Preparing Entry-Level Counselors for Collaboration


Over a period of 5 years, faculty members from the North Carolina State University’s Counselor Education Program have integrated a curriculum enhancement to promote collaboration behaviors among program graduates across the master’s degree options for training school, college, and community counselors. The School-College-Community Collaboration (SC3) idea was integrated into a 48-credit master’s degree curriculum accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. The authors present the rationale for the training program, historical background, program enhancement content, evaluation findings and faculty responses, and future plans for the SC3 enhancement program.

Approximately 7 years ago, 33% of the tenure-track faculty members of the Counselor Education Program left North Carolina State University to retire and move elsewhere. The dean challenged the remaining faculty members to present a rationale for the program that would justify replacing the missing faculty members. The dean’s challenge provided an opportunity for the remaining faculty members to review the existing program and consider new ideas. The primary product of the effort was to integrate a training program enhancement into the master’s-level program that was related to a theme initially identified as school–community collaboration and then changed to School–College–Community Collaboration (SC3).

The training program is located in a southeastern Research I land grant university. The university has master’s and doctoral programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs in counselor education with entry-level (master’s degree) options in school, college, and community counseling. The SC3 thematic training program enhancement was integrated into the three entry-level options. Presented in this article are the rationale for the training program, historical background, program enhancement content, evaluation findings and faculty responses, and future plans for the SC3 enhancement program.

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School-community agency collaboration is a term Hobbs and Collison (1995) used to depict formal arrangements between schools and the greater community so that schools could enhance their educational mission by expanding access to a variety of services for academically at-risk students and their families. Synonyms include school-family-community linked services (Keys & Bemak, 1997), multidimensional system of services (Keys, Bemak, & Lockhart, 1998), school-community collaboration (Taylor & Adelman, 2000), school-family-community partnerships (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007), and service learning (Jones & Hill, 2001).

Although the terminology may differ, the rationale for collaboration between schools and the greater community seems to be consistent. Furthermore, the federal government has emphasized the importance of successful achievement of all students (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002). Unfortunately, many children and adolescents face numerous personal and social barriers to learning such as poverty, family instability, substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, personal and community violence, and a host of mental health problems (Keys & Bemak, 1997). These barriers prevent at-risk students from taking full advantage of academic opportunities that school systems attempt to provide for all students.

Several scholars have observed that most school systems are ill equipped to provide the comprehensive services that academically at-risk students and their families need to be able to take advantage of the educational opportunities in their schools (Adelman & Taylor, 2002; Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Hobbs & Collison, 1995; Keys & Bemak, 1997; Keys et al., 1998; Luongo, 2000; Taylor & Adelman, 2000). Too few school-based personnel such as counselors, psychologists, and social workers exist to meet the personal and social needs of academically at-risk students, and such personnel's roles and functions tend to be restricted by school system policies (Adelman & Taylor, 2002; Hobbs & Collison, 1995; Keys & Bemak, 1997). The central theme presented by these scholars is that collaboration between school personnel and the greater community must occur to expand access to services that at-risk students and their families need to make the delivery of these services more efficient and effective (Keys et al., 1998; Luongo, 2000; Taylor & Adelman, 2000).

Although evidence of the need for school-community partnerships and for collaboration among personnel in the schools and the communities is compelling and logical, implementation of the concept into successful partnerships is fraught with challenges. Several challenges must be overcome when community agencies try to collaborate with school systems: (a) negotiating changes in power and control mechanisms when two independent entities attempt to collaborate, (b) adapting to joint rather than unilateral decision-making procedures, (c) resolving turf issues that arise for schools and community agencies, (d) addressing complex ethical decisions about information exchanges between enti-
ties that are not accustomed to sharing information, (e) adapting to the different knowledge bases of school and community professionals, (f) discovering a common professional language so that professionals can communicate successfully, and (g) establishing within all entities a willingness and a readiness to work collaboratively (Hobbs & Collison, 1995). These challenges require a disposition toward overcoming them through acts of advocacy and collaboration. School counselors are well positioned to coordinate the collaboration process.

A review of the professional literature has yielded reports of successful collaborative partnerships in Anne Arundel County in Maryland (Keys & Bemak, 1997); Baltimore, Maryland (Porter, Epp, & Bryant, 2000); Columbus, Ohio (Jones & Hill, 2001); Los Angeles, California (Adelman & Taylor, 2002; Zetlin, Ramos, & Valdez, 1996); and Memphis, Tennessee (Taylor & Adelman, 2000). Support for collaborative partnerships through the positions taken by the American School Counselor Association (2005) in their National Model and by the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (House & Hayes, 2002) can also be found in the literature.

The existing conditions in North Carolina State University's entry-level training program provided a unique opportunity to expose students in the school, college, and community counseling options to the SC3 rationale and challenges. The opportunity also existed to help students understand and accept the rationale and prepare them to meet the challenges by engaging them in the experience of working collaboratively to develop hypothetical collaboration projects.

**Historical Background**

During the 1st year of implementation, the focus was primarily on informing new students in the master's degree options about the SC3 concept and initiating an intervention process. Each entry-level option requires all students to enroll in an introductory course designed to socialize the students to school, college, and community counseling, respectively. The three introductory courses are held during the fall semester on the same day of the week and at the same time of day. These circumstances have allowed faculty members teaching the three introductory courses to hold two joint class meetings over the course of the semester. The first joint class meeting was held early in the semester to introduce the goals of the curriculum enhancement, present related assignments, engage in interactive discussion about the idea and process, and make future collaborative activity assignments. The second joint class meeting was held late in the semester to help the students process what was accomplished relative to SC3 during the semester, to challenge them with suggestions about how they could enhance their learning during the remainder of the program, and to assist them in conducting an evaluation of the efforts thus far.

During the intervening years between the 2002 fall semester and the present, faculty members have devoted considerable time to processing student evaluations and determining ways to enhance the introduction process, spent a moderate amount of time on integrat-
ing the concept into the clinical courses in the training program, and devoted a sparse amount of time to determining how to integrate the idea into the required core courses. The use of evaluation and student program data in this article is exempt from the federal regulations governing research with human participants.

**Program Enhancement Content**

The current SC3 intervention is the product of changes made on the basis of feedback from evaluations by the students and faculty members over the course of 5 years. Several dramatic changes have been implemented: (a) expanding the focus of required readings to include articles from the school, college, and community counseling literature; (b) reducing the reading requirements to the most important articles to avoid redundancy; (c) giving the students a greater opportunity to apply what they learned from related readings and discussions; and (d) providing time for the working groups to meet during class time of the introductory courses because students were having difficulty in getting together once away from the campus.

The three introductory courses—for school, college, and community counseling—are taken for 4 credits. The classes meet for 3 hours each Tuesday for 15 weeks. The fourth credit is a laboratory assignment primarily conducted beyond the 3-hour class time—the SC3 enhancement is housed in the laboratory credit. The SC3 component represents 25% of the course grade. The SC3 project is described in each introductory course’s syllabus, and the instructions and expectations are similar: (a) guidelines for a related-readings assignment to prepare responses to specific questions and grading criteria for the prepared responses, (b) specific instructions about a hypothetical grant proposal for a funded collaborative project designed to intervene in a significant mental health issue (to be prepared by each working group), and (c) guidelines and grading criteria for oral presentations by each working group to be made during the second joint class meeting. Course faculty instructors introduce students to the SC3 project during the first class of the fall semester.

During the fourth class time of the semester, students from the three introductory courses meet. This first joint class meeting begins with a presentation by faculty members about the importance of collaboration in providing better services to clients—the SC3 concept. The presentation is followed by a question-and-answer discussion session among the students and faculty members. In addition, students are introduced, assignments to working groups are made, and working groups meet and get organized under the supervision of one of the three faculty instructors. Before this first joint class meeting, students are to read a version of the present article.

**Learn to Work in Small Groups**

During the first joint class meeting, students from the three introductory courses are assigned to working groups. Typically, 9 to 12
working groups consisting of three to four students each are created. All entry-level options are represented in each working group (e.g., two school, one college, and one community counseling students). Each of the three faculty instructors supervises a cluster of 3 to 4 working groups.

The introduction to the SC3 concept emphasizes the importance of collaborating with other helping professionals to provide better services to clientele. The working groups provide an opportunity to learn about the settings, service philosophies, work responsibilities, challenges, and strengths of colleagues in other specialty areas of counseling. Because the students are primarily adults living off campus throughout a large metropolitan area and several nearby rural counties, the working groups are allowed to meeting during class time of the introductory courses. During the second and fourth class times after the first joint class meeting, working groups are provided with 30-minute meeting times at the end of class. These meeting times reduce the pressure to find times and places for working group meetings away from campus.

Because the students live in varied locations and contexts, they learn how to deal with one of the challenges of collaborative efforts between agencies and schools, that is, finding ways to come together for purposes pertaining to their work. The importance of being able to work efficiently, independently, and cooperatively is described to all students during the first joint class meeting. This part of the presentation highlights several areas vital to collaboration: (a) getting to know each other, (b) discussing areas of common interest, (c) setting goals pertaining to a SC3 project, (d) becoming committed to the goals, (e) becoming committed to being responsible team members, (f) dividing responsibilities, (g) determining roles of team members, (h) being supportive of each other, (i) scheduling meetings, (j) making efficient use of time devoted to the project, (k) communicating with each other over the duration of the project, and (l) being committed to completing the project successfully. Data from surveys of students who previously completed this SC3 experience have indicated that the cooperative learning component was an important learning experience in and of itself.

Read the Assigned Materials for Understanding and Application

To enhance student understanding of the SC3 conceptual framework beyond the first joint class meeting, students are assigned journal articles as required reading (articles are placed on electronic reserve at the university library). Articles are selected to provide information about collaboration across the three counseling domains represented in the entry-level program. An article by Porter et al. (2000) represents school counseling and describes the challenges associated with an implementation of the collaboration concept in a school setting. An article by Tierney and Jun (2001) represents college counseling. Articles by Zetlin et al. (1996) and Keys et al. (1998) represent community counseling.
Students are expected to read the articles during the week following the first joint class meeting. To prepare for discussing the articles, students provide written answers to open-ended questions about the readings. Students are required to submit their written responses to their respective introductory course faculty instructors. An example of an open-ended question is "What two features of collaboration described in Porter et al. impressed you the most, and why did you choose them?" The open-ended questions focus on helping students understand how the authors of the assigned articles are presenting collaboration concepts.

During the first class time after the first joint class meeting, the faculty instructor leads an in-class discussion of the assigned readings, using the open-ended questions as a foundation. The selected assigned readings and related discussions are designed to enrich students' understanding of the conceptual framework of the SC3 project. The intent of these interactions with the students is to help them apply their understanding of the reading material to the hypothetical collaboration projects they are developing in their working groups.

**Develop a School–College–Community Project**

The project assigned to the working groups is designed to provide students with a hypothetical collaboration experience. The project is also the core of the laboratory credit in the introductory courses. Instructions for the SC3 project are similar across the three introductory courses:

Your SC3 group will write and present a grant proposal for a prevention, development, or remedial program that involves collaboration among school, college, and community counseling professionals and services. The topic for the proposal should reflect the common interests of the group members. To expand your skills, the proposal should include a technology component. For example, your group could develop a Web site, create a podcast or a short video, or develop and use an online survey (e.g., Zoomrang) as a part of your program intervention. Plan to present the ideas and logistics of your program as if it were a proposal to a possible donor/grant program. You will present your idea to the combined classes and submit the logistics of your program in PowerPoint or some other computer-enhanced presentation.

Each working group will make a 20-minute presentation of its proposal during the second joint class meeting. Note that the content and focus of the current version of the second joint class meeting is different from that which was described in the Historical Background section of this article. The change was influenced by feedback and student evaluations from previous SC3 programs.

Each of the three faculty instructors serves as a consultant for three to four working groups. When the working groups are meeting during designated class times, the faculty instructors help the working groups (a) get organized, (b) brainstorm ideas, (c) clarify assignment guidelines, (d) stay on task, (e) consider possible resources, and (f) move toward determining a project idea. Outside of class time, the faculty instructors are available for consultation via e-mail or telephone.
Typically, the SC3 projects address mental health issues that have significant present and future social implications. For example, two of the hypothetical collaboration projects that were developed in 2007 concerned tutoring and student achievement.

Example A. The project concerned a school-based tutoring and mentoring program serving adjudicated (i.e., high incidences of criminal activity) high school freshmen. Participants were to meet with both a college student tutor and a community mentor after school once a week for 15 weeks. School counselors served as the program coordinators. Participants were to maintain the relationships with their community mentors after graduation.

Example B. The project focused on closing the achievement gap for upper elementary students while promoting responsible citizenship, community service, and leadership. The collaboration component included an elementary school parent-teacher association, a city boys and girls club, a university mentoring program, neighborhood church leaders, and a police department. One of the working group members was a teaching assistant at the elementary school, and this hypothetical program was actually implemented the following semester.

Creating the grant proposal, with its technology component requirement, and presenting to one’s peers and instructors provides students with a common structure and similar expectations (e.g., purpose and objectives for the grant proposal and procedures and timeline for the proposal). These requirements challenge the students to acquire or enhance proposal development skills, technology competence, and presentation skills in addition to acquiring or enhancing cooperative learning skills.

Evaluation Findings and Faculty Responses

Earlier Evaluations

Thus far, program evaluation efforts have focused primarily on the effects of the SC3 enhancements in the introductory courses. Quantitative and qualitative data from surveys of the students enrolled in those courses have provided information that is useful in restructuring the way the introductory component was envisioned and implemented. For example, the goal of the introduction was originally to introduce students to the collaboration concept through reading foundational articles and engaging in related discussions via e-mail to process and understand the concept. Findings from the surveys at that time led to adjusting the structure to allow for face-to-face working group meetings during class time and expanding beyond students’ reading and processing the information to engaging cooperatively in the development of a hypothetical collaboration project concerning real-world issues. Changes have been made over time on the basis of feedback collected since the inception of the SC3 idea.

Evaluation Findings

Method. All students attending the second joint class meeting are provided an opportunity to complete an evaluation questionnaire. The
questionnaire distributed in the 2007 fall semester consisted of 12 objectively scored items and 4 essay-response items. In addition, space was provided for comments for each objectively scored item. The evaluation questionnaire was completed by 35 students: 12 school counseling students, 12 college counseling students, and 11 community counseling students. Table 1 presents the findings for the objective items. Table 2 presents the essay-response items and the most common themes derived from the responses via thematic analysis.

The three faculty instructors responsible for the introductory courses cooperatively designed the evaluation questionnaire. Item content was derived from course objectives, findings from previous evaluations, and the desire to learn the perceived effectiveness of specific instructional strategies. An alpha correlation coefficient of $r = .87$ was derived from the responses for the objectively scored items, indicating a relatively high level of internal consistencies reliability for those items. Responses to the 12 objectively scored items were made using a 5-point Likert-type scale with high scores indicating higher levels of valuing the activities represented in the items ($1 = \text{not valuable}$, $2 = \text{minimum value}$, $3 = \text{moderate value}$, $4 = \text{quite valuable}$, and $5 = \text{very valuable}$). The three faculty instructors independently read students’ responses to the essay-response items and cooperatively agreed on common themes via a coding and categorization process. Responses were coded and categorized, and themes were identified from the categorized data by two faculty instructors, who worked independently. The two faculty instructors negotiated agreements on the resultant themes. Then primary themes were identified and summarized for each essay-response item by the team of faculty instructors, working collectively (Glaser, 1992).

Results. For the 2007 fall semester evaluation questionnaire, none of the ratings for the 12 objectively scored items resulted in a mean

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Content</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
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<tr>
<td>The total packet of readings</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The article by Keys, Bemak, and Lockhart (1998)</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The article by Tierney and Jun (2001)</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>0.73</td>
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<tr>
<td>The article by Zetlin, Ramos, and Valdez (1996)</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The article by Porter, Epp, and Bryant (2000)</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The opening presentation and overview at the initial meeting</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The process of organizing into collaborative groups and getting organized at the initial meeting</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>0.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the collaborative groups with a mixture of students from all three program options</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The SC3 group proposal development assignment</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The directions for the SC3 group proposal development assignment</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The scheduled group proposal development meetings at the close of regular specific class meetings</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quality of consultation from faculty members about the proposals</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>0.85</td>
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TABLE 2

Most Common Themes From Essay-Response Items on the School–College–Community Collaboration (SC3) Program Evaluation Questionnaire

In what ways was participation in the SC3 program most useful to you?

The collaboration experience was insightful and helpful.
I learned about the other options and professions.
I received a better understanding of group dynamics.

What important changes will you work on in the remainder of the training program in order to be proficient in implementing the SC3 concept as a professional counselor?

Learning to collaborate with other professionals.
Learning to think creatively (outside the box).
Learning to work with the community.

What did the experience teach you about self-directed learning?

It is mentally and physically challenging.
We need to learn to negotiate and compromise.
We must learn to seek information and use it independently of the classroom assignments and activities.

What specific suggestions/recommendations would you make to improve the group project component of the SC3 assignment?

The groups need more time to meet and to do so less often.
The group project should be due earlier in the semester. Take the emphasis off of a 5- to 7-page paper possibly placing more emphasis on the oral presentation, and, if this assignment remains in the program, provide sample projects to review.

lower than 3.34. Therefore, we concluded that the overall response was positive and some modest changes or enhancements should be introduced the next time the introductory courses meet to begin the SC3 program. The thematic information gleaned from the essay-response items reinforced some of the planning and provided helpful ideas for making constructive changes. For example, we decided to replace one of the reading assignments with a version of the present article; provide more class time for working groups to meet; and revisit the written proposal assignment, possibly placing more emphasis on the oral presentation. The information also validated our thoughts about generally being on the right track with the decision to introduce the collaboration concept during the introductory course.

Future Plans

Although most of the efforts toward promoting collaboration among the graduates of the entry-level training program have thus far been focused on the introductory courses as previously described, we have also been attempting to promote the concept in our clinical and core courses.

Clinical Courses

Clinical courses consist of an introductory practicum, a counseling practicum, and an internship. Students enroll in these courses
sequentially, one course each semester. All entry-level students in
the school, college, and community counseling options enroll in the
same introductory and counseling practicums. Each entry-level op-
tion has its own internship sites and on-campus seminar during the
final semester of the training program.

During the introductory and counseling practicums, students are
assigned to counseling practicum supervision groups that consist of a
mixture of students from the three options. The doctoral-level students,
who are the practicum group supervisors, represent a variety of coun-
seling service backgrounds as well. Because each option is represented,
students are introduced to a variety of clients, client problems and
issues, and helping strategies beyond those that are common within
their own options. Students are also challenged to learn about the role
and functions of students in the other options and how to communicate
with them during the student feedback interchanges.

During the internships, students receive individual supervision from
site supervisors and group supervision from university supervisors
who are trained in their respective options (i.e., school, college, or
community counseling). Whereas the group supervision sessions are
separate, students receive a common assignment: spend a day work
shadowing professional counselors in the two options that are dif-
ferent from one's own. For example, students enrolled in the school
counseling option shadow both a college counselor and a community
counselor. The experience of work shadowing allows the students to
blend what they have been learning about the collaboration concept
and the other counseling professions in the academic setting with
what they have observed in a real-world setting. The assignment of
work shadowing also encourages students to inquire about the work
of those they are shadowing and requires them to submit reports
devoted to processing what they have learned from the experience.

Core Courses

Those nonclinical courses required for all entry-level students that are
taken at the same time or after the introductory courses are referred
to as core courses. Topics covered in the core courses are career
counseling and development, cross-cultural counseling, theories and
techniques of counseling, group counseling, gender issues in counsel-
ing, and research and assessment in counseling.

The implementation strategy in the core courses is to provide a
statement on the first page of the course syllabus that indicates how
the course contributes to the SC3 process. Instructor-led presentation
and discussion of that role in the SC3 process occurs during the first
class time. The goal of this process is to establish a frame of mind
for the students and the instructor that will influence their thoughts
and behaviors about the relationship between the course and the
SC3 concept over the remainder of the semester. An example for the
career counseling and development course is, "This course will help
you become knowledgeable about family systems and college, com-
munity, and school resources." An example for the group counseling
course is, “This course will help you learn how to lead therapeutically focused and skills-based counseling groups that are important in working with at-risk clients.” The purpose of this information for students enrolled in the group counseling course is to help them understand that, regardless of their chosen option, they share the responsibility of being able to work collaboratively with at-risk clients.

Future Research

Future plans for SC3 enhancement program include improving those components of the enhancement that are already in place, further expanding the enhancement process to the core and clinical curricula, sharing experience with colleagues via conference presentations and journal articles, and developing plans for empirical studies beyond course evaluations. Several possible research questions have been identified, such as “How well do entry-level students understand how the content of the core courses will help them prepare to implement the collaboration concept as professional counselors?” and “In what ways do the clinical assignments such as work shadowing enhance the students’ motivation to collaborate or their collaboration competencies?” We are also challenged to find out how well the SC3 training experience has transferred to the real world of professional counseling. Therefore, we need to consider how to incorporate items requesting data about our graduates related to the expectations of the SC3 enhancement into the training program’s surveys that are sent to employers every 3 years. These survey items would become part of an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of the SC3 interventions.

We anticipate that new ideas will surface as we continue the process of implementing and evaluating the SC3 program. That pattern would be consistent with our experience since the outset of the program enhancement process. Although the basic idea is relatively simple, we find that the implementation process is complex and dynamic, and we are comfortable with that reality.

References


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