. The analysis yielded several subthemes that encompassed the challenges participants experienced: (a) lack of university support, (b) limited high school support, (c) financial concerns, (d) lack of college knowledge, and (e) inaction.

Lack of university outreach. In general, participants described a sense of disconnection from the university during the college application and enrollment process. Participant 2 indicated that the university “did not provide any assistance with the enrollment process.” Participant 1 shared that the “university did not provide any assistance,” and he “does not recall a university rep coming to the school” to help during the process. Participant 3 shared that she knew “it was really just one [student support staff] and it was kinda [sic] a big group [of students] so I can see why she didn’t get to stay on top of everybody.”

Limited high school counselor support. Overall, the participants described little interaction with their school counselor regarding the college application and enrollment process. Participant 1 stated, “The school counselor did not help in any way.” When asked if the school counselor at her high school offered help, Participant 6 responded, “No, I met with her [school counselor] once about my schedule, but that was about it. She didn’t really help me at all.”

Financial concerns. Participants expressed serious concern related to paying for college and the accumulation of debt. For example, Participant 3 stated, “I didn’t have the money to afford it, so I was like, there’s my stop sign.” Participant 5 also shared similar concerns,

Well, I would probably say money was the biggest issue. I did the FAFSA, but I didn't get any scholarship money to pay for it. I remember I got the financial letter from [the university], telling you how much they were going to give you, and the only thing it really said was loans. I knew I didn't want to have to borrow that much for a semester of school when I didn't know what I wanted to major in or anything like that.

The financial barrier was too significant to overcome and was exacerbated by a lack of direction.

When describing his financial concerns, Participant 4 shared, "They [military] will pay for school, so that's why I ultimately decided to wait and do that first." Other participants described their concerns about family finances. For example, Participant 6 stated, "I wanted to stay and help my mother with some of the finances around the house."

Lack of college knowledge. All participants described experiences suggesting they lacked access to the necessary, reliable information or resources to inform their decision to attend college. Several participants were misguided and did not have a clear direction or plan after high school graduation. For example, Participant 6 indicated, "I was undecided about what I wanted to do, so didn't see a reason to try to meet with her [school counselor] about college." Also, when discussing FAFSA, Participant 6 stated, "I knew about it but didn't worry about filling it out because I wasn't sure if I wanted to enroll anywhere and thought completing it would be like signing up." Similarly, Participant 3 shared, "I didn't file for it [financial aid] because when I did get to school, I was told that I definitely would not get it." Participant 5 said, "People told me it was better to just go to the community college than waste that money on classes I might not need

at the college.” Participant 2 indicated that she largely “took care of everything on her own,” however, she “did not recall any other financial aid process other than completing the FAFSA” and “was not aware of the college having an orientation.”

Inaction. All participants indicated that they failed to complete the necessary steps after admission to successfully enroll in and attend college immediately following high school graduation. For example, regarding signing up for housing or attending orientation, Participant 4 stated, “No, I had pretty much decided on doing the military before I did any of that.” He did not understand the point of completing these steps. Similarly, Participant 6 indicated, “No, I didn’t do anything like that; I didn’t get that far into the housing process.” Participant 1 claimed that he “decided not to enroll in college right before the orientation date.” While participants were positioned to attend college, they elected to withdraw from the process.

Alternative to College

During the interviews, participants offered several reasons for their decision to forego postsecondary education at a four-year institution immediately after high school graduation. We identified three subthemes that described the participants lived experiences: (a) work, (b) save money, and (c) community college bound.

Work. Most participants indicated they were working following high school graduation rather than attending college. Participants focused mainly on working with little or no plan to pursue college. For example, when describing his current job, Participant 1 shared, “I’d rather work and make money than waste time with going to school.” Participant 3 stated,

Well since I've graduated, I've actually been working on a college campus. So, I've been able to see what students go through to get their books and their classes together. And I'm looking into nursing or pharmaceuticals. I've actually took a pharm tech class to get some experience, and I've been through the clinicals and all that. I'm really still trying to figure out what I want to do, but that's what I'm leaning towards.

Participant 4 indicated, "Well, since I graduated, I've joined the army reserves, so I went to boot camp over the summer, and now that I am back, I have a job here in town."

Save money. Several participants emphasized their desire to save money rather than spend it on college immediately following graduation from high school. For example, Participant 6 shared that she "wanted to work to save up money for a car and to afford college tuition without having to take out loans." Similarly, Participant 5 stated, "I wanted to save money and stay at home for the first two years" in preparation for college.

Community college bound. At the time of the interview, all participants shared a plan to further their education at a local community college, a deviation from their original intent to attend the MSI. Participant 1, for example, suggested, "I'm not interested in this university now. I'm thinking about enrolling at the local community college so I can work and still go to school." Participant 5 stated, "I am taking classes to transfer to a college from the community college." Finally, Participant 3 indicated, "As far as where I want to go to college, I want to go off. I've just got to get the money right. So, right now it'll probably be a community college."

Perceived Protective Factors

Participants reflected on factors or experiences that could have supported their efforts to pursue postsecondary education at a four-year institution. The analysis yielded two main subthemes: (a) high school supports and (b) university supports.

High school supports. All the participants described measures their high school could have taken to assist during the college application and enrollment processes. For example, Participant 5 was asked what more her high school could have done. She shared, “I would say letting students know about scholarships and the deadlines for scholarships for certain schools; I didn’t know anything about that in high school.” When describing additional supports the school counselor should deliver, Participant 6 responded, “Maybe, hmmm, I don’t really know. Maybe checking in with me about different options that are available and explaining what each school offers.” Participant 1 indicated the high school counselor “could have checked in on the financial aid piece,” while Participant 4 remarked, “Maybe some information about money for college, but that is about it,” when referencing additional supports that could have supported their efforts.

University supports. Several participants explained the measures and support the university could have provided to better assist their efforts to attend college immediately after high school. For example, Participant 2 stated the university “could have assisted with information on scholarships.” Similarly, Participant 5 suggested the university should “Probably give out information about deadlines for things and scholarships too.” Participant 3 responded, “The only thing I would say is price, but I know that isn’t something you can really change, but

other than that I think the emails and stuff reach out pretty good,” when asked how the university could have provided better support. Finally, Participant 6 stated, “Maybe they [university] could also provide a program to help with the transition for students leaving home for the first time.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to learn about the lived experiences of high school students who applied and were admitted to college but did not attend. Understanding the critical transition period between high school and college can help school counselors best frame and design support systems that counter summer melt. The participants in the study noted the support they received from high school counselors and college outreach. However, the descriptions of summer melt facilitators who assisted participants appear to outweigh the supports received. While parents, high school, and the university offered support, it was insufficient and did not lead participants to attend college. As a result, the participants elected to pursue alternatives to college, such as employment and saving money, and eventually enrolled in a community college.

Participants indicated that family members offered support, and while it is possible that the support received was the best the family could offer, it lacked the quality and value necessary to overcome the summer melt phenomenon. For example, Castleman and Page (2013) reported that lower-income parents often are less involved in the college-going process than their middle- and high-income counterparts. As suggested by Gibbons et al. (2016), without family support, it is difficult for students to make sense of financial aid award letters and find additional funds to pay for college. Furthermore, students are less confident during these processes and related

financial issues when families withhold or fail to provide relevant information (Scharp et al., 2018). FGCS also have a lack of college knowledge and find completing pre-college tasks arduous, especially during a time without support from high school counselors or college officials (Castleman & Page, 2013; Ryan, 2022).

Students in rural areas face unique obstacles that negatively impact their effort to enroll in and attend college (Oliveri et al., 2018). Similarly, the participants in this study were hesitant leave their hometown because of concerns about the cost of living away from the family, feeling obligated to follow family traditions (such as businesses, farms, other occupations), and uncertainty about college and financial aid jargon. Family members can help clarify and offer insight into financial concerns related to college, provide college knowledge, and facilitate action for the recent high school graduate. However, some parents are better positioned to provide this support than others (Mishra, 2020).

Participants also described college-going supports provided by their high school yet suggested that their high school counselor offered limited guidance. High school counselors appeared involved in college preparation; however, they were perceived as taking a laissez-faire or hands-off approach. Participants described school-wide initiatives aimed at supporting college-going; however, the schools "did the standard," as Participant 3 reported. School counselors did not provide individualized attention or an intentional plan to support students during the high school-to-college transition, according to participants. However, according to Lapan et al. (2014), students who meet with school counselors to discuss college and career

readiness issues are more likely to feel they belong and are often more diligently involved in college planning. It is possible that the lack of school counselor involvement contributed to or exacerbated financial concerns and the lack of college knowledge. Also, participants may have experienced ambivalence and inaction during the transition as a result of poor planning that would otherwise be curbed by active school counselor engagement (i.e., prevention and intervention). As agents of social change, school counselors must remain steadfast in delivering equitable services to students transitioning to college (Warren & Goins, 2019).

Like their high school experiences, participants described minimal outreach from university representatives during their transition to college. Arnold et al. (2009) described this transition as a “loose handoff between secondary school and postsecondary institution” (p. 23). Universities largely interacted with participants indirectly through form letters and emails. Participants suggested that universities provided little individualized attention or support. Additionally, based on participants' experiences, college representatives were not readily available, and support mechanisms were not readily accessible. As one participant stated, the “university did not provide any assistance.”

Participants perceived that both their high school and college could have communicated more effectively during their pursuit of postsecondary education. Furthermore, participants believed that their high school and college representatives could have provided more individualized support during the transition. The lack of college support and outreach that leads

to summer melt can be thwarted by school counselors who establish systematic, intentional college-going cultures, as noted by Brown et al. (2017).

Limitations

While the findings of this study are valuable and offer insight into participants' experiences with summer melt, several limitations exist. First, participants were forthcoming with their experiences of summer melt; however, socially desirable responses remain a concern when interviews yield self-report data. Additionally, we provided detailed and rich descriptions of participants and their experiences, positioning readers to make informed decisions about transferability. However, generalizability remains a concern given the small sample size and nature of qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2024). The findings of this study are relevant to participants admitted to one MSI; other groups or populations may experience summer melt differently. For example, this phenomenon may manifest differently for high school graduates who apply to another university or for those living in other states. Finally, it is unclear what level of outreach other universities offered to which the participants applied; support was still inadequate to overcome summer melt.

Implications and Future Research

Ensuring that students are prepared for college is a central aim of professional school counselors. While the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2025a) and the ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success (ASCA, 2025b) generally guide the work of school counselors, it is critical that viable, concrete measures and mechanisms are established that

support students' efforts to successfully transition from high school to college. It is imperative that school counselors strive to deliberately establish college-going cultures at their schools that support all students' aspirations to attend college. Based on this study's results, school counselors, especially those working with high school seniors transitioning to college, are encouraged to evaluate how they collaborate and coordinate services with students, families, and universities to support students' pursuit of postsecondary educational opportunities.

Within a tiered model of support, school counselors are encouraged to develop comprehensive programs that provide all students with a core curriculum based on ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success (ASCA, 2025b). This curriculum can include the development of protective or noncognitive factors such as resilience, growth mindset, social capital, and the ability to navigate the system; skills that lead to life-long success (Warren & Hale, 2016a). Practical strategies can also benefit students. For example, the development of interest-based postsecondary plans can foster short- and long-term planning, guiding students toward appropriate college and career paths. School counselors can also compile and disseminate scholarship information, community resources, online resources such as the College Foundation of North Carolina (CFNC.org), and important deadlines related to the high school-to-college transition. Finally, developing an intentional school-wide marketing campaign that leverages the school's website, and social media can support students' efforts, increase access, and foster a college-going culture.

While these strategies are potentially enough to lead most students to successfully enroll in and attend college, some students need a greater level of support. In these instances, school counselors should provide small group and individualized support when needed, as outlined in the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2025a). Understanding demographic, interpersonal, academic, and familial factors that contribute to summer melt or alternatively, lead to college-going, such as those noted by Bryan et al. (2017)

School counselors can help facilitate the individualized attention needed for a successful transition from high school. School counselors who use student data and are familiar with the students and families they serve can build student profiles to track college preparation accomplishments and offer targeted support. They can also identify students at-risk of melting and connect them with peer mentors or a volunteer network they can access during the summer months as they transition to college.

School counselors can support parents' efforts to help their children pursue postsecondary education. In many cases, parents are misinformed or ill-informed of the processes required to successfully apply, enroll, and attend college (Warren & Hale, 2016b). This is especially true for parents who have not earned a four-year college degree. Parents who did attend college may also have difficulty navigating today's systems; however, they often have social capital to compensate for their lack of knowledge (Mishra, 2020). Therefore, school counselors must strategically seek out and educate parents of impending FGCS about available resources and processes related to their child's transition to college. School counselors can offer college-going-focused workshops

and consultation to parents. A central focus of this parental support is to develop college knowledge and social capital and to empower parents.

Finally, school counselors should engage with local universities and college access partners to support students transitioning from high school to college. Partnerships between high school and college recruiters, admission officers, and orientation and transition staff can yield positive outcomes for students transitioning to college (Oliveri et al., 2018). For example, school counselors can coordinate teacher visits to local colleges to learn about college expectations, available academic resources, and disability support, thereby better preparing students for college. Additionally, school counselors can remain informed about application deadlines, federal financial aid processes, orientation registration, and housing information, and therefore serve as a better resource for students. School counselors are encouraged to connect “melting” students with university offices and offer guidance and support to their families.

The findings of this study may lead to further research on the summer melt phenomenon. More qualitative investigations can offer additional insights into the lived experiences of students who fail to successfully transition from high school to college. Moreover, researchers should explore the role of school counselors in promoting college and career readiness and college preparation. Identifying evidence-based college preparation practices and better understanding vulnerable populations may steer school counselors toward offering a greater level of intentional and individualized college transition support. Relatedly, the identification and study of

programming specifically designed to minimize summer melt facilitators can shed light on the efficacy of summer melt prevention and intervention.

Conclusion

Students from rural areas and historically underrepresented backgrounds are especially vulnerable to experiencing summer melt. While several studies have described the high school-to-college transition, we explored the summer melt experiences of individuals who applied to, were admitted to, but did not attend an MSI. The findings of this study align with previous research on the topic and further substantiate the need for individualized and intentional support to successfully transition from high school to college. Based on participants' experiences in this study, students were supported by their families, high schools, and the colleges to which they were admitted. However, the support provided is not enough for all high school students. School counselors, as social justice advocates and facilitators of college and career readiness, are well-positioned to support all students and ensure they have the information, social capital, and determination to overcome barriers that might otherwise lead to summer melt.

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A Qualitative Investigation of School Counselors' Experiences While Participating in Professional Learning Communities

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Abstract

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have become a popular method of staff development among school districts. These PLC groups, in some cases, are organized for school counselors and provide the opportunity for them to be trained in current issues in the profession. In this qualitative study, the researchers sought to understand the experiences of school counselors while participating in professional learning communities. The majority of the participants participated in school counseling PLC groups, while a few participated in PLC groups with teachers, and a few others participated in administrative PLC groups. Researchers identified themes related to the school counselors' experiences in professional development, such as community and culture building, unity and cohesion, and the critical meeting components that need to be included in school counseling PLC groups.

Keywords: *Professional Learning Communities, Professional Development, Professional Identity*

School counselors are required to handle a multitude of different tasks with a variety of expertise on a consistent basis. The school counseling profession emphasizes the importance of school counselors being properly trained through continuing education due to the number of complex job expectations (ASCA, 2019). Carey and Dimmett (2005) advocated for the importance of quality professional development for school counselors. School counselors need to refresh their training to stay current with the latest trends of the profession because there are constant changes in the field. Without proper training, the quality of a school counselor's work will suffer tremendously (Carey & Dimmett, 2005). Due to the demands of ASCA model

implementation, school counselors report needing multicultural training to support equity issues related to promoting success for the entire student population (ASCA, 2019). School counselors also report a need for updated professional development in career counseling to keep up with current practice and implement updated college information in the ever-changing technological world (Knight, 2015). Professional development is crucial in preparing school counselors to support students in a constantly evolving work environment.

Professional Development and School Counseling

There is a lack of research on professional growth for school counselors (Forman et al., 2009), and what research exists highlights the deficits of professional development for school counselors. School counselors tend to be responsible for their own professional development and often lack financial support from their school districts (Remley & Herlihy, 2010). Splete and Grisdale (1992) found school counselors are often left out of professional development plans for school districts and are provided little funding to conduct their own training. Many schools operate with one school counselor, leaving the individual without professional support and guidance to carry out the requirements of the ASCA model (Wilczerski et al., 2010). School counselors struggle with finding appropriate professional development and also find it to be costly (Remley & Herlihy, 2010). However, the costs are greater than monetary concerns, school counselors face significant burnout from the lack of support for their professional development.

Professional Learning Communities

Collective learning and the application of learning is related to all professionals being actively engaged in an effort to collaborate. Avenues that bring higher student outcomes are explored extensively, which strengthens the relationship between administrators and teachers. Educators strive to execute excellent practices to increase student achievement. Adjustments are made to support the diversity of the student population. Proper use of time and a positive outlook among educators, along with an aligned vision of practice, are all important components of collective learning (Hord, 1990). The concept of shared personal practice comes from educators often feeling a sense of isolation in their work. The purpose of shared personal practice is to support educators, so they recognize they are not alone in their pursuit of improving student outcomes. Supportive conditions include both environment conditions such as the protected time for the PLC meetings to take place and a comfortable space for the meetings, along with positive and supportive characteristics from the PLC leader and administrators who promote a collaborative rather than authoritative style (Hord, 1990).

Professional Learning Communities and the ASCA Model

Dufour (2004) viewed professional learning communities as a learning process successfully implemented through collaborative work. Historically, teachers and administrators have been granted the opportunity to participate in PLCs for the purpose of school reform. Research indicates school counselors have been left out of school reform, until recently, and have been provided inadequate opportunities to collaborate on ASCA model implementation (Remley

& Herlihy, 2010). In this study, the researcher is seeking to understand the experiences of school counselors who are currently participating in PLCs for the purpose of school improvement. Many school counselors lack the opportunity to meet with colleagues for the purpose of professional development, which can possibly lead to feelings of isolation and frustration related to practicing ASCA National Model standards.

School Improvement and ASCA Model Implementation

School improvement continues to be an important topic because students are currently not performing as well as their peers from other countries, and, within the nation, and there is a performance gap between white students and minority students (Friedman & Mandlebaum, 2011). The ASCA model provides opportunities for school counselors to play an important role in enhancing student performance. Sink and Stroh (2003) found the ASCA National Model can enhance student outcomes and display high-quality counseling programs. For school counselors to execute the ASCA model, they must be given the time to plan and prepare for implementation (Mullen, Chae, & Backer, 2019). Evidence in the literature indicates a long history of misuse of school counselor's time on the job (Collins, 2014; Pyne, 2011). Implementation of an ASCA model program requires schools to adequately train counselors, which involves giving them proper professional development.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this Qualitative study is to explore school counselors' experiences from their participation in PLCs through the lens of the ASCA National Model. ASCA model

implementation provides the specific professional guidelines on which counselors are evaluated yearly. Historically, counselors have been provided inadequate resources for professional development due to a lack of understanding among school administration (O’Conner, 2002). There is a gap in the research of professional development of school counselors participating in PLCs for the purpose of ASCA model implementation. Further research is needed to determine whether this is a viable method of professional development to support the work of school counselors.

Method

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a means of professional development for all school personnel, including school counselors. Dufour (2014) outlined the components of PLCs, which include scheduling monthly meetings for professionals to collaborate on agreed-upon learning objectives to achieve a specific set of goals. The purpose of this qualitative study is to answer the following questions through interviews with school counselors about PLCs.

1. How do school counselors experience and use PLCs?
2. How does the PLC experience translate into ASCA model implementation?
3. How do school counselors perceive professional growth while participating in a PLC?

Participants

The researcher used purposeful sampling for participant selection. Participants voluntarily agreed to be a part of the study. They received an informed consent form explaining the topic and a description of time length. Participants were free to withdraw from the survey at

any time. Participants needed to be professional school counselors currently engaged in PLCs for the purpose of ASCA model implementation. The researchers conducted phone interviews with participants, so the setting for my research was determined by participants' choice of their natural setting for virtual interviews through Zoom.

Data Collection

Since the purpose of the study was to explore and understand participants' experiences and perspectives, the researchers used a phenomenologically oriented, qualitative research approach. Qualitative inquiry was appropriate for this study because it offered the researcher the opportunity to understand school counselors lived experiences of PLCs. The aim of this study was to address the contribution of applying qualitative methods in examining the lived experiences of school counselors actively participating in PLCs. The researchers intended to determine the opinions and needs of school counselors from their participation in PLCs. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with school counselors until saturation was achieved. The researcher collected data using semi-structured open-ended interviews.

After receiving IRB approval, permission to solicit participation was granted and the researchers contacted participants through email. Participants did not receive offers of payment or other rewards. A research information form addressing the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks and discomforts, payment information, confidentiality, participation and withdrawal, identification of investigators, and rights of research participants was provided to all participants. Criteria for selecting participants included being a current school counselor and

employment in a school that engages in professional development with PLCs. Another requirement of the participants was their willingness to participate in a 45 minute to 1-hour recorded interview.

Sample

Sixteen participants were interviewed for this study. Requirements for participation in the study included current employment as school counselors who were participating in professional learning communities with school counselors, teachers, or administrators. Out of 16 counselors, seven were elementary school counselors (44%), two were middle school counselors (12.5%), four were high school counselors (25%), and three were K-12 counselors (19%). Four out of the 16 participants had 0-5 years of experience (25%), two had 6-10 years of experience (12.5%), three had 11-15 years of experience (19%), three had 16-20 years of experience (19%), and four had 21 or more years of experience (25%). All of the participants identified as female. Two of the participants were African American and 14 were white. In terms of the population size of the student body at their schools, one had < 350 (6%) students, nine had 351-700 (56%) students, two had 701-1000 students (12.5%), and one had 4,000 students (6%) or more total students in the total school population. Eight counselors work in a suburban school (50%), two work in an urban school (8%), and six work in a rural school (42%).

Demographic information also included the school counselors' education and training. Thirteen of the school counselors were trained in a CACREP master's program (81%) and three were trained in a non-CACREP program (19%). Eleven of the counselors were National

Certified Counselors (NCC), (69%). Out of the total 16 participants, four had achieved RAMP status for their school. Twelve of the school counselors have earned a master's degree (75%), three had a specialist degree (19%), and one interviewee earned a doctoral degree (6%).

Data Analysis

This study included three different levels of analysis: (a) first cycle coding, (b) second cycle coding, (c) replication strategy. At each level of analysis, constant comparison was used to distill the data further, until themes materialized from the data. First cycle coding included descriptive coding, process coding, and attribute coding of the details of the PLC meetings (Miles et al., 2014). These authors defined descriptive coding as labeling and assigning codes to summarize using one word. Process coding uses gerunds to label observable details from the data. Attribute coding is the labeling of the specific detailed information from the data (Miles et al., 2014).

Second cycle coding included pattern coding and narrative description to discover themes. Pattern codes can look like categories or themes, causes, relationships among people, or theoretical constructs (Miles et al., 2014). The researcher employed Stuckey's (2015) color coding method to quantify the emerging themes. Stuckey (2015) described color coding strategy as part of the second cycle coding process that involves using markers to assign various themes different colors.

The 16 research interviews with school counselors currently employed as school counselors served as the primary source of research data. The demographic questionnaires

served as supporting research data. After every four interviews, the group of four interviews were coded manually using open coding, and reviewed for emerging themes. Clarifying questions were added to the second set of interviews after the open coding of the first four interviews. Miles et al. (2014) recommended adding clarifying questions after completing first cycle coding if the initial coding produced additional need for clarification. The clarifying questions included in the second set of interviews were:

1. After participating in PLCs were you more likely to engage in a Group Me or group text involving the members of the PLC?
2. Were you more likely to reach out to members of the PLC group for help/consultation after engaging in the PLC process?

Results

Research Question One

The first research question sought to explore how school counselors experience and use PLCs? The following themes were discovered through the coding process of the first research question: Collaboration, Community, Cohesion, and Critical Meeting Components.

Collaboration. All 16 of the participants found value in learning new ideas and resources to work with their students. The school counselors learned a variety of different topics from working together. Many of the PLC groups engaged in training the counselors found valuable. Twelve out of 14 participants specifically used the term collaboration to describe their experience in PLC. ASCA (2019) suggested collaboration on the part of the school counselor, as a crucial

part of implementation of the comprehensive counseling program.

Community/Culture Building. A total of 13 of 16 participants discussed the concept of community building as being very valuable in their experience of participation in their PLC groups. Karis discussed the relationship building that occurred during the monthly PLC meetings, which helped the counselor establish trust with one another. Megan found the PLC meetings helped create a positive culture among the PLC members. Megan stated:

The PLC group has built a strong sense of community within the counseling department. There are three counselors in my building, but we stay so busy all of the time taking care of the needs of the students and staff and the administrative responsibilities that fall on our desk or just finishing up whatever was left there from the day before or weeks prior taking precedence. And so, for us as counselors in the same building and even district wide, the PLC group has built an opportunity for us to collaborate so much more and I now know without a doubt what my colleagues at the other middle schools are doing and we are all working together.

Thomas (2005) noted school counselors can reduce feelings of isolation from the opportunity of meeting collaboratively. A total of eight out of the 16 counselors interviewed discussed the reduction of isolation being a very valuable part of the PLC participation. Norms for school counselors often suggest working alone without the opportunity for consultation (Little, 1990, as cited by Thomas, 2005). Julie is the only counselor K-12 in a rural community where the next closest school is 60 miles away. There are no assistant

principals, so she has to fill in for the principal when he is out. Her PLC group only meets every 2 months and has only recently started videoconferencing to include more counselors and meet more frequently. She puts in 10-hour days and mentioned feeling alone and isolated in her current position. She shares her time between two different schools. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she became closer to the PLC counseling group through Zoom meetings, and they have been responding to the needs of students and families in a unified fashion across their district.

Critical Meeting Components. Critical meeting components emerged as a primary theme when exploring how school counselors utilize PLCs. A total of 13 of 16 participants discussed the qualities required to engage in an authentic PLC group. Some of the participants had a district level counseling administrator to schedule and organize the meetings to ensure the counselors had protected time to meet, which they found valuable. Those counselors who worked with a counseling administrator described the admin as a strong advocate for counselors who provided professional resources and support. Elementary and secondary counselors mentioned dividing the groups up according to student population because they found their work to be different from one another.

All 13 of the participants mentioned having more frequent meetings that last all day. Several wanted time to talk for relationship building purposes and felt it had helped build

consulting relationships outside of the meetings. Some mentioned having the meeting in a neutral location so none of the participants would get pulled out for normal school issues.

Those who had lunch provided mentioned the fellowship of breaking bread together was one of their favorite parts of the meeting. Dufour (2014) listed four important qualities of effective PLC groups, which are related to the school counselors’ preferences: 1. PLC groups should be ongoing rather than occasional.; 2. PLC groups should be collected rather than isolated.; 3. PLC groups should involve learning while embedded in the profession.; and 4. PLC groups should be results- oriented with activities that tie back to learning.

Some of the interviewees noted, due to meeting monthly consistently, they felt comfortable calling or messaging each other with professional engagement questions. Some of the counselors shared a Google folder so they could provide each other with resources, and many felt a sense of professional identity and validation for their work in the schools from meeting in the PLC groups. See Table 1 for full details on participant data.

Table 1

Themes Related to How School Counselors Experience Professional Learning Communities

Participant	Collaboration	Community/ Culture Building	Reduced Isolation	Unity/ Cohesion	Critical Meeting Components
Debra	X	X	X	X	X
China	X	X	X	X	X

Karis	X	X	X	X	
Maggie	X	X		X	X
Abby	X	X			X
Carmen	X				X
Julia	X		X		X
Emily	X	X		X	X
Trixie	X	X		X	X
Lori	X	X	X		X
Laura	X		X	X	X
Pam	X	X		X	X
Megan	X	X			X
Hannah	X	X			X
Molly	X	X	X		
Nina	X	X	X	X	

Research Question 2

Research question two explored the PLC experience translates into ASCA National Model implementation? The emerging themes discovered through coding were Advocacy, Leadership, ASCA National Model Review, and Program Design.

Advocacy and Leadership: ASCA (2019) defined advocacy in terms of school counselors as a critical part of upholding the mindsets of what school counselors believe in.

One example would be that all students can learn and succeed (ASCA, 2019). Of the 16 participants interviewed, 13 discussed examples of advocacy. These examples of advocacy were

related to students, programs, professional identity, and gaining support for families during COVID-19. Maggie advocated within her PLC group about the size and demands of her caseload and was given the opportunity to present the need for a third counselor in her school, which she succeeded.

The second component of the first theme is leadership. ASCA calls on school counselors to be leaders within the school community to design and implement programs to help all students succeed (ASCA, 2019). Every participant provided rich examples of leadership they were providing within their PLC group and their school community. Some participants engaged in grant writing to supplement programs for their students. Another example includes teaching social emotional objectives to staff.

ASCA National Model Review. The second theme of research question two is the ASCA National Model program development. Of the 16 participants, nine have studied the 4th edition of the ASCA National model to determine what changes needed to be made to their current programs. There are four participants who have RAMP certification and are updating and refining their programs. Three of the RAMP certified counselors out of the four are the PLC leaders and are assisting with program development within their PLC group. China is working toward a 3-year plan for RAMP certification with her district as PLC leader. Although Hannah is RAMP certified, she is not currently leading ASCA National Model implementation because some of the PLC members are not interested and it is not required by her district. Her PLC group is led by the district social worker, and she has used aspects of her PLC participation

in the design of her program.

Some of the participants work in economically disadvantaged school systems and would need to have the number of non-counseling duties removed to pursue RAMP certification. Some are overwhelmed with the size of their caseload. A few of the school counselors who are not able to achieve all of the components of ASCA model implementation and discussed the level of support and knowledge the PLC group provides and finds it helps reduce work stress and feelings of burnout.

For some of the school counselors interviewed, 11 have engaged in data analysis as part of the ASCA review conducted within their PLC. ASCA (2019) charges school counselors with implementing a data driven approach to the design of the school counseling program. This approach involves looking at achievement, attendance, and discipline to define areas of growth. Nina's PLC group is specifically designed to review student data to create SMART goals, which are student objectives based on ASCA standards. Nina stated:

We set as our focus this year to identify 5-6 essential standards, which was hard because I feel like all of the counseling standards are essential. Our PLC group was working together as a common area on educator effectiveness, and we decided that goal setting was something that we were all working on with students.

ASCA (2019) requires accountability for their program implementation through the stakeholder meetings and evaluations that are part of the model. Out of the 16 participants, six school counselors mentioned accountability being a factor in PLC participation. Abby's PLC

group works together to design the needs assessments to be used and evaluated in the stakeholder meetings, which holds the counselor accountable for program effectiveness. Debra went through SMART goal training where she was then held accountable for producing smart goals, having a percentage and a target number to review in the PLC group. Debra mentioned producing smart goals within the accountability model was challenging for PLC group members but highly valuable: “It’s hard for a school counselor who’s been doing things a certain way for over 25 years to change. But whatever we’re trying to accomplish should not make anyone feel outdated or isolated.”

Program Design/Curriculum Development. The final theme for the second research question is program design/curriculum development. ASCA (2019) requires school counselors to create programs for students based on the mindsets and behaviors listed in the ASCA National Model. Out of the 16 participants, 14 have engaged in program design and/or curriculum development through PLC participation. Molly’s school is in year 2 of becoming a trauma-informed school, which has involved extensive program development. The training has been cohesive throughout the entire district thanks to the work of the school counseling PLC group. Each month, the PLC group meets to discuss what is working and not working which has brought the counselors closer together and has created unity across schools. Molly has found from working together on the trauma-informed curriculum, students are able to receive the same services, which creates support throughout the district. Molly stated:

We are all on the same page and our kids know their expectations and the

programs that we offer are the same at each school. They're getting used to that. And I think that's really healthy for the kids as well, knowing that no matter what school they're at, the same things are going to be offered to them at each place they go for social and emotional health.

See Table 2 for full details on participant data for research question two.

Table 2

Themes Related to ASCA Model Implementation

Participant	Advocacy	Leadership	ASCA Review/ Checklist	Data Driven/ Data Analysis	Accountability	Program Design/ Curriculum Development
Debra	X	X		X	X	X
China	X	X	X		X	X
Karis		X	X	X		
Maggie	X	X	X	X	X	X
Abby	X	X	X			X
Carmen	X	X				X
Julia	X	X				X
Emily	X	X	X	X	X	X
Trixie	X	X	X	X		X
Lori	X	X				X
Laura		X	X	X		X
Pam	X	X	X	X	X	X
Megan	X	X		X		X

Hannah		X	X	X		X
Molly	X	X		X		X
Nina	X	X		X	X	X

Research Question 3

Themes were explored for the final research question: How do school counselors perceive professional growth while participating in a PLC? Themes associated with this research question were: Mentorship, Social/Emotional Learning, and Ethics/Consultation.

Mentorship/Supervision. Due to economic issues and lack of awareness, many novice school counselors report to work with no mentors, a lack of supervision, a heavy workload, and limited resources (Bickmore & Curry, 2013). Participants revealed many school counselors are experiencing a lack of supervision when they first begin work as a new school counselor. Out of 16 participants, seven reported opportunities to be mentored or provide mentorship in their PLC group. Pam had the best support as a mentor in her large, suburban high school. Everyone in Pam’s district is a part of a PLC mentor group for the first 2 years of employment. Pam is a lead mentor who is highly accomplished as a school counselor. On the flip side, Lori is the only high school counselor serving her first year. Her monthly school counseling mentor meetings have been essential to her work. She has relied on her colleagues to help train her for various new responsibilities on the job. She staffs questions about how to help students with graduation credits, college scholarships, and a multitude of new responsibilities. One of her peers in the PLC held the high school counseling position the previous year, and she serves as a mentor to

support her work. Lori stated she feels as though she would not survive without her monthly PLC meetings with her colleagues.

Social/Emotional learning. The second theme of Research Question 3 is social/emotional learning. Curriculum development was discussed previously as it relates to development of comprehensive school counseling models; however, 10 out of 16 participants specifically discussed social emotional learning as a part of their own professional development in PLC groups that impacted their work. Hannah, China, and Miranda completed book studies with their PLC groups about social emotional learning. Trixie trains her PLC group using social emotional learning objectives.

Several participants made social emotional learning part of their classroom counseling lessons and their overall comprehensive counseling plan. Morgan taught social emotional learning components to her teacher staff as part of their staff development after researching the curriculum in her PLC group. Emily uses social emotional learning lessons with middle school students. Social emotional learning is an important curriculum for students, a powerful teaching topic for teachers, and fellow counselors. Because Trixie teaches social emotional lessons to staff and students, she finds herself practicing it daily in her profession to set the right example.

Ethics/Consultation. The final theme of Research Question 3 is ethics/consultation. School counselors face ethical decisions frequently that require consultation from other professionals. Out of 16 participants, 10 cited the importance of staffing ethical concerns during PLC meetings as part of professional growth opportunities. Virtue ethics is a critical viewpoint

for achieving ethically sound conduct in the school counseling profession (Wilczenski, et al., 2020). Abby serves as a mentor counselor in a PLC group. She was taught to consult before making any ethical decisions for her students with her trusted professional peers. Abby stated:

The thing I love about the PLC group so much is that grad programs all over the place have such strong foundational stuff that is taught to them. The biggest thing we were taught is consult, consult, consult. Don't try to decide by yourself; especially if it's one that you don't feel comfortable making. If it's the first time you've encountered something, if it's uncomfortable. If something just seems wrong. The PLC group provides that space for consultation.

Counselors who practice using virtue ethics are inspired to help students by the importance of long-term ramifications (Wilczenski et al., 2020). Lori relies on her PLC group to help ensure she is making sound, ethical decisions as a first-year high school counselor. She staffs ethical concerns with her colleagues to help in the process of training her to make the right decisions. See Table 3 for full details on participant data for research question three.

Table 3

Themes Related to Professional Growth

	Mentorship/ Supervision	Social/ Emotional Learning	Transition	Ethics/ Consultation
Debra		X		X
China	X		X	X
Karis		X		
Maggie	X	X		
Abby	X	X		X
Carmen	X			X
Julia				X
Emily	X	X		X
Trixie		X		X
Lori	X		X	X
Laura			X	X
Pam	X	X	X	
Megan				X
Hannah	X	X		
Molly		X	X	
Nina		X	X	

Discussion

Research Question 1 Themes

The themes that emerged from the first research question on how school counselors experienced and used PLC groups were collaboration, community and culture building, and the critical meeting components of PLC groups. All 16 participants discussed the importance of collaboration. Many discussed the importance of hearing from each other about their programs, which was inspiring and led to new ideas in their daily work with students. There was value found in being able to work together with peers, and it was frequently suggested that the groups needed to be divided by the age groups (elementary/secondary) for school population.

The second theme that emerged from the first research question on school counselors' experience and utilization of professional learning communities was the theme of community and culture building. Many participants shared participation in PLCs helped reduce feelings of isolation. Those who worked with at least one other school counselor in their setting experienced isolation in their work due to how heavy their workload was. They mentioned that they stay so incredibly busy that the PLC meeting is often the first opportunity that they have to slow down and discuss their work with each other. Within that sense of community, the school counselors who had a lot of experience found value from sharing their knowledge, while newer counselors enjoyed sharing updated information from their graduate programs, as well as offering support with technology.

The third theme that emerged from Research Question 1 is the critical components of the PLC meetings. The school counselors who were interviewed mentioned several important ingredients of effective PLCs. One important factor was the importance of having a highly

effective leader. Several school counselors had a school counseling administrator scheduling and leading the meetings. This person was considered to be an advocate for the school counselors who were available to listen to concerns and help deliver resources to support the PLC meetings.

Some of the school counselors interviewed were the leaders of their own PLC group. The school counselors who led the meetings were very passionate about leading the PLC groups and supporting the work of school counselors in their districts. In one particular case, the PLC leader had achieved RAMP status for her school and successfully advocated to run a bi-monthly PLC school counseling group. The district she works for pays her a stipend and sends her to ASCA each year. The subjects discussed the importance of having protected time each month to meet with an agenda they had input in producing.

Research Question 2

Themes that emerged from Research Question 2 were Advocacy and Leadership, ASCA National Model Review, and Program and Curriculum Design. Narratives that emerged from data collection included advocacy, social justice, professional identity, and participants' ability to create sensitivity and awareness for students with both teachers and administrators.

Participants who participated in administrative PLCs built stronger relationships with their principals, which led to advocacy for students and for teachers. The PLC meetings created a sense of empowerment, making it easier to advocate for students, families, colleagues, and the school counseling profession. Advocacy requires a school counselor to sometimes step out of the background and speak up regarding social justice issues.

Advocacy and leadership go hand in hand, the implementation of an ASCA aligned curriculum and program implementation cannot occur without the school counselor taking on an

active role in leadership within the school. All 16 participants provided examples of leadership that emerged from participation in the PLC group or groups. Some subjects were a part of a leadership team with principals and assistant principals. Those opportunities led to school counselors starting new programs and services for their comprehensive programs. Two of the participants were a part of a leadership PLC with their superintendents, other principals, and lead teachers that led to creating positive changes for the entire school district.

A total of nine of the 16 participants engaged in a review of the ASCA National Model. Some of the participants have already achieved RAMP status and are reviewing the updated 4th edition of the ASCA model to make modifications to their program. One participant leads her PLC group to support their work in implementing a comprehensive program, creating uniformity throughout her district. The participants who have a heavy workload from either a large student population or an understaffed, impoverished district feel less prepared to implement the comprehensive program but find encouragement through meeting in the PLC group with peers. In two different large, suburban districts, the participants start each year by reviewing their comprehensive school counseling program, scheduling their stakeholder meetings, and updating and revamping their practice. One participant referred to the process as “cleaning it up and making sure the work is intentional.”

Research Question 3

Three themes emerged from Research Question 3: Mentorship, Social Emotional Learning, and Ethics and Consultation. Of the seven participants who mentioned mentorship as being a critical part of professional growth, four are actively engaged in providing mentorship to other PLC members. One participant was specifically participating in a school counselor PLC group to provide mentorship to her peers. She started off in the group as a new school counselor

receiving mentorship and loved participating in the group so much that the counseling administrator eventually made her a mentor. She described her joy in helping new school counselors grow in their practice and how much she learned from other counselors new to the profession. Another participant is the only high school counselor in a rural area where she is experiencing her first year in the profession. She credits her mentorship in the PLC group as being the only way she would have survived her first year because of the amount of support and training her mentor peers have provided.

Providing opportunities for school counselors to engage in discussion about social emotional learning was part of 10 of the 16 school counselors' perceptions of professional growth in PLC groups. The 10 participants have learned about the impact of social and emotional learning on a child's development and how that has impacted student success and overall well-being. Two participants also studied secondary trauma, which impacts the teachers who are working with traumatized students. A self-care for adult's toolkit was a part of the PLC group designed to address secondary trauma. The participant who had the opportunity to learn about secondary trauma was then able to lead a PLC group with teachers and help support their work by teaching about the importance of self-care. Some of the participants completed book studies about social emotional learning as part of their PLC experience. The book study was cited by those participants as very engaging and helpful to their work with their students.

One of the participants stated she felt overwhelmed about the number of ethical decisions she faced as a school counselor, and the impact of having ethics consultation in the PLC group had proven to be critical to her practice of school counseling. Many of the participants engage in

group messaging outside of the PLC meetings with the group members. Within these ongoing conversations, the PLC members frequently engage in ethics consultation with one another. One school counselor stated, instead of trying to make an ethical decision on her own, she consults through group messaging where she has seven colleagues to support her work. Being able to discuss ethical dilemmas was mentioned as helping reduce professional isolation and gain confidence in decisions that can have lasting impact on students. Out of the 16 participants, 11 discussed how important consultation was to their PLC group.

Professional Implications

School counselors who participated in the study found value and importance in participating in monthly PLC meetings for the purpose of running a comprehensive school counseling program. School counselors feel isolated and lack professional identity without the opportunity to participate in PLC groups for counselors. Participants unanimously agreed on the importance of collaboration in PLC groups. There was agreement that mutual collaboration and sharing of resources and services took place that would not have occurred without the PLC meetings. Many found a level of comfort that allowed them to consult on a more regular basis outside of the PLC group. Some participants talked about being able to support families with students in different schools more effectively from meeting in PLC groups and staffing cases. In some cases, school counselors were involved in student advocacy and used the PLC time to form strategies to help students district wide.

Supervision for novice school counselors took place in many of the PLC groups, which led to additional training and support among the PLC group members. Hearing about PLC members' specific techniques and programs led some of the subjects to new methods and gaining

a stronger sense of professional identity. Gaining that sense of professional growth led to unity and cohesion of services. Participants all discussed new leadership opportunities through PLC participation, which led to participants assessing their counseling programs alignment with the ASCA National Model, or helping lead other PLC members to pursue RAMP designation, as well as supporting current RAMP status programs for those who had already achieved the RAMP designation.

Out of the 16 participants, five participated in an administrative PLC group in addition to the school counseling PLC group. All five participants mentioned having a stronger relationship with their principal based on the leadership PLC participation. The school counselors became an important contributor to policy changes, providing new programs for students, and helped the administrative team gain an understanding of the work of school counselors. Further studies could be conducted to investigate the professional development opportunities being offered to school counselors. Administrators could be interviewed to find out their perceptions of starting school counseling PLC groups and the potential impact of school counseling PLC groups

Limitations

Participation in PLC groups with school counselors is not broadly utilized, so one limitation is there is a restricted number of counselors who have this shared experience. Future studies might consider investigating potential differences between PLCs for secondary and elementary school counselors. The subjects repeatedly talked about how different their work was between schools and the need for separating the PLC groups based upon the development of the students. The PLC groups also operated differently depending on the funding available for school counselors and the work within the PLC group also varied depending on the school's resources. For example, in a rural impoverished area, the school counselors were training each

other on how to deal with student records, which school counselors in more adequately funded school districts would not be handling.

Conclusion

School counselors who have the opportunity to meet monthly in professional learning communities' benefit in many different ways. Mentorship as a part of PLC groups is particularly important for school counselors. School counselors guide and help each other professionally in PLC meetings, supporting professional identity. Supervision is beneficial for novice school counselors who would potentially not have a veteran colleague to guide them through the navigation of designing the school counseling program and implementing a comprehensive school counseling program. School counselors also experience self-care in PLC meetings by having time to connect and bond with one another. School counselors experience validation and encouragement from working with peers in PLC groups. School counselors from the study often mentioned PLC meetings were an opportunity to advocate for resources, professional growth and training opportunities, and program development to benefit students districtwide.

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Social Justice and Advocacy Among Counselors in Global Settings: Fostering International Community and Education Partnerships

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Abstract

This article presents a multi-phase community-based initiative in Jamaica designed to address mental health disparities through international partnerships grounded in social justice and advocacy. Using a participatory action research (PAR) framework, the project collaborated with educators, church leaders, and community members to co-design sustainable mental health programming. Key activities included professional development training, trauma-informed care delivery, home visits, and collaborative community needs assessments. Findings are organized around five central themes that illuminate the complexities and opportunities involved in developing ethical and culturally responsive international partnerships. The initiative is situated within the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies framework and contemporary global mental health literature emphasizing ethical engagement, cultural humility, and community-led practice. Implications for counseling education, international advocacy, and global counseling partnerships are discussed.

Keywords: *social justice counseling, global mental health, participatory action research, advocacy, international partnerships*

Introduction

Social justice and advocacy are not new constructs in the field of counseling. The American Counseling Association (2014) has articulated in its Code of Ethics; the ethical responsibilities counselors have to not only advocate for the rights of individuals but also to work to eliminate disparities in access to mental health care and to promote the well-being of oppressed and marginalized communities. When counselors work in international settings, they are likely to encounter systems in which power imbalances are more deeply entrenched and people's access to services is further constrained by historical inequities, extreme poverty, inadequate resources, and in many contexts around the world, stigma and shame about mental health (Ratts et al., 2016; Wainberg et al., 2017).

This article reflects on an ongoing multi-phase initiative in Jamaica that was undertaken

to form and build international community partnerships to address mental health needs, advocate for human flourishing, and reduce individual and systemic suffering through community and school counseling interventions. These efforts involved collaborative work with educators, church leaders, government ministries, community organizations, and mental health care workers in Jamaica with the explicit goals of building counseling competencies and advocacy in novice and practicing counselors. This intervention builds on the growing evidence that culturally responsive and community-driven approaches are required to effectively and ethically create and implement sustainable mental health interventions in global and multicultural contexts (Asnaani et al., 2022; Woods-Jaeger et al., 2017).

The Jamaica project was conceptualized and implemented using a participatory action research (PAR) framework, which placed Jamaican stakeholders at the center of co-creating the approach and the ongoing evaluation. Shahnaz et al., (2025) describes PAR as critical to codesigned interventions because it is a shared process that centers the expertise of communities and reflects their own ways of knowing. It also has been argued that in order to counter Western-centric models of mental health, it is essential that counselors co-design mental health frameworks with communities (Donald, 2025). The Jamaica initiative provided professional development training, trauma-informed care, community outreach, and needs assessment and placed Jamaican educators, clergy, and community leaders at the center of these activities.

In this article, I reflect on this international field experience and how it can lead to increased counseling skills and cultural humility as well as advanced advocacy competencies. Guided by the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017), the article seeks to answer three interrelated questions:

1. How can counselors work with international communities and organizations to develop sustainable and culturally responsive partnerships?
2. What is the role of educational systems, faith-based communities, and community leaders in building equitable mental health services and advocacy?
3. What strategies can counselors adopt to ensure that international advocacy is community-led, contextually informed, and sustainable?

Situating this case example in Jamaica in the context of global counseling literature, this article explores some of the opportunities and challenges in creating international social justice and advocacy partnerships.

Literature Review

Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies

The counseling profession has developed a set of competencies for counselors to utilize when working in international and multicultural contexts. In the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC), Ratts et al., (2016) call on counselors to develop a deep understanding of their own cultural identities and positions of privilege or marginalization, to gain knowledge of clients' cultural worldviews, and to work to create systemic change. This is of particular relevance for working in global contexts in which historical inequities, colonization, immigration, and cultural stigma about mental health influence access to care, as well as the meaning and experience of counseling (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). Counselors must critically reflect on their positionality to ensure that they are not unintentionally perpetuating power differentials and that they are listening and engaging with communities in a collaborative and community-driven manner.

Global Mental Health and Participatory Approaches

Mental health initiatives in global contexts often struggle to effectively combine evidence-based approaches with cultural relevance, sustainability, and responsiveness to community priorities (Wainberg et al., 2017). Many interventions are developed using top-down approaches that are not codesigned with local partners. Shahnaz et al.,(2025) describe codesign as using participatory approaches to create ownership over mental health interventions. This has the effect of ensuring that services are not just culturally grounded in local context but also led by community members. Similarly, Donald (2025) makes the argument that in moving beyond top-down frameworks, it is critical for counselors to integrate local cultural expressions, such as storytelling, art, and faith, into intervention approaches. Donald (2025) provides a strong example of how mental health counseling approaches can be adapted in Caribbean contexts when he discusses trauma and resiliency counseling from a strength-based framework rooted in a Caribbean worldview.

Culturally Responsive Practice in Trauma and Crisis Intervention

Working with diverse populations in crisis and trauma settings requires not only technical skill but also an understanding of cultural nuances and humility. Woods-Jaeger et al., (2017) make the argument that counselors must adapt evidence-based interventions (e.g., trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy) in ways that fit with communication patterns, local healing practices, and limited resources. Asnaani et al., (2022) further state that for counselors to adapt interventions for cross-cultural practice, it is essential that these are codesigned with community partners in order to ensure that they are culturally congruent. These articles also are highly relevant to providing counseling and trauma work in faith-based contexts, as many communities

in developing contexts rely on religious institutions to provide care, including emotional and relational support.

School and Community Mental Health Promotion

Schools and community organizations have been identified as important sites for community mental health promotion in global settings. Weist et al., (2017) provide a series of country experiences, including India, Lebanon, Mexico, and the United States, that describe school-based interventions and their reach to family and community settings. Rowling (2003) challenges scholars and practitioners to think beyond traditional research in moving toward participatory and action research frameworks that incorporate mental health in a way that is more deeply integrated into community well-being. These perspectives speak to the importance of cross-sector and multi-systemic collaboration in addressing social determinants of mental health and health promotion in global contexts.

Implications for International Counseling Partnerships

The literature points to a set of key principles that guide international and global counseling partnerships that are also reflected in the case study:

1. Centering the voices and empowerment of local stakeholders (Shahnaz et al., 2025).
2. Adapting approaches to be culturally and faith-based relevant (Donald, 2025; Asnaani et al., 2022).
3. Committing to long-term relationships for capacity and sustainability (Wainberg et al., 2017).
4. Engaging in reflexive practice to address power and privilege (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017; Fickling et al., 2019).

These and other principles informed the creation of the Jamaican project and ensured that the interventions were collaborative, culturally congruent, and fit with community priorities.

Methodology

This project was guided by a participatory action research (PAR) framework that focused on collaboration, cultural humility, and ethical engagement with Jamaican communities. PAR is a cyclical process of planning, taking action, reflecting, and then adjusting to ensure that activities are aligned with community voices (Shahnaz et al., 2025). This approach was aligned with the goals of the Jamaica project, which were to create and maintain sustainable partnerships, promote human flourishing, and build counseling competencies for novice and practicing counselors.

Context and Collaborators

This project was based in several Jamaican communities and included international and community partnerships with Andrews Memorial United Church, Mandeville Parish Prison, Bellevue State Mental Health Hospital, the International University of the Caribbean, Mandeville Nursing Home, Mt. Olivet Boys Home, and Ebenezer Primary School. Weist et al. (2017) show the value of including faith-based communities, schools, and government as important partners in work to create mental health capacity and address complex mental health needs.

Participants and Activities

The participants in this project were clergy, educators, mental health workers, community leaders, and counseling professionals. The work that was completed with them was mutual and was characterized as a learning experience for all involved that combined counseling competencies with the local cultural and spiritual context. These activities included the following:

- **Professional Development:** Workshops and training focused on trauma-informed care and resilience, stress management, conflict resolution and communication skills, socio-emotional health in children, and crisis intervention.
- **Community Engagement:** Home visits, care packages, and informal counseling to build trust and address immediate needs.
- **Needs Assessment:** Collaborative work with local leaders to assess the context, evaluate priority needs, and then tailor activities.

The value of these efforts is underscored by Asnaani et al.,(2022), who argue that community partnerships are essential to ensure the cultural fit of evidence-based interventions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical engagement was an intentional and foundational component of the work design. The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014) and the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts et al., 2016) were used to ensure that activities were respectful of the cultural values, supported community agency and capacity, and were not externally driven. Reflexivity about one's power and privilege was an important ongoing theme in the interactions with community members and local leaders (Ratts, 2017).

Findings and Key Themes

The Jamaica project yielded five key themes that have some important insights about the opportunities and challenges of using international and global partnerships to advance social justice and mental health equity. These themes emerged from the collaborative activities, feedback from participants, and ongoing reflection on the process of partnering with Jamaican communities.

1. **Shared Community Vision Through Participatory Design:** One important result of the project was the creation of a shared vision for the intervention among all community stakeholders in the local cultural and spiritual context. Co-creation of the training content and intervention strategies allowed the project to build a sense of ownership and fit with community values. This theme resonates with Shahnaz et al., (2025), who argue that codesign results in more sustainable and effective mental health interventions because they are informed by community voices and priorities.
2. **Bridging Academia and Practice Through Applied Learning:** The Jamaica experience also served to bridge the academic goals of building counseling competencies and the practical application of working in a global community setting. Counseling students and professionals who participated in the project all reported that the experience built their capacity for cultural humility, advocacy, and making adaptations to fit with local context. This type of applied learning also is reflected in the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts et al., 2016) and points to the importance of building international applied learning experiences into counselor training (Fickling et al., 2019).
3. **Global Collaboration as a Catalyst for Sustainable Change:** A final theme that emerged from this project is that the multi-sectoral partnership was a critical component of the intervention's success. The long-standing and multi-faceted collaboration among church, educational, and governmental institutions was essential for building systemic capacity and laying a foundation for sustainable mental health promotion and capacity building. This is similar to the integrative approach of school and community partnerships described by Weist et al., (2017) in a number of countries.

4. Cultural Responsiveness and Adaptive Practice: A central process of delivering the training in Jamaica was the need to continue to adapt the activities and strategies based on community partners' feedback and needs. For example, using biblical narratives and culturally relevant metaphors was a valuable way to engage participants and to ensure that learning goals were met. This process of culturally responsive adaptation is consistent with the work of Asnaani et al., (2022) and Donald (2025) in integrating local cultural lenses into counseling interventions.

5. Long-Term Engagement Builds Trust and Capacity: Sustained presence was a critical feature of the project and key to building trust and developing local leadership. Returning to Jamaica annually for retraining and evaluation deepened the relationship with communities and gave time for gradual leadership development. Donald (2025) describes the importance of long-term presence for creating community resilience and program sustainability, while Ratts & Greenleaf (2017) talks about the ethical imperative of counselors to engage in systemic change over the long-term.

Discussion

This Jamaica project provides critical lessons and information about how counselors can effectively and ethically engage in international and global mental health and social justice partnerships. The themes and findings are important in their own right but also have some important connections to current global mental health literature and the MSJCC. The project also points to a number of implications for future global counseling partnerships.

Participatory Design and Community Ownership

The PAR approach of this project was essential to ensure that interventions were culturally relevant and grounded in the experiences of Jamaican communities. Shahnaz et al., (2025) show that codesigned mental health interventions have a much higher likelihood of

being accepted and sustained because they are based on community priorities, rather than the goals of outside entities. In this project, Jamaican partners informed all aspects of the training, from content and mode of delivery to evaluation, in a way that helped to create a sense of shared ownership and long-term investment.

Cultural Humility as a Professional Imperative

Working in cross-cultural global settings requires more than skill and knowledge, it also requires cultural humility and reflexivity. Counselors have a responsibility to reflect on their own positionality and understand the ways in which power and privilege shape their work (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). The integration of faith-based approaches in this project was a respectful and important recognition of local cultural and spiritual values and an approach that is also recommended by Asnaani et al., (2022), who advocate for interventions that are embedded within community and local structures.

Long-Term Presence and Capacity Building

Short-term and episodic interventions in international settings will not create systemic change or long-term capacity to address mental health needs. Wainberg et al., (2017) make the argument that counselors must commit to long-term engagement in order to challenge the systemic barriers to equity in mental health and to support local capacity building. For this project, annual visits for training and retraining as well as program evaluation were essential to the creation of continuity and a sustained presence that built trust and deepened relationships with Jamaican communities. This also gave space for the long-term development of local leadership, which has been described as an important factor in community resilience and program sustainability by Donald (2025), Ratts and Greenleaf (2017).

Bridging Research and Practice

Finally, this project points to the important role that applied learning can have in preparing counselors to work in international and global contexts. By working directly with communities and taking on a co-learning posture, counseling students and professionals were able to develop skills in cultural adaptation, ethical advocacy, and participatory

engagement. These outcomes are in line with Fickling et al., (2019), who argue that models of counselor supervision and training must center multicultural and social justice counseling competencies.

Implications for Counseling Practice

The insights from this Jamaica project have important implications for counselors, counselor educators, and organizations that are considering or already engaging in international or global social justice and mental health advocacy. Informed by current literature and the MSJCC, these implications point to the importance of a participatory approach, cultural responsiveness, and long-term commitment for moving toward social justice and systemic change.

Center Community Voices Through Codesign

Counselors who are interested in building international mental health advocacy partnerships should be guided by and center the voices of the communities that they work with. As Shahnaz et al, (2025) make clear, this codesign is a powerful way to create community ownership, voice, and long-term sustainability. For counselors, this approach calls for being a co-learner and co-advocate and less an expert who is imposing pre-packaged interventions.

Integrate Faith and Cultural Frameworks

Faith-based organizations and communities are often important support systems and safety nets in communities with few or limited resources for formal mental health services. The importance of integrating these into counseling interventions is made clear by both Asnaani et al., (2022) and Donald (2025). In the Jamaica case, the use of biblical principles and partnering with church leadership were important for both cultural relevance and expanding the reach of the training.

Engage in Reflexive, Ethical Practice

The ACA Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 2014) and Ratts & Greenleaf (2017) challenge counselors to engage in reflexive practice, particularly in cross-cultural work. This ongoing self-assessment of one's cultural assumptions, positionality, and the power of privilege are key for navigating ethical tensions and dilemmas. Reflexive practice also supports counselors in ensuring that their advocacy work is informed and directed by the communities that they seek to serve.

Commit to Long-Term Partnerships

Episodic or short-term interventions are not likely to result in systemic change and sustainable capacity for addressing mental health needs in global contexts. As Wainberg et al., (2017) and Donald (2025) make the case, long-term engagement creates the opportunity to develop trust, relationships, and local capacity. Counselors and organizations should plan for and commit to a sustained presence over the long-term and then create opportunities for building local leadership.

Prepare Counselors for Global Practice

Counselor educators and supervisors have a responsibility to help prepare counseling students for work in global and international settings. Fickling et al., (2019) describe multicultural and social justice competencies as essential to this process and underscore the need to build multicultural and global experiences into counselor education.

Conclusion

The Jamaica project serves as a vivid example of the impact that culturally responsive, community-based, and collaborative partnerships can have in advancing social justice and mental health equity. Centering the voices of the Jamaican community, integrating faith and cultural values, and maintaining long-term commitment to collaboration are key strategies that counseling can and should adopt to address complex, systemic, and individual-level needs on a global scale.

The work that was conducted as a part of this project demonstrates the value of applying the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts et al., 2016) in an ethical global engagement process and is also in line with the current discourse in the global mental health literature on the importance of engaging in participatory and collaborative approaches that avoid the “one-size-fits-all” top-down models and, instead, support shared ownership and long-term sustainability (Shahnaz et al., 2025; Wainberg et al., 2017).

From a counselor educator’s perspective, this case can serve as a foundation for helping students and counselor practitioners better understand how international partnerships can be employed as applied learning laboratories for enhancing one’s cultural humility, advocacy, and reflexive practice. As Donald (2025) and Woods-Jaeger et al., (2017) so eloquently put it, our work in global mental health is not about the delivery of counseling or mental health

interventions. Instead, it is about the process of providing services that will allow our clients and communities to thrive in their own way and in their own time.

As global disparities continue to impact the availability of quality mental health care, counselors have an opportunity and an ethical responsibility to get involved with and engage in international partnerships that will prioritize and center the cultural context and local leadership. With care, humility, and diligence, counselors can make a significant contribution to the well-being of individuals and communities across the world.

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