

International College Options: An Influential Professional

Development Program for School Counselors

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Abstract

As more students in the US explore college options outside of the country, school counselors need more training to support this exploration and process. International College Options began in 2013 to address this need by providing professional development opportunities for school counselors. This quantitative study examined the program's influence on school counselors' work in the college process; results show that participating school counselors found the program helpful to their work with students. Implications for practice and future research are included.

Keywords: professional development, college readiness counseling, international colleges

International College Options: An Influential Professional Development Program for School Counselors

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) highlights the importance of continued professional development for school counselors (ASCA, 2017b). Young and Kaffenberger (2015) also stress the need for professional development for K-12 school counselors, with an emphasis on counseling for college readiness. College readiness counseling is a process that allows young adults to engage in conversations and activities that allow them to gain more knowledge about themselves and their post-secondary paths (Savitz-Romer, 2012). Counseling of this kind aims to assist students in areas of gaining self-knowledge and awareness, choosing a major, and becoming knowledgeable about resources available to them. However, school counselors often lack training in the areas of college and career readiness, and there has been a call for more effective professional development and training in these areas (Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Cholewa, Burkhardt, & Hull, 2016; Gilfillan, 2018; Savitz-Romer, 2012).

Literature Review

In recent years, professional organizations and counselor education programs have begun to address the need for more training in the area of college readiness counseling. ASCA offers an online training program for College Admissions Specialist, which helps school counselors be more prepared to support students with their post-secondary plans (ASCA, 2017a). In addition, National Association for College Admission Counselors (NACAC) offers an annual conference where there is a plethora of college readiness counseling topics discussed (NACAC, 2018).

In addition to training focused on practicing school counselors, counselor education programs have begun to explore how to offer college readiness knowledge and skills during

school counseling master's programs (Council of National School Counseling & College Access Organizations, 2016). The Council of National School Counseling & College Access Organizations reports on how many and which school counseling master's programs offer college readiness counseling courses. Their 2016 report found that 42 institutions reported having a course related to college readiness. While this is not a long list of programs, it shows that there are some counselor education programs working towards meeting this need. There are variations in the types of topics and content that are recommended to be covered in college readiness counseling training and professional development. ASCA, NACAC, and College Board suggest topics and content such as academic planning, college search and application processes, financial aid, career planning, supporting first generation college students, and transition processes (ASCA, 2016; College Board, 2010; NACAC, 2000). As counselor education programs and professional organizations begin to provide more training, it is important to determine what makes providing additional college readiness content effective and influential.

Growing Interest in International Education

While the topics and skills needed for college readiness counseling continue to be researched, there is one particular area of college readiness counseling that has not been addressed thoroughly – supporting students in the US who are interested in pursuing their college degree in another country. Over the past several years, the number of U.S. students who pursue a degree abroad has grown. The Institute of International Education reported that in the 2011-12 school year, there were 46,500 U.S. students pursuing a degree outside the US, which was a five percent increase from the previous year (Belyavina, Li, & Bhandari, 2013). Those students were in addition to the 273,000 U.S. students pursuing a short-term study abroad program, a number that has also been on the rise. Most of the U.S. students

pursuing a degree internationally (about 68%) studied in English-speaking countries, and the most common destination is the United Kingdom (Belyavina et al., 2013).

There are benefits for U.S. students to earn their bachelor's degree internationally, including lower costs and degrees that can be completed in three years (Gilfillan & Schultz, 2018). For example, there are professional degrees like architecture and law that can be completed as an undergraduate degree outside of the US that would not be possible in the US. There are even some countries that offer free tuition to U.S. students, such as Germany, where 4,600 U.S. students were pursuing a bachelor's degree in 2015, which was a 20 percent increase over the previous three years (Strasser, 2015). Many international colleges accept U.S. federal student loans and some even accept GI Bill funding (NACAC, 2017). The reasons for pursuing a degree abroad vary. Some students see study abroad as a new adventure to gain a globally focused degree while others have dual citizenship with another country and choose to pursue their bachelor's degree in that country (Gilfillan & Schultz, 2018).

There are a growing number of U.S. students interested in international colleges (Belyavina et al., 2013), and school counselors are likely to need more in-depth training in this area. In a national survey of school counselors, NACAC reported that 51% of school counselors surveyed felt *not at all* prepared to provide information or assistance to U.S. students about pursuing postsecondary education in another country (Clinedinst, Koranteng, & Nicola, 2015). Similarly, NACAC reported that 73% of school counselors surveyed believed they were *not at all* prepared to provide information or assistance to U.S. students about using federal student aid to attend college abroad.

International College Options Program

International College Options (ICO) was started due to the increased interest in college options outside the US by American students, as well as a lack of training options related to the support for students pursuing international college options (Gilfillan & Schultz, 2018). A small group of practicing school counselors established the program over the course of one year, developing ICO's purpose, objectives, and format through discussions with and surveys of experts and potential participants, which included both high school counselors and international college representatives. ICO serves two purposes: to educate students and their families about international college options for bachelor's degrees and to provide professional development opportunities for school counselors related to supporting students as they explore international college options (International College Options [ICO], 2018). ICO's professional development objectives include: school counselors will interact with a diverse group of international college representatives; observe admission- and enrollment-related international college presentations; and obtain information about admission requirements, applications, scholarships, and financial aid for international colleges.

The ICO programs offered include a college fair and counselor workshop, at which approximately 30 international colleges attend. The first ICO programs were held in fall of 2013 (ICO, 2018) and included two college fairs and one counselor workshop in the Chicago area. International college representatives discussed information about their institution such as school setting and type, enrollment, percent of international students, notable programs, application details for U.S. students, travel details, cost of attendance, scholarships, and financial aid. Since then, ICO has held programs in four other cities (Detroit, Denver, New

York City, and Pittsburgh); each program, regardless of location, is facilitated using the same format.

In each city, ICO holds a college fair and counselor workshop. Students, family members, school counselors, and community members are invited to the college fairs. During the college fair, each college (which typically number around 30) has a table where attendees can speak with as many college representatives as they would like. For the counselor workshop, a similar college fair arrangement takes place for about one hour, and a formal presentation is offered for an additional two hours, which also includes lunch. During the formal presentation, each college representative presents information on their college and several representatives offer general information about the countries represented. For example, there may be five educational institutions from the UK at the program and each offers a short presentation about their institution, then one of those representatives also gives general information about studying in the UK. Participants at the counselor workshop receive a booklet containing information from the formal program. During the 2017 year, ICO programs were held in New York City and Pittsburgh (ICO, 2018).

Throughout the years, the program has drawn more counselors each year, and while anecdotal evidence shows this to be an effective professional development opportunity for school counselors (Gilfillan & Kim, 2017), this study aims to provide more details about the aspects of the program that are perceived to be most helpful to counselors.

Importance of International College Knowledge

There continues to be support for professional development in college readiness counseling, and specifically for the support of U.S. students who want to pursue bachelor's degrees in foreign countries (Belyavina et al., 2013; Clinedinst et al., 2015). However, particular topics and effective means for this training has not been explored. This study aims

to explore and analyze one professional development program (ICO) for school counselors to determine what elements and methods are most influential in their school counseling positions. This study examines what makes this program effective for enhancing school counselors' professional competencies. The hypotheses to be tested are: (a) ICO is perceived as an influential professional development program for school counselors as defined by items on the counselor survey; (b) School counselors who participated in ICO earn higher scores than the national mean related to the preparedness to provide information and assistance to U.S. students pursuing postsecondary education and using federal student aid in another country.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from the two ICO counselor workshops in fall of 2017. Forty-eight school counselors attended the workshops and 30 of the total attendees participated in the study ($N = 30$). The majority of participants had more than 10 years of experience (14, 46.7%). Among participants, 13 (43.3%) counselors reported their title as *school counselor*, while 15 (50.0%) reported as *college counselor*. More than half of respondents reported that they work in suburban school settings (16, 53.3%), and the others reported urban school settings (14, 46.7%). Eighteen participants (60.0%) worked for public schools, while 12 (40.0%) worked for private schools. Most counselors indicated that they work in high schools (22, 73.3%), and 7 (23.3%) counselors reported working for K-12 schools.

Twenty (66.7%) participants responded that they have seen an increase in interest in international college options among students and families. Among all participants, 13 (43.3%) said they attend three to five professional development programs in a year, followed

by 10 (33.3%) counselors who attend six to ten programs in a year. In addition, 23 (76.7%) participants reported that they had not attended any professional development activities related to international colleges. See Table A1 for demographic frequency information.

This study used paper format surveys to collect participants' data. The survey included a demographic questionnaire and an evaluation of ICO.

Demographic questionnaire. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire developed by the researchers and included gender, race/ethnicity, years of experience, job description, school setting, and experience of professional development programs. The demographic questions were included to provide an overview of the characteristics of school counselors who attended to ICO program.

ICO evaluation. Eleven items were included to measure the influence of the ICO. Items were based on the objectives of ICO that were related to school counselor professional development. Experts in school counseling reviewed the items for content validity. Questions included the objectives that positively influence the participants' work with students and families, such as interaction with college representatives, presentations, information about admission requirements, applications, scholarships, and financial aid. Sample items included, "The presentations about studying in each particular country will positively influence my work with students and families," and "The information about financial aid for the represented colleges will be helpful in my work with students and families." Other questions asked whether attending an ICO conference influenced the participants' competence, such as building relationships with college representatives and advising skills. For example, "ICO educated me about the opportunities for U.S. students to obtain a bachelor's degree abroad." These items were scaled from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*), where the higher score indicates the stronger agreement of the

statements. The scale also included a neutral central response 3 (*Neither*) to create a bivalent and symmetrical characteristic. Cronbach's alpha indicates an internal consistency of 11 items of 0.91.

Additionally, two items were asked about preparedness of school counselors to assist U.S. students in attending international colleges. These items were adapted from the ones used in a NACAC national school counselor survey conducted every year (Clinedinst et al., 2015). The items also asked about counselors' feelings of preparedness to provide information to U.S. students about postsecondary education options and federal student aid options in countries outside the US. The questions were specifically selected to statistically compare the national mean and the mean of ICO participants. The items used scales from 1 (*Not at all prepared*) to 4 (*Very prepared*). The higher score indicates better preparedness of participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected at each of the two ICO programs in Fall 2017, using convenience sampling method. Participants who attended the ICO counselor luncheons were asked to complete a survey after the program. The survey was provided in hard copy form before the counselor luncheon program and participants were asked to return their completed survey at the end of the luncheon. The total number of responses was 33. Among the responses, three were completed by independent consultants, and were excluded in analysis as the purpose of the study is to examine the effectiveness of the ICO program for school counselors. In sum, 30 responses were used in data analysis. An a priori power analysis using G*Power 3 software was conducted to determine a sufficient sample size. When the effect size d was set as .80 at the 5% level (two tailed), the recommended sample size was 23. Because our sample size exceeded the recommended sample size, the researchers

proceeded with data analysis without additional sampling. Study procedures were approved by an institutional review board.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics including frequency, mean, and standard deviation were analyzed to obtain an overview of participants' demographic features and responses of all items. Next, considering the parametric nature of the data, a one-sample *t*-test was conducted to compare ICO participants' and the national sample's mean scores on preparedness to assist U.S. students with attending international colleges. All analyses were conducted using SPSS 21.0.

Results

Descriptive statistics were used to show the influence of ICO programs. The results shown in Table A2 indicate that most participants answered that they either agreed or strongly agreed with all items. In general, participants agreed that ICO educated them about opportunities to pursue a bachelor's degree in another country ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 0.50$). Specifically, interactions with college representatives showed the highest mean ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 0.35$), followed by information about admission requirements ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 0.38$). Information about financial aid, however, showed the lowest mean ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.73$), and the mean of information about scholarships ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.56$) was also lower than the overall average ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.35$).

Lastly, a one-sample *t* test was conducted to compare the national mean of preparedness to advise U.S. students in applying to international colleges. The two items were normally distributed, with a skewness range from 0 ($SE = .434$) to .177 ($SE = .434$) and kurtosis range from -.459 ($SE = 845$) to -.242 ($SE = 845$). According to the 2016/17 NACAC survey ($N = 2,266$), the mean of preparedness of assisting U.S. students about pursuing

postsecondary education in another country is 1.8 and that of the preparedness of assisting U.S. students about using federal student aid to attend college abroad was 1.7. Using this information, the results of a one-sample t-test are shown in Table A3. Bonferroni adjusted alpha levels of .025 per test ($.05/2$) were used. The sample mean of preparedness of assisting students pursuing post-secondary education in another country, 3.00 ($SD = 0.65$), was significantly different from the population mean, 1.8, $t(29) = 9.87$, $p < .001$. The 95% confidence interval ranged from .95 to 1.45. The effect size ($d = 1.83$) indicates a large effect. The sample mean of preparedness of assisting with federal student aid to attend college abroad, 2.52 ($SD = 0.79$), was significantly different from 1.7, $t(29) = 5.61$, $p < .001$. The effect size ($d = 1.04$) indicates a large effect. In summary, school counselors who attended the ICO programs demonstrated statistically significantly higher level of efficacy to help students who are considering colleges in another country as an option, compared with a national sample. The results also indicated that school counselors who attended the ICO programs demonstrated statistically significantly higher levels of efficacy to help students with using federal student aid to attend college abroad, compared with a national sample.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of ICO programs for school counselors to promote preparedness of supporting U.S. students pursuing international colleges. The results supported that the ICO program was helpful for school counselors to advise students about international colleges. Also, participants were more prepared than the national average to provide information to students about attending college in another country.

The survey items were designed around the ICO objectives and visions. Some of the items that had higher means may help in analyzing the influential elements of the program.

The highest mean was in response to the statement, “My interactions with college representatives will positively influence my work with students and families.” The nature of ICO is very interactive, allowing counselors plenty of opportunities to learn from, speak with, and create networks with college admission representatives. Previous researchers found that relationships between school counselors and college admission representatives can have a positive influence on students’ college outcomes (Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Tremblay, 2013). This study found similar results in that the attendees identified their interactions with college representatives as beneficial to their work with students.

The second highest mean was in response to the statement, “The information about admission requirements to the represented colleges will be helpful in my work with students and families.” Again, this finding is not surprising, as researchers and counseling models identify this area as important to college readiness counseling (McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012; College Board, n.d.). Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines (2009) stated, “School counselors also must become knowledgeable of the admission requirements of all types of colleges and universities (e.g., selective, liberal arts, historically Black colleges and universities) so that they are better equipped to advise all students of their college options” (p. 289). As students begin to explore their college options and expand their interest globally, school counselors likewise need to expand their knowledge of international college options, including information about their admission requirements. ICO offers an opportunity for school counselors to gain this knowledge, enabling them to share more options with their students.

While all of the item means were above the median, items related to financial aid and scholarships were lowest. This type of information is often cited as an area in which school counselors are in need of more in order to best serve students (Brown et al., 2016; Perna et

al., 2008). The ICO program may benefit from incorporating more information and training related to financial aid and scholarships in the future.

Limitation and future investigation

The results of this study should be carefully reviewed due to several limitations. First, the sample size of this study was rather small, though the minimum requirement of the sample size was exceeded. A larger sample may provide stronger support of the effectiveness of the ICO program in future studies. Furthermore, the survey was conducted only once to measure influence of the program while the participants were actively involved in the training. Should a pre- and post-survey be conducted, the measurement of effectiveness of the program could be more thorough. In future studies, measuring the influence of the program and the preparedness of assisting students both before and after the program would be beneficial. Similarly, no control group or alternative intervention were used to measure the effectiveness of the program in this study. These aspects require careful consideration in the interpretation of the results. In addition, the majority of participants were White and female. The rate of female participants mirrors the demographics of the field. The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs' (CACREP) Annual Report 2016 (2017) indicated 83% of all students in CACREP-accredited counselor education programs identified as female. In the same report (2017), 59% of the students identified as Caucasian/White, and this does not necessarily correspond with the rate of White participants of this study. Therefore, it should be noted that the sample of the study overly represents White school counselors. Finally, there is a possibility that respondents of the survey were more satisfied with the program than those who did not answer the survey. This may result in selection bias, which may skew the results. Therefore, the results should be carefully interpreted.

Implications

This research study confirmed the anecdotal evidence that ICO is an influential professional development program for school counselors. These findings demonstrate some of the benefits of attending professional development programs. Specifically, the study highlights the need for school counselor training in the area of international college options. While all school counselors may not find their students interested in these options, as school counselors, it is important to have information about as many options as possible. As the number of students in the US who are interested in attending international colleges increases, it is likely that school counselors will be asked to support students as they explore these international options. The benefits of obtaining a bachelor's degree outside the US include lower costs, academic programs that are not offered in the US, and a more globally-focused program (Gilfillan & Schultz, 2018). ICO has expanded across the country, so practicing school counselors and school counselors in training can attend these programs to increase their knowledge, given that it seems to have a positive influence on school counselors' work with students.

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Appendix

Table 1
Demographic Features of Participants

	Categories	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	6	20.0
	Female	23	76.7
	No response	1	3.3
Race/Ethnicity	White	23	76.7
	Black	2	6.7
	Hispanic	3	10.0
	Asian	2	6.7
Experience	Grad student	4	13.3
	0~2 years	2	6.7
	3~5 years	6	20.0
	5~10 years	4	13.3
	More than 10 years	14	46.7
Job description	School counselor	13	43.3
	College counselor	15	50.0
	No response	2	6.7
School setting	Urban	14	46.7
	Suburban	16	53.3
School type	Private	12	40.0
	Public	18	60.0
School grade	K-12	7	23.3
	Middle/junior high	1	3.3
	High school	22	73.3
Have you seen a change in students/families' interest in international college options?	Interest increase	20	66.7
	No change	9	30.0
	No response	1	3.3
Number of PD programs attending in a year	0~2	2	6.7
	3~5	13	43.3
	6~10	10	33.3
	More than 10	3	10.0
	No response	2	6.7
Experience of attending PD related to international colleges not including ICO	No	23	76.7
	Yes	7	23.3

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics of ICO's Influence (N = 30)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Strongly Disagree <i>n (%)</i>	Disagree <i>n (%)</i>	Neither <i>n (%)</i>	Agree <i>n (%)</i>	Strongly Agree <i>n (%)</i>
My interactions with college representatives will positively influence my work with students and families.	4.87	0.35	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (13.3%)	26 (86.7%)
The presentations about studying in each particular country will positively influence my work with students and families.	4.73	0.45	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (26.7%)	22 (73.3%)
The presentations about individual international colleges will positively influence my work with students and families.	4.73	0.45	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (26.7%)	22 (73.3%)
The information about admission requirements to the represented colleges will be helpful in my work with students and families.	4.83	0.38	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (16.7%)	25 (83.3%)
The information about applications to the represented colleges will be helpful in my work with students and families.	4.77	0.43	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (23.3%)	23 (76.7%)
The information about scholarships for the represented colleges will be helpful in my work with students and families.	4.63	0.56	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.3%)	9 (30.0%)	20 (66.7%)
The information about financial aid for the represented colleges will be helpful in my work with students and families.	4.50	0.73	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (13.3%)	7 (23.3%)	19 (63.3%)
ICO helped me build relationships with college representatives.	4.73	0.45	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (26.7%)	22 (73.3%)
ICO helped increase my competence in advising students on international options.	4.73	0.45	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	8 (26.7%)	22 (73.3%)
ICO helped increase my confidence in advising students on international options.	4.60	0.56	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.3%)	10 (33.3%)	19 (63.3%)
ICO educated me about the opportunities for U.S. students to obtain a bachelor's degree abroad.	4.77	0.50	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.3%)	5 (16.7%)	24 (80.0%)

Table 3*One-sample t test (N = 30)*

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	National Mean	t statistics	Cohen's <i>d</i>
How prepared do you feel to provide information or assistance to U.S. students about pursuing postsecondary education in another country?	3.00	0.65	1.8	9.87***	1.83
How prepared do you feel to provide information or assistance to U.S. students about using federal student aid to attend college abroad?	2.52	0.79	1.7	5.61***	1.04

*** $p < .001$

Biographical Statements

Beth H. Gilfillan is a doctoral candidate in counselor education and supervision at The Pennsylvania State University. Prior to this, she was a high school counselor for ten years in Illinois. Her research and advocacy interests include training school counselors, improving college access, and supporting first generation college students.

So Rin Kim is a doctoral candidate in counselor education and supervision at Pennsylvania State University. She has worked with high school students and young adults in her clinical experiences. Her research interests include resilience of underrepresented population such as international students and counselor training.

Diandra J. Prescod is an assistant professor of counselor education and coordinator of the career counseling emphasis at Pennsylvania State University. She is a licensed professional counselor and approved clinical supervisor. Diandra is currently part of a team that explores vocational maturity for 4th-6th grade students. Her areas of research focus on career development interventions for science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) undergraduate students and the journeys of women/students of color in higher education.