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More Than Just an Internship: One University's Collaboration with a Rural School District to Attract, Develop, and Retain School Counselors

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Promising Practice

More Than Just an Internship: One University’s Collaboration with a Rural School District to Attract, Develop, and Retain School Counselors

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This promising practice describes an innovative collaboration between West Virginia University, a land grant institution situated in the middle of rural Appalachia, and Kanawha County Schools, located in Charleston, WV. The partnership aimed to assist the rural school district by supporting children in three elementary schools and by providing the university’s school counseling students an immersion experience in rural schools, with the hope of retaining them in the school district following graduation. The collaboration fulfilled the original mission of the program in two ways; first, the school district retained one-third of the school counseling students who participated. Secondly, the collaboration was met with overwhelming support by district leadership, resulting in an increase in school counseling students entering the program in the next academic year.

It is well documented that rural locales often face immense difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified school personnel (Holme et al., 2017; Johnson & Reynolds, 2011). The reasons are wide-ranging, including smaller tax bases to fund public education (Kaden et al., 2016), lower pay (Glover et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2012; Ladd, 2011), and burnout due to having to assume multiple roles (Maele & Houtte, 2012). The constant “revolving door” school culture negatively impacts students’ learning and their ability to forge and sustain positive relationships with school staff. Similarly, there is a nationwide shortage of school counselors (American Civil Liberties Union, 2019), who are often the only school-based mental health professionals qualified to support students’ social-emotional needs. Given the well-documented economic, social, and mental and physical health disparities common to Appalachia and West Virginia, there is an imminent need for school-personnel trained in supporting students experiencing trauma and crisis intervention.

Considering this, we highlight an innovative school–university partnership, referred to as the “School Counselor in Residence (SCIR) program,” an initiative developed to increase rural student access to qualified mental health resources while addressing school counselor shortages in West Virginia. We provide background context regarding the surrounding community and rationale for the SCIR program, followed by an overview of the program’s framework and design. Lastly, we offer outcome data from SCIRs and key personnel (i.e.,

university personnel, school district personnel), and considerations.

The Rural Context

Before highlighting our initiative, it is important to contextualize the region, state, and community in which the promising practice was launched. Our promising practice is situated in Kanawha County, West Virginia, a state located wholly within the Appalachian region. The need for school counselors in this region is of utmost urgency. In fact, of the state’s 55 counties, Kanawha County ranks first in deaths due to alcohol and drug-related diagnoses, 17th in deaths due to drug overdose, and 14th in death by suicide rates (West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources, 2016). These long-standing issues (e.g., intergenerational poverty, substance use, addiction) often elicit substantial trauma to communities, families, and children, who routinely witness the debilitating impact of addiction, poverty, and substance use. These ramifications can best be conceptualized through the terms “Adverse Childhood Experiences” (ACEs; see Felitti et al., 1998), defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; n.d.) as “potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years)” (para. 1). Examples may include witnessing parent/guardian substance misuse, poverty, witnessing domestic violence, parental separation, unresolved familial mental health problems, and physical abuse or neglect. West Virginia has among the highest rates of ACEs. Specifically, West Virginia ranks 6th nationally in

the percentage of children who have faced at least two ACEs, and 3rd in the percentage of children who have faced at least one ACE (ACES; State Health Access Data Assistance Center, n.d.). These ACEs, when unaddressed, can impede students' ability to think, concentrate, regulate emotions, and succeed at school, thus possibly negatively impacting students' postsecondary outcomes (Morrow & Villodas, 2018; Perez et al., 2016; Sporleder & Forbes, 2016; van der Kolk, 2014; Zeng et al., 2019).

Students who have experienced trauma often encounter challenges in school settings. Within the classroom, teachers often feel ill-prepared to adequately support students' mental health needs (Alisic, 2012; Crosby et al., 2015). This inadequate preparation commonly leads to teacher frustration, burnout, and even attrition (Antoniou et al., 2013; Butler & Monda-Amaya, 2016; Karsenti & Collin, 2013). Given teachers' classroom-based challenges, school counselors, often the only school-based mental health professional, have the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities, to adequately support students experiencing trauma and mental health challenges.

The School Counselor and Student Mental Health

School counselors play an integral role in supporting students' academic and postsecondary success, while prioritizing pressing student mental health needs (American School Counselor Association (ASCA), 2019). In many counseling graduate programs, school counseling graduate students take the same counseling coursework as students concentrating in clinical counseling. In other words, school counselors often have comparable counseling pre-service training to therapists working in clinical settings.

Individuals in rural locales may have limited access to community mental health resources (Bradley et al., 2012). Additionally, the school counselor may be the only qualified mental provider within a reasonable driving distance (Bain et al., 2011; Grimes et al., 2014). Despite this essential role, rural school counselors are often encumbered by barriers impeding student access (e.g., higher than average student-to-school counselor ratios), and have less availability and accessibility due to extra tasks. Like Kanawha County, rural school districts often struggle recruiting and retaining school counselors. Thus, the SCIR program was developed to address school counselor shortages while providing

additional mental health professionals to elementary schools, who often have higher student-to-school-counselor ratios than their secondary colleagues.

School Counselors in Residence Program

The SCIR program is a unique university-school district partnership between the Kanawha County Schools (KCS) and West Virginia University to recruit graduating school counselor education students (SCES) to fill elementary-level vacancies while concurrently fulfilling their university internship requirements, occurring during their final semester. The semester before their final year of studies, prospective SCIRs interview for a SCIR position with the Director of Counseling & Testing, along with university personnel. Candidates are assessed for their knowledge of student mental health needs along with their potential to meet the expectations of being a SCIR. Selected SCIRs are then placed at a high-needs elementary school in KCS where they are supervised by an experienced mentor counselor, who provides a minimum of one hour of weekly supervision. Unlike typical internships, SCIRs are compensated for their efforts. WVU and KCS submitted a grant, successfully securing CARES Act funding to support this promising practice. The funding procured provided each selected SCIR a daily KCS employee stipend, and a monthly housing stipend, as Kanawha is not within reasonable driving distance of WVU. Lastly, the funding provided program, departmental, and college fiscal support for SCIR-related expenses. SCIRs have several expectations, based on their dual school counselor and student identities. Firstly, as KCS employees, they are held to the same standards and expectations as fully-licensed educators, working the same contractual number of days and hours as their assigned mentor counselors. Concurrently, SCIRs are enrolled in WVU's weekly "school counseling internship" course, which meets virtually, offering SCES and fellow SCIRs opportunities to learn from each other, exchange ideas, brainstorm solutions, and receive formative and summative feedback from the university internship supervisor, a former school counselor. To augment supervision and communication channels, the university internship supervisor facilitated monthly supervision sessions comprised of all the SCIR stakeholders, including SCIRs. Monthly check-ins allowed for shared struggles and experiences to be processed across all the elementary schools in which SCES were placed.

School Counselors in Residence (SCIR) Program--Visual Representation of Personnel and Duties		
School District Personnel		
Title	Supervisory Role (if any)	Duties
Mentor Counselors (3)	Each mentor counselor supervises one SCIR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide weekly supervision to their assigned SCIR • Complete midterm and final evaluations of their SCIR • Support the SCIR in becoming acclimated to their new school district • Attend monthly check-ins with university and school district personnel, and SCIRs • Assist SCIR in fulfilling internship requirements (e.g., obtaining access to data to complete data-informed advocacy projects, obtaining a caseload of students with whom to work, support establishing small group counseling program for SCIR).
Director of Counseling & Testing (1)	Supervises the mentor counselors and the SCIRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend monthly check-ins with university and school district personnel, and SCIRs • Provide additional support to SCIRs and mentor teachers • Serve as the “point person” between the university personnel and the school district • Facilitate SCIR technology and human resource needs
University Personnel		
University Internship Supervisor (1)	Provides university didactic supervision (i.e., instructor of record) to the three SCIRs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize and facilitate monthly check-ins with university and school district personnel, and SCIRs • Provide 2-3 hours of weekly group supervision (i.e., the SCIRs meet with the university internship supervisor to discuss their experiences and engage in peer and instructor consultation • Assign letter grades (i.e., pass or fail) based on their fulfillment of internship requirements • Serve as the “point person” between the university and the three mentor counselors regarding internship matters (e.g., SCIR concerns, general internship questions).
School Counseling Graduate Program Coordinator (1)	Indirectly supervises SCIRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend monthly check-ins with university and school district personnel, and SCIRs • Serve as the “point person” between the university and the school district (i.e., the Director of Counseling & Testing) • Collaborate with the Director of Counseling & Training and University Internship Supervisor to ensure the program’s copacetic functioning. • Provide district-wide professional development on school counseling program development as requested by Director of Counseling & Testing

Figure 1 SCIR Visual Representation

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of all the SCIR professional stakeholders as well as their designed roles and responsibilities in the program.

KCS, located in Charleston, West Virginia, is home to the largest school system in the state, serving over 28,000 students. Before this partnership, KCS employed one school counselor per each of their 43 elementary schools. However, even with one counselor assigned at each elementary school, student-to-school-counselor ratios continued to

exceed, and in some cases, double, national averages. According to the KCS Director of Counseling & Testing, many elementary positions become vacant following each school year as school counselors shift to fill openings at secondary schools, thus leaving unfilled school counseling positions at the beginning of each school year. Additionally, once filled, KCS struggled to retain school counselors over a 2–3-year timeframe, with many leaving for various reasons. To improve student mental health services, KCS desired

to not only recruit and retain school counselors for the existing positions, but to also increase the number of school counselors in the district. For example, it was strongly desired to add at least one full time school counselor to each of the 43 elementary schools. This, however, would complicate finding qualified individuals to apply for and fill these new open positions. While this challenge is not unique to KCS, as the land grant institution in West Virginia, KCS recognized that WVU's school counseling program was well positioned to assist in meeting the county's need to recruit and retain school counselors

What Worked

To evaluate the program's effectiveness, we measured growth by: reflections written by the three SCIRs, final evaluations by mentor counselors, evaluations from university supervisors, and commentary from the school district's Director of Counseling & Testing. We also looked at course assignments (i.e., the university internship course), described later in this section.

SCIR Commentary

Overwhelmingly, the SCIRs expressed immense satisfaction in participating in this promising practice, largely determined by reviewing their biweekly internship reflections. One SCIR's commentary effectively encapsulates others' sentiments:

Overall, I have learned so much from [the SCIR experience], and I could truly see myself being happy here, if the opportunity becomes available. The students know me, and I am well adjusted to how our school operates. It will be incredibly exciting to see where next year takes me. I am so grateful for the support of the program, Kanawha County Schools, and my cohort members throughout this time. Counselors are needed more than ever as we look to process the impact that COVID-19 has had on our students and their families.

SCIR Mentor Counselor Commentary

Aligned with university and programmatic internship requirements, all three SCIRs received formative and summative evaluations, written by their respective mentor counselors. These evaluations provided qualitative (e.g., short answer prompts) and quantitative (e.g., Likert scale questions) data noting SCIR's strengths and areas for growth. Overall, the

mentor counselors spoke highly of both (a) SCIRs' contributions and (b) SCIR's growth. For example,

The students at [elementary school] in Charleston, West Virginia have exceptional needs. The school currently has 6 positions funded by Title 1, a federal program that provides funds to schools with high percentages of low-income students. In 2017, a student survey indicated that more than half of students had experienced or were currently experiencing one or more adverse childhood experiences, also known as trauma. These traumatic childhood experiences have proven to change the composition of the brain and have lasting effects on individuals throughout their lifetimes. [My SCIR] came to [elementary school] with background knowledge in trauma and was eager to help meet the needs of our students. In no time, students and staff saw her as part of the team and valued her input. This was no small task for a brand new SCIR, but she was up for the challenge and did very well.

University Personnel Commentary

Aligned with the SCIR mentor counselors' commentary, both university-level personnel (i.e., university internship supervisor and the school counseling program coordinator) determined that the SCIR experience was highly beneficial to the partnering school district, SCIRs, and the university. For their internship class, SCIRs were required to independently complete a "data-informed advocacy project." Essentially, this involved (a) SCIRs identifying a data-informed issue impacting their assigned school, (b) developing a targeted intervention to address said need, and (c) proactively developing measures to assess its effectiveness. All three SCIRs, coincidentally, focused their efforts on career knowledge, excitement, and exploration; this topic is highly salient, given the research citing the importance of fostering career interest and excitement in elementary settings (e.g., Akos et al., 2011; Boulden et al., 2021; Knight, 2015; Mariani et al., 2016; Sharf, 2013; Soo Yeon et al., 2015). Moreover, proactively galvanizing career interest has been found to mitigate the likelihood of dropping out of high school, an issue impacting many communities in Appalachia, while simultaneously helping students connect academic achievement with their postsecondary aspirations (Akos et al., 2011; Turner & Lapan, 2013). Unilaterally, data from all three

SCIR's interventions indicated that their elementary students had increased knowledge and awareness of viable postsecondary career options; moreover, the elementary students expressed excitement regarding pursuing possible passions and living a fulfilling life. The SCIRs also developed and conducted developmentally-appropriate classroom lessons, outside of the data-driven advocacy project, to students on topics such as self-esteem, resilience, peer refusal skills, identifying trusted adults, making good choices, and opioid awareness and prevention. They also provided crisis counseling to students who experienced trauma, connecting them with relevant resources and supports. Overall, the university personnel were pleased at the SCIRs' contributions to their schools and their ability to address critical issues germane to Appalachia.

Director of Counseling & Testing Commentary

The Director of Counseling & Testing oversees all school counselors within the respective school district, including the mentors who supervised the three SCIRs. The Director of Counseling & Testing also provided positive commentary regarding the SCIRs and the partnership's efficacy in addressing both student and school community needs. Given the growing student needs, likely exacerbated by COVID-19, the supervisor appreciated having three well-qualified SCIRs to support the districts three school counselors and the students with whom they worked. As the supervisor often articulated, "if I could hire all three of them, I would, in a heartbeat!" In fact, due to the practice's effectiveness, the Director of Counseling & Testing successfully advocated for the funding of two additional SCIRs for the subsequent school year, increasing the practice's number of SCIRs from three to five. Thus, it is clear that the SCIR practice is highly valued, as are the SCIRs and their expertise in mental health, trauma, and working within school settings.

Practical Considerations

While the SCIR promising practice appears to be highly effective at addressing both students' mental health needs and school counseling shortages, we recognize that school districts and universities may encounter barriers related to developing a similar program. Accordingly, it is prudent to discuss potential limitations, along with possible strategies to circumvent these challenges. Firstly, as mentioned

previously, all SCIRs received remuneration for their services, along with a monthly stipend for rent and additional living expenses. While we are fortunate that the school district could invest in the program, we recognize that this component, particularly, is likely a financial barrier for many school districts. Thus, to circumvent this, school districts can consider partnering with a nearby university (most likely, the university with whom the school district would partner) to pursue state, regional, and federal grants that would address most or all financial considerations. This symbiotic relationship is beneficial to both the school district and university. For example, the school district can leverage the university's grant-writing resources and acumen; the partnering university, in turn, can provide meaningful state-level service while fulfilling potential university grant-seeking scholarly and service expectations. Additionally, school districts and universities can consider holding the school district--university check-ins virtually (as opposed to in-person) through a secure web conferencing platform. This is particularly relevant as rural communities often span great distances, thus possibly making in-person meetings challenging. Next, the school district and partnering university may consider developing the SCIR program incrementally; for example, for the first year of implementation, they could allocate one SCIR and one mentor counselor, evaluate the program's effectiveness, and then consider allocating additional funding and resources to expand the program. Lastly, while the university personnel were elated that the mentor counselors were aware of the existing SCIR programs that were in place in other areas of the state, it is possible that the SCIR concept may be foreign to other school districts. Thus, to engender a synergistic and collaborative partnership, it would behoove the school district and university personnel to create formal and informal opportunities to socialize, develop rapport, and better understand the SCIR program (e.g., roles, responsibilities, important contacts). Proactively creating these opportunities will help ensure a collaborative and supportive experience for all.

Conclusion

In summary, the SCIR program was developed with two principal goals: to address the shortage of qualified school counselors in West Virginia and address the shortage of school-based mental health professionals equipped with the knowledge, skills,

and abilities to address pressing student needs. Unanimously, the SCIRs, school district personnel, and university personnel expressed pleasure regarding the program's impact on students, school communities, and the SCIRs' professional growth. While practical considerations exist regarding

program replication, we assert that the SCIR university--school district partnership is an exemplary promising practice, providing additional school-based mental health professionals in high-need rural communities.

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