

# Developing a Global Culture of Collaboration for School Counselors

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*School-university partnerships are becoming increasingly popular within the field of school counseling. Peer consultation groups offer a specific type of partnership and support for practitioners, numerous advantages for those in higher education, and significant potential for international application. This article expands on Thomas' (2005) peer consultation model developed for school counseling alumni, with adaptations of the model in two universities, as well as several K-12 school districts within a single county. Data from participant evaluations indicate strong support for the personal and professional value of peer consultation.*

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**C**ollaborative partnerships between universities and K-12 schools offer a number of tangible benefits to both parties. For counselor educators working in university settings, partnerships with schools provide exposure to the current reality of school life as experienced by those “in the trenches,” as well as the opportunity to conduct research. For those on the K-12 side, partnerships with university members provide access to numerous

resources, an avenue for solving school-based problems, and the opportunity to give feedback to those in higher education about current difficulties faced in everyday practice (Beale, Copenhaver, Leone, & Grinnan, 1997; Blackman, Hayes, Reeves, & Paisley, 2002; Clark & Horton-Parker, 2002; Hayes, Paisley, Phelps, Pearson, & Salter, 1997; Taylor & Adelman, 2000; Thomas, 2005).

It is this form of collaboration—the school-university partnership—that is the focus of the present article, which builds on the original School Counselor Alumni Peer Consultation Group model described by Thomas (2005). This model has been modified and implemented in three other settings, including several K-12 school districts within one county and two universities. These adaptations are described here to provide counselor educators with concrete examples of various uses of peer consultation groups, and to stimulate further creative applications.

Watkins' (2001) examination of comprehensive guidance programs across the globe underscored the variations in the practice of guidance and counseling due to differences in culture, school systems, language, and community needs. The models presented here offer flexible formats for peer consultation to school counselors worldwide. With technological support, the potential also exists for peer consultation across international borders.

## **Background: The Value of Collaborative Partnerships**

School-university partnerships have become more popular in recent years, with a number of different models emerging in the literature. For example, Clark and Horton-Parker's (2002) discussion of professional development schools (PDS) revealed the value of formal collaboration between counselor preparation programs and local school districts in the training of school counseling interns. Blackman and colleagues (2002) reported regarding eight years of collaboration between counselor educators and school counselors. This report discussed the benefits of the "partnership community," which include the opportunity for reflection on professional identity issues, a sense of renewed commitment and increased productivity, as well as the development of meaningful connections through networking activities. Romano and Kachgal's (2004) focus on improving the connections between counseling psychology and school counseling also

called for formal collaborations between those in higher education and those in K-12 schools.

The Counselor-in-Residence program described by Beale and others (1997) allows for a different kind of direct collaboration, in which a practicing school counselor becomes a visiting member of the faculty for one year. Collaboration may also adopt a specific focus, such as the curriculum proposed by Bruhn, Irby, Lou, Thweatt, and Lara-Alecio (2005) involving an agreement between a university and a school district with the specific purpose of training bilingual school counselors. Further support is presented in the argument articulated by Yeh (2004) that collaborative efforts should aim to teach skills in advocacy, contextual research, and cross-cultural competence.

Bemak (2001) proposed that graduate counseling programs should place more focus on the development of skills in leadership and collaboration, in response to the increasing demand for school counselor involvement with local communities and agencies. Hayes and colleagues (1997) advocated a team-based approach for counselors and counselor educators to work on a variety of professional issues and to relate theory to practice.

It is the interplay between theory and practice that is perhaps the most important benefit of partnerships. This is especially true in the field of school counseling, where the two realms have not historically been connected in ways that seem relevant to practitioners (Clark & Horton-Parker, 2002; Hayes et al., 1997; Ringeisen, Henderson, & Hoagwood, 2003). When training is more theoretical than practical, school counseling graduates complain that, upon entering the workplace, they feel unprepared or under-prepared to handle the day-to-day realities of working in a school (Barret & Schmidt, 1986; Beale et al., 1997; Paisley & Borders, 1995).

It is essential for counselor preparation programs to heed these concerns and to focus more attention on making helpful connections between theory and practice (Barret & Schmidt, 1986; Beale et al., 1997; Bemak, 2001; Clark & Horton-Parker, 2002; Hayes et al., 1997; Paisley & Borders, 1995; Ringeisen, Henderson, & Hoagwood, 2003). Collaborative partnerships offer one solution to this dilemma and represent a powerful source of ongoing professional development opportunities for all parties.

Consultation groups, which can be facilitated by the college or university, provide an especially valuable resource for ongoing collaboration

while graduate students are pursuing their degrees and after they have graduated and are working in the field (Logan, 1997; Robertson, 1998; Thomas, 2005). What follows is an update on the consultation group model designed by Thomas (2005), as well as detailed descriptions of the ways in which this model has been adapted in two universities and one county. Participant evaluation data from the four sites is also presented, and offers concrete examples of the personal and professional benefits of peer consultation.

### **An Update on the School Counselor Alumni Peer Consultation Group**

At Saint Mary's College of California, the School Counselor Alumni Peer Consultation Group (Thomas, 2005) provides structured support through the post-graduation stage and affords graduates of the training program a regular place and time in which to meet to provide mutual encouragement and engage in professional development activities. The group, which is open to all alumni from the program, meets every other month to discuss pre-assigned readings and to share best practices. The readings and discussion topics are chosen by the participants and reflect their current areas of concern within the field of school counseling.

This type of partnership promoted connections between theory and practice for both the alumni and the counselor educator (the first author) who facilitates the group. Alumni are exposed to research and literature pertaining to issues they face in their school site, and the facilitator gains important feedback from those working in the field. The School Counselor Alumni Peer Consultation Group (Thomas, 2005) is thus mutually advantageous: it fosters collegiality and professional networking among the members, reduces some of the isolation commonly experienced by school counselors, and provides a structured environment for problem-solving. It also allows faculty to have ongoing contact with graduates and to maintain awareness of the relevant issues in the day-to-day practice of school counseling.

In the past several years, the group has made a number of changes in format, including the addition of a guest speaker series and a case study approach in lieu of the previous format of pre-assigned readings and member-led presentations on "best practices" (Thomas, 2005). Guest

speakers have been chosen from within the local college and K-12 community for their expertise on topics requested by group members. Presentation topics included multiple intelligences, career counseling and goal-setting techniques, narrative therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, and strategies for promoting parent involvement in the schools. Each guest speaker has brought relevant readings to the group, which members could read after the presentation and discuss at subsequent meetings.

The new case study format relies partly on e-mail correspondence, as cases are sent to the facilitator prior to the meeting. After the meeting, each member receives a written summary of each case and the results of the consultation that occurred during the group session. The e-mail component of this group affords greater flexibility with regard to the concept of group membership, in that alumni can participate and benefit from the consultation that occurs even if they are unable to attend in person. In fact, several alumni have retained their membership in the group after moving out of California or out of the United States. This aspect of the peer consultation group reflects the potential for international adaptation through the use of the Internet and other types of technology.

### **The Alumni Support Group at University of San Diego**

The Alumni Support Group at the University of San Diego (USD) was initiated after a conference presentation on Thomas' (2005) model described above. The coordinator of the group, the third author of this article, had been in conversation with USD graduates about their desire to have a forum to gather and gain support from each other. She implemented the group based on the School Counselor Alumni Peer Consultation Group (Thomas, 2005) model and on additional input from USD alumni. The first and third authors subsequently presented jointly at a state conference about the similarities and differences between the two groups. The collaboration that occurred between these two counselor educators represents an effective example of how the peer consultation model can be applied and modified in different settings within one state; it is our belief that this type of collaboration would be successful globally as well.

School counseling alumni who are practicing counselors in neighboring school districts are invited to participate in the Alumni Support Group at

USD. The meetings began during the 2005-2006 school year and occur three times during the university school year. The meetings are facilitated by the third author, a former school counselor who serves as Director of Field Experiences, as well as coordinator of an elementary guidance grant in a school district in the county. Topics for discussion are determined by the group members, and all participants are asked to bring an article, resource and/or personal reflection on the theme. Topics have included grief and loss, transition issues for clients and for counselors, and the implementation of a state-funded school counseling supplemental program serving students in grades 7-12. Both this group and the original group share the same overall goals, including providing information on current counseling strategies, legislation and roles of school counselors, and support for new practitioners in the field of school counseling.

The group provides benefits for both the alumni and the university. The practicing counselors express appreciation for the support and reconnection with their peers in the field who graduated from the same university. They report that the sharing of strategies, materials, and updated information on current legislation enhances their job performance and satisfaction. The information shared by the alumni about perceived gaps in their preparation between theory and practice has also been helpful to the university faculty as they update and evaluate course content. An added benefit of this strong collaboration is that after alumni have practiced in the field for some years, they often volunteer to mentor current students during informational interviews for introductory courses, to facilitate workshops at university sponsored conferences, and to serve as on-site supervisors during the practicum and fieldwork classes. Due to massive budgetary cuts and recent layoffs in school counseling in California, USD faculty have decided to increase alumni support by having more frequent meetings in order to maintain these valuable connections and to boost morale during difficult economic times.

### **The School Counselor Group in Southwest Riverside County**

The School Counselor Group began through the efforts of school counselors from various districts throughout a developing suburban area in Southern California. The initial focus of the group was to provide an opportunity for practicing professionals to gather socially to exchange ideas

related to best practices and to develop a support network that would extend beyond district boundary lines. There were many new high schools in the area, often staffed by counselors with little or no experience. The School Counselor Group, which is open to school counselors, trainees, and counselor educators in the area, provides an excellent opportunity for professional development through shared ideas and mentoring. The organization currently includes counselors from 10 school districts, as well as two trainees and a counselor educator from a nearby university.

The group initially decided to hold meetings at a different high school location every other month. This strategy provided an opportunity to become familiar with different campuses throughout the region and allowed the members to assess the physical layout and environment of the various counseling departments. Unfortunately, it also contributed to some confusion because many of the campuses were in locations that were difficult to find. Ultimately, the group decided to meet at a centrally located high school campus that was easily accessible from the freeway. This decision has led to an increase in participation and regular attendance at meetings.

The School Counselor Group has now been in existence for approximately six years. A typical meeting consists of a light dinner with an opportunity for informal discussion, followed by a guest speaker who presents on a topic of interest identified by the group. The group has also utilized a roundtable format in which all participants share information related to the topic at hand. Previous topics have included: sophomore counseling programs, cutting/self-mutilation, student assistance program development, equity issues related to course selection, and course change policy and procedures.

In the winter of 2005, the fourth author, a member of the School Counselor Group, attended a workshop conducted by the first author, who provided an overview of the School Counselor Alumni Peer Consultation Group (Thomas, 2005). The use of journal articles was highlighted in this workshop as a key component to the alumni meetings. This idea was subsequently proposed to the School Counselor Group, which agreed to incorporate readings as a focal point for future meetings. Additionally, the two groups, the Saint Mary's College of California group and the Southwest Riverside County group, decided to communicate on a regular basis to exchange ideas about discussion topics. This networking expanded the focus

for each individual peer consultation group, and could be applied in an even wider range of settings across very different geographic regions.

In 2006, the School Counselor Group was addressed by a senior member of a local university admissions office. The counselors were provided with an overview of the undergraduate admissions process with specific emphasis on the student's personal statement. This led to a collaborative effort between the university and the English departments from neighboring high schools in which a university representative provided an in-service to teachers of 12<sup>th</sup> grade English classes.

School Counselor Group meetings have focused on understanding and using the American School Counselor Association's (2003) National Model and responding to local and state legislation. The School Counselor Group in Southwest Riverside County has served as a ready resource for local school counselors. The meetings have provided an opportunity to share strategies, develop professionally, and encourage efforts to provide quality programs. These meetings also serve to generate ideas that equip school counselors to take a more active leadership role in the educational community.

### **Alumni Web Forum and First Monday Forums at George Fox University**

What began as a web-based forum for school counseling alumni at George Fox University in Oregon has expanded to also include a face-to-face gathering on the first Monday of each month. The combined goals of the Alumni Web Forum and the First Monday Forums are to stay connected, share expertise, provide consultation for one another, and engage in self-care.

The Alumni Web Forum came about during a focus group of alumni and current students who met with the second author, the director of the school counseling program, to review the university's program. During the focus group, alumni voiced discontent at their loss of the support and growth opportunities available through their group supervision time during their field placement. Having recently come across Thomas' (2005) model, the idea of peer consultation had been percolating for the second author. Her comments about the model and peer consultation, combined with ideas from alumni, gave rise to the idea of an alumni consultation website. The vision that emerged was a password-controlled website that school counseling

program alumni could join, and which current students could join during their last year of the program. The rationale behind this was that the field experience seemed to be a key time for the value of supervision and consultation to take root. Opening the site to students at this juncture of their professional growth seemed timely. An alumna with technological skill and resources developed the site and agreed to serve gratis as webmaster. It was piloted late in the spring of 2007 with current internship students and officially unveiled in the fall of 2007.

The Alumni Web Forum site includes a professional contacts page where members' contact information is listed. The heart of the site includes six posting forums: (a) Resources, (b) Opportunities, (c) Everything Else, (d) Alumni Events, (e) Forms, and (f) Discussion Board. Members can post to or retrieve helpful information, downloadable documents, or useful links from these various sections.

The Resources Forum includes numerous member postings ranging from topics like advocacy and relational aggression to a solution-focused first session note taking form. The Opportunities Forum includes job postings, résumé writing tools, links to educational fairs, relevant upcoming conferences and trainings, and license renewal information. Pictures of graduated cohorts are currently showcased in the Everything Else Forum, and First Monday flyers are available in the Alumni Events Forum.

The next two forums are predominantly used by students during their field placements. The Forms Forum includes downloadable documents for school counseling field placements, such as video-taping release forms and summative evaluation forms. The Discussion Board Forum is a place for assigned written reflection and interaction on issues that arise during the course of the year. These last two forums encourage interns' use of the site, and heighten the likelihood they will visit and use the other site forums as well.

In addition to connecting via the Alumni Web Forum, program alumni can also attend informal monthly gatherings. These First Monday Forums came into existence soon after the inception of the web site, and were prompted by the desire for face-to-face community and an opportunity for some relaxing self-care. Alumni chose to have these gatherings, as the name suggests, on the first Monday of each month at local restaurants. The second author e-mails a quarterly flyer to all alumni with upcoming locations.

First Monday Forums have provided alumni with ongoing support as they have shifted from the safe space of group supervision into new work sites. Alumni appreciate the opportunity to maintain ties with each other and with the university's school counseling program. Our gatherings foster ongoing community in a profession that can be isolating. The time is spent consulting about client and workplace concerns (great care is taken to honor client confidentiality), sharing resources, talking about school counseling in general, and talking about the university's school counseling training program and how it might better equip current students and bridge the theory/practice gap.

From a university faculty perspective, the Alumni Web Forum and the monthly First Monday Forums offer a circular link that allows alumni, current students, and faculty to forge and maintain contact, and to have a window into each other's worlds. Alumni are able to stay connected to what is current at the university via contact with faculty and via intern and faculty member postings. For students, the web site contributes to bridging the gap between theory and practice as their own postings and concerns are shared with alumni. University faculty maintain familiarity with the reality of "life in the trenches," which then informs the ever-evolving shape of the school counseling program and the professional development of current students who graduate and become the new alumni.

Recently alumni who regularly participate have broached the possibility of more focused quarterly gatherings that would include some of the more structured pieces from Thomas' (2005) School Counselor Alumni Peer Consultation Group, such as formal case consultations and guest speakers. The adaptability of peer consultation groups allows for variations that best answer the needs of each site, and suggests their potential for implementation across and outside the United States.

### **Participant Evaluation of Peer Consultation Groups**

In order to gather more concrete data on participant perceptions regarding the value of peer consultation, we designed an eight-question survey (See Appendix) for group members to evaluate their participation in their respective consultation group. Efforts were made to establish face and content validity, and feedback was sought on item clarity. After minor revisions, the survey was then posted online in the summer and fall of 2008;

each author contacted group members to request that they complete the survey. There were 54 total responses (an overall 50% response rate). Of these, 22 came from Southwest Riverside County, 21 from Saint Mary's College, seven from George Fox University, and four from the University of San Diego.

The majority of respondents (48.1%) had been members of their group for two to five years, with an additional 20% who have been involved between one to two years. Most respondents (84.9%) participated in their group either in-person (49.1%) or both in-person and online (35.8%). Peer consultation group members were asked a series of questions regarding their experiences in their group and their perceptions of its value. All of the respondents indicated that the group they belonged to was valuable, and 98% indicated that the peer consultation group had a positive impact on their professional lives.

There were 42 responses to the open-ended question regarding the value of the peer consultation group. Qualitative analysis of these responses revealed "connection" as the most common theme, with 21 out of 42 respondents referencing this concept as the primary benefit of participating in peer consultation. Connection included sub-themes of support, staying in touch, extended community, and reducing professional isolation. Consider the following excerpts:

"The thing that is most important to me is hearing other counselors' stories and sharing mine. It feels good to share with those who understand the joys and frustrations of being a school counselor. We all have similar challenges. We have different experiences than teachers and administrators. This group provides an important extended community group. We have the common experience of knowing what we learned in our counseling program and now how far away we are drifting from the ideal. Somehow, connecting with my peers helps me to re-center myself. And this, I think, helps me to like my job more and to be a better school counselor!"

*George Fox University Alumni Group member*

“Staying connected with fellow members of my cohort after graduation creates a sense of family and togetherness.”  
*University of San Diego Alumni Group member*

“To stay connected with my peers, to become more educated on current topics, and to learn of more community resources.”  
*Southwest Riverside County School Counselor Group member*

“The peer consultation group has been a great experience for me. It provides an excellent forum to stay connected to colleagues, keep current with emerging trends, and consult. Each session, I learn something. Each session, I leave feeling fortunate to belong to such an amazing group.”  
*Saint Mary’s College Alumni Peer Consultation Group member*

Quantitative responses supported these comments about connection. In response to survey item #4, 66% of respondents indicated that the peer consultation group had had a positive impact on their sense of connection with colleagues.

Professional growth was another significant theme. Twenty-five percent of respondents selected “learning about new programs” and/or “specific resources” as the greatest benefit of their involvement with the peer consultation group. Twelve respondents included qualitative comments referencing learning about new programs and resources, useful presentations, and keeping current with trends in the field. Members stated the following:

“I think it is great for keeping up contacts and learning about new resources and approaches to problems.”  
*Saint Mary’s College Alumni Peer Consultation Group member*

“As a retired educator/counselor, this is one way for me to stay in touch with current challenges.”  
*Southwest Riverside County School Counselor Group member*

Another primary theme was “sharing stories,” with 11 responses using a phrase that referred to the value of the sharing that occurs in peer consultation. Respondents made these statements:

“The ability to consult with, debrief with colleagues who are not necessarily a part of your school district is very valuable. There is an ability to share and to glean valuable insights from others who are more removed from specific situations.”  
*George Fox University Alumni Group member*

“It's always beneficial to hear about best practices and to consult with colleagues from other districts. My district does not provide leadership or time for collaboration outside my school.”  
*Southwest Riverside County School Counselor Group member*

A related theme was networking, which was mentioned directly in five of the responses, including:

“The networking by e-mails and the tremendous value of having a place to bring concerns and issues, and to help others, and to see/hear new presentations. This is an all around valuable and wonderful group. I do not always attend. I do always value that I can attend.”  
*Saint Mary's College Alumni Peer Consultation Group member*

“It has helped me develop a local network. I also like the information we receive. We always have speakers that give information that we can apply to the job immediately.”  
*Southwest Riverside County School Counselor Group member*

Participation in peer consultation also involved mentoring or being mentored, which was referred to by 6 respondents. Consider these excerpts, which reflect both sides of the mentoring relationship:

“The value has changed over the past 10 years from peer support and collaboration to additionally mentoring newly

credentialed students.”

*Saint Mary's College Alumni Peer Consultation Group member*

“As a newly credentialed counselor, it is very important to me to learn from the wisdom of those who have ‘been there, done that!’ I also think that I have a fresh perspective to add to the more experienced counselors.”

*Southwest Riverside County School Counselor Group member*

The themes of connection, professional growth, sharing and networking, and mentorship that arose from this open-ended question match our own goals for the participants in peer consultation groups. The responses to this evaluation reflect some of the key benefits of participation in a peer consultation model as it evolved in several different settings.

### **Suggestions for Global Applications of the Peer Consultation Model**

The evidence from the participant evaluations suggests that the model could be further adapted for use within other countries and could facilitate efforts toward international collaboration and consultation in the field of counselor education. An international focus in school counseling is timely, given that the profession has been gaining momentum in countries like China (Corbin & McNaughton, 2004), Israel (Erhard & Erhard-Weissm 2007), and Japan (Studer, 2008).

The peer consultation group format presented here could be replicated in other countries, as it has already been modified and applied in different counties and states within the United States. The type of connections, networking, and mentorship that have already emerged within and across the four existing groups could have a much wider effect with international applications. The use of technology enhances the potential for regular communication between groups in relatively simple ways such as e-mail, message boards, and blogs; more advanced technology such as web conferencing would allow for collaborative meetings between and among groups in different locations as well. Facilitators of peer consultation groups could also meet in special interest group forums and/or present together at

international counseling conferences in order to foster a sense of international community and common interests.

Peer consultation has the potential for making a significant contribution towards the development of a global culture within the field of school counseling. Although the issues faced by school counselors obviously have cultural and regional implications and variations, there are universal themes that bring diverse groups of counselors together—issues that relate to the work that school counselors engage in with children, adolescents, and their families. Many of these issues transcend borders. The opportunity for sharing creative interventions and best practices, not just within local communities or neighboring cities or states, but across countries, in and of itself advances the field of school counseling.

## Conclusion

It is vital that counselor educators seek solutions to the problem of bridging the gap between theory and practice. One way to do this is to improve curriculum within training programs so that current students have opportunities to make tangible connections between the two realms. Counselor educators who work with alumni will be more aware of changes in the field, and this will in turn improve their ability to teach in a way that is both theoretical and practical. Collaborative partnerships—such as those described in this article—offer the promise of meaningful, productive connections among counselor educators and practicing school counselors, as well as the potential for global communication and consultation across programs. Everyone involved benefits.

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