

## **Selective Scheduling: An Alternative Class Scheduling Procedure**

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### **Abstract**

*High school class scheduling can be streamlined and more effective when counselors selectively advise only students who need counseling to prepare their schedules and refer other students to qualified clerical staff members for processing and entry of schedules.*

**Keywords:** School Counseling, Guidance,

### **1.0 Introduction**

Surveys of high school counselors' roles and functions (Fitch, Newby, Ballestero, & Marshall, 2001; Stalling, 1992) consistently reveal that scheduling classes for students is one of the most important activities counselors provide, and one that requires a substantial portion of their time during the school year. Although the time demands associated with class scheduling may vary according to the type of scheduling used in a school (e.g., traditional seven or eight period scheduling, block scheduling, trimester scheduling), up to 40 percent of a high school counselor's time at school during an academic year may be devoted to planning and entering class schedules for students, and more than 50 percent may be devoted to scheduling and similar clerical tasks (Campbell & Dahir, 1997; College Board, 2012).

Although counselors tend to endorse scheduling as an important part of their roles and functions (Hutchinson, Barrick, & Grove, 1986; Karch, 2011), many counselors also report that scheduling is an undesirable aspect of their work (High, 1995; Stalling, 1992). Developing a systematic academic plan and, particularly, six or nine-week class schedules, for many students is perceived by many counselors as a tedious, time-consuming chore to be dispatched as quickly as possible. Even counselors who are committed to the scheduling endeavor may fail to apply their knowledge of student development and professional counseling interventions to their academic counseling work. Scheduling may seem little more than a clerical task, one in which needed courses are chosen according to availability, appropriateness to a student's academic track, and time compatibility with other needed courses; then entered into the school's computer for a seemingly endless line of waiting students. Counselors who must schedule many students may find that the time needed to complete scheduling significantly limits the time available to perform other, equally important services, such as crisis intervention, personal counseling, and career development (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). The Association for School Counseling (2005) included scheduling as an "inappropriate activity for school counselors. At a time when increasing demands are being made on high school counselors' time, it is essential that they perform tasks as efficiently as possible. Although class scheduling for many students is a complex task, it need not be an onerous one if conducted in an organized manner, as part of a larger academic guidance plan involving both middle school and high school counselors. This article will common problems in high school class scheduling procedures that hinder counselors' efficiency in performing this task, and present a procedure for class scheduling that would enable a counseling department to use counselor time more efficiently while providing students the levels of counselor service they require to arrive at an appropriate class schedule, consistent with their academic and occupational aspirations.

### **2. Common Problems in Class Scheduling Procedures**

During the author's visits to many high school counseling departments in five states (Indiana, Kentucky, Minnesota, Ohio, Tennessee) during the past 28 years, counselors have described several problems inherent in both traditional and more innovative (e.g., block scheduling) procedures.

These problems include the following:

**Counselors provide the same levels and types of scheduling services to all students each term:** In the typical high school, counselors are expected to see each student to which they are assigned, to provide academic advising and assist them in selecting classes for the upcoming academic term. Prior to any given term, however, some students do not require extensive assistance in planning their schedules and merely need assistance in confirming that their selections are available, do not conflict in terms of time, and are consistent with their academic program or track. These students' needs often could be addressed by a clerical worker in the guidance department, without the direct involvement of a counselor. Other students require more extensive advising and counseling services, ranging from course selection and program guidance to postsecondary and career development that do require the counselor's skills and expertise.

**Counselors perform both counseling and clerical aspects of scheduling:** In many high schools, counselors are responsible for entering students' schedules into the school's computerized scheduling system. Although this is an important function, data entry is a time-consuming task that takes time away from counseling functions and could be performed by clerical staff at lower cost.

**Students receive inadequate academic counseling before and during high school:** In all states (Schroth, 1997), students entering high school are required to declare a concentration area or track" (e.g., honors, liberal arts, technical) that will serve as the basis for course selection for the next four years. Many students, however, receive little or no academic guidance in the middle school grades and enter high school without an organized academic plan or on that is inadequate to plan classes from term to term.

One reason that students enter high school without an adequate academic plan is that there is limited or ineffective communication between counselors at the middle and high schools (Hayes, 2014). Counselors at the two levels may not communicate adequately on students' needs as they move from middle school to high school and may be unclear as to their respective roles in preparing students for their transition to high school. Students who are prepared with an initial academic plan when entering high school will experience a negative impact on their ability to plan their course work throughout the next four years. Furthermore, these students will need more frequent and more extensive counseling services to plan their class schedules each term.

Other students encounter difficulty with class planning when they do not receive adequate academic advising, independently of course scheduling, as they progress through high school (Harris, 2015). As students' aspirations change during their course of their high school experiences, their academic plans will need to change accordingly. High school counselors' frequent concern is that some students fall through the cracks," that is, they do not seek out and are not sought out by their assigned counselors and their academic plans become dated (Carletta, 2012, Hutchinson, 1986). As is the case with students who receive insufficient planning prior to entering high school, students who do not receive regular academic counseling during their high school careers will require more extensive services at scheduling sessions, a time when counselors have the least amount of time to devote to academic advising. Because of the time pressures associated with providing academic counseling to an unprepared student during scheduling activities, it is likely that the advising will be minimal and fail to fully address the student's needs, thus making scheduling for that student difficult prior to the next academic term.

### ***3. The Selective Scheduling Approach***

In the selective scheduling approach, it is assumed that students receive academic planning services prior to entering high school. Prior to each academic term, each student's advising needs are assessed by a trained staff member, who determines if the student requires a counselor's intervention to formalize a schedule, or simply needs a clerical staff member to process class choices and enter them into the schools scheduling system. In this approach, the roles of academic advising and class scheduling are treated as separate activities that may be conducted at times different from those periods in the school year when schedules are processed. The elements of this approach are described below.

**Early Academic Advising:** Prior to students' transition from middle school to high school, they participate in individual and group academic and career development.

These activities are developed and implemented collaboratively by the appropriate counselors (e.g., the eighth and ninth grade counselors) within the school district. Students' initial academic curriculum plans will serve as the basis for initial course scheduling for the freshman year.

**Determining Students' Academic Advising and Scheduling Needs:** Near the conclusion of the academic year or during the summer, counselors assess each student on their caseloads in order to determine the adequacy of each student's curriculum plan. The initial contact with students to assess the adequacy of their plans may be performed by a selected counselor in the department, by a clerical staff member using questions developed by the counseling staff, or by a paper-and-pencil questionnaire mailed to students' homes. Students indicate a need for counseling through direct request or indirectly, via responses that reveal poor understanding of their programs or the classes they need to complete their programs. Those students are scheduled to see their counselor to obtain academic advising and other counseling services as needed during the next scheduling session. Students who indicate that they are satisfied with their existing plan and have selected appropriate classes for the upcoming academic term are given an appointment with a clerical staff member to submit their courses. The staff member reviews the class selections in order to determine availability of the classes and enters the selections into the scheduling system. These students' counselors become involved in the scheduling process only when students' selected classes are not available, when classes inappropriate for completing their plan have been selected, or other scheduling problems arise that the clerical staff are unable to resolve without the counselor's expertise.

**Level of Counselor Involvement in Class Scheduling:** During each subsequent scheduling period, students who do not require academic advising and are aware of the classes they need to take during the upcoming academic term submit their proposed schedules to the clerical staff for review and entry to the scheduling system. Students who need additional assistance to select classes appropriate to their existing plan, or who require advising to revise their plan, are given an appointment to see their counselor. The counselors provide academic guidance and assist students in selecting appropriate classes, then refer the students to the clerical staff to submit their elections and enter them into the scheduling system. In all cases, the actual entry of schedules into the school's scheduling system is performed by clerical staff who are trained to perform this task. This enables counselors to devote a greater portion of their time to academic advising and resolution of specific scheduling problems for those students who need such assistance and frees counselor time for other tasks, such as personal counseling and career development, and other counseling-related tasks.

#### **4. Case Study**

The model was implemented on a one-year trial basis at an urban public high school in a Midwestern state. The school enrolled 1300 students in grades nine through twelve. The school was the only regular high school in its district, which included three elementary (grades kindergarten through six), two junior high schools (grades seven and eight), an alternative high school, and a career center. The counseling staff included ten guidance counselors, one career specialist, and one counselor assigned to the alternative school. The ten counselors were assigned students based on the first letter of students' last names. Caseloads were adjusted such that each counselor had approximately the same number of assigned students. The typical student to counselor ratio at this school was between 115 and 130 students. In addition, one counselor was assigned annually to coordinate the orientation of eighth grade students in the junior high schools to the high school. The intended purposes of the eighth-ninth grade transition coordinator was to work closely with the counselors in the district's two middle (grades six through eight) schools to assess the eighth grade students' academic progress, academic and career aspirations, schedule their courses during ninth grade, and plan their academic programs through twelfth grade.

Through a series of program evaluations, the counseling department had concluded that they did not adequately address students' academic advising, college and career planning and, particularly, emotional and behavioral needs because they were required to spend up to 40 percent of their work time in scheduling tasks. Scheduling was particularly time-consuming during the late fall and late spring semesters. However, counselors reported that their class scheduling duties occurred throughout the semester because of students' schedules required adjustment throughout the semester. The evaluations revealed that three-quarters of the students did not have specific academic, career-related, or personal problems that would hinder planning their schedules and did not need their counselors' involvement in developing the next term's schedule and entering it into the schools computerized scheduling system.

The only problem confronting these students usually was the complexity of coordinating the times of their needed courses in order to avoid overlapping class times. Yet, school policy during the past 35 years required the counselors to go over each student's proposed schedule, work through any time, prerequisite class, or other logistical conflicts, and enter the schedule into the scheduling system. The survey also identified several areas in which counselors reported inadequate time to provide services.

These areas include the following: (1) postsecondary and career counseling and programming, (2) networking in the community to obtain additional financial resources, career internships, speakers on career and academic topics, and tutors, and (3) networking and implementing school-wide interventions to address racism and social inequity in the high school. After discussing their needs with superintendent, the counseling department successfully proposed to the local board an alternate approach to distributing the staff's time that reduced their time spent on scheduling by involving trained clerical staff in schedule preparation and entry.

The counseling department implemented the selective scheduling model on a trial basis during one academic year. The counseling department was funded to hire two "scheduling specialists." These specialists had technical training and more than five years of extensive experience in database management and records entry. Both specialists were trained to conduct scheduling interviews with students, identify and manage logistical problems, and enter the completed schedules into the system. They also were trained in curricular requirements for the general, college-preparatory, and academic honors diplomas, academic requirements of colleges in the region, and procedures for accessing additional resources on college and other postsecondary academic requirements. One specialist was assigned to the ninth and tenth grade classes and the other specialist was assigned to the eleventh and twelfth grade classes.

Each of the ten counselors in the department was assigned an equal number of ninth grade students in addition to their caseloads of tenth through twelfth grade students. Counselors met with their assigned ninth grade students during the spring semester of their eighth- grade year to provide academic and career counseling, orient them to the high school, and help them select an academic track. The middle school counselors, assisted by the scheduling specialist, subsequently assisted students in preparing their ninth grade schedules.

Students were initially seen by their assigned scheduling specialist. Students presenting any of the following problems were identified as "Requiring Counseling" and referred to their counselors for advising and scheduling : (1) the proposed schedule would not be able to enable the student to obtain the student to meet the requirements for the desired diploma (i.e., general, college preparatory); (2) the student wished to change to a different diploma track, (3) the student was experiencing significant academic problems; (4) the student had recent disciplinary problems; (5) a junior or senior student was undecided or verbalized no clear plans for career or academic activities after high school, or (6) the student had specific academic, career-related, or personal questions or concerns. All other students were seen only by the scheduling specialists, who reviewed their completed schedules or assisted them in creating an appropriate schedule, and then entered the schedule in the scheduling system.

A longstanding policy of the school corporation was that high school counselors maintained logs of the time they spent providing various student services. Also, the number of incidents in which students' had been inappropriately scheduled into classes or inappropriately advised (i.e., advised to take a course inconsistent with their career or postsecondary educational aspirations) was tracked. At the end of the academic year, these logs were reviewed to compare the amount of professional time spent in class scheduling and other counseling-related activities, and the number of scheduling errors made by counselors and non-counselor staff during the year. The results of this evaluation revealed that throughout the year, a majority (54 percent) of the students had been scheduled into classes by the non-counselor schedulers. 1.3 percent of these students experienced scheduling errors compared to 2.6 percent of students scheduled by their counselors. The difference in scheduling errors was attributed to the non-counselor schedulers' ability to focus more time and attention to scheduling details since scheduling was their primary task.

During the year prior to the pilot trial of the scheduling procedure, the high school counselors devoted an average of 25.8 percent of their time at work to scheduling tasks. Counselors spent 18 percent to career and postsecondary information services, and 2.3 percent of their time to social justice activities. During the pilot trial year, counselors spent 8.4 percent of their time to scheduling, 26.3 percent of their time to networking, and 17.0 percent of their time to social justice activities. Key stakeholders (i.e., faculty, school and district administrators, student, their families, and community leaders) generally concurred that counseling services had improved.

Most notable improvements were better preparation of eighth grade students for high school, better preparation of students for education or work after high school, and better linking of the work and education worlds by creating a more organized, extensive network of speakers, internships, and college exposure experiences. These stakeholders also agreed that the racial and social climate in the high school had improved significantly.

With some of the additional time saved by having qualified non-counseling staff members participate in scheduling, counselors provided several experiential programs to raise students' awareness of racial and cultural issues in the school and community. These workshops resulted in several student service projects, funded by foundation grants and local businesses, to raise engage in discussions on reducing racism and classism, as well as service projects to assist community youth service organizations obtain resources for their programs (e.g., after school programs, youth leadership activities).

### **5. Benefits of the Selective Scheduling Approach**

Selective scheduling of students can provide several benefits for counselors, students, and school districts. With traditional scheduling approaches, counselors sometimes forego their other professional responsibilities to advice and process schedules for their assigned students. This is a significant problem in school that have larger student to counselors' ratios (Graham, 1997) at a time when counselors are being called upon to assume a greater range of professional responsibilities. When counselors do not process the schedules of every student to whom they are assigned, they have more time to devote to other counseling responsibilities and work on innovative programs. Students who require assistance in academic planning and course selection can see their counselors sooner and are likely to spend more time with them.

### **6. Considerations for Non-Counseling Staff in Scheduling**

Although the use of staff to review and process schedules can save considerable time for counselors, certain potential problems must be considered. First, although some students need only clerical services to process their schedules, counselors need to remain aware that this may be construed by colleagues, parents, and students as an attempt to avoid seeing students or "passing off" advising tasks to others. The counseling staff must educate students, colleagues, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders on benefits for students of devoting more time to other direct counseling activities. Such efforts to educate stakeholders are particularly important at a time when counselors are being held increasingly accountable for the ways in which they spend their time (Hayes, 2014). Counselors need to document that the time they no longer spend processing schedules is reallocated to other counseling activities, such as personal counseling and career, postsecondary, and other services to create an optimal learning environment.

Second, the use of clerical and other nonprofessional staff to process schedules of students who do not need professional assistance requires that the counseling department has sufficient staff to deal with the task effectively, and that those staff members are adequately trained to evaluate and process students' schedule choices. These staff members must be able to determine if a student who was not originally identified as needing academic guidance in fact should receive intervention from a counselor. However, the hiring and training of clerical staff generally is less costly than hiring additional counselors and enables the counseling staff to provide increased levels of services in other guidance areas, which increases their cost effectiveness.

Third, counselors must keep in mind that streamlining the class scheduling process does not reduce the need to provide regular academic counseling and postsecondary career planning for all students. It is essential in this approach that all students receive formal academic counseling and advising from their assigned counselors in middle school, and regular reviews of their academic plans throughout their high school years.

### **7. Summary and Conclusions**

The selective involvement of counselors in the class scheduling process can be both an effective cost-saving adaptation and a means for counselors to use their time more efficiently in a period when they are expected to assume more diverse, complex roles in high schools. If the assessment of students' needs for guidance from their counselors is carefully conducted, selective counselor involvement in scheduling benefits students by making their counselors more accessible and increasing the time and resources available to help them make important educational and career decisions in a positive school climate.

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