



## School Counseling Abroad

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### Introduction

Although there are a variety of settings where school counselors can hone their skills, perhaps one of the most interesting ways to expand one's experience is to work as a school counselor in a foreign country. Working abroad can add to the counselor's own growth and development while simultaneously serving the broader world community and contributing to the profession through informal exchange and collaboration. Whether serving through a brief exchange opportunity or a longer more formal appointment, counselors can widen their perspective in ways that are unique to immersion in cultures that are different than their own.

As globalization and technological advances make international collaboration in many professions a reality, the profession of school counseling has been following this trend in its own research, practice, and professional development. International opportunities can provide school counselors ways to enhance both their personal and professional development, contribute to the development of the field abroad, and collaborate with others to conduct research that informs theory, education and training, and best practices.

### International Exchanges

There are a variety of ways that American school counselors can participate in this enterprise. At the basic level, counselors can participate in information exchanges, informally on the Web, or more formally through exchange initiatives sponsored by professional organizations. Recently, the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) helped initiate an exchange between the National Board for Certified Counselors International staff and U.S. based and international counseling professionals (NBCC, 2005). The goal of this collaboration is to share information and expertise through "conference presentations, scholarly publications, and personal interactions with colleagues" (p. 5).

The American Counseling Association (ACA), in cooperation with the *People to People Ambassador Programs*, has extended this type of collaboration by sending a delegation of school counselors to China in an effort to exchange information, and get firsthand feedback, about the school counselor's role in the U.S. and the developing field of school counseling, now in its infancy, in China (Rollins, 2006). Student and teacher exchanges between the U.S. and China are also planned. A delegation was also sent to Russia where they were impressed with the integration of school counseling practices throughout the curriculum of the Humanitarian Gymnasium #11, a "high-level school for gifted and talented students" (Kennedy, 2006, p. 27).

Perhaps the most intense yet fulfilling opportunity is for school counselors to participate, through a formal exchange, with a foreign counterpart or to work abroad on their own.

Although these experiences can be rich and meaningful, they can be quite challenging as well. Quite often, an exchange will be made to a job that is not exactly equivalent, in terms of role and function, to a school counseling position within the U.S. (Williamson, 1999). Total immersion into a new culture, particularly as a working professional rather than a tourist, enables the school counselor to observe the similarities as well as appreciate the differences encountered at their "host" school. The benefits of such experiences can be invaluable to the development of the individual counselor and can have far-reaching effects when they return home.

A popular opportunity for school counselors looking for international experiences is through employment at American-Sponsored Overseas Schools (A/OS). Although there are American students at these schools who represent "military, government and private sectors of the United States" (Rifenbary, 1996), there are also significant numbers of students from host and other countries in attendance, making these schools very multicultural. This phenomenon is due to the desire of students from host countries to improve their chances of American college acceptance. Indeed, Rifenbary's study revealed that the college counseling function is prominent for A/OS school counselors, accounting for 40% of their time.

### Participation in International School Counselor Training

School counselors and counselor educators who participate in international collaborations can additionally contribute to counselor training curriculums here and abroad. Quite often, host countries do not have compatible professional roles or training programs. In these cases, U.S. counselors can provide collaboration and assistance with curriculum development and the establishment of school counselor certification (Rollins, 2006).

Two of the authors of this digest have participated in this type of collaboration with Occidental College and University of California at Los Angeles to both design an introductory school counseling curriculum and deliver its on-line courses to school personnel on the Micronesian islands of Yap and Kosrae. The goal of local administrators was to bring counseling activities to their schools to increase the college-going rate of their students. This experience has been both enriching and challenging. One of the biggest challenges has been to craft an educational training program that meets the needs of the secondary school students being served while recognizing that the traditional, western models for counseling and school guidance may not always apply in this nonwestern cultural context. For example, a discussion of confidentiality made it clear that our (U.S.) value of protecting students' privacy did not fit the islands' cultural norm of community input into problem solving. This, coupled with the fact that

many students, teachers, and other school personnel are related led to some interesting discussions (R. Roth, personal communication, August 28, 2006).

An additional challenge in crafting the curriculum and delivering the on-line courses was recognizing that while Yap and Kosrae are both a part of the Federated States of Micronesia, their cultures are vastly different from one another, and thus delivery of material needed to be modified significantly for each island—from the way on-line discussions were handled to the types of assignments given. One group of students was very verbal and desired and needed a tremendous amount of contact and interaction about coursework as well as about social matters. Students on the other island were quite independent, desiring little or no interaction except in regards to grades for coursework; in fact, social discussion was discouraged by the students. These challenges served as reminders of the importance of thoroughly investigating cultural differences to ensure effective curriculum development and program delivery.

### Summary and Implications

The ASCA *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2004) discusses the importance of multicultural competency and the development of self knowledge in order to address the impact of counselor values and identity on their counselees. This self-knowledge, along with an understanding of the historical, sociopolitical and experiential aspects of diversity, here and in the global community, aids the school counselor in becoming more culturally proficient.

Although the ASCA *National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* (ASCA, 2003) can serve as a guide when working abroad, it is important that school counselors avoid the paternalistic trap of “we know what’s best.” There are many countries where the profession of school counseling does not exist or is viewed differently than in the United States. Multicultural awareness and competency are critical skills for counselors working here or overseas.

Constantine (2002), in her study and review of the effect of multicultural training on multicultural competency, reports the importance of both didactic and experiential training for school counselors. In accordance with this, many school counselor education programs require candidates to intern at schools that are richly diverse so that they might increase their proficiency in working with a variety of students.

Constantine and Gushue (2003) point out that multiculturally competent counselors can help students cope with the difficulties raised when cultural differences impact their well-being. School counselors who have worked abroad may be better able to identify with this experience, and be more empathic and competent in identifying particular stressors and their solutions.

Counseling and collaborating abroad can serve as an opportunity to build your own cultural proficiency and prepare you to lead others in this effort whether in schools at home or abroad. These skills go beyond efforts to foster awareness and appreciation of diversity within one’s school. “Educational leaders who are successful in creating culturally proficient learning communities will enable students to play vital roles wherever they go in the global market” (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003, p. 15).

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