

OUR ROLE IN CULTURAL COMPETENCY

What does it mean to be culturally competent, and how does cultural competence affect our practice as school counselors? What is cultural competence? For that matter, what is culture?

The ASCA Board of Directors tackled these and other questions during the April board meeting and has continued to engage in powerful conversations surrounding changing demographics/cultural competency in our schools and in society. Bonnie Robbins, ASCA assistant board chair, and I recently met with the presidents of the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling; Counselors for Social Justice; and the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development to gain perspective from their associations.

Unlike race or ethnicity, people can adopt a culture, and one person could be part of several cultures based not only on race and ethnicity but also on sexual identity, age and other factors. Therefore, when working with students, school counselors have the responsibility to define the populations within their overall school population to ensure the needs of each member of the student population are met.

Because student populations are changing and the number of cultures within a school continues to grow, we agreed that being aware of the differences among

student cultures is essential for working effectively with students.

Cultural competence can help school counselors improve their practice to help specific student populations. People all have some preconceived beliefs, including some they may not be aware they have, and make judgments based on those beliefs. Even those of us who don't overtly exhibit bias and prejudice sometimes inadvertently say things without realizing the ramifications of the things we say.

Self-reflection and a healthy self-awareness are crucial when working with students who represent various cultures. Once we understand our own beliefs, we can understand how those beliefs may influence our behavior and, in turn, understand the impact our behavior may have on student outcomes. The goal is not to learn every characteristic of every culture but simply to be aware that some behaviors or attitudes of students may be attributed to their culture, and therefore, we as educators need to be sensitive to their cultural identity.

One primary student outcome is improved academic achievement and preparation to continue their education or enter a career after graduation. Because schools still generally follow systems designed for middle-class white students, our school systems themselves may sometimes create cultural barriers for some students that present obstacles

to learning. A student outcome that is just as important as academic achievement and college and career readiness is social/emotional learning. Students in diverse schools need to learn how to respect and get along with their peers who may look and act different from themselves. Even students in homogenous schools need to learn how to be culturally competent in a diverse world, especially when their school or community doesn't reflect the growing diversity in the United States, because that's the world in which they will inevitably live in the future.

School counselors can help their students achieve success in two ways. First, we must recognize the impact students' cultural identity can have on their education. When students encounter problems or difficulties, we should be cognizant of the role culture might play in their situation. Also, by disaggregating data, we can identify different outcomes among different cultural groups and detect opportunity gaps that affect groups of students and specific problems and trends among specific populations. At the same time, we should balance students' cultural identity with their individual identity. As differentiated instruction becomes more common, facilitated through technology that allows students to learn at their own pace, we as educators need to recognize the individual attributes of students to address their unique interests, talents and needs.



Board Chair
Julie Baumgart



Board Assistant Chair
Bonnie Robbins



Patrick Akos, Ph.D.



Bob Bardwell



LaWanda Edwards, Ph.D.



Doug Hauserman



Lisa Koenecke



Edward A. Mainzer,
Ed.D., LMHC



Daniel Peabody



Jan Updegraff