CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS IN MINNESOTA SCHOOLS:

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELOR IN FACILITATING MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

High Schools in Minnesota and across the United States face new challenges in the 21st century as student demographics change rapidly. Minnesota’s immigrant population continues to grow, bringing new challenges to educators. Likewise, previous immigrants, American Indians, and African-American students face their own challenges. School Counselors are well positioned to provide crucial leadership in smoothing the transition for these students and building welcoming and inclusive communities. This paper examines some of the challenges faced by various minority populations, and ways in which school counselors can have a positive impact with students, school personnel, families, and the community as a whole.
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Introduction

The United States continues to undergo a change in demographics, with increasing numbers of immigrants and people of color. Minnesota is reflective of this national trend, as figures and projections on state populations indicate a rise in the number of immigrants entering the state, both from abroad and from other parts of the United States (McMurry, 2009). These changing demographics put a strain not only on local communities, but on Minnesota schools. In many districts administrators, teachers, and students are unprepared for the challenges brought about by increasing racial and ethnic diversity. School Counselors are well positioned to take a lead role in finding solutions to these challenges and easing the transition to more diverse school populations.

The challenges faced by ethnic and racial minority youth are numerous. Immigrant students must adapt to a new culture, new system of education, language barriers, separation from friends and family, and too frequently, poverty. Students relocating from within the U.S., such as African-Americans, face challenges as well in adapting to cultural change, racism, and family upheaval. This paper will explore the trends in demographics in Minnesota, and delve into the problems different populations face and their impact on minority students in Minnesota schools. The focus will be on Latino, Somali, Asian, and African-American students; though other populations face challenges as well, including American Indians. The paper will also explore the challenges diversity brings to school counselors, administrators, and teachers; including dealing with language barriers, cultural expectations, racism, and different methods of learning. In particular, there will be an examination of the need for counselors to be culturally aware and to work to educate themselves about the populations they will work with. Finally, there will be an exploration of potential solutions; including staff training, classroom
interventions, formation of family partnerships, preparing minorities for success beyond high school, and the counselor as advocate.
Review of Literature

Demographics

Projections from the United States Census Bureau (2008) point to current minority populations growing substantially, so that by 2050 “minorities” will actually outnumber whites. The fastest growing population will be Latinos; expected to triple in size in the next 40 years. African-Americans are projected to increase slightly, and the Asian population forecast to increase from roughly five percent to nine percent. Government projections further indicate that by the middle of the century, 62 percent of children in the United States will come from minority populations, with 39 percent of these children Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

Studies in Minnesota indicate similar increases in minority populations in the coming years. Figures from the State Demographic Center show the white population will experience slow growth in the next 25 years, while Latino, black and African-American, and Asian populations will increase dramatically, in some cases doubling their populations (McMurry, 2009). The Latino population will likely experience the fastest growth, with projections showing a population less than 200,000 in 2005 rising to an estimated 551,000 in 2035. Black (including African immigrants) and African-American populations are projected to rise from 218,000 to 454,000 and the Asian population is expected to show a 114 percent growth by 2035. McMurray reports projections from the State Demographic Center indicate most of these populations will likely live in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, but increases will be seen in all parts of the state.

Similarly, studies show Minnesota will experience a growth in the population of immigrants. Statistics indicate that while Minnesota has a foreign-born population below the United States average, the growth of that population in the last 20 years has been well above the
national growth rate (Otteson, Meyerson, & Owen, 2010). In the period from 1982 to 2008, over one million immigrants passed through Minnesota, with roughly a third of those settling as permanent residents. Asians of various cultures have comprised the majority of these immigrants, as opposed to the U. S. as a whole which has a higher number of Latino immigrants. However, the single country of origin for most Minnesota immigrants is Mexico, and as shown previously, the Latino population is expected increase significantly in the state. Otteson et al acknowledge it is difficult to get a firm estimate of the number of undocumented immigrants in the state, with government figures estimating between 55,000 and 85,000.

While much of the growing minority population is expected to locate in the Twin Cities area, the foreign-born population is currently most represented in the southern and western portions of Minnesota. In these areas large numbers of Latino, East African, and Southeast Asian immigrants find work in agriculture related fields. Many of these immigrants are low-skilled, and find themselves working in low-paying jobs, including meat packing, manufacturing, and service industry positions. Estimates are 27 percent of the foreign-born adults in Minnesota lack a high school degree or equivalent; though there is also a concentration of immigrants at the upper end of the spectrum as well, with an estimated 32 percent of immigrants holding at least a four-year college degree (Otteson et al, 2010).

Three populations are of special interest in Minnesota, as the state has large numbers of Hmong and Somali immigrants, and a sizeable population of American Indians of various tribes. Minnesota has the largest Hmong population in the United States, with close to 70,000 estimated in the Twin Cities area alone (Leiding, 2006). Immigrants continue to arrive from Southeast Asia, as Saint Paul welcomed five thousand new Hmong refugees in 2004. Likewise, Minnesota hosts a large population of Somali refugees, with over 40,000 estimated to have settled in the
state since violence erupted in Somalia in 1991. Most Somali immigrants have settled in and around the Twin Cities, though low-skill jobs have drawn many to spread out to smaller communities throughout the state. Figures show a slowdown in the growth of American Indian populations in the state, though population estimates are not as reliable as for other groups, as many American Indians also identify with other races (McMurry, 2009). Figures from a Minnesota state senate report show some 29 thousand Ojibwe living on seven reservations in rural northern Minnesota, under two thousand Dakota living on four reservations in the southern part of the state, and roughly 25 thousand of various bands living in the Twin Cities area (1995).

Labeling

Members of minority groups, along with school personnel and others who deal with these populations, often face concerns over what label is to be used in referring members of the population group. This is especially prevalent in dealing with Latinos, as different agencies use different terminology, people of Latino background have different forms of self-reference, and most terms bring out some form of reaction from outside groups (Williams and Butler, 2003; Malott, Alessandria, Kirkpatrick, and Carandang, 2009).

The U.S. government generally uses the term Hispanic to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, and other Central and South American countries. This term has been used since 1978, when it was first employed by the Office of Management and Budget (Herring, 1997). Some object to the term as it is inclusive of those of European Spanish descent and does not accurately describe the cultural difference of those from Latin America. Latino as a term is more inclusive of all those of Latin American origin, although not with problems of its own. Though
Latino is the term chosen for this paper, it is important to remember that many Latinos prefer to identify by their specific ethnic background (Malott et al, 2009; Herring, 1997).

One study of Mexican-American youth demonstrated most preferred to label themselves as Mexican rather than Latino or Hispanic, though there were situations when the Mexican was not seen as a desirable term (Malott et al, 2009). Participants in the study used the term Mexican to illustrate their cultural background, connection to family, and family origin; many of the youth surveyed also used the term to educate others outside of their culture. However, not all were comfortable self-referencing as Mexicans in all situations. Negative stereotypes and racism were the most common reasons for avoiding the specific ethnic identification, with those choosing to not identify as Mexican typically sticking to Hispanic or Latino as their primary ethnic label. Among those comfortable with the labeling as Mexican, the influence of family and peers were cited as the most prominent factors in choosing the label and seeing it in a positive light.

American Indian is also a term used in this paper, with the acknowledgement that this term is generic and not representative of the characteristics of individual tribes. Indeed, many prefer the term Native American, as indicative of those native to North American as opposed to the mistaken belief by early explorers that the people they encountered were from India. However, most American Indians identify most closely with their actual tribe, and prefer to be referred to as such (Herring, 1997). In Minnesota the Ojibwe, or Chippewa, prefer the term “band” to describe tribal affiliation; and the Dakota refer to “communities” in describing more specific origin (American Indian Communities, 1995). Herring (1997) has shown that confusion over terminology and labeling can have a negative impact on American Indian youth, as they struggle to find their own self-identity; and the challenge of uncertain labeling on a wider scale is
that those working with American Indian youth may see them as one homogenous group, rather than a varied and diverse culture.

**Challenges for Immigrants**

As previously noted, Minnesota is home for a variety of immigrant populations, each facing challenges which impact youth in the learning environment. These challenges and barriers are wide-ranging; some are universal, and others unique to specific groups. Challenges include language, lack of community support, loss of key relationships, and different approaches to education from those found in the country of origin (Suarez-Orozco, Onaga, & de Lardemelle, 2010). Students must adjust to new cultures, which often feature different patterns and scripts for behavior, and deal as well with many of the normal concerns of adolescence (Williams & Butler, 2003). Many find themselves facing attitudes of racism and exclusion, and face segregation and isolation in their new school environments (Dotson-Blake, Foster, & Gressard, 2009).

Language acquisition is perhaps the most immediate and challenging barrier faced by immigrant students. Students need competence in speaking, reading, and writing in English to be able to understand the goings-on in the school at a minimum, and in the long term to be able to grow as students and achieve at the levels from the schools in their countries of origin (Williams & Butler, 2003). Likewise, language is an important part of a student’s culture, and can have a powerful impact on how students feel about themselves as they try to fit into a new environment (Leiding, 2006). As such, counselors and school personnel need to be aware of the impact stereotyping because of language and English skill can have, and how students may feel as they struggle to understand lessons taught in a language which is new to them.
Changes in culture can be significant stressors to newly arrived students. These changes can be even more difficult when there is a disconnect between the acculturation of the students and the lag in acculturation of parents and other family members, as has been seen in recently arrived groups from Southeast Asia and Somalia (Leiding, 2006). For example, as Hmong youth have adopted Western values and customs, in many cases parents have stuck to more traditional cultural norms. This gap has led to stress within the family structure which can spill over to the school environment as young people struggle to balance between two cultures. Leiding has also shown how Somali youth face drastic changes in adapting to a new culture as they move from a predominantly Muslim region to a predominantly non-Muslim area. Somali youth face challenges in school in issues surrounding meals, prayer, and traditional dress; and face as well a dramatically different environment than that found in Africa.

Adapting to new styles of learning are challenges for students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. In many cultures, students are expected to listen to lectures, then memorize and repeat the material as presented. Students are often not prepared for the American school environment which generally encourages more active student participation, including in-class discussion, small group work, and classroom presentations (Suarez-Orozco et al, 2010). Students also may need to learn new expectations for classroom behavior and discipline. Many mistakenly believed to be unengaged, uncaring, or failing to learn because they operate in a manner more consistent with schools in their country of origin (Leiding, 2006; Suarez-Orozco et al, 2010).

**Challenges for African-American Students**

African-American students continue to face a variety of challenges and barriers in the education environment. A common problem, which continues to persist, is that of low
expectations on the part of teachers, administrators, and counselors. Though many professionals in education recognize and work to derail low expectations, the problem persists, and causes stress and feelings of powerlessness on the part of students and their families. Often low expectations manifest by assigning blame to poor administration, family disinterest in education, and lack of community support (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010).

Educators can also fall prey to misconceptions about African-American culture, and a lack of understanding of cultural dynamics. This often manifests through problems in communication, with teachers and others failing to pick up on varying styles of verbal and non-verbal communication in African-American students (Herring, 1997). For example, African-American students often use non-verbal body language and cues in communication. Often, this silence can be mistaken for lack of understanding unless the educator is attuned to the non-verbal signals. Likewise, the heavy use of slang and “Black” English can enforce negative stereotypes of African-American youth, and disrupt basic classis communication. Herring asserts this use of language is generally based on the level of acculturation to the predominant culture, with those youth raised in predominantly African-American communities usually more likely to use slang and dialect.

Two other challenges which must be acknowledged and addressed are poverty and single-parent households (Leiding, 2006). Students in impoverished conditions lack access to many basic resources, including adequate health care and access to help with special education challenges. Poverty also places severe stress on the household and family, and can contribute to the high school drop-out rates seen in African-American communities. Likewise, single-parent homes can create barriers for children, who often need to take on extra roles in the household
above simply being children. For example, older children are often asked to spend more time caring for younger children, and more time as well in taking care of themselves.

**Challenges for American Indian Youth**

Many American Indians in the United States, including Minnesota, battle with severe issues of poverty and substance abuse. Herring (1997) points out that while these issues are well documented in the literature; other challenges are more immediate to American Indian youth in school. Foremost among these barriers are significant cultural differences between American Indians and the dominant white culture. Many American Indians have been resistant to adopting mainstream culture, and have stuck to more traditional cultural norms. A major barrier in the school environment is the basic difference in cultural approaches to working with others. American Indian students tend to value cooperation over the competitiveness modeled in many traditional American classrooms. As such, American Indian students are prone to tune out when faced with the more individualistic and competitive climate in white schools and will often shy away from being in the spotlight.

Other differences in learning styles can cause tension between students and educators. Leiding (2006) has shown that American Indian students often are more meticulous and take more time in completing assignments, and need to be presented with a bigger picture when learning about new topics. Further, students can be reluctant to correct the work of classmates, and often hang back and observe to make sure they know how to complete a task.

**Counselor Self-Awareness**

School counselors are positioned to be leaders in developing and implementing programs to assist in multicultural transitions and creating positive multicultural climates. To do so,
counselors must first become aware of their own cultural background and perceptions of other cultures, and how these factors influence the counselor’s work with diverse students (Harris, 1999). Studies have shown that counselors who have had strong multicultural training and a well-developed sense of their own racial attitudes and identity fare better in dealing with multicultural student populations than those who lack well explored and developed attitudes and identity (Constantine & Gushue, 2003). In particular, counselors who are well versed in the challenges and barriers facing immigrant students are much better positioned to provide services to those students and to assist them in overcoming challenges of culture shock. Constantine and Gushue believe counselors with good racial self-concepts can better recognize problems in students, and are better positioned to develop effective plans to address student difficulties.

Harris (1999) in particular points to the racial development model offered by Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (as cited by Harris, 1999) as a valuable tool for counselors to use in furthering and supporting their own multicultural education and awareness. They propose a five stage model of development, with different behaviors and attitudes exhibited by members of minority groups at each stage of the development. The first stage is Conformity, in which minority individuals accept and identify with the views of the dominant culture. This is followed by Dissonance, in which individuals begin to question and learn that stereotypes are not always true. In the third stage, Resistance and Immersion, individuals become consumed with the beliefs and values of their own culture and reject the dominant culture. In the Introspection stage, individuals go through personal growth, which can lead to emotional and psychological stress. The finally stage is termed Synergistic Integrative Awareness. While conflicts are not resolved in this stage, individuals are now able to form their own independent ideas about their own culture and other cultures. Awareness of these stages, and the behaviors associated with each, can help counselors
move beyond the idea of judging all members of a minority group as being alike, and can help
the counselor gain a better understanding of the challenges facing individuals struggling to come
to terms not only with their own culture, but with the dominant culture as well.

Another important concept for counselors to consider is Multicultural Personality, which
is developed and strengthened by increased interaction with various cultures (Ponterotto, 2008).
School counselors are in strong positions to provide leadership on multicultural issues in the
school setting, and by understanding the impact diverse worldviews and values have on learning
and interpersonal communication in the classroom, community, and family, Ponterotto believes
they are better prepared to lead. In a similar vein is the idea of School Counselor Multicultural
Self-Efficacy (SCMES), which involves a counselor’s ability to perform tasks necessary and
important to student equity in schools, and to be aware of and present for the ethnic and cultural
needs of diverse student populations (Holcomb-McCoy, Harris, Hines, & Johnston, 2008).
SCMES also posits counselors with strong self-efficacy find themselves better able to understand
and respond to challenges of diversity, and to believe they are capable of dealing with such
challenges. Holcomb-McCoy et al also found these counselors are more likely to find satisfaction
in dealing with diverse student populations.

It is important for counselors to test their own cultural attitudes and biases, and to seek
further training and education in order to strengthen their own approach to delivering services to
diverse populations and to stay current on new developments in the multicultural education
(Holcomb-McCoy et al, 2008). Counselors can use a basic set of questions designed for self
reflection to explore their own confidence in dealing with minority students, and to gauge their
own attitudes toward other cultures. Counselors can ask themselves their own attitudes toward
racism, comfort level in dealing with racial issues, how their own culture affects their life, how
they see their culture in relation to other cultures, what stereotypes they may have toward other
groups, what expectations they have for minority students, and how well they get along with
members of other cultures (Harris, 1999). Answering these types of questions can form a
foundation for building awareness in the counselor of other cultures and beliefs.

The Counselor in Staff Development

As school populations continue to evolve and change, school personnel need to be able to
adapt to these changes and deliver appropriate services to students. Ponterrotto (2008) asserts
that because of their training and access to all areas of the school environment, counselors can
take a leadership role in assisting administrators, faculty, and staff in learning to deal with
increasing diversity in schools. Counselors are well positioned to consult with teachers on
classroom issues of diversity, conduct cultural awareness workshops with faculty and staff,
present lessons to students in the classroom setting, advocate for minority students, and work
with families and the minority community (Ponterrotto, 2008).

School administrators are being encouraged to prepare for changes in the school
environment by developing diversity plans, implementing multicultural curricula, assessing
student needs, and developing training for staff (Boothe, 2000). Counselors should be involved
in each of these areas, and can be important consultants to school administration. Components of
building a diverse school community which counselors can involve themselves in include staff
training, communicating with parents, tracking student needs, and playing a key role in helping
minority students new to the school adapt to a different environment.

Counselors are in a strong position to lead staff development efforts not only because of
their educational background in cultural diversity, but also because of the skills they possess in
individual and group counseling. The use of small group skills can be especially effective in training teachers and allows for a collaborative environment for teachers and counselors alike (Durodoye, 1998). Group sessions also provide a setting where faculty and staff can be gently pushed out of comfort zone, and share ideas with others they may not normally correspond with (Guerra & Nelson, 2009). Durodoye (1998) has found success using a three part group process with elementary school teachers which begins with small group explorations of teachers' cultural backgrounds, proceeds to large and small group discussion of how different cultural norms may impact the classroom, and finishes with teachers reviewing and analyzing their own curricula and materials to determine inclusive an environment they create in the classroom, and how can they can take steps to further improve. Likewise, Guerra & Nelson (2009) have used group training in which participants respond individually to a series of basic questions on their own backgrounds and cultural attitudes, then share and discuss them first in small groups, and then in a larger group setting. These interactions can be useful to learn not only about cultural differences based on race and ethnicity; but on age, gender, socioeconomic background and other factors.

Counselor as Advocate

School counselors are in a position to be advocates for all students, and in particular minority students facing barriers and looking for opportunities. Counselors can play an important role in advocating for social justice, on behalf of youth in need of empowerment, and for systemic change in schools with regard to diversity issues (Nelson, Bustamante, Wilson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). By collecting and analyzing data and interacting with various stakeholders, counselors are positioned to assess where schools stand in terms of providing services to minority students, and advocate for any changes which may be needed. Further, counselors can
be leaders in fostering a caring and positive climate which creates a school community providing security and support not only to students, but to their families as well (Sink & Edwards, 2008).

Despite the changes in demographics, and the call for counselors to take a more active role in promoting diversity and social justice in the school environment, there remains a fair amount of resistance, which Bemak and Chung (2008) have referred to as “nice counselor syndrome.” The call to advocacy and the process of change can run counter to many counselors' instinct to avoid conflict while building a climate of harmony in the school, and being seen as “nice” people. Confronting issues of injustice exhibited by teachers, staff, and administrators can be challenging and stressful; often counselors fear backlash if they do not conform to roles set for them by others in the school. Many believe they lack the power to effect change, or are overwhelmed by the needs of diverse students. Bemak and Chung (2008) argue there are ways counselors can and should overcome these personal challenges. Counselors can align their own advocacy with existing school mission and goals, make sure their advocacy is data driven, take care not to internalize or personalize obstacle they face in advocacy, be aware of school politics and build alliances, and remain professional in the face of resistance. Finally, counselors must keep in mind they are doing the right thing, and be patient through the process.

**Partnering with Families and Community**

There are many important reasons why school counselors should look to form partnerships with the families of minority students, and with community agencies which can lend additional support to youth from diverse backgrounds. These reasons vary depending on the population, and often include an expansion of the challenges previously explored in dealing with students in the school. School counselors need to remember that students are part of family
systems, and be mindful that links have been shown between the environment the student has at home and the student's performance in school (Portman, 2009). Further, many national education associations and accreditation boards have indicated partnerships involving schools, families, and communities are important goals to aim for (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010).

Immigrant families especially can benefit partnerships with school personnel. The five year Longitudinal Immigration Student Adaption Study showed the importance networks of relationships had in helping youth adapt to new surroundings, including a new school (Suarez-Orozco et al, 2010). As a result of this study, counselors are encouraged to be proactive in working to prevent negative outcomes and promoting positive outcomes for students, with the formation of partnerships a key component of this goal. Suarez-Orozco et al (2010) identify three main areas for student engagement for youth in schools: a cognitive area of intellectual involvement in learning, a relational area of connection to teachers and peers, and a behavioral area relating to student effort. This last includes such components as attendance, completion of assignments, and participation. It is here that family can play the strongest role in ensuring students complete homework, attend school, and becoming involved in the school experience.

The process of fitting into a new culture can cause tension in immigrant families. Mexican immigrants often place a stronger emphasis on family than is seen in American schools, which tend to promote more individualism and independence in youth (Dotson-Blake, Foster, & Gressard, 2009). Children typically adapt more quickly to new cultural norms than do their parents, which can lead to conflict in the family. Children in the school also tend to receive more exposure to English than do their parents, which can further stress the family structure. Slow language acquisition on the part of parents often causes communication gaps between family and school; and coupled with other stress factors such as poverty and documentation status
contributes to a higher school dropout rate among Mexican youth. Frequently the parents of Mexican immigrant students do want to be involved in the school setting, and cooperate in the educational process, but are not sure of how to overcome barriers to that involvement (Dotson-Blake, 2010). Counselors too can benefit from partnering with minority families in that the counselors can further their own multicultural education and develop new insights into different populations (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010).

There a number of ways in which counselors can reach out to and partner with culturally diverse families. Dotson-Blake et al (2009) have suggested a number of steps for including Mexican immigrant parents in the school, and each of these steps would seem to work as well for Hmong, Somali, and other immigrant groups. The first part of the process involves developing a foundation of respect for all cultures and participants in the education process. Involved in this is including parents and community members in the process of decision making relative to multicultural components and offering an inviting atmosphere which encourages parents to involve themselves in school events. Counselors can next work to establish a welcoming physical environment in the school, working with staff and administration to remove barriers to parent access including poor signage and unclear building rules on visitors. Counselors should also work to identify and ally with leaders in the community who can aid in communication between the school and families, and help in educating school administration and faculty on issues relating to the specific population. Throughout the process, counselors should seek feedback from stakeholders and evaluate progress.

Oftentimes the only contact minority families have with school personnel is in a negative context, such as poor student performance or discipline issues. One way for counselors to begin building family partnerships is to instead reach out to parents for positive reasons, such as
highlighting student achievements (Suarez-Orozco et al, 2010). Doing so can create a more welcoming scenario for parent involvement. By meeting individually with parents, counselors not only demonstrate the importance of parent contact in education, but also give themselves an avenue to learn more about the students they are working with. Parents can provide clues to student behaviors and cultural contexts. Counselors can take this time to stress the value of involvement in education to the parents. A key outcome identified by the work of Suarez-Orozco is the idea of normalizing; helping parents see the struggles they and their children face are normative, and then helping reframe negatives into positives. Counselors can use their skills both in working with individuals and in group work by helping to facilitate parent support groups for new members of the school community.

Counselor's Role in College Readiness

A number of studies show that minority youth are under-represented in college enrollment and advanced placement coursework in high school (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Marsico & Getch, 2009; Ohrt, Lambie, & Ieva, 2009). The reasons for this discrepancy between post-secondary enrollment for minority students and white students are varied, but common themes do emerge. A troubling trend among minority students is the belief that their school counselors were not available to them, or had low expectations for their academic success (Vela-Gude, Cavazos Jr, Johnson, Fielding, Cavazos, Campos, & Rodriguez, 2009; Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Lopez (2006) cautions against the idea of “threshold counseling,” wherein counselors deal only with those students who initiate contact. This tendency misses the students who most need assistance in preparing for their post-secondary path, and counselors need to more pro-active in reaching out to all students and maintaining high expectations for students regardless of cultural background.
Another common theme which emerges involves the idea that a particular minority student may be the first in his or her family to attend college. Though parental involvement is often essential in supporting students wishing to continue their education beyond high school, many students in minority communities end up relying more on the school counselor than on parents post-secondary information (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Further, minority parents from a low-income background often overestimate the costs of college, and lack fundamental knowledge of financial aid resources available. A study of Latino college students reflecting on their high school experience with college counseling reflected this need for counselors to be available with information on the college admission process, financial aid, and scholarship information; with many of the participants reporting they had inadequate contact with their counselors on these issues (Vele-Gude et al, 2009). In light of this, it may be instructive to briefly examine two experimental programs designed to incorporate parents into the college selection process while also increasing the numbers of minority students seeking admission to AP programs and colleges.

The first program, tracked by Ohrt et al (2009) sought to increase the number of African-American and Latino students in a high school seeking entrance to AP courses by encouraging collaborations among students, parents, and school personnel. This collaboration began with the inclusion of various stakeholders in the design of the program itself, initiated by the school counselors and then involving selected teachers in developing the curriculum. Students were identified based on scores from the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT) administered during the 10th grade year. Student records were also examined to check previous coursework, grades, and teacher recommendations for those students who did not take the PSAT. An informational meeting was held to explain the process to students and school staff.
Counselors than arranged individual meetings with students to assist in program planning; set up mentoring sessions involving older minority students and staff who had been through the AP or college search process, and made contact with parents guardians to explain the program, the importance of AP coursework, and provide educational resources.

A key element of the process was an eight week group counseling session to provide the prospective students with skills needed to be successful. These sessions covered topics including organization, time management, goal setting, note taking, test taking strategies, and stress management. The sessions also provided a place for students develop relationships and find support in the program. Students were able to share their concerns over AP courses and the college process, and support each other in obtaining the needed skills.

Results of the program indicated a nearly 40 percent increase in Latino and African-American students enrolled in AP courses the following year. Of these, the number of students scoring a three or better on AP exams was comparable to the national average. The program also highlighted to administrators, teachers, parents, and students the limited number of minority students in the school participating in AP courses, while challenging those students who took part to engage in more rigorous coursework in preparing for post-secondary options (Ohrt et al, 2009).

The second program, conducted at a school district in Georgia, sought to increase the number of Latino students enrolling in college. In planning the program, Marsico and Getch (2009) noted earlier work by Sue and Sue (1990) which indicated Latino students tended to be action oriented, interested in receiving some advice, focused on the present, seeking structured approaches, and looking for short-term goals with readily seen results. The two major
components of the plan involved a parent night for the parents and guardians of senior Latino students, and an eight week small group session for Latino senior students. The parent night served to illustrate to families there was a support system available in the school for students interested in enrolling in college, to outline the planned program, and to provide important information to families on the college process. The group sessions focused on the college application process, goal setting, and information gathering. Students were able to complete applications and financial aid forms in a structured environment. The results showed an increase in the number of Latino students applying to colleges, and also showed that once students began the group sessions, parents were more likely to continue with and support the college application process as well.

In encouraging minority students to challenge themselves academically and seek to further their education beyond high school, counselors need to build on many of the items already highlighted; including partnering with parents and families, educating other school personnel on minority issues, advocating, and furthering their own knowledge of diverse cultures. Counselors must keep in mind that a lack of student success in high school does not mean the student will be unsuccessful in higher education (Vela-Gude et al, 2009), and that tracking of students shows they do achieve in post-secondary education. Counselors must also work to disseminate college related information not only to students, but to parents and guardians. In doing so, counselors may need to find creative methods for involving families; such as using the internet, hosting college information nights, reaching out directly to parents, and ensuring a welcoming climate for parent involvement (Holcomb-McCoy, 2010). Finally, counselors need to track data in monitoring the success of minority students; examining graduation rates, college admittance, school attendance, and school dropout rates (Lopez, 2006).
Conclusion

The changing school demographics not only in Minnesota but across the United States place school counselors in new roles, and position them to be leaders in creating positive school environments for students and families from all backgrounds. Different populations have different pressures, challenges, needs, and cultural norms. This paper has looked specifically and briefly at a few of these cultures as representative in Minnesota schools, but this is by no means the definitive list. In the context of these groups, school counselors need to be conscious of their own level of cultural knowledge and cultural bias, and work actively to improve in both areas. Further, school counselors should be aware of the level of cultural knowledge and bias among members of the faculty, staff, and administration; and work to educate colleagues in areas of multicultural issues. School counselors also have an opportunity to connect with minority families and foster a welcoming environment for all family members; taking a lead role in demystifying not only the school environment and experience, but also the process of preparing sons and daughters for life after high school. Along with this, school counselors are in position to connect with leaders in the various minority communities as well, and bring these leaders into the school as needed. School counselors also have an important role to play in advocating for the needs of minority students, both in the school and in the community in general. Finally, school counselors can take on the key role of encouraging minority students to challenge themselves in taking advance placement type courses, and pursuing a post-secondary education. Here again the counselor is positioned to work not only with the students, but with families and other school personnel.

In considering these new and critical roles for school counselors, it is important to refer to the American School Counselor Association revised ethical guidelines. Section E.2 of the
guidelines clearly outlines the role of school counselors in multicultural and social justice advocacy (see Appendix A for full text). The guidelines call on school counselors to expand their own knowledge of multiculturalism while being aware of not only their own biases, but how prejudice and power structures impact various groups. ASCA also calls on counselors to be advocates, to be inclusive in language and actions, and to take the lead in educating families and colleagues (ASCA, 2010).

Professional school counselors in Minnesota schools face new challenges as the population changes in the 21st century. Counselors have the unique training and skills to cope with these challenges, and resources are available for counselors to strengthen their own knowledge in multicultural areas (see Appendix B for a select list). Counselors are supported by ASCA guidelines along with developing research in multiculturalism in schools, and should be prepared to deal confidently with the changing face of Minnesota schools.
References


Appendix A

ASCA Guidelines Section E.2.

Multiculturalism and Social Justice Advocacy and Leadership

Professional school counselors:

a. Monitor and expand personal multicultural and social justice advocacy awareness, knowledge and skills. School counselors strive for exemplary cultural competence by ensuring personal beliefs or values are not imposed on students or other stakeholders.

b. Develop competencies in how prejudice, power and various forms of oppression, such as ableism, ageism, classism, familyism, genderism, heterosexism, immigrationism, linguicism, racism, religionism and sexism, affect self, students, and all stakeholders.

c. Acquire educational, consultation and training experiences to improve awareness, knowledge, skills and effectiveness in working with diverse populations: ethnic/racial status, age, economic status, special needs, ESL or ELL, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity/expression, family type, religious/spiritual identity and appearance.

d. Affirm the multiple cultural and linguistic identities of every student and all stakeholders. Advocate for equitable school and school counseling program policies and practices for every student and all stakeholders including use of translators and bilingual/multilingual school counseling program materials that represent all languages used by families in the school community, and advocate for appropriate accommodations and accessibility for students with disabilities.
e. Use inclusive and culturally responsible language in all forms of communication.

f. Provide regular workshops and written/digital information to families to increase understanding, collaborative two-way communication and a welcoming school climate between families and the school to promote increased student achievement.

g. Work as advocates and leaders in the school to create equity-based school counseling programs that help close any achievement, opportunity and attainment gaps that deny all students the chance to pursue their educational goals.

From ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors, retrieved from http://schoolcounselor.org
Appendix B

Selected Online Resources

Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota: http://www.immigrantlawcentermn.org

Minnesota Chicano Latino Affairs Council: http://www.elac.state.mn.us/issues/index.html

Confederation of Somali Community in Minnesota: http://www.cscmn.org/

Teaching Tolerance (Southern Poverty Law Center): http://www.tolerance.org/

Minnesota Indian Affairs Council: http://www.indianaffairs.state.mn.us/index.html

NAACP Education page: http://www.naacp.org/programs/entry/education-programs

Hmong Cultural Center: http://www.hmongcc.org/

Hmong American Partnership (general immigration/refuge resource): http://www.hmong.org/