



School-Level Bureaucrats: How High School Counselors Inhabit the Conflicting Logics of Their Work

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their Work**

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“So many times, a student comes into your office for one thing and it turns into something totally different. They came in to change their schedule, and five minutes into the conversation, you find out they’re cutting themselves.” (Mr. Coughlin, Counselor Educator)

School counselors are the first line of response for mental health issues in K-12 schools. Through three years of graduate training, they build a professional identity based on providing social-emotional, academic, and postsecondary guidance to students. However, embedded in schools, they are often utilized as administrative staff coordinating high-stakes testing, master class schedules, and other non-counseling tasks. School counselors find it difficult to act as a bridge between academic success and mental health due to resource constraints (especially in public schools), and role ambiguity and role conflict inherent in working with and for principals, teachers, and other non-counselors (Blake 2020; Monaghan, Hawkins, and Hernandez 2020).

Beyond these obstacles, part of the conflict school counselors face in doing their jobs well is doing so in a highly bureaucratic environment that often needs to prioritize efficiency rather than the one-on-one relationships in which counselors were trained to engage. The effort that school counselors expend in their jobs is framed by the rules and guidelines of the organizations where they train and work. These guidelines are manifestations of and legitimized by the logics of the institutions in which they are embedded (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012), institutions such as the graduate counseling programs and professional organizations that oversee their training, and the public schools that structure their actual work. These institutions frame the attention and behavior of school counselors by defining the problems and issues on which they spend their time.

To better understand this conflict school counselors face, I draw from interviews with high school counselors, counselor educators, and others, and a year of observations of two high school counseling offices to study these logics as “phenomena” that are in their own right worthy of study (Lounsbury et al. 2021). I extend the literature in this area by also studying how counselors interpret and adapt these macro-level logics in the organizational meso-level of schools when enacting their micro-level roles with the understanding that institutions are “inhabited” by people who understand, create, and communicate new and existing rules and norms through everyday behavior and interactions with others (Everitt 2012, 2018; Hallett 2010; Scott 2014). Counselors must make day-to-day “fairly mundane” interpretations of the environment and make decisions to “muddle” through (Powell and Colyvas 2008:277). Inhabited institutionalism provides the tools to understand how social interactions contribute to how institutions operate, and how these interactions influence outcomes of counselors and students (Hallett and Hawbaker 2019).

I document how counselors transform conflicting logics into decisions and interactions by observing those interactions and discussing the meaning of those interactions in interviews. I find that the identity and goals of school counselors are tied to the (macro-level) professional logic of school counselors, and that this professional logic conflicts with the bureaucratic structure of their jobs in public high schools, where they are asked to focus on efficiency in the face of a lack of resources. I contribute to inhabited institutional theory by exploring how counselors (at the micro-level) utilize their professional logic in the face of the time scarcity and resource constraints of the bureaucratic logic of their jobs, and the negative consequences for students and the identities of counselors. Counselors try to find solutions for how to structure their time in a way that makes sense within public schools, but also the local cultures of their schools and counseling offices (Haedicke 2012). Ultimately, when performing the pure form of the professional logic or changing

the bureaucratic logic is unfeasible, I find counselors reluctantly compromise between the two logics, concede to the bureaucratic logic, or do their best to survive the tension between the two.

LITERATURE REVIEW

High School Counseling

Since its origins, the counseling profession has focused on the growth and development of people through attention given one-on-one or in small group settings.¹ Professional authority over *school* counseling in the United States emanates from two sources – the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the American Counseling Association (ACA). These organizations value counselors who excel in social-emotional, academic, and postsecondary guidance (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011). Like in teaching (Everitt 2018), these organizations have increasingly contributed to the professionalization of counseling.

In addition, the organizations that oversee the training of counselors – the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and the graduate programs they accredit – also influence the profession through principles, guidelines, and standards (Scott 2008). Programs wishing to be accredited must meet the latest standards for counseling overall and each subspecialty, such as school counseling (CACREP 2015). CACREP does not mandate certain classes, but they do require that the curriculum for all counselors cover eight areas – professional counseling orientation and ethical practice, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, counseling and helping relationships, group counseling and group work, assessment and testing, and research and program evaluation.

Yet high school counselors work in schools that have a different mandate than the clinical counseling centers in which their classmates are employed. Like teachers, public high school counselors are embedded within bureaucratic organizations managed from the federal government

to the state, to the district, to the principal (Bridgeland and Bruce 2011; Everitt 2018). School counselors work under rules and laws structured by these entities, which have implicit and explicit goals and expectations for their work (Lipsky 2010; Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018). Counselors are often asked to prioritize efficiency and bureaucratic compliance through school management to support the overall functioning of the school.

There are certain things an organization can do to control the amount of time and attention a worker can dedicate to certain tasks (Ocasio 1997). However, school administrators cannot directly oversee the day-to-day decisions of counselors, nor counselors' individual interactions with students; they can only set expectations, deadlines, and resources to complete these responsibilities, based in the logic of the environment. This leaves high school counselors to use their judgment when deciding how to accomplish their tasks and how they interact with students (Lipsky 2010; Sattin-Bajaj et al. 2018; Scott 2008).

Translating Institutional Logics into Interactions

The institutional logics approach frames high school counselors within multiple social institutions at multiple levels – focusing on interactions between people (at the micro-level) embedded within schools as organizations (at the meso-level), and embedded within institutions at the macro-level (professional and bureaucratic logics) (Everitt 2018). Each frame, or “institutional logic,” shapes the attention and behavior of people and organizations to some issues at hand through rules and guidelines that prioritize certain issues or tasks (Goodrick and Reay 2011). These frames provide goals, expectations, and a blueprint for action toward certain tasks, and can constrain actors or provide valuable supports and shortcuts that guide their work (McPherson and Sauder 2013; Scott 2014; Thornton et al. 2012). For example, Dunn and Jones (2010) highlight how two logics – care and science – developed together over time in medical schools as these

schools balanced the scientific exploration of medical issues with an increasing imperative toward care of the patient.

Logics based in the profession receive their legitimacy through personal expertise, with oversight by professional associations and in interaction with other professionals (Thornton et al. 2012). Each individual instantiation of one of the ideal-type logics (like the profession) is unique to the position, time and location (Lounsbury et al. 2021). Though multiple logics may exist within a profession, professions typically have one dominant logic through which workers learn appropriate actions, identities, and answers to issues (Dunn and Jones 2010; Thornton 2004).

But viewing actors as influenced by these institutional logics does not mean they are without choice or agency in their social structure (Coburn 2004; Everitt 2018; Thornton et al. 2012). Institutions are “inhabited” by people who understand, create, and communicate new and existing rules and norms through everyday behavior and interactions with others in their organization (Everitt 2012; Hallett 2010; Scott 2014; Thornton et al. 2012). People can choose whether or not to follow the implicit rules, and thus may influence and change the rules themselves through embedded agency (Brown 2021; Thornton 2004). For example, teachers may not adopt institutionally-based practices that go against their professional logics (Bridwell-Mitchell 2013), or may adapt the logics based on their prior education and teaching praxis (Coburn 2004).

School counselors – like other actors – interpret the logics in the context of the local setting (Binder 2018; Nunn 2014). It is through interactions that logics gain meaning (Hallett and Hawbaker 2019). This local setting could mean the geographic region, the type of school, or the student clientele, so that interactions are dependent on how these individual counselors interpret larger institutional logics in a localized manner (Binder 2018). This local-level interpretation of

macro-level logics is the premise of inhabited institutionalism, which brings the micro-level approach of symbolic interactionism to understand how macro-level logics actually play out (Binder 2007; Fine and Hallett 2014), particularly in a meso-level organizational setting (Everitt 2018). Inhabited institutionalism privileges interactions – it is through interactions that people make meaning of and negotiate logics (Everitt 2018).

In this article, I outline two main logics that govern the work of public high school counselors – the logic of their profession, and the bureaucratic logic inherent in the way their jobs are structured in public high schools. I then use the inhabited institutionalist approach to prioritize observing interactions between counselors, students, and others to see how they navigate and discuss conflicting logics in action and the meaning they assign to their interactions, bringing “more attention to everyday processes” in institutional analyses (Powell and Colyvas 2008:277). When used to determine the antecedents of decision-making, inhabited institutionalism gives me the opportunity to view how a counselor’s decision within a particular interaction is constrained, how they navigate these constraints, and how their subsequent actions can have larger organizational consequences.

DATA AND METHODS

Sample Network

This study is based on 53 interviews with and observations of school counselors and those they interact with on a regular basis, such as principals and counselor educators (a full list can be found in Online Appendix A; a short list of the participants by type and location can be found in Table 1).² I focused on the counselors in a school district in a midsized urban city in the Midwest in the United States. Ashview School District³ is largely low income and racially diverse, with 70 percent of students taking part in the free and reduced lunch program (FRL) and over 50 percent

of them identifying as Black or Latinx. This district was chosen because of its racial and income diversity and because of the diversity across its high schools.

[Table 1 about here]

I conducted interviews with the guidance directors of each of the high schools in the district, and guidance directors and counselors of other public and private high schools in the area. An additional four counselors were interviewed throughout the country to gather non-local perspectives. Each of the formal, semi-structured interviews with counselors were conducted between June 2015 and October 2016 and lasted between 45-180 minutes. Questions for the counselors focused on their thoughts on how the district structured their time and resources, how they managed their time, and how their graduate training prepared them for the challenges they would experience in the job.

I then narrowed my focus to interviews with and observations of the school counselors in two of the high schools in Ashview. These two high schools represent the highest and lowest performing high schools in the district according to state metrics. The first school, Hunter High School (HHS), had approximately 1,700 students, with 50% of students on FRL, 40% of students identifying as White, and a student-to-counselor ratio of 340-to-1. The second high school, Edward High School (EHS), had a 75% FRL population, 80% of its 900 students identifying as Black or Latinx, and a student-to-counselor ratio of 225-to-1.

My observation period of HHS and EHS spanned from October 2015-August 2016. I observed counselors in the main counseling office, during their meetings with students (student permitting), during school- and district-level meetings with school personnel and administrators, and during events organized by the counselors, recording field notes along the way. In addition, during my observations I often engaged in informal interviews with the counselors, allowing me to

develop rapport, gain insight into their thoughts on current issues to reduce recall bias, and to clarify my field notes regarding observations.

To gather information on the supervision of school counselors, I also interviewed Ashview school-, district-, and state-level administrators and personnel, including the principals of both schools and those whose work brought them in contact with or supervision of the counselors. Lastly, to gather information regarding school counselor training and expectations, I interviewed counselor educators in colleges in the state and around the country in semi-structured, recorded, and transcribed interviews (in person or by phone). As the majority of the counselors in Ashview obtained their master's degree in school counseling in their state, these interviews supplied information regarding the training process of these counselors and the logic of the profession.

Data Analysis

Field notes and interview transcripts with all participants were coded using MaxQDA using an iteratively based coding scheme. After using prior research on school counselors to create an interview questionnaire focused on how their jobs were structured within schools (particularly Holland (2013)), during my field work and prior to coding (Brown 2021), I observed these interviews and observations suggested the potential use of institutional theory to explain the conflict counselors encountered. When all data were collected, I constructed “parent” codes using holistic and provisional coding to label conversations and interactions that were used to describe the logic of their professional training and identity and the logic of their work in public high schools (Saldana 2009). In a second round of coding, I looked for frequent themes within these logics and how counselors enacted them. For instance, in coding the way that counselors and counselor educators discussed and inhabited their profession, words such as “care”, “personal”, and “social-emotional” emerged frequently and were subcodes used to describe the field of school

counseling. In coding the way that their work was structured in the schools, words such as “meetings”, “managing”, “efficiency”, and “master schedule” emerged frequently as counselors described how their roles were structured within schools, fitting the ideal-type bureaucratic logic. Discerning a conflict between these two logics, I looked for words, phrases, and actions that explained how they inhabited these logics, with discussions of “balance” and “choices about time spent” coming up most frequently. I then reread these data and revised codes by further refining examples and counter-examples of the logics and strategies counselors employed. I use a small subset of my conversations and observations with participants below to explain how the two logics operated in the schools, and their strategies for navigating them (Saldana 2009).

RESULTS

Logics of High School Counseling

School counselors exist within overlapping “institutional spheres” such as school counseling graduate programs, professional organizations, and K-12 schools. Each of these spheres are influenced by different logics. Here I discern between the rules, guidelines, and practices that oversee school counselors within public high schools to determine which logics framed their utilization, attention, and behavior. Evidence from interviews and observations of interactions, as well as prior research, suggests that there are two main logics that govern the work of high school counselors: a professional student-centered logic focused on the social-emotional and academic success of students, and the bureaucratic logic of the way their work is structured in public high schools. Data regarding the profession logic are gathered from counseling professional organizations, counselors and counseling faculty (to situate the training of counselors at the meso-level), while data regarding the bureaucratic logic are gathered from counselors and school administrators (to place their work in at the micro-level in their school setting).

The Profession Logic of School Counseling

According to the counselors and counselor educators in this study, through professional membership and graduate education, counselors are exposed to social-emotional counseling to identify obstacles to a safe and productive learning environment and to respond to physical and emotional abuse or social problems that prevent learning. School counselors are also trained and expected to guide students through the academic, college, and career discernment process. Their continued professional socialization is ongoing (Everitt and Tefft 2019) and shaped by their personal identities, their schools, and by other counselors around them.

According to CACREP, graduate programs may meet their standards in many ways. However, when I asked the faculty members what made their programs similar or different from others, they all said that CACREP-accredited programs followed the same blueprint, showing how professional training can be a key source of “normative isomorphism” in organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Dr. Ware, an assistant professor at the regional public university responsible for educating the majority of Ashview counselors, indicated that school counseling graduate programs emphasized counseling through roughly ten general counseling courses, but with one to two courses specific to school counseling (introduction to school counseling and career counseling). She believed that school counseling programs are indistinguishable from each other, except for different ways of obtaining internship and practicum hours (in a clinic versus school), or the influence of the school’s mission on the content of courses (like at a religious institution). This largely standardized curriculum across programs ensures that counselors across the country are obtaining a similar education with a student-centered logic of the profession.

Multiple faculty members highlighted how important it was that school counselors be “counselors first” with school counseling as their specialty, and that they have a “therapeutic

relationship” with students. The ability to counsel and care for students was more often than not indicated as a “vital skill” for graduates of school counseling programs. Mr. Coughlin, a program director at a state university, explained why counseling skills were vital to the position in the quote opening this article, a quote that represents the importance of counselors as mental health professionals, even if within the context of a fairly routine class scheduling meeting. For faculty, completing the job of school counselor involved considering “the whole person,” and tackling students’ social-emotional issues to understand how to fix the academic issues. The identity of school counselors, as Dr. O’Brien, a faculty member at a mid-Atlantic school counseling program, put it, is to “identify as counselors [who] straddle the world of mental health and education,” while excelling in clinical skills.

The counseling student-centered logic was also evident in my conversations with school counselors and in observations of when they would activate this logic. When asked about their responsibilities, each counselor I interviewed referenced activities such as helping students choose their courses, handling course conflicts, counseling students with poor grades, attending to their social-emotional needs, and supporting teachers on these issues. These goals were laid out in HHS’s counseling office mission:

The mission of the Hunter School Counseling Program is to help all students succeed through a comprehensive developmental counseling program addressing academic, career, and personal/social development. School counselors are professional advocates who provide support to maximize student potential and academic achievement and assist students in overcoming barriers that inhibit their success.

In activating the profession logic, the HHS counselors applied for the highest recognition that ASCA has to offer school counseling programs, the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP). For this process, they made a list of situations that interfered with learning in which they would provide counseling, such as abuse, anxiety, depression, divorce, drug/alcohol use, eating disorders, homelessness, suicide, and teen parenting, to name a few. School counselors would enact the profession logic through individual meetings with students, group

presentations in classrooms or after school, and other counseling tasks. Counselors would spend their time talking with students about their courses, talking about how they could stay on track toward graduation, meeting to discuss students' individualized education programs (IEPs) or academic progress, or just establishing a rapport with students to engender trust.

Activating this logic was not always easy for the Ashview counselors. Whereas their clinical counseling counterparts received the same training and operated in a clinic, the school counselors worked in schools supervised by and working alongside non-counselors. While the student-centered logic was available to all school counselors, regardless of school sector or age group with which they work, activation of this logic was contingent on how the schools they worked in structured their time.

The Bureaucratic Logic of the Structure of the School Counselors' Jobs

While not every high school's use of school counselors is the same nor operates under the exact same rules or logics, through interviews and observations, it was evident that Ashview counselors often grappled with a bureaucratic logic at the micro-level which focused their attention on "non-counseling tasks" such as data entry, creating the master schedule, and coordinating high-stakes testing to support the management of the school. Explicit and implicit expectations of this logic of bureaucracy were that the counselors be as efficient as possible with their time, even if that meant sacrificing time with students.

Evidence of this logic is apparent symbolically in the words the Ashview administrators used to describe the work of counselors. For instance, the HHS principal talked about the counselors as the "glue" of the school, referring to the role they played in the smooth operation of the school, rather than as the mental health professionals they saw themselves as. The EHS principal described the school counselors as the "artillery" (opposed to the teachers as the

“frontline”) due to the “sheer background work” done by the counselors. Both “glue” and “artillery” imply a job description dedicated to school management and the proper functioning of the school. The source of the school counselors’ identity was not their professional identity as counselors, but the role they played in managing the school. Even Julia noted that the administration saw the counselors as “the cog of the building, we kind of keep everything with students and schedules that runs the high school.” This comment seems positive, referring to the counselors as indispensable to the school. But their indispensability was not due to their roles removing obstacles to academic success or in serving the students’ emotional needs, but in ensuring the school ran smoothly.

Evidence of this logic could also be seen materially in the ways that the principals and school district leaders utilized the counselors, like tasking them with the master schedule of courses. This entailed not only inputting students into classes in the school management software, but also determining how many sections of classes were needed, when teachers had planning periods, and who taught the courses.

Competing Logics

The profession and bureaucratic institutional logics embedded within the work of Ashview school counselors dictated how they did their jobs. School counselors are trained to provide student-centered support, but the Ashview high schools constrained the amount of time counselors could spend counseling students, focusing instead on school management tasks. A few of the faculty members I spoke with discussed this conflict, such as Dr. Mario, a faculty member at a Southern university:

They’ve got a foot in [the] world of education and they’ve got a foot in [...] the area of mental health and counseling [...]. The school counselor has to figure out how to live in both of those fields where [s/he] can do the small group for 6 to 8 weeks on divorce issues but not 6 to 8 months, and how does

[s/he] keep [himself/herself] from being the person that always gets called when a teacher is sick or when the librarian is out? So that's tricky, but it's something that a school counselor has to figure out and they don't learn that in graduate school.

The profession's logic encouraged one-on-one and small group meetings with students to discuss social-emotional, academic, and postsecondary topics, while they were pushed toward efficiency in school management tasks in a resource scarce environment. For example, for their RAMP application, the HHS counselors had to calculate where they spent their time over two weeks. They calculated that only 45% of their time went to guidance, counseling, and advocacy – with the last two only garnering 5% of their time total. This was in contrast to the ASCA recommended 80% of time. Management activities like emails, granting hall passes, setting up how to student meetings, and planning events took 16% of their time (versus the recommended 10%). The non-programmatic duties they completed included state testing, state reports, book rental, substitute teaching, attendance, report cards, transcripts, master scheduling, balancing class loads, and planning events. These activities took upwards of 38% of their overall time over the two weeks (versus the recommended 10%).

The Ashview counselors questioned whether it was appropriate for them to be doing school management tasks. Rose, the guidance director at EHS, struggled with this in particular. She noted being trained to do developmental counseling, where “you have 8-10 students, you work with them for 6, 8, 9 weeks and then you can see the before and after.” She loved this part of her training and looked forward to it in her job. But she was disappointed to find that this form of developmental counseling was never possible in her school. This impacted her professional identity: “I can say that I'm a real counselor because I'm certified in the state, because you wouldn't want anyone saying ‘oh, you're not a counselor, you're not a real counselor.’ Well, I got my certification, so I'm a real counselor.” But she rarely practiced those skills.

Below I outline how counselors used their discretion to navigate these constraints and the conflicting logics utilizing data collected at the micro-level. I utilize inhabited institutionalism to understand how these logics were negotiated in micro-level interactions. I find that both logics were available to counselors and counselors attempted to meet the expectations of both, engaging in three strategies: 1) accede to the constraints of the bureaucratic logic, 2) push against the bureaucratic logic to emphasize the profession logic, or 3) balance the two logics. Below I discuss the various factors that influence the activation of these logics and their consequences, including factors due to the nature of the schools and their local cultures (Nunn 2014).

The Constraints and Consequences of the Bureaucratic Logic

The two most consequential strategies counselors engaged in to manage their workloads were to structure efficiency into their student assignments, and to engage in “mass processing.” In terms of structured efficiency, students are assigned to counselors in one of two ways. One is to assign based on the alphabet: Counselor 1 counsels students whose last names start with A-M, Counselor 2 works with N-Z students. Another way is to assign part of or a whole class of students and follow them to graduation: Counselor 1 has all first-year students, Counselor 2 has all sophomores, etc. Three of the Ashview schools (including EHS and HHS) followed the alphabet model, while one Ashview school followed the class-model. Both models have pros and cons, but both are attempts at structured efficiency – ensuring each student has a counselor dedicated to them. However, the other duties counselors were assigned took more of their time, and so when they met with students, they needed to do so efficiently.

The second bureaucratic strategy Ashview counselors often would engage in was “mass processing,” conveying information to all students in their high caseloads, but not having to do so with in-depth individualized meetings. This mass processing was apparent in the summer leading

into the first week of school. During the summer, about 215 students and their parents came through the HHS counseling office looking to solidify Fall schedules. At any one time up to 35 students and their parents were waiting to be seen by the 5 counselors in a nearby classroom. Because each counselor wanted to see students in their assigned caseloads, each counselor had a separate waiting list. This meant that a student who arrived at 9:30am to see one counselor might actually be seen *after* someone who arrived at 10:00am who came to see another. This created a fair amount of grumbling from students and parents as there was little explanation for the different wait times.

The strategy of mass processing was more apparent at HHS than EHS because their caseloads were larger (EHS would meet up to an hour a year with each of their juniors and seniors, though not the first-year or sophomore students – I explain this more later) and their guidance director, Julia, felt the strategy was necessary to manage their caseloads. During another busy time - the scheduling season in January and February - the five HHS counselors needed to schedule over 1,200 rising sophomores, juniors and seniors, and upwards of 450 incoming freshmen, all within a four-week span. They met all the students in an English class (ranging from 15-30 students) in the library to schedule them for next year's classes within the 45-minute class period. On average, each of the five counselors had six students in a class of 30, so they could meet with each of them for 7.5 minutes. That is not a lot of time, and I rarely saw any conversation about social-emotional issues or vocational discernment. Even 7.5 minutes per student might be generous as one counselor may have upwards of ten students in any particular English class they need to meet with. In this case, each student received maybe five minutes of attention, or the student would have to meet with a different counselor they did not know. In an informal conversation, Susan, a guidance director at an Ashview school that utilized a similar approach to

HHS, noted the difficulty of “trying to compact four years of high school in 10-15 minutes” during those scheduling meetings. Because they had such an enormous caseload to work through in four weeks, the counselors did not or could not start longer conversations regarding what the student wanted to achieve beyond “what do you want to be when you grow up?” These meetings were the only meetings most of the first-year students would have with their counselors that year, and they focused more on the task of filling out a schedule than integrating the high school experience into the goals the students have for the future.

While allowing counselors to meet with each student at least once a year, the consequences of this structured efficiency meant students received little meaningful contact with counselors. Without one-on-one attention from a counselor, any additional support beyond the 10-minute meeting a year required that *students* reach out to the counselor. Joe, a guidance director at a nearby school, highlighted the unequal nature of this arrangement:

There are sometimes when people don't know what to ask, and those are the people I worry about the most [...]. There are all kinds of people with all kinds of needs that don't verbalize those needs and it's like... how do you know? I mean, if the wheel doesn't squeak, how do you know it needs grease?

Jane, a counselor at HHS, shared: “you know the old saying, ‘the squeaky wheel gets the oil’? My whole thing is that we deal with 20% of the clients 80% of the time.” The consequence is that those students less likely to ask for help are not receiving the attention they might need.

More than once, Ashview counselors noted that the middle students – those not at the top or bottom of their class – received the least attention. Laura, a counselor at EHS, explained how the middle students were overlooked:

They have kind of middle child syndrome. They're smart enough, they're kind of doing well enough that they're going to make it if they want to go on to college or do some kind of technical training. It's usually the really gifted ones that I spend a lot of time trying to get them into the school that they're looking to, or spending time talking about “what do you want to do and how

do you plan to get there?” Or the really challenged ones that take up a lot of the time.

Students in the middle did not create situations where immediate attention was needed, and thus Laura and others reluctantly acknowledged that they were underserved. There was a sense among the school counselors in this study that these middle students were falling through the cracks because they did not ask for help and they as counselors were too busy to identify and help those that needed it (as Julia put it, being more “reactive than proactive”).

Because of this tendency only to serve the loudest students or those at the extremes, some counselors recognized they were sacrificing relationships with students. For instance, in this conversation with Leonard, I asked him if he got a chance to meet with all of the students in his caseload:

Juniors, yes. And seniors, yes. Generally not freshmen. The only time I meet with freshmen is if I have to change their schedule or they have an issue. Ideally, we should be able to meet with all of our students but it is really difficult.

Rose noted that students who were not motivated enough to do class work their freshmen year and earned poor grades were haunted by this behavior four years later when they were trying to graduate. They tried to make up for these mistakes their senior year, but often it was too late. This group of freshmen – promising but not putting forth the effort – could be a group counselors focused on. But their issues were not treated as time-sensitive.

The Promises and Pitfalls of Prioritizing the Profession Logic

The Ashview counselors were not just passive recipients of mandates, blindly accepting the prevailing logic of the school environment. They could and did utilize their own agency in choosing how to do their jobs, reproducing and/or adapting the rules of the institutions they

inhabited. There were times when their strategy was to push back on the expectation that they manage the school or be as efficient as possible with their time, activating the profession logic.

When they felt they had the power to, the counselors set boundaries that protected the time they spent on student-centered tasks. At EHS, Rose had a favorite saying: “they would like for me to do something administrative, but I keep saying that I need to stay in my lane. That’s my favorite last words, ‘stay in my lane.’” Rose’s definition of her “lane” included what she had learned in her graduate training, such as group counseling, academic, and postsecondary counseling. It did not include administrative responsibilities. If she did not protect her time, this could impact her self-identification as a trained counselor. Rose suggested this “stay in your lane” approach to Susan after Susan complained how stressed she was around scheduling. But Susan responded, “our lane is a little crowded.”

Despite working in a system built for efficiency, another strategy was to take extra time to meet with students. In their attempts to provide individualized meetings to students, I observed the EHS counselors meeting with upperclassmen anywhere between 5-60 minutes. During these meetings the counselors provided detailed information on the scheduling process and met with students to build knowledge and trust. Of the meetings I observed, the upperclassmen meetings of the EHS counselors were the most thorough regarding academic and postsecondary counseling, a strategy championed by their director, Rose, but also an opportunity partially born out of the fact they had, on average, 115 fewer students per counselor than HHS. However, one hour a year with a counselor likely only scratches the surface of student academic and postsecondary needs, while social-emotional needs were not discussed.

At HHS, Jane often worked at odds with the system of meeting students, having much longer meetings with students than the other HHS counselors and spending more time getting to

know them. When students arrived during the summer add-drop period, Jane tended to host longer meetings with students and parents, with a few upwards of 2-3 hours, while another counselor had all of her students in and out in 20 minutes each. During winter scheduling, Jane made sure never to rush a student out of her office. She was warm and inviting and seemed to enjoy chatting with students about both school and non-school related things, just to get to know them.

The consequences of working at odds with the system were felt on students and counselors alike. Despite their efforts to more fully meet student needs, the district instructed the EHS counselors not to take so long to meet with students, wanting them to be more efficient (and thus cutting down on relationship building the one time of year counselors met with all the students). This caused Laura and Leonard stress in particular, as they dealt with stern warnings and constant reminders of deadlines. But they advocated to keep meeting with students longer than just to schedule classes.

Jane too sacrificed efficiency to hold thorough meetings with students. But longer meetings meant that other students were left waiting, especially during the important summer add-drop time. Jane explained her approach:

I'd like to think that I'm a person that's approachable, so a lot of times kids will come in, not particularly because they need something, but they just want to connect, which is good. And I never stop them from doing that when they want to do that. [...] We're really here for them, and we really should be rolling out the carpet for them. But not all the time that can happen because of all the other things that can encroach upon that.

Jane received push back for this approach. After a conversation with Jane, I noted in my field notes: "She says (now in hushed tones) that when she started here, she was told to get the students in and out, in and out as fast as she could." Julia the guidance director perceived Jane as slow and inefficient, even trying to enlist me to help Jane with data entry of class schedules. The HHS Principal also complained about Jane to me during our interview (although not by name;

context told me who he was speaking of). He said she was “extremely slow” and worried about her completing deadlines.

This example shows how there is very little room for inefficiency or relationship building with students, especially in high caseload environments. There was not time for Jane to be both student-centered and efficient, nor any room for error or slowness (even working extra hours – which many did – was not enough). If Jane tried to rewrite the rules of the efficiency approach by focusing on students, she might cause unintended negative consequences elsewhere, especially for students waiting for her. She as an individual was not going to change the way all the counselors worked with students because the institutional structure of the work would push against her.

Surviving the Tension

Facing pressure to be efficient while maintaining their identities as student-centered counselors, the Ashview counselors requested administration provide more resources, such as an additional counselor (which HHS received just prior to my observations, though they still had the highest student-to-counselor ratio in the district), or a test-coordinator (which one of the area Catholic schools received). There were also interactions when the counselors hoped I would advocate for them on their behalf with my research. However, most of the times the counselors advocated for their profession, these efforts went unheeded. When these attempts at surviving the tension between the logics were not enough or went unanswered, the Ashview counselors attempted to make sense of the compromises they made in their work with strategies below.

In the majority of the scheduling meetings I observed at both high schools, counselors merely recorded student class preferences. Little actual college guidance was occurring during these scheduling meetings. I noted one day after observing two HHS counselors schedule freshmen that one of the counselors mentioned college once when trying to convince a student to

take a language class even though it was not a requirement, but neither counselor asked their students if they wanted to go to college. The students were freshmen, so more pointed questions might be premature, but having that initial conversation as early as 9th grade could set the standard for a relationship built toward that goal.

Time seemed to be the biggest hindrance to providing college counseling, not lack of college knowledge. Leonard at EHS used to work for a college preparation program and had more extensive knowledge of college-going than most counselors (as did Laura). Yet on multiple occasions, Leonard suggested students “Google” information on colleges that had their intended majors, or talk to teachers regarding career discernment, instead of engaging in that discernment with them. He later admitted he was discouraged and surprised how little time he had to engage students in college counseling. Rose at EHS noted her utilization of resources provided by college preparation programs found in the community, such as SAT preparation courses or a college preparation program dedicated to low-income students. She utilized these when she could not ensure those services were being provided by her and her office. The HHS counselors left much of the college counseling to business teachers who taught the college and careers courses for freshmen. But not all high schools have access to a college preparation program or college counselors/teachers.

When the EHS counselors did provide information on academic and postsecondary issues during the meetings with upperclassmen, they faced the challenge of imparting everything students needed to know about their remaining high school career and postsecondary plans in a short amount of time. This meant that the students were overloaded with so much information in a short amount of time that even I could not keep up. In Rose’s meetings with juniors, her strategy was to go through a mental checklist of topics, such as grades, taking the SAT or ACT, and career

aspirations. Despite the type of information being mostly uniform across students, she had no written mechanism to relay the information, relying on her memory to inform them, and relying on their memory to remember and act upon what she said. Often she would tell a student to come back to her office another day with some piece of information, but the students never wrote these instructions down, and I am not even sure they brought pens to write with, so it was unlikely they would follow up. The students in these meetings rarely talked, shared their thoughts, or asked questions.

Leonard approached his upperclassmen meetings in a similar way, and I noted in one meeting the student's response to all of this information:

Throughout all of this, the student looks bored, and has a glazed over look in his eyes. Sometimes he'll bite his fingernails, and he's not writing anything down. None of the students Leonard met with today are writing any of the information down. And the only information he physically gives them is their progress report and the SAT and ACT dates.

Laura and I discussed the struggles she had regarding this method of informing students.

From my field notes after a meeting between her and a junior:

She says she has an internal battle regarding how much information she should share with the students. Sometimes she's worried that she gives too much. But then she's worried that if she doesn't cover this information, they won't be prepared. She's worried that she saw the student's eyes glaze over, and realizes that at a certain point, she needs to stop telling them everything. But she also wants to make sure they are prepared and can start on a lot of this before senior year.

This technique of information overload was common at EHS because the counselors insisted on meeting with each of their juniors to discuss classes and postsecondary plans. HHS counselors, on the other hand, gave presentations to juniors through their English classes, another example of mass processing that was more efficient, but meant less time talking to individual students about individual college needs.

Regardless of method at EHS or HHS, despite all the information provided to students in these meetings, missing was meaningful conversation regarding the students' future. These meetings were typically one-sided, with the counselors unloading a lot of complicated information about scheduling and the college application *process*, but little to no information about college or career options or *discernment* or *preparation*. Thus, it was unclear what the students were retaining from these meetings or if the counselors had any impact on their college and career plans.

Because of these challenges meeting students' needs, the high school counselors in this study were skeptical of their ability to reach all students in their caseloads, regardless of which school they worked at, downgrading expectations of what they were able to accomplish. This served the purpose of bridging the gap between the few resources they had and the goals of their position. For instance, Jane from HHS talked about balancing the desire to help all students with the reality of the job:

I really want these kids to have what they so richly deserve. All of them. Not just the 20%. And I know that there's probably not enough of us to go around and make that happen, but each one reaches one. Sometimes I'll have kids who will come in and bring another kid. And so I could get them that way.

Rose echoed this sentiment: "I just feel that if I can help one more to get their diploma, I'll do my best and do that." Her sentiment suggests the technique of serving a small portion of the student body in an ideal manner, reducing her expectations that she could help all students (or at least a lot of students) in a meaningful way.

Amy, the guidance director at a Catholic high school near Ashview, said something similar, recognizing how she was downgrading her expectations regarding how many students she could impact:

Are you going to be able to help every student? No, but when you've helped one or two and you know you've made an impact...I mean that's one or two. And that doesn't sound like a lot in the scheme of things, but if everybody's truly making an impact on one or two [...]. When you've got a student that comes back to you [...] and thanks you, it kind of makes up for all the many that aren't happy with you.

Amy's approach is likely an effort to maintain optimism and a sense of a good job done, essential to positive feelings about one's job. But the consequence of this approach is that it lowers the bar of expected outcomes.

One counselor even made the observation that teachers engaged in counseling more than counselors. When I asked him how much actual counseling he was able to do, Dave, a substitute HHS counselor and former teacher, juxtaposed the difference between counselors and teachers and how teachers often became *de facto* counselors because of their greater access to students:

As a teacher I probably did more counseling because I had kids everyday and I had the same kids everyday. [...]. That's not saying that counseling is bad or teaching is good. It's just that you meet with that kid everyday [as a teacher]. You get to say "you're smiling today," next day "you're not smiling, you got some kind of scratch on your face here." Or you can say "your clothes are torn today" or something like that. Whereas you can't do that here [in the counseling office] because you don't really know if the kid, what kind of the attitude the kid has, unless you get to know the kid.

Teachers are poised to provide counseling-like services to students because of their daily interactions. But teachers are not trained counselors, and they might not see that student again after the semester is over, whereas a high school counselor is typically assigned to a student all four years and *is* trained, but does not have time to interact with students on such a regular basis.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

School counselors join the profession to help students succeed academically, socially-emotionally, and post-high school (Armor 1969; Blake 2020; Bridgeland and Bruce 2011; McDonough 2004; Rosenbaum 2001). However, the conditions of their work constrains their

ability to counsel students (Lipsky 2010; Ocasio 1997). In this study, I drew from interviews with and observations of high school counselors, administrators, and counselor educators to determine the macro-level logics of their profession and their work in public schools. Utilizing inhabited institutionalism, I investigated how high school counselors translated these macro-level logics and structural constraints into micro-level decisions regarding their time and attention, impacting their professional identities. Because institutions are “inhabited” by people who make, understand, create, and communicate new and existing rules and norms through everyday behavior and interactions with others in their organization (Everitt 2012; Hallett 2010; Scott 2014; Thornton et al. 2012), it was important to observe how these logics were translated through the experiences of the counselors themselves.

Not every high school’s use of school counselors is the same nor operates under the exact same rules or logics (Binder 2007; Nunn 2014). Every counselor has their own agency and interprets the local logics in their own ways (Binder 2018; Nunn 2014). In addition, different schools may be influenced by different logics, such as Catholic schools (religious logic) or charter schools (market logic). But in this study, I found that the work of these high school counselors is guided by two often conflicting logics – a student-centered logic of the profession and an efficiency and management-centered bureaucratic logic of their jobs in public high schools. By observing interactions between counselors, students, and other school personnel, as well as engaging in interviews to talk about and make meaning of those interactions, I discussed how these logics impact how they approach their jobs and the conflict regarding their time and attention, extending knowledge of the structural conditions of school counselors’ work. Counselors, like teachers, have to adapt to changing rules and expectations of their work (Everitt 2018). However, while their training and actual work may differ, teachers still get to teach, while

counselors must adapt to an ever increasing (and professionally norm-diverging) list of things to do, while still attempting to do the purest form of their profession (to counsel). While the Ashview school counselors wanted to and were trained to provide student-centered counseling for social-emotional, academic, and postsecondary needs, they were often tasked instead with school-centered management tasks such as data entry or were expected to interact with students in short but efficient ways that made it difficult to build relationships.

While a lack of resources constrain high school counselors, counselors retain discretion *within those constraints* in how they accomplish their work (Lipsky 2010). I extend inhabited institutionalism by showing how time scarcity can shape how social actors translate norms. Ashview counselors developed patterns of practice that helped them manage the conflict, utilizing their own agency in choosing how to do their jobs (Binder 2018; Thornton et al. 2012). Their combination of strategies is one that makes the most sense to them based on how they interpret the logics and their mandates, often in ways they recognize are not ideal. While some would push against expectations of efficiency to spend more time with students one-on-one, they often received pushback. Some counselors would attempt to manage the two logics by meeting with students but overloading them with information to the point where I could not keep it all straight. Some utilized strategies attributed to other “street-level bureaucrats” such as downgrading their expectations of how many students they could serve (and how well), which are often based in the unrealistic expectations placed on them (Everitt 2018; Lipsky 2010). Counselors outsourced college counseling to others as they found little time to do this on their own. Many time students – such as those who did not ask for help – fell through the cracks, especially first-year students and the students in the academic middle. Ultimately, this struggle to inhabit two conflicting logics made counselors question their identities as “real counselors.”

There were some differences in the way that the Ashview counselors navigated the conflicts, whether it was one counselor adapting differently from the other counselors in her school, or differences between the two schools due to local cultures and leadership. For instance, HHS counselors were more likely to engage in mass processing than EHS counselors, partially due to the lower student-to-counselor ratio at EHS which gave them more time to meet with students. However, in highlighting these different strategies, it is important not to reduce the struggle counselors face to solely one of the student-to-counselor ratio as if an influx of resources will completely solve the conflicting logics of their work (though it would not hurt). Counselors at all the schools I interviewed struggled with these conflicting logics, even if those at schools with smaller ratios had more freedom. That freedom meant meeting for 60 minutes rather than 10 minutes with a student each year. While obviously more time, this is not the level of involvement counselors were trained to provide, and no counselor at any school felt they were meeting the social-emotional needs of students. This is extremely important to highlight in the face of increasing mental health issues among adolescents. The overall conflict between how counselors are trained and how they are utilized in schools will still be there in relatively low ratio schools because of the way schools utilize counselors unless concerted efforts are made to change this dynamic (Blake 2020).

I extend inhabited institutionalism by discussing how people who feel they lack substantial power adapt two conflicting logics in their work. Believing they lack the power for change, the counselors almost reluctantly engaged in the bureaucratic logic, and adapted their profession-informed behaviors and meanings in the face of this conflict (perhaps exerting their agency where they could – in how they *interpreted* the conflict) (Everitt 2018). Haedicke's (2012) work highlighted a similar process, focusing on how co-op managers made sense of the seemingly

inevitable market-like changes to their more democratic and participatory business model in a conscious and deliberate way (or go under if they did not). The counselors, too, engaged the conflict in a conscious way. But unlike Haedicke (2012), the counselors compromised between the two logics rather than changed the environment. While some counselor educators did discuss pushing their counseling students to make change at the school level, most counselors felt they were not adequately trained to nor had the power do so. Counselors were reluctant compromisers, negotiating but eventually settling with strategies in the best way they could with the resources made available to them. The counselors' adaptations were not ideal. When they utilized the efficiency model they compromised relationships with students. When they protested against the efficiency model to prioritize these relationships, they received push back themselves from other counselors and principals for being "slow," butting up against school-level practices.

The study was not designed to make causal claims regarding how counselor-to-student ratios, school type, or geography influence the activation of logic-balancing strategies. However, much of the narrative of counselor educators and professional organizations was how counselors could maintain their professional identity in the face of increasingly school-management centered instructions from principals. So while individual narratives I have presented are in no way evidence of all high school counselors' approaches to work, they represent a larger trend regarding school counseling as existing within conflicting logics, how they must manage their time, and the resulting gap left in mental health and postsecondary services.

RESEARCH ETHICS STATEMENT

Research protocol was approved by the University of Notre Dame Institutional Review Board. All human subjects gave their informed consent prior to their participation in the research, and adequate steps were taken to protect participants' confidentiality.

ENDNOTES

1. For a more detailed history of the field, see Gladding (2013) or Blake (2020).
2. School personnel and faculty interviewees were not asked about their racial/ethnic background, though some did offer it in conversation. Because this information was not collected consistently across these interviews, it is not provided in the text.
3. All names of places and people are pseudonyms.

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Table 1. Number of Participants by Type and Location

Meso-Level Interviews		#	
In-State School Counseling Faculty		11	
Out-of-State School Counseling Faculty		5	
District-Level Administrators		2	
State-Level Administrators		2	

Micro-Level Interviews	Counselors	Other Personnel
Ashview School District		
Edward High School*	4	4
Hunter High School*	7	3
Shannon High School	1	
Matthew High School	1	
Alternative High School	1	
Other High Schools		
Public High Schools (5)	6	
Catholic High Schools (2)	4	
Charter High School	1	
Private High School	1	

NOTE: *Edward and Hunter High Schools were the main focus of the study; observations of school counselors occurred at these sites, with a few additional observations of all Ashview counselors occurring during all-district meetings and events.

ONLINE APPENDIX A

Alias	Education Organization	Title
EHS and HHS School Counselors - Interviewed and Observed		
Rose	Edward High School	School Counselor/Director
Laura	Edward High School	School Counselor
Leonard	Edward High School	School Counselor
Nia	Edward High School	School Counselor
Julia	Hunter High School	School Counselor/Director
Becca	Hunter High School	School Counselor (Outgoing)
Dave	Hunter High School	School Counselor (Substitute)
Jane	Hunter High School	School Counselor
Jessica	Hunter High School	School Counselor
Robert	Hunter High School	School Counselor
Stephanie	Hunter High School	School Counselor
Counselors at Other Schools - Interviewed		
Susan	Matthew High School (Ashview)	School Counselor/Director
Linda	Shannon High School (Ashview)	School Counselor/Director
Denise	Ashview Alternative High School	School Counselor/Director
Amy	Ashview Catholic High School	School Counselor/Director
Trisha	Ashview Charter High School	School Counselor/Director
Brooks	Ashview Private High School	School Counselor/Director
Eve	Neighboring Catholic High School	School Counselor/Director
Sylvia	Neighboring Catholic High School	School Counselor
Theresa	Neighboring Catholic High School	School Counselor
Joe	Neighboring Public High School 1	School Counselor/Director
Jeannine	Neighboring Public High School 2	School Counselor/Director
Kathy	State Capital High School	School Counselor
John	West Coast High School	School Counselor
Adam	Western High School	School Counselor
Brooke	Western High School	School Counselor

Alias	Education Organization	Title
Other School District and State Personnel - Interviewed		
EHS Principal	Edward High School	Principal
HHS Principal	Hunter High School	Principal
Counselor Admin.	Ashview School District	Counselor District Administrator
Union Rep	Ashview School District	Teachers' Union Representative
EHS Career Specialist	Edward High School	Career Specialist
HHS Career Specialist	Hunter High School	Career Specialist
EHS Careers Teacher	Edward High School	College and Careers Teacher
TRiO Rep.	Edward High School	TRiO Representative
Erin	Hunter High School	Administrative Assistant/Registrar
Cecilia	State Education Office	State Education Representative
Roger	State Education Office	Former Counselor/Consultant
School Counseling Faculty - Interviewed		
Dr. Callahan	In-State Small Private University	School Counseling Faculty
Mr. Coughlin	In-State Regional State University	School Counseling Faculty
Dr. Jenkins	In-State Small Private University	School Counseling Faculty
Ms. Martin	In-State Regional State University	School Counseling Faculty
Ms. Meyer	In-State Regional State University	School Counseling Faculty
Dr. Norris	In-State Private Religious University	School Counseling Faculty
Dr. Peters	In-State State Flagship University	School Counseling Faculty
Dr. Richards	In-State Medium State University	School Counseling Faculty
Ms. Tanner	In-State Small Private Religious University	School Counseling Faculty
Dr. Ware	In-State Regional State University	School Counseling Faculty
Dr. Wyatt	In-State Large State University	School Counseling Faculty
Dr. Christopher	Out-of-State Urban Private University	School Counseling Faculty
Dr. Elizabeth	Out-of-State Southern Public State University	School Counseling Faculty
Dr. Johnson	Out-of-State Urban Private University	School Counseling Faculty
Dr. Mario	Out-of-State Southern Private University	School Counseling Faculty
Dr. O'Brien	Out-of-State Southern Public Regional University	School Counseling Faculty