AN EXAMINATION OF CURRENT AND PAST RECOGNIZED ASCA MODEL PROGRAM (RAMP) RECIPIENTS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH PURSUING THE Re-RAMP DESIGNATION

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DEDICATION

For my mother.
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ABSTRACT

AN EXAMINATION OF CURRENT AND PAST RECOGNIZED ASCA MODEL PROGRAM (RAMP) RECIPIENTS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH PURSUING THE Re-RAMP DESIGNATION

Amanda R. Fitzgerald
Suzanne G. Fegley

To highlight exemplary school counseling programs, in 2003, the American School Counselor Association developed the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) as an acknowledgement for those schools that have implemented a comprehensive school counseling program based on the ASCA National Model (American School Counselor Association, 2016b). Since the inception of the RAMP program, 668 schools have earned the RAMP designation. Of those, 189 have current RAMP status and 469 have had RAMP status at some point but have let it lapse.

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that contributed to a school’s decision to continue or discontinue the pursuit of subsequent RAMP designations. This mixed-methods study surveyed 238 schools of various levels (e.g., elementary, middle and high school) located in 36 states. Following the analysis of the questionnaire data, six in-depth interviews were conducted. Two of the interviews were with schools that had earned multiple-consecutive RAMP designations, two were with schools that earned multiple RAMP designations in non-consecutive years, and two were with lapsed RAMP schools.
The findings of this study indicate that current RAMP schools and lapsed RAMP schools that did not have significant turnover within the counseling department from the time of their original RAMP designation, report to be currently implementing comprehensive school counseling programs regardless of their current RAMP status. Additionally, schools that were unwilling to pursue subsequent Re-RAMP designations were likely to cite multiple barriers or challenges that include: time, a lack of support or understanding from school administrators and staffing turnover. Finally, the results indicate that schools are more willing to pursue the Re-RAMP designation if they have a variety of supports in place and perceive the benefits of the designation to be valuable.

Implications of these findings for the association’s management, improvement and support of the Recognized ASCA Model Program are discussed. Further areas for research regarding the various components of comprehensive school counseling programs are suggested.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the American School Counselor Association (2012a), in an effort to standardize the profession, developed *The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs*. The framework was a necessary development as school counselor scholars had identified an inconsistency in the programs and services school counselors provided in addition to the lack of methods to measure school counselor effectiveness. The model provides a philosophy, serves as an implementation guide, and has given the field a tool to establish professional legitimacy (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006; Hatch, 2008; Gysbers, 2010).

The American School Counselor Association (2012b) defines the modern day role of the school counselor to be:

Professionals that are certified/licensed educators with a minimum of a master’s degree in school counseling, making them uniquely qualified to address all students’ academic, career and social/emotional development needs by designing, implementing, evaluating and enhancing a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes and enhances student success. (para 1)

Despite the definition being formally defined by the professional trade association, confusion still exists surrounding what exactly the school counselor does (Chandler, Burnahm & Dahir, 2008; Cinotti, 2014).

To combat the ongoing confusion and to further highlight the appropriate role of the school counselor, in 2003, the American School Counselor Association developed the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) as an acknowledgement for those schools that have implemented a developmentally appropriate, comprehensive school counseling program.
program based on the ASCA National Model (American School Counselor Association, 2016b).

Schools interested in applying for RAMP status must have an academic year of school counseling data before completing the program components (American School Counselor Association, 2012a, p. 147). The program requires school counselors to follow a rubric to complete an electronic portfolio explaining, in detail, how their program meets the criteria of a comprehensive school counseling program. They must outline the school counseling program’s vision, mission, and the role of a school counseling advisory committee, report on a detailed school counseling calendar, have a principal-counselor management agreement in place and collect outcome data from small group and whole class interventions and classroom guidance (American School Counselor Association, 2016). Additionally, the goals of the school counseling program must align closely with the school’s improvement goals. For example, if the school’s improvement goals address absenteeism and improved math scores, the school’s counseling program would address those goals as well.

According to the program’s founder and director, Jill Cook, approximately 125 RAMP applications are submitted each year to the American School Counselor Association (personal communication, January 21, 2016). Each RAMP application is reviewed by 3 RAMP reviewers. The RAMP review committee is comprised of school counselors that have worked in RAMP schools, college professors and district supervisors. The committee members participate in regular trainings provided by the American School Counselor Association and are, therefore, highly qualified to review and evaluate the submissions (J. Cook, personal communication, January 21, 2016).
Approximately 50 percent of applicants receive RAMP recognition on their first attempt (J. Cook, personal communication, January 21, 2016). Those schools close to the passing threshold get an opportunity to resubmit their application eight weeks later after making necessary updates. The resubmission acceptance rate is approximately 85 percent (J. Cook, personal communication, January 21, 2016). Prior to 2014, RAMP status would last for three years, at which time a school was required to start the process again. In 2014, the RAMP designation was extended and now lasts for five years (American School Counselor Association, 2016b). Since the first RAMP designations were made in 2004, over 600 schools in more than 40 states have achieved the RAMP designation (J. Cook, personal communication, January 21, 2016).

The purpose of this study is to examine the similarities and differences that may exist in both current and past RAMP schools. Specifically, I explored the factors that contribute to a school’s decision to discontinue the pursuit of subsequent RAMP designations. Identifying the key components that the former and present RAMP schools share may help provide examples of possible strategies to enable school counselors to implement developmentally appropriate, comprehensive school counseling programs elsewhere. Identifying the reasons that prohibit schools from seeking the Re-RAMP designation may shine a light on areas that have become unnecessarily burdensome or other problematic areas of the program.

**Background and Context**

Two years ago I completed a pilot study (Fitzgerald, 2016) examining the perceived challenges, supports and benefits of the RAMP process for one middle school
that had earned consecutive RAMP designations in 2012 and 2015. The findings showed that this particular middle school had perceived strong support from its school community and systemic support from the school district in terms of specialized professional development opportunities and regularly scheduled RAMP support work sessions. Additionally, the building principal was instrumental in encouraging the department to seek out the second RAMP designation and the school board was also aware of the accomplishment. The findings also show many perceived challenges in the process, including the amount of time invested in completing the lengthy application and the subjectivity of the scoring. However, using the process to reflect on their practice and display their school counseling program as exemplary was perceived as a great benefit to keep this department invested in the RAMP program.

The findings of this pilot study motivated me to develop a new study to explore the characteristics of schools that continue to seek the RAMP designation and those that do not. The present study was designed to identify themes as to why schools do not pursue subsequent RAMP designations. This information will be of great value to the American School Counselor Association. As of 2017, there were 668 schools that have achieved the RAMP designation since the 2004 inception of the program. Roughly, 469 of those schools have allowed the designation to lapse. While the attrition rate is quite high, the popularity of the program is growing as there are increasingly more applications submitted each year (J. Cook, personal communication, October 4, 2016). It is in the association’s best interest to understand why the attrition rate is so high and try to combat the problem as soon as possible in order to continue to grow this program.
**Positionality.** I serve as the director of public policy for the American School Counselor Association. The American School Counselor Association (2016a), founded in 1952, is a voluntary, non-profit, membership organization. The members consist of practicing school counselors working in a K-12 setting, graduate students studying school counseling, professors teaching school counseling courses and retired school counselors. As of October 2016, the American School Counselor Association had a membership of more than 30,000 people (American School Counselor Association, 2016a).

In my role, I serve as an association liaison to the federal agencies (e.g., United States Department of Education, Department of Justice, Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Agency, etc.), the United States Congress, and numerous organizations (e.g., education stakeholder groups, non-profits and for-profit corporations). Additionally, I oversee and advocate for the association’s federal policy priorities. I do not have a role in the management of the association’s RAMP program nor the selection criteria by which schools are selected.

**Rationale and Significance**

In my role as the director of public policy for the American School Counselor Association, I am continually advocating for school counselors to collect data to illustrate how a comprehensive school counseling program can impact student outcomes and then present that data in meaningful ways. The RAMP designation recognizes school counseling programs that are doing just that. I oftentimes use RAMP schools as examples of how school counselors directly impact school improvement goals and assist classroom teachers with a myriad of issues that affect student outcomes.
Working with a large membership, it is important for the association to provide details around the successful practices of schools, and to perhaps provide tips that might be applicable in their own implementation attempts. As such, one of the American School Counselor Association’s goals has been to provide characteristics of effective school counseling teams or environments that will assist in the implementation of a data-driven school counseling program. Exploring the perceptions of the schools that have gone through the RAMP process could support this work. Understanding the reasons why schools that have already earned the designation but have chosen not to try again is of particular interest because the association may be in a position to address the concerns that influence schools’ decisions to pursue the RAMP designation. It is important to be able to know exactly what types of support are needed in the field to ultimately increase the number of schools with comprehensive school counseling programs.

As the director of public policy for the American School Counselor Association, my primary responsibility is to advocate for students to have access to school counseling services and for school counselors to perform the appropriate duties for which they are trained. The most effective messages I hear are stories from the field that incorporate data. It has been my experience that many people are unaware of exactly what a school counselor does. In various meetings I attend, people typically acknowledge the role a school counselor plays in the college admissions process (e.g., college exploration and selection, letter recommendations and financial aid information). However, misconceptions that I encounter include beliefs that the school counselor only works with a specific population of students (e.g., gifted, at risk, special education). Many people with whom I work cannot necessarily pinpoint what a school counselor might do day-to-
day. This is true for not only the general public and lawmakers, but also for other educators working in the same building as a school counselor. The profession has a long history (Gysbers, 2001/2010; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006; Cinotti, 2014), with some foggy role-definitions (Hoyt, 1955; Gysbers, 2010; Cinotti, 2014). Therefore, it is quite common to find in informal discussions that different principals may employ their school counselors to perform completely different tasks. This illustrates why the profession was in need of standardization, and why the creation of the ASCA National Model in 2003 was necessary to framing the profession (American School Counselor Association, 2012a).

The ASCA National Model (2012a) has helped me in my advocacy role as it has provided a standard framework for how a school counseling program should be implemented. The RAMP program has been extremely helpful because it packages unique school data in a way that demonstrates how student outcomes are affected by school counseling interventions. I have learned of school board meetings where school counseling positions were preserved in times of budget cuts because of the impact the data demonstrates. However, school counselors will find it very difficult to successfully implement a comprehensive school counseling program if their day is consumed with performing non-school-counseling activities that include “any activity or duty not related to the development, implementation or evaluation of the school counseling program” (American School Counselor Association, 2012a, p. 142). Common, but inappropriate, school counseling duties might include things such as providing long-term therapy to students, handling testing coordinator duties, providing special education services as
prescribed within an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and substitute teaching among other non-counselor tasks (American School Counselor Association, 2012a, p. 45). RAMP recognized school counseling programs are required to complete a use-of-time assessment to illustrate how much time they are spending on each activity. Further, counselors must be spending at least 80 percent of their time on direct and indirect student services (American School Counselor Association, 2012a, p. 43). Another component of the RAMP process is to establish an Annual Agreement with each of the school’s school counselors and their supervising administrator (American School Counselor Association, 2012a, p. 46). The Annual Agreement allows school counselors and their administrators to meet and agree upon school counseling priorities, program goals and implementation strategies (American School Counselor Association, 2012a, p. 46). This component is important as it provides school counselors the tools to advocate for themselves and identifies how to spend their time most effectively.

I have found there is limited research specific to RAMP schools. This could be a result of the relative newness of the program. And, the research that does exist is linked to student academic outcomes (Ward, 2009) as opposed to the actual RAMP process. Ward’s (2009) dissertation examined the attendance rates and reading scores of elementary schools and found schools that had attained RAMP status had significantly higher attendance rates and reading scores when compared with the state averages. While the results showed RAMP schools may positively affect student outcomes, there is no research looking at barriers preventing more schools from becoming RAMP recognized. Since my work at the American School Counselor Association involves advocating for school counseling services, and the RAMP program provides me a vetted cohort of
schools doing quality work, it would benefit the school counseling profession and students to increase the number of schools in that cohort as much as possible. It would be ideal if I could locate a RAMP school in every single congressional district to highlight to lawmakers. This would be helpful because RAMP schools provide data to demonstrate the impact the school counseling program has on student outcomes. It would be more meaningful for a lawmaker to hear about an exemplary program in his/her district as opposed to only being able to share national statistics. Additionally, increasing the number of RAMP schools to represent various populations (e.g., urban, suburban, affluent, economically disadvantaged) would better situate the association to provide trainings, professional development, and lessons learned to all of the school counselors and schools across the country.

The present study was designed to learn what factors may be helpful to school districts that are working on improving their school counseling programs. I have used data compiled from RAMP reports to demonstrate how school counselors make a difference in school improvement goals. One of the objectives of this study was to identify factors that can potentially increase the number of schools that are able to implement a comprehensive school counseling program and ultimately achieve and maintain RAMP status. Additionally, the findings of this study will be helpful in my advocacy work with other stakeholder groups (e.g., the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, AASA: The School Superintendents Association and others) as well as lawmakers that are responsible for appropriating funds for education.
While this study’s findings will personally benefit my work at the American School Counselor Association, it may also have an impact on the school counseling profession and, most importantly, on students. The intended end result is not merely to increase the number of RAMP recognized schools. Ultimately, the goal is to increase the number of comprehensive school counseling programs around the country to ensure there is one in every single school. RAMP is simply the label that identifies the school that has an exemplary school counseling program. The association can serve as the ambassador to increase the number of quality school counseling programs that exist and, moreover, provide much needed school counseling services to the nation’s students.

Research Questions

There are three research questions for this study. The first question is, “What similarities and differences exist between schools that decided to pursue a subsequent RAMP designation(s) and those that did not?” The study will examine schools that have a current RAMP designation and those that have a lapsed designation. The study explores if lapsed schools are still implementing a comprehensive school counseling program regardless of pursuing a subsequent designation or not.

The second research question is, “What factors contribute to a school’s willingness to pursue a Re-RAMP designation?” And, the third research question is, “What factors contribute to a school’s unwillingness to pursue a Re-RAMP designation?” The purpose of research questions two and three were to focus the research on how schools perceive the RAMP process. The variety of reasons contributing to a school’s willingness or unwillingness to pursue a subsequent RAMP designation could inform the
American School Counselor Association how to improve the process. Specifically, these two questions were designed to learn what supports enable schools to successfully apply for the RAMP designation, the perceived benefits of the designation and the barriers that make the RAMP process more difficult.

While there are many possible ways to study the RAMP and Re-RAMP designation, this study will focus on those schools that have had at least one RAMP designation and then had to make a decision as to whether or not to pursue a subsequent designation.
Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study, illustrated below, outlines how the evolution of the profession has played a role in a professional shift for school counselors for the past 100 years, further defining the identity of the profession. As a need to standardize the profession, the ASCA National Model (American School Counselor Association, 2016b) defined comprehensive school counseling programs. When implemented, a comprehensive school counseling program demonstrating school counselor leadership, allows counselors to spend time on the educational duties they are uniquely trained and qualified to do and will, ultimately, have an impact on student outcomes. The RAMP designation is the recognition for schools that have fully implemented comprehensive school counseling programs. This study examined the similarities, differences and overlaps of those schools that have achieved one or more RAMP designations and those schools that have allowed the designation to lapse. Specifically, this study examined the similarities and differences in the perceived supports, challenges and benefits of going through the RAMP process and what is deemed significant when schools determine whether or not to pursue subsequent RAMP designations.
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Graphic
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature provides a rich context of how and why the profession began, the challenges the profession has faced and the present day role of the school counselor as an integral school leader. It is important to look at this through a historical context to understand why schools may find it challenging to implement a comprehensive school counseling program and how school counselors feel they are supported in their effort to do so.

Evolution of the School Counseling Profession

**Historical Context.** The profession of school counseling in the United States began more than 100 years ago out of a need for vocational guidance (Gysbers, 2001/2010; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006; Cinotti, 2014). Reed (1947) cites the first wave of interest in vocational guidance beginning in the early 1900s, and peaked as the United States began involvement in World War I. At this time the workforce needs were evolving. According to Brewer (1942), the following conditions helped to “foster the need for skilled professionals to assist people in finding the proper vocation: a growth of technology, the need for vocational education by business and industry, and the spread of modern forms of democracy.” (p. 139)

Frank Parsons is credited with being a founding father of vocational guidance (Davis, 1969, Gysbers, 2010). Parsons opened the Vocation Bureau of Boston in 1908. His subsequent report issued later that year, used the term vocational guidance for the first time (Davis, 1969). He was instrumental in assisting young people to make the transition from school to work and emphasized that there was a scientific approach to
choosing an occupation (Gysbers, 2010). While the emphasis was very much on vocational counseling, by the 1920s schools had also been focusing on issues that were more personal in nature including mental health, personal adjustment and measurable aspects of students (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006).

By 1952 a group of counselors that were members of the National Vocational Guidance Association determined there was a need for a professional organization for those counselors working in a K-12 school setting. Thus, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) was founded in 1952 as an independently operating branch of the National Vocational Guidance Association (Gysbers, 2010). Subsequently, the American School Counselor Association began publishing a journal, *The School Counselor*, in 1955 (Gysbers, 2001, 2010; Gysbers & Henderson, 2006).

The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 was a turning point for the profession as it was the first federal initiative designed to impact education. The priority of the program was to encourage and finance more students to study science and technology to give Americans a competitive edge in the Space Race (Gysbers, 2010). A secondary priority was a significant federal investment to prepare individuals to be counselors in secondary schools to identify students, regardless of financial circumstances, who could excel in those subjects and pursue college studies (Gysbers, 2010).

According to Froehlich (1948), before the enactment of NDEA, a survey of the 1945-1946 school year showed that of the more than 24,000 secondary schools in the United States, there were 8,299 persons with the title counselor or guidance officer. Approximately 16.4 percent of schools had a school counselor. The profession has grown
considerably since that time. Most recently, the US Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2014) reported that there were more than 103,000 school counselors in the 2012-2013 school year serving nearly 50 million students in elementary, middle and secondary public schools. On average, in 2013-2014 academic year, a public school counselor had a caseload of 491 students. While it is helpful that the federal government captures these numbers, it does not tell the story about staffing inequities in specific settings (e.g., rural or urban vs. suburban).

*The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* was first authored in 2003 (American School Counselor Association, 2012). The framework sought to standardize the role of the school counselor and provide a framework for a developmentally appropriate, comprehensive school counseling program for grades kindergarten through 12 (Gysbers & Henderson, 2006; Hatch, 2008; Gysbers, 2010). While the profession of school counseling goes back nearly a century and has a foundation in vocational counseling, it has continued to evolve to align with other aspects of education reform, notably accountability and student achievement (Gysbers, 2010). Thus, it is important to understand the historical changes in the profession and the relatively recent efforts to standardize the role of the school counselor. The goal of this study was to determine what factors play a role in encouraging or discouraging a school to implement a comprehensive school counseling program and whether or not these factors influence the decision to apply for subsequent RAMP designations.

**Role of the School Counselor.** School counselors, guidance counselors and guidance teachers have had a role in schools for a century. Many times the duties of the position have been left up to the immediate supervisor or principal to define. Hoyt (1955)
analyzed the job of the school counselor and determined that, on average, the school counselor would spend more than 55 percent of his or her time in counseling and group activities with students. The other time was spent working with teachers, conducting local research and performing clerical tasks. Based on his assessment, Hoyt concludes that a school counselor should have no more than 400 pupils in his or her caseload. Literature going back to 1957 determined that the school counselor is an educator with specialized training at the M.A. level and beyond. And the typical school counselor was concerned primarily with the normal growth needs of students, focusing more on personality development than problem crises (Gysbers, 2010).

The 3rd edition of the ASCA National Model (2012a) now recommends that school counselors devote 80 percent of their time to student services, both in-person interactions (direct) and services on behalf of students that require interactions with other stakeholders (indirect). The remaining 20 percent is dedicated to program management and school support services such as school counseling program foundation, management and accountability tasks. A small portion of that 20 percent should also be dedicated to the fair share duties required of all staff (e.g., bus duty, hall duty, lunchroom duty). The American School Counselor Association (2012b) defines the modern day role as professionals that are certified/licensed educators with a minimum of a master’s degree in school counseling, making them uniquely qualified to address all students’ academic, career and social/emotional development needs by designing, implementing, evaluating and enhancing a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes and enhances student success. (para 1)

Chandler, Burnahm and Dahir (2008) conducted a study of more than 1,200 school counselors in Alabama to determine the amount of time they spent on counseling vs. non-counseling duties. Their findings varied by grade level. Elementary counselors
reported direct services and test coordination most frequently, while middle school counselors reported meeting frequently with system-level coordinators, and providing direct services and professional development opportunities via conferences and workshops. High school counselors included scheduling, individual student planning, record keeping, and master schedule development. Their study suggests, however, that counselors were often unclear as to what might qualify as a “non-counseling” duty. Despite 88.9 percent of Chandler et al.’s participants self-reporting that they were implementing a comprehensive program, they were also reporting high levels of involvement in the following non-counseling areas: coordination of the statewide testing, record keeping, and serving as the building registrar. Even though this study only focuses on counselors in Alabama, it highlights the tension between performing appropriate counseling-related tasks and non-counseling related tasks that are oftentimes assigned to school counselors.

Astromovich, Hoskins, Gutierrez and Bartlett (2013) surveyed a group of more than 100 master’s-level graduate students (preservice school counselors) at a large southwestern university surveying them specifically about the role they felt that school counselors needed the most unique skillset to perform and the least unique skillset. The master’s-level students overwhelmingly reported that individual counseling (e.g., academic counseling, college/career planning and social/emotional counseling) required the most unique skillset. The least unique skillset was required for the other commonly assigned support duties including: hall duty, assisting with principal’s office duties, reviewing and changing students’ schedules and substitute teaching for absent teachers. Astramovich et al. (2013) concluded that school counselors perceived that they are
trained to provide direct counseling services to students but are oftentimes assigned supporting roles that they are overqualified to perform. This study utilized a survey based on the most recent edition of the ASCA National Model and therefore it can be concluded that these students are likely being trained in a graduate program that aligns with the American School Counselor Association’s role definition.

Beesley and Frey (2006) surveyed over 300 principals representing all levels (elementary, middle and high schools). The survey sought to measure principal satisfaction with various components of school counseling services and sought to identify the principals’ opinions of the appropriate role of the school counselor and suggestions for improvement. The results show that principals are generally satisfied with the school counseling services in their building, more so for those in an elementary setting. Further, the findings show that principals had suggestions for improvement in specific areas including accountability. An important finding to note is that only 17 percent of the principals surveyed had any graduate coursework on practices to utilize school counseling services or education on the role of the school counselor. This could mean that, many times, it is up to school counselors to self-advocate and educate the administrators in the building about the appropriate role of the school counselor and the benefits of implementing a comprehensive school counseling program.

The aforementioned studies analyze the role of the school counselors from the graduate student’s perspective, the practicing school counselor’s perspective and the principal’s perspective. The findings of these studies provide insight into two issues. First, school counselors are being trained to specifically provide direct services to students. Based on the findings of Astramovich et al. (2013), preservice school
counselors feel strongly that they are uniquely qualified for providing direct services and can clearly identify non-counseling duties that are oftentimes assigned. This relates to my research as schools that have implemented a comprehensive school counseling program are very clear as to what constitutes appropriate counseling duties.

Second, there are distinct differences when schools have supportive leadership in place. A principal with a good understanding of the school counselor and one who utilizes the department appropriately provides school counselors the autonomy to implement a comprehensive school counseling program. Chandler et al. (2008) reports a disconnect between school counselors in the field in terms of recognizing counseling vs. non-counseling tasks. While the preservice counselors report daily assigned duties as inappropriate or non-counseling, the practitioners report them as direct services to students or appropriate counseling duties and occurring at a high rate. If these studies can conclude that preservice professionals and in-service professionals are unclear about appropriate roles of a school counselor, it may be reflective of other’s views on the profession as well, including administrators, teachers, students and parents.

The research suggests that role ambiguity is prevalent. Beesley and Frey (2006) assert that many principals do not receive formal training on the appropriate role of the school counselor. Thus, it is imperative that school counselors receive adequate education and training in their graduate programs. Moreover, school counseling graduate students need to enter the workforce with the confidence to ensure that they are able to enact the appropriate role once employed because the other school counselor professionals and/or administrators in the building may have an erroneous or outdated sense of what the appropriate role should be.
School Counselor Identity. Role confusion and the school counselor identity crisis goes as far back as the beginning of the profession. Gysbers (2010) reports that in the early 1950s roles and titles were often confused. Surveys showed that it was not uncommon for school professionals without the title of counselor to provide school guidance services. This group included teachers, advisers, deans and even superintendents of public schools.

Cinotti (2014) claims there is still ambiguity about the role of the school counselor. There are two competing identities: educator vs counselor. This ambiguity is perpetuated by scholars within the school counseling field that are training preservice school counselors, thereby creating a profession that is confused. School counselors may be taught that their primary role is that of counselor and once they gain experience in a K-12 setting, the expectation is one that focuses primarily on education processes and outcomes. The educator identity couches the school counselor as a trained educator who works with students to address the barriers to learning to maximize student success (Cinotti, 2014). The emphasis is always on learning and academic outcomes. Conversely, the counselor identity focuses more on the mental health and well-being of the student and provides a more therapeutic role in the school building. Cinotti acknowledges that identity confusion within the field of school counseling often exacerbates confusion regarding the school counselor’s role, assigned duties and expectations among building principals.

Dahir (2009) claims that the future of school counseling will continue to evolve with other education reform efforts, and the profession should adapt as necessary: “Twenty-first-century school counselors are social justice advocates who ensure that
academic, career, and interpersonal success is woven into the fabric of education for every student” (p. 4). Similar to Cinotti (2014), it is my opinion since school counselors work in a school setting they should be viewed as educators and, as such, have responsibility for having an impact on students’ academic outcomes. This is not to mean that the student’s mental health should be ignored or neglected. Certainly, addressing the social/emotional well-being of all students is an integral piece to ensuring they are in school and ready to learn. The school counselor can address various issues and provide students with the tools to be productive in the classroom and, in most cases, more intensive therapeutic services should be offered outside of the academic school hours by a clinically trained professional.

The research suggests that the profession has had ongoing confusion concerning the role and identity of the school counselor (Hoyt, 1955; Gysbers, 2010; Cinotti, 2014). Confusion about what the school counselors ought to be doing likely translates into confusion as to what resources and training might be perceived as necessary to the practitioner. Further, an administrator may not be aware of what an exemplary program can do in terms of school improvement and thus, may then be more apt to assign the counseling department more non-counseling roles and responsibilities.

**Education Reform.** Since the NDEA first recognized the importance of the role of the school counselor in 1958, other federal education legislation has also addressed the profession. Sabens and Zyromski (2009) discuss how the role of the school counselor fits into current law\(^1\), the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001. Titles I-V and VII of No Child

\(^1\) New federal legislation, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA,) was signed into law in December 2015 but it will not fully take effect until the 2018-2019 school year.
Left Behind have implications for school counselors and school counseling services, primarily listed as an allowable use of grant funds.

Namely, the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling program can be found in Title IV. This program is important because it not only provided dedicated funding for schools to establish or expand school counseling programs, but it is the first time in federal law where the importance of elementary school counselors is recognized. While the NDEA focused on the role of college and career counseling in the secondary schools, the provision in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) recognized that the work of elementary school counselors in the younger grades fosters an environment of prevention and provides early intervention services for struggling students. It is also important to recognize the historical context of when each took place. The NDEA was enacted in the midst of the Cold War and, more accurately, the Sputnik Era, and thus its impetus was to help America keep pace and surpass their Soviet counterparts in science and technology (Gysbers, 2010). The NCLB, which was signed into law two years after the tragedy at Columbine and months after 9/11, underscored the need for student mental health services in American schools (Gysbers, 2010).

While the most recent federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), will not fully take effect until the 2018-2019 school year, it will address the unique skillsets of the school counselor. The new law provides multiple flexible funding possibilities for local education agencies to leverage school counseling services including academic counseling (including college and career planning), social/emotional development and mental and physical health services. Additionally, states will now be required to report on one non-academic indicator of school performance or measure (e.g.,
chronic absenteeism or school climate) annually as they complete individual state plans. While state plans are under review and just being approved at the time of this paper, there is discussion of utilizing this indicator to show the current school counselor staffing ratio or a social-emotional learning metric, or even college acceptance rates (ASCD, 2016). The addition of this new reporting requirement could have an impact on how states utilize and measure school counseling services.

School counselors should be aware of the reform efforts and proactively fit themselves into these efforts as opposed to being unaware and reacting to unwanted mandates. The direction the federal policy points the profession in is important – especially when looking at the evolution of the profession and its role confusion. While the NDEA’s emphasis was on academics, and the NCLB’s direction identified school counselors as mental health supports in the school building, both initiatives were in response to larger events affecting American society. Time will tell how the Every Student Succeeds Act points the profession, but in the earliest stages of the new law it would appear it has appropriately blended the academic and mental health pieces and will allow states the flexibility to expand efforts in either or both directions.

**Comprehensive School Counseling Programs**

**School Counselor Leadership.** Young and Miller-Kneale (2013) argue the role of the school counselor should be seen as an educational leader in both the school building and the school district. School counselors at the building level exhibit horizontal leadership as they “lead change efforts within their current role to improve outcomes for all students” (p. 12). Additionally, school counselors should be working in tandem with
their administrators to analyze schoolwide needs affecting student achievement and school climate. Schools with comprehensive school counseling programs are then uniquely situated to provide counseling interventions to address the needs of individual students and school improvement goals all the while working with and serving as a leader among other school staff, students and parents. Young and Miller-Kneale (2013) also note the importance of vertical leadership of those school counseling professionals serving in a supervisory capacity in the building, district setting, or state level position. “Vertical leadership requires working collaboratively with stakeholders to secure the necessary resources and training for school counselors to implement and lead comprehensive school counseling programs” (p. 12). Therefore, the modern day school counselor should be someone eager to take on leadership responsibilities and be viewed as a leader rather than as a supporting cast member.

In 2015, Young and Bryan conducted multiple studies to validate a newly developed School Counselor Leadership Survey to create a way to measure leadership characteristics specific to the school counseling profession. The findings of the study determined five factors of leadership that are instrumental in the school counseling profession. These factors include, “interpersonal influence, systemic collaboration, resourceful problem solving, professional efficacy, and social justice advocacy” (p. 10). The School Counselor Leadership Survey provides a first step in standardizing, defining and measuring what it means to be a school counseling leader whether the counselor is the only school counselor in the building, is working as part of a team or is working in a supervisory capacity. This survey could increase the legitimacy and importance of the role of the school counselor with other education stakeholders. It could become a helpful
tool when advocating for the importance of comprehensive school counseling programs to administrators, school staff and parents. While local school counselor leadership is important within one’s own school and district, leadership must also be considered at the larger community, state and national levels.

Hatch (2008) outlines the importance of school counselor leadership within the organization, the institution and the political sphere. Hatch explains the necessity for any organization, including the professional association that governs the body of professionals, to strive for a leadership role on the state and national levels, amongst other education stakeholder groups. She credits the American School Counselor Association and the development of the ASCA National Model for providing a unified framework as to how school counseling programs should be implemented.

Hatch (2008) argues that the profession must have a leadership role within each institution or school. The language around a common framework and school counseling standards has become a language that other stakeholders are also now aware of. Principals, teachers and students purportedly have a better understanding of what school counselors do and the integral role they have in systemic change (Hatch, 2008). This role of the school counselor should no longer be viewed as a support role to faculty, staff and teachers, but rather as one of a school leader (Hatch, 2008).

Finally, school counselors need to increase their social capital and become leaders with a voice in the political decision-making in education reform efforts. Hatch (2008) concludes that school counselors should be at the table when local school board, state, and federal policy is being discussed and implemented. Creating a leadership voice at the organization, institution, and political levels decreases the role confusion for the
profession and will increase the knowledge, resources and support available for school counselors to implement appropriate programming.

Schools that are applying for the RAMP designation are required to embody horizontal leadership and, if-applicable, vertical leadership (Young & Miller-Kneale, 2013) and present details of their comprehensive school counseling program and data from various results reports to the district’s school board (J. Cook, personal communication, January 21, 2016). Since advocacy strategies such as these are built into the RAMP application process, broad participation can be seen as an effort to help propel the profession into various leadership roles.

**Professional Development.** Too many times schools provide widespread professional development opportunities for teachers but require all support staff to participate in these teacher-specific workshops or seminars as a way of optimizing trainings within the school. The lack of school counselor specific professional development opportunities speaks to a lack of uniformity and leadership in the profession. School counselors should be afforded unique professional development opportunities as opposed to being inappropriately teamed together with other school staff and personnel. Bardwell (2005) states that it is difficult to speak in general terms of most-needed professional development topics since needs may differ depending on level (elementary, middle or high), years of experience and prevalent issues unique to the school or area. Bardwell goes on to explain that common themes throughout quality professional development may include legal and ethical issues, strategies to prevent school violence and bullying, integrating technology, school counselor reform and general counseling skills.
Hatch (2001) states that many times school counselors may not have school counselor specific professional development provided from their own school or district. Those who rely on finding professional development opportunities on their own are oftentimes not afforded a budget and are expected to pay for conference attendance, workshops, and professional certifications out of their own pocket.

The limited research available on school counselor professional development suggests that school or district provided professional development opportunities need to be specialized and unique to school counseling. Adequate in-service trainings could be necessary to maintain RAMP status. If school counselors had more of a leadership voice in decision-making areas it would be clear that unique in-service opportunities are necessary to maximize the school’s school counseling services. Ultimately, rich professional development opportunities to ensure students have access to comprehensive school counseling services could have far-reaching benefits.

**School Counselors and Student Outcomes.** A study conducted by Militello, Carey, Dimmitt, Lee, and Schweid (2009) looked to identify the practices of school counselors as they relate to high rates of college acceptance. To investigate, Militello et al. interviewed a group of school counselors who worked in nationally recognized high schools that were defined as having social, cultural and economic barriers while also having higher than average college placement rates. While college placement rates may not be synonymous with academic achievement, it is still helpful to recognize this positive outcome. The findings showed common traits of school counselors and school counseling programs with higher than average college placement rates to include the following: effective program management practices, external partnerships that add
resources and social capital, perceived leadership positions within the school, effective college-focused interventions with low-income students, an established achievement-oriented school climate, parental involvement regarding the college admissions and financial aid process, effective use of school data, a role in implementation of inclusive school policies, and the ability to offload non-counseling duties.

Ward (2009) examined elementary schools that had nationally recognized exemplary school counseling programs and compared several achievement indicators to their respective state averages. Ward’s examination included 31 elementary schools from three states (Indiana, Georgia and North Carolina). The findings show that the elementary schools with exemplary school counseling programs have significantly higher achievement scores, significantly higher attendance rates and significantly higher 3rd grade reading scores overall, and specifically for low-income 3rd grade students when compared to the averages of their elementary school counterparts within the same state. The school demographics or neighborhood income levels were not reported. However, a cohort of 3rd grade students qualifying for free and reduced lunch was used in the data comparison (Ward, 2009).

The two studies show that, on average, schools that have exemplary school counseling programs also achieved higher on certain student benchmarks. RAMP schools are required to work towards three goals centered on student outcomes. These outcomes must also align with schoolwide goals based on data-informed needs. Because school improvement goals vary from school to school, the goals addressed in RAMP applications are also different. This study explored if past RAMP schools were still engaging in goal setting and detailing the impact on student outcomes regardless of
formally applying for the designation or if the practice has also ended. This information is pertinent to the study because the findings show that the school counseling program encountered a fundamental change since the initial RAMP designation regardless if a subsequent RAMP designation was deemed worth pursuing.

In conclusion, the literature outlines the evolution of the profession, the necessity for a more clearly defined role and the purpose of school counseling. Additionally, the literature discusses the need for school counselor specific professional development and the impact school counseling services have on student outcomes. The literature supports the importance of a more uniform profession and the development of the ASCA National Model (American School Counselor Association, 2016b). The ASCA National Model serves as a guide for school counselors to implement developmentally appropriate, comprehensive school counseling programs in K-12 school settings. The literature provides a framework for this study as the RAMP designation highlights those schools that have implemented a comprehensive school counseling program. In order for the school to earn the designation, it must employ school counselors that have been adequately trained and are performing the duties of a modern day school counselor as defined by the professional organization, the American School Counselor Association.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

To answer the proposed research questions, I employed a mixed-methods research design, collecting a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. According to Creswell (2014), “the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a more complete understanding of a research problem than either approach alone” (p. 4). Such is the case for this study, in which I was interested in learning preliminary information from both previous and current RAMP recipients and more in-depth information from some of those same participants. This research was conducted as an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell, 2014) as surveying the participants first, informed the subsequent interview selections and questions.

Specifically, I used information from participants’ responses to a questionnaire to explore the demographics, years of experience, current staffing structures, and perceived supports, challenges and benefits that made it possible for the school to pursue and attain their voluntary RAMP designation. The questionnaire results assisted me in finding themes and narrowing down the group of participants I interviewed to provide a clearer picture as to whether or not they were willing to pursue subsequent designations, and why.

According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), a mixed methods approach is suitable for this research as I intended to glean insights and information in the form of qualitative data to supplement the larger data set obtained from the survey. The insights from past and currently identified RAMP schools that have gone through this rigorous process has enabled me to understand some of the organizational conditions needed for such programs to be fostered and grown in other schools and those that enabled the
school counseling team to apply for the RAMP recognition. The knowledge gained in this study can inform the American School Counselor Association about some of the roadblocks preventing the RAMP program’s growth and how to refine the process to, ultimately, encourage more schools to maintain their RAMP status. Because I serve as a team member at the association, this research has a direct and practical connection to my work and the findings can provide the RAMP program administrators with interventions and possible solutions to implement swiftly in the near future. The questionnaire and interview protocol were presented and approved by my dissertation committee in April 2017. The study was then submitted and approved by the University of Pennsylvania’s Institutional Review Board, also in April 2017.

Since I conducted a sequential mixed methods study, the methods were conducted in two phases. The first phase included the administration of the questionnaire and analysis of the open-ended survey questions. The second phase consisted of the six in-depth telephone interviews and qualitative data analysis of those interviews.

**Phase 1 – Procedures**

**Participant Selection**

The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather information from a representative sample of school counselors who had gone through the RAMP process. The first RAMP recipients received their awards in 2004. At that time it was a 3-year designation. If a school received the recognition in 2004, the school would need to successfully reapply in 2007, again in 2010, etc., to remain as a RAMP designated school. The program extended the length of the RAMP designation to 5 years in 2015. Since the inception of the RAMP
program, 668 schools have earned the RAMP designation. Of those, 198 have current RAMP status and 470 have had RAMP status at some point but have let it lapse. Of the 198 current RAMP schools, 124 are in their first RAMP designation and 74 have had multiple RAMP designations. Of the 74 schools with multiple RAMP designations, 46 have successfully maintained continuous RAMP designations (for the purpose of this study, I labeled these “continuous RAMP” schools) and 28 have had a lapse in their designation at some point between originally earning the designation and the present time (I referred to these as gap-RAMP schools). RAMP schools (e.g., continuous, gap and lapsed) are located in 43 states and consist of traditional public, private, charter and alternative school settings. RAMP schools cover various grade levels including elementary, middle, and secondary, K-8 and K-12 settings.

**Selection Criteria.** My role at the American School Counselor Association allowed me access to the RAMP database. The information provided in the database is open to all staff members and available to the public upon request. This study explored why schools seek the Re-RAMP designation and why they let the RAMP designation lapse, from the school counselor’s perspective. Therefore, I excluded the 124 current, first-time, RAMP schools from this study and only focused on those that have been faced with the decision to apply for subsequent RAMP designations. I included all 544 remaining schools: 46 schools with a current, continuous, Re-RAMP designation, 28 schools with the gap-RAMP designation and the 470 schools that have lapsed. The 544 remaining schools are located in 36 states and span each of the grade levels.
Data Collection Procedure

In an effort to capture as much data as possible from the 544 schools located in 36 states, I first reached out to each of the schools to confirm the most appropriate school contact to receive the questionnaire. I learned that 37 schools no longer employed any school counselor or the counselor was unable to be identified on a school website or by calling the school. Additionally, 15 schools had closed since the last RAMP designation had been earned. Therefore, I eliminated 52 schools from my possible survey pool. Upon contacting the remaining schools and seeking permission, I disseminated the questionnaire to the remaining 490 schools. I administered an emailed, non-anonymous, questionnaire to compile initial data to inform the subsequent data collection. Based on the questionnaire responses and the themes uncovered, I developed and administered 6 telephone interviews in Phase 2 of the study. The interview participants and questions were dependent upon the data gathered in the initial questionnaire. Based on those questionnaire results, I selected two participants from each of the RAMP groups (continuous RAMP, gap-RAMP and lapsed RAMP).

Questionnaire. I developed an original questionnaire that was then disseminated to the 490 schools (See Appendix A). The questionnaire captured the respondent’s gender and ethnicity, school characteristics (e.g., location and size), how many years the respondent had been employed as a school counselor, how many years s/he had been employed at his/her current school, and current RAMP status. The questionnaire also included several questions regarding the respondent’s perceptions of going through the RAMP process. The breadth of the RAMP process questions were derived from the
results of the pilot study I completed in 2016 that explored one school counseling team’s perceptions of going through the RAMP process (Fitzgerald, 2016). The Likert-scale questions were developed to understand the supports, challenges and benefits that school counselors perceived as important when going through the RAMP process. Specifically, the questionnaire included six questions linked to school and district supports. An example of a question under this section is, “I received support from the principal or the administrative team when completing the RAMP or Re-RAMP process”. The questionnaire asked five questions regarding the challenges of completing the RAMP process. An example of a question under this section is, “The RAMP or Re-RAMP process took too much time”. There were nine questions regarding the perceived benefits of the RAMP process on the questionnaire. An example of a question that measured a perceived benefit is, “The RAMP or Re-RAMP process provided me valuable insight into the school’s counseling program”.

Before I conducted any interviews, I asked each participant to complete the questionnaire, created on Qualtrics, via email where they specified their name, years of experience as a school counselor, years at their current school, and staffing information regarding the time the school achieved their RAMP designation compared to the present time. Informed consent was included in the questionnaire. The Likert-scale questions were used to address respondents’ perceptions of going through the RAMP process and measured degrees of opinions by allowing participants to rank their perceptions in a manner that went beyond just two options such as yes/no (McLeod, 2008). The RAMP process questions also included an option of “Does Not Apply” as the school may have experienced staffing turnover and that made it very difficult for the participant to answer
some or all of the questions with accuracy. There was also an open-ended component to the questionnaire so that participants had the opportunity to share any other information that they felt was important but not covered in the close-ended questions. Most survey participants completed the questionnaire in 30 minutes or less. See Appendix A for a sample questionnaire.

Survey participants were given a month to complete the questionnaire and a reminder message went out three times to those who had not yet responded. In order to maximize participation, I offered those who completed the survey in its entirety the opportunity to be entered into a drawing for one of four $25 Amazon gift cards. The drawing took place after the noted deadline. I also contacted a school counseling contact at each of the schools prior to disseminating the online questionnaire by either email or phone to confirm the most appropriate contact at each school. I received a total of 238 completed surveys out of a possible 490 surveys disseminated resulting in a 48.6 percent response rate.

**Participants**

A total of 238 participants completed the survey questionnaire. Of the 238 completed questionnaires, 38 respondents were from continuous RAMP schools, 16 were from Gap-RAMP schools and 184 were from lapsed RAMP schools. The respondents were from various K-12 settings - 90 selected high schools, 54 in middle schools and 82 selected elementary schools. The remaining 12 respondents noted other age-ranges such as K-8, middle/high or “other”. One hundred forty-five respondents identified working in a suburban setting, 46 in an urban setting, and 42 in a rural setting. The remaining five respondents selected “other” or left the field blank. The respondents worked in 36
different states. One hundred and seventeen respondents answered the open-ended question of “Is there anything else you would like to share”. Respondents were also asked if they would be willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview, 101 respondents answered yes, they would be willing to participate in the interview.

Table 1. Demographics of Survey Respondents

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Phase 1 - Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). A series of steps were taken to explore the questionnaire data and the results of these steps are reported in Chapter 4.

First, I tabulated data to calculate the frequency and percent for all of the variables of interest including gender, ethnicity, school location, school level and RAMP type (see Table 1). Next, I conducted Cronbach’s Alpha statistical tests to assess the reliability of the Likert-scale questions in the supports, challenges and benefits categories from the survey questionnaire. I also conducted the Chi-square ($X^2$) test of independence to see if there were any statistical relationships among the demographic variables and the RAMP designation of the participant’s school. Finally, I conducted independent samples $t$-tests to see if there were any statistical relationships among the RAMP types and participants’ subscale scores for supports and benefits. A subscale for challenges was not created due to skewed distributions of participants’ responses to those questions.
Therefore, the frequencies and percentages of the Likert-scale questions under the “challenges” section will be reported and discussed.

**Open-ended Survey Responses.** The survey included one open-ended survey question, “Is there more you would like to share about the process?” One hundred seventeen survey participants entered some comment in the textbox. I exported the open-text items and pasted the text into a Word document with numbered lines. I used a qualitative coding method to analyze the open-ended survey questions. I started with an open-coding method (Emerson et al., 2011) and read each line looking for themes. The following key areas emerged in my first steps of data analysis:

- Time it took to complete the RAMP process
- Lack of benefits associated with the designation
- Lack of teamwork to complete the process
- Lack of support or understanding of the RAMP process
- Subjective reviewing system

I began the analysis with the broad themes and concluded with a narrower focus on the data. Because 77 percent of the survey participants were lapsed RAMP, it could be assumed that they would be more critical of the program since they chose not to reapply or may even have been rejected on their last attempt. Therefore, the themes from the open-ended survey responses tended to be more focused on challenges of completing the RAMP process and areas in which the RAMP process could be improved upon.

In summary, the questionnaire from Phase 1 was necessary to collect school demographic information and programmatic information to understand the state of the school
counseling program during the first RAMP submission and the present time. Upon examining various factors (e.g., staffing turnover, administrator turnover, staffing ratios) and the open-ended questions, I compiled the data to select participants from six schools to interview to obtain a more in-depth look at their perceptions of the value of the RAMP designation and the RAMP process. The data from the questionnaires aided in selecting the interview participants and participants’ responses to the open-ended questions aided in the refinement of the interview questions.

**Phase 2 – Procedures**

**Participants**

Six survey respondents participated in the interview phase (Phase 2) of the present study. Each selected interviewee had been a school counselor at a RAMP school during the time of the most recent RAMP submission. Also, each interviewee was part of the team when the decision was made to pursue or not to pursue a subsequent RAMP recognition.

**Interview Selection.** The survey data served as a guide to select interview participants. As I examined the questionnaire responses to select interview participants, I first eliminated the respondents who noted they would not be willing to be interviewed. Next, I eliminated any respondents who currently, or had previously, served on the association’s board of directors. I removed past and present board members as possible interview participants because they may be perceived to have more inside working knowledge of the association and the association’s programs. I intentionally wanted participants who were part of the general membership as opposed to the decision makers.
and association leaders. In addition, many of the returned questionnaires from lapsed RAMP schools showed significant staffing turnover. Many of the respondents of these schools were unfamiliar with the RAMP process and were unable to answer many questions. Therefore, it was determined that these respondents would not be ideal interview participants. In addition, because nearly half of all respondents contributed to the open-ended question, I determined these particular educators had more to share about the RAMP program that went beyond the questions on the survey. Hence, the final selection criteria for the interviewees was based on the following:

1) RAMP classification (continuous, gap and lapsed)
2) School level (elementary, middle and high)
3) Geographic location (suburban, urban and rural) and
4) Response to the open-ended portion of the survey (responded, did not respond).

I was careful to select participants who had been through the RAMP process once, multiple times and those new to a school previously awarded RAMP and had therefore inherited their RAMP or expired RAMP status. Subsequently, two interview participants are from lapsed RAMP schools, two are from gap-RAMP schools and two are from continuous RAMP schools. Additionally, two are elementary school counselors, two are middle school counselors and two are high schools. Each of the six interviewees work in different states and all provided insightful comments in the open-ended section of the questionnaire. Below is a description of the six interviewee participants.
**Continuous 1 (C1).** C1 is an interview I conducted with the school counselor in a rural Georgia elementary school. She has been a school counselor for 14 years and has been at this school for the entirety of her career. She is the only school counselor employed at the school, resulting in a caseload of 650 students. C1 has earned the RAMP designation continuously in 2009, 2012 and 2015.

**Continuous 2 (C2).** C2 is an interview I conducted with a school counselor in a suburban Colorado high school. She has been a school counselor for 18 years and has been at this school for the entirety of her career. The school has approximately 2,650 students and eight school counselors. The counselor I spoke with at C2 has a caseload of approximately 300 students. C2 has earned the RAMP designation continuously in 2007, 2010, 2013 and 2016.

**Gap 1 (G1).** G1 is an interview I conducted with a school counselor in a suburban Oklahoma elementary school. She has been a school counselor for 15 years and at her current school for 14 years. She is the only school counselor employed at the school resulting in a caseload of approximately 400 students. G1 earned the RAMP designation in 2009, 2012 and 2016, meaning 2015 was a gap year where the designation had lapsed until the 2016 resubmission.

**Gap 2 (G2).** G2 is an interview I conducted with a school counselor in a suburban North Carolina middle school. She has been a school counselor for eight years and at her current school for four years. The school has approximately 1,350 students and employs four school counselors. The caseload is not evenly distributed as each school counselor is responsible for an entire grade. Therefore, the counselor I spoke with had a caseload of
500 students. G2 earned the RAMP designation in 2009, 2012 and 2016, meaning 2015 was a gap year where the designation lapsed until the 2016 resubmission.

**Lapsed 1 (L1).** L1 is an interview I conducted with a school counselor in a suburban Nevada middle school. She has been a school counselor for 22 years and employed at her current school for 10 years. At the time of the survey she was one of two school counselors and had a caseload of approximately 330 students. At the time of the interview, she was the only school counselor employed with a caseload of 660 students and the school was not actively trying to fill the vacancy due to budget constraints. L1 earned the RAMP designation in 2014 and opted not to resubmit an application in 2017.

**Lapsed 2 (L2).** L2 is an interview I conducted with a school counselor at an urban Michigan high school career center. She has been a school counselor for eight years and has been at this school for the entirety of her career. The school has a student population of approximately 850 students and employs two school counselors. Each school counselor has a caseload of approximately 425 students. L2 earned the RAMP designation in 2013 and the school unsuccessfully resubmitted in 2016 and has not yet attempted again since then.

Table 2. *Characteristics of Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Type of RAMP</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Years in Profession</th>
<th>Years at School</th>
<th>Counselor/Student Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>GA</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1:650</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), interviews were an appropriate method for this research because I wanted to identify common themes about a specific process. I conducted six telephone interviews that lasted approximately 30 minutes, using a semi-structured format to allow me the flexibility to ask different follow-up questions with each of the participants depending on the individual responses (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). With permission from the participants, I audio recorded each interview and sent the audio recording to a transcription service, Rev. Rev anonymized the transcriptions and emailed each transcript to me as a Word document. The transcriptions were saved on a password protected server and used for analytic coding purposes. The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix B. The following questions were a sample of what I used in the interviews:

- What is your experience with the RAMP process?
- Can you provide me examples as to how your school or district provides support to school counselors going through the RAMP process?

- What, if any, are the district’s expectations for the school counseling departments in each of the schools?

- Who are the various stakeholders that might influence your role as a school counselor the most (e.g., administrators, parents, student populations, other faculty and/or community leaders)?

- Was it important to any of the stakeholders, namely administrators, teachers, or students that your school counseling program is, or was, nationally recognized?

- Are their components of the RAMP process that can be made easier or eliminated altogether?

**Research journals.** Ravitch and Carl (2015) assert that a research journal is an integral piece in the research process. Throughout this study I kept an electronic journal to help organize my thinking, allowing me a time to brainstorm new ideas and address any issues I came across during the research process. I created an entry approximately once a month.

**Memos.** I wrote a Researcher Identity/Positionality Memo during the study as recommended by Ravitch and Carl (2015). It was important to revisit this memo throughout the study to help me address the biases and assumptions I had coming into the research given my role at the association and my experiences with the RAMP program as
an association employee and not as a school counselor. Additionally, Ravitch and Carl (2015) strongly suggest the creation of a fieldwork and data collection memo as a way to check-in with the research design and to note any specific questions about the research process. I also drafted multiple coding and analytic memos following each interview (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Each interview presented a new perspective and rich data. Upon completing an interview I created a unique field work/data collection memo. Afterwards, I listened to the audio recording of each interview and added to each of the memos, respectively, any themes or statements that really stood out to me. Finally, I used the transcriptions as a structured way to code and organize the themes and to verify the initial thoughts I had while authoring the memos.

**Document reviews.** My position at the American School Counselor Association allows me access to documents and resources that exist independently of this research. The ASCA office and server hosts every RAMP application that has been submitted. While the information is not located on a public website, it is not considered confidential and could be made available to members and researchers upon request. I did reference a couple of the interviewees’ original RAMP submissions to look closer into the schools’ staffing information at the time of their original RAMP designation, as well as a way to verify some of the answers stated on the questionnaire.

**Phase 2 - Data Analysis**

**Interviews.** First, I listened to each of the interviews and read through the notes I took during the interview, as recommended by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011). Next, I created an analytic memo based on my first impressions. The audio recordings were sent to Rev, a transcription service. Upon receiving the transcriptions, I listened to the
recording again to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. I highlighted words that immediately struck me as important. Once fully transcribed, I took an open-coding approach (Emerson et al., 2011) and read line-by-line looking for themes and ideas. I read and coded the transcripts at least twice; most of the transcripts were read three or more times. During the first round, I focused on any themes or ideas that I perceived as dominant, and then the subsequent reads allowed me to code on focused areas relating to my research question, as described by Ravitch and Carl (2015). I reflected on this initial process and noted my findings by creating an analytic memo (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). The following key areas emerged in my first steps of data analysis:

- Validation
- Accountability
- Recognition
- School leadership
- Time and effort
- Professional development and mentoring
- Subjective reviewing system

Finally, as suggested by Ravitch and Carl (2015), I started with very broad themes and concluded with a narrower, specific look at the data when creating a code set. After analyzing the initial data, I combined many key areas into overarching themes that contribute to a school’s willingness or unwillingness to pursue a Re-RAMP designation. The themes I have uncovered are perceived supports, challenges and benefits participants relate to going through the RAMP process.
Validity

**Researcher role positionality.** As mentioned, I serve as the director of public policy for the American School Counselor Association. I do not have a role in the management of the association’s RAMP program or the selection criteria for which schools are selected. While I cannot grant a program RAMP status, it is possible that I am perceived to have an influence in this process by virtue of working at my organization. This perceived power could be seen as a validity threat, specifically what Maxwell (2013) describes as “reactivity” (p. 124). This could create a relationship that may be somewhat unbalanced or I may be perceived to be in a place of authority over the school counselors. I addressed these concerns in my introductory email to all participating schools and reiterated my positionality on the phone prior to any of the interviews.

**Triangulation.** In order to maximize the depth of the analysis, I used a “variety of methods” in my data collection (Maxwell, 2013, p. 128). Triangulation is “commonly thought of as having different sources or methods challenge and/or confirm a point or set of interpretations” (Ravitch & Carl, 2015, p. 194). I examined data from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and archival data. The goal was for the data from these three sources to align and ultimately strengthen the findings.

**Participant validation.** Per the suggestion of Ravitch and Carl (2015), I conducted member-checks upon initial review of the interview notes and transcripts to ensure the data I collected was an accurate portrayal of the participants’ responses. These member-checks included a summary of some of the interviewees’ questionnaire data to allow the participants the space to interject if they feel they had been misrepresented. It
also provided participants an opportunity to clarify any statements and provide further explanation to expand upon any interview questions.

**Memos.** To ensure continuous reflecting on my research and that I keep the focus of my research question at the center, I created memos to assist with validity. Ravitch and Carl (2015) suggest the use of a Validity Research Design Memo. I created versions of this memo throughout the research process to keep my validity strategies at the forefront to ensure that my findings were meaningful.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of chapter 3 was to describe the methods I used to examine this study’s research questions. As discussed, I collected survey data via a non-anonymous questionnaire to learn more about the schools that are classified as continuous RAMP, gap-RAMP and lapsed designation. The survey data served as a baseline to select interview participants. Subsequently, I collected qualitative data using semi-structured interviews to have survey participants expound upon their individual experiences going through the RAMP process and to learn their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the program. This approach allowed me to analyze quantitative and qualitative data as a check on one another and to assess whether the two methods support a single conclusion (Maxwell, 2013).

In Chapter 4, I present the results of this study. I then discuss the study’s findings and implications for future research and implications for the professional association in Chapter 5.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Chapter Overview

This chapter includes a report of the quantitative data analysis results and the qualitative thematic analysis. The chapter is organized in two sections. In the first section, I report the findings from the quantitative data collected during Phase 1. In the second section, I report findings from the qualitative thematic analysis conducted during Phase 2.

Results from the Phase 1 Quantitative Analyses

Descriptive Statistics

I conducted Cronbach’s Alpha statistical tests to assess the reliability of the Likert-scale questions in the supports, challenges and benefits categories from the questionnaire. The supports subscale consisted of 6 items (\(\alpha = .754\)), and the benefits subscale consisted of 9 items (\(\alpha = .925\)). As mentioned, the challenges subscale did not have enough variability to merit a new scale. Instead the frequencies of the challenge variables are denoted below in Table 3.

Table 3. Challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Frequency</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RAMP was overwhelming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>64.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree/Disagree</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>80.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>81.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did Not Answer/Does</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RAMP took too much time</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>61.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree/Disagree</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>80.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>80.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did Not Answer/Does</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I was not adequately prepared</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree/Disagree</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>41.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>68.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>84.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did Not Answer/Does</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School/District advised against RAMP</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Agree/Disagree</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>80.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did Not Answer/Does</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The frequencies show that a majority of survey respondents (64 percent) felt they were prepared to complete the RAMP process. This may suggest that school counselors have received adequate training in their graduate programs and/or professional development on how to implement comprehensive school counseling programs.

Approximately 20 percent of survey respondents felt they were not adequately prepared to apply for the RAMP designation, suggesting that there is still some work to be done in terms of ensuring school counseling graduate programs are aligned with the ASCA National Model and school counselors have access to professional development opportunities.

Only 7 percent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were advised not to complete the RAMP process. This may suggest that the remaining 93 percent of respondents worked in schools that were encouraging the RAMP designation, may have been indifferent to the RAMP designation or that the school counselors in these schools may have more autonomy to pursue their own program goals and do not require input from administrators or supervisors.
Approximately 50-60 percent of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the RAMP process was overwhelming, stressful and time-consuming, while fewer than 10 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. This could be problematic as the stress and time associated with completing the RAMP designation may be a deterrent for school counselors to pursue subsequent designations. Additionally, school counselors that have negative feelings associated with the RAMP process may share these feelings with colleagues to where the program designation is associated with a negative reputation that may prevent others from applying.

Overall, it is promising that over 50 percent of respondents felt prepared to pursue the RAMP designation and that only 7 percent of school counselors were advised against attempting the designation. However, school counselors reported that there are barriers like time and stress associated with the process.

**Demographic Differences**

Statistical analyses were conducted to examine relationships among participants’ demographic characteristics and their RAMP designation. Specifically, Chi square tests for independence were used to look at the relationship between level of school (elementary, middle or high school) and RAMP designation (i.e., current or lapsed), and type of school (i.e. rural, urban or suburban) and RAMP designation. Independent sample t-tests were used to look at differences in participants’ years as a school counselor and number of years in the current school as a function of their school’s RAMP designation. There were no statistically significant relationships among participants’ demographic characteristics and their school’s RAMP designation.
Differences in Supports and Benefits by Ramp Designation

I conducted an independent samples \( t \)-test to see if there was a statistically significant difference in survey participants’ perceptions of supports as a function of whether they were in a school with a current or lapsed RAMP designation. There was a statistically significant difference in participants’ perceptions of support for those working in schools with a current RAMP designation (\( M=4.02, \ SD=.74 \)) and those from schools with a lapsed designation (\( M=3.63, \ SD=.90 \)); \( t(123)=2.198, p = 0.03 \). These results suggest that schools with a current RAMP designation are likely to report that there were more supports in place to complete the RAMP process compared to those schools with a lapsed designation. Further, Cohen’s effect size value (\( d = .47 \)) indicates a moderate practical significance.

An independent-samples \( t \)-test was also conducted to compare participants’ subscale scores for the measure of benefits for those working in schools that had a current RAMP designation and those working in schools with a lapsed designation. There was a statistically significant difference in participants’ perceptions of benefits for those working in current RAMP schools (\( M=1.79, \ SD=.65 \)) and those working in schools with a lapsed designation (\( M=2.47, \ SD=.84 \)) conditions; \( t(177)=-5.137, p = 0.0001 \). These results suggest that participants from schools with a current RAMP designation are likely to report more benefits of the RAMP designation as opposed to those from schools without a current designation. Additionally, Cohen’s effect size value (\( d = .89 \)) indicates a high practical significance.
In summary, the statistical analyses indicate schools that have a current RAMP designation tend to have more school and district supports in place and perceive more benefits from the designation than those schools without a current RAMP designation.

**Results from the Open-ended Survey Responses**

A majority of the results from the open-ended survey responses indicated challenges of completing the RAMP process. There were fewer open-ended comments discussing the benefits of completing the RAMP process and the supports needed to complete the RAMP process. The most frequently captured data in the open-ended survey responses noted the time to complete the RAMP application as being a barrier, the subjectivity of the reviewing being a challenge as well as seeing the recognition as simply having no value to the school or school counseling program.

As outlined in Table 4, the open-ended survey responses showed supports for the RAMP process 12 times, benefits of completing the RAMP process 12 times, suggestions how the association can improve the process 12 times and challenges to completing the RAMP process 103 times. The imbalance of responses indicating the challenges of the RAMP process is not surprising as a majority of the survey respondents were from lapsed RAMP schools. Lapsed RAMP schools would be expected to note mostly challenges as they obviously have let their designation lapse because of multiple barriers or because they were unsuccessful in their Re-RAMP attempt. One might also assume that people who took the time to add to the prompt “Is there more you would like to share about the process?” may feel strongly about the application process and be more apt to share the things they perceived to be difficult or negative as opposed to sharing the benefits or the positives of the experience.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Open-Ended Survey Response #</th>
<th>Number of References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supports</td>
<td>Central Office Staff/ School District</td>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Support provided from having dedicated central office/district support staff.</td>
<td>51, 54, 61</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>S3</td>
<td>Having school counselor-specific professional development offerings</td>
<td>39, 54</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>A principal that is encouraging and provides resources to the school counseling department.</td>
<td>41, 61, 65</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor/ strong counseling team</td>
<td>S5</td>
<td>A supervisor that is actively involved in the departments goals and assists with the recognition requirements</td>
<td>41, 82</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-service Training</td>
<td>S6</td>
<td>Graduate program prepared me to create a comprehensive school counseling program and RAMP process</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State school counselor association</td>
<td>S7</td>
<td>My SCA is supportive or offers PD opportunities to increase my preparedness or pays the app fee</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Challenges

| Time | C1 | A great amount of time spent on completing the actual application. | 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 12, 15, 17, 20, 22, 25, 26, 30, 32, 36, 37, 38, 39, 42, 44, 58, 60, 62, 63, 64, 65, 67, 68, 70, 72, 73, 74, 77, 79 | 36 |

| Reviewer Bias/Problematic reviewing system/Unclear Application | C2 | Subjective reviewing process and reviewer bias. | 3, 75, 76 | 14 |

| Benefits/Expensive | C3 | The recognition lacks benefits, therefore is not worth the trouble. | 1, 4, 6, 8, 15, 16, 44, 46, 48, 50, 68, 70, 72 | 12 |

| Teamwork/Staffing turnover | C4 | The department has weak links thereby leaving strong teammates to do carry the water. | 5, 9, 10, 24, 31, 38, 68, 78, 80, 82 | 10 |

<p>| Stress/Resistance | C5 | The process was stressful. | 5, 6, 13, 22, 27, 32, 34, | 11 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>References</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team of 1</td>
<td>C6</td>
<td>The participant felt alone in the process.</td>
<td>37, 38, 48, 73</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio</td>
<td>C7</td>
<td>Ratio is so high that it is difficult to implement a comprehensive school counseling program.</td>
<td>3, 6, 11, 22, 35, 67</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support/ Lack of understanding of the process or specific components</td>
<td>C8</td>
<td>Admin or other stakeholders do not understand the role of the school counselor or support the RAMP process.</td>
<td>2, 4, 8, 10, 14, 15, 28, 35, 49, 56, 60, 61, 71</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Benefits**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>References</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Various stakeholder (e.g. student, parent, administration) and national recognition.</td>
<td>45, 61</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/program improvement</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Identification and addressing school wide needs.</td>
<td>23, 25, 29, 38</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation</td>
<td>B3</td>
<td>The school counselors felt validated and valued.</td>
<td>45, 68, 81</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>B4</td>
<td>A concerted effort to ensure that they were meeting program goals and aligning those goals to</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
school wide goals.

**Advocacy**  
B5  Advocacy for the department, profession, roles and responsibilities.  
21  1

**Reflection**  
B6  The process allowed me an in-depth reflection on my school counseling program and practice.  
43  1

### Areas for Improvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page ranges</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conference pricing – financial support</td>
<td>I1</td>
<td>Conference is expensive, travel and lodging is expensive. Application fee is too much.</td>
<td>53, 70</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness/Marketing</td>
<td>I2</td>
<td>More local coverage of the accomplishment and what the accomplishment means</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Education/Recertification</td>
<td>I3</td>
<td>Create CEUs, graduate credit or re-certification hours for the process</td>
<td>33, 50, 67, 72</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful mentorship/Reviewing as PD</td>
<td>I4</td>
<td>Pair up reviewer with school for RAMP intensive workshops – allow that</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I5

Increase organization and management

Become better organized with the process and RAMP resources

42, 1

I6

Revising specific components

A specific component of the RAMP process may not be relevant to demonstrating the school has a comprehensive school counseling program

55, 62, 65, 77

4

Results from the Phase 2 Qualitative Data Analysis

I developed a preliminary code set based on my survey questions and interview protocol. The codes fell under three main themes: supports, benefits and challenges of completing the RAMP process. As I read through the open-ended survey questions and the interview transcripts I was able to note several sub-themes that provided more detail and could be teased out further beyond the main themes of supports, benefits and challenges. After multiple passes through the data, I decided to add a fourth category to include “Areas of Improvement”. Many respondents had specific suggestions directed at the association to improve the existing RAMP program. Some of the suggestions were similar enough they could be categorized together creating a fourth category for coding purposes. Because the intent of this research study is to provide practical suggestions that
can be implemented in my work setting to improve the RAMP process, I felt the addition of the fourth theme of “Areas of Improvement” was an important one to include.

Table 5 presents the results of the data analysis. This table details the major themes: Supports, Challenges, Benefits and Areas for Improvement. Each theme has sub-themes labeled under the code description column. There are also columns noting the frequency in which the sub-theme can be found in the data and the interview participant who discusses each sub-theme.

In the table, the number of references that I coded related to each theme is indicated in the “Number of references” column. For example, one of the challenges for completing the RAMP process was how much time the process entailed. “Time” is a subtheme found under the major theme “Challenges” and was evident twelve times in the interview data and five of the six interview participants discussed time as being a challenge to completing the process.

It was important to compile the various codes in both the interviews and the open-ended surveys so I could begin to see patterns and the frequency as to how many times the sub-themes emerged in the data.

Table 5. Coding Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Code Description</th>
<th>Number of References</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supports</td>
<td>Central Office Staff/</td>
<td>S1</td>
<td>Supports provided from</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>G2, L1,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School District</td>
<td></td>
<td>having dedicated central</td>
<td></td>
<td>L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>office/district support staff.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

61
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Development</th>
<th>S3</th>
<th>Having school counselor-specific professional development offerings</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>L1, L2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>S4</td>
<td>A principal that is encouraging and provides resources to the school counseling department.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>C1, C2, G1, G2, L1, L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor/ strong counseling team</td>
<td>S5</td>
<td>A supervisor that is actively involved in the departments goals and assists with the recognition requirements</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>G2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-service Training</td>
<td>S6</td>
<td>Graduate program prepared me to create a comprehensive school counseling program and RAMP process</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>C1, G2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State school counselor association</td>
<td>S7</td>
<td>My SCA is supportive or offers PD opportunities to increase my preparedness or pays the app fee</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>C1, G1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Teachers</td>
<td>S8</td>
<td>Classroom teachers are supportive of the school counseling program</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>C1, C2, L1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Challenges**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>A great amount of time spent on completing the actual application.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>C1, C2, G2, L1, L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewer Bias/Problematic reviewing system/Unclear Application</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Subjective reviewing process and reviewer bias.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>C2, L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits/Expensive</td>
<td>C3</td>
<td>The recognition lacks benefits, therefore is not worth the trouble.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork/Staffing turnover</td>
<td>C4</td>
<td>The department has weak links thereby leaving strong teammates to do carry the water.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>C2, G2, L1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress/Resistance</td>
<td>C5</td>
<td>The process was stressful.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>L1, L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team of 1</td>
<td>C6</td>
<td>The participant felt alone in the process.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio</td>
<td>C7</td>
<td>Ratio is so high that it is difficult to implement a comprehensive school counseling program</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of support/ Lack of understanding of the process or specific components</td>
<td>C8</td>
<td>Admin or other stakeholders do not understand the role of the school counselor or support the RAMP process</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>C1, C2, G1, G2, L1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Benefits**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Authors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Various stakeholder (e.g. student, parent, administration) and national recognition.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>C1, C2, G1, G2, L1, L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/program Improvement</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Identification and addressing school wide needs.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>C2, C2, G1, G2, L1, L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation</td>
<td>B3</td>
<td>The school counselors felt validated and valued.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>C1, C2, G2, L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>B4</td>
<td>A concerted effort to ensure that they were meeting program goals and aligning those goals to school wide goals.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>C1, C2, G2, L1, L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>B5</td>
<td>Advocacy for the department, profession, roles and responsibilities.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>C1, C2, G1, G2, L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>B6</td>
<td>The process allowed me an in-depth reflection on my school counseling program and practice.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>G1, G2, L1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Areas for Improvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference pricing – financial support</td>
<td>I1</td>
<td>Conference is expensive, travel and</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>C1, G1, G2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Idea</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>C, L</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lodging is expensive. Application fee is too much.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness/Marketing</td>
<td>I2</td>
<td>More local coverage of the accomplishment and what the accomplishment means.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>C1, L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Education/Recertification</td>
<td>I3</td>
<td>Create CEUs, graduate credit or recertification hours for the process.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>C2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful mentorship/Reviewing as PD</td>
<td>I4</td>
<td>Pair up reviewer with school for RAMP intensive workshops – allow that reviewer to score the application.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>C2, G1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase organization and management</td>
<td>I5</td>
<td>Become better organized with the process and RAMP resources.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>G1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revising specific components</td>
<td>I6</td>
<td>A specific component of the RAMP process may not be relevant to demonstrating the school has a comprehensive school counseling program</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>G2, L1, L2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Interview Data**

The purpose of the interviews was to explore the study questions in more depth with a smaller sample of individuals. Unlike the survey, which was made up of a majority of lapsed RAMP schools, the interviews were made up of a majority of schools that currently had the RAMP designation. Since the interviews were conducted with two schools that had earned RAMP multiple, consecutive times (continuous RAMP), two schools that had earned RAMP multiple, non-consecutive times (gap-RAMP) and two lapsed schools, the interview data was slightly more balanced throughout the four themes as opposed to the open-ended survey answers. Not surprising, the interview data highlighted the benefits of the RAMP designation the most. Specifically, interviews most frequently mentioned how the designation allowed the school counselors to advocate for themselves – whether it was for more time to do appropriate counseling duties or to advocate for other stakeholders including state lawmakers. Overall, the interview data noted supports for the RAMP process 30 times, challenges to complete the RAMP process 48 times, benefits to completing the RAMP process 70 times and 21 suggested areas for improvement.

**Thematic Analysis**

The following section describes the definitions of the themes and sub-themes that emerged. This section also includes evidence, by way of the participants’ own words, that supports the meaning of each sub-theme. This section ends with a summary of the qualitative analysis.
Theme 1: Supports

Supports refers to data where participants described ways in which they felt supported while going through the RAMP process or supported to pursue the Re-RAMP process. Interview participants and survey respondents both described areas of support. Those descriptions included: school district support, professional development opportunities specifically for school counselors, principal support, having a strong school counseling team or department, graduate school training, state school counselor association, and supportive classroom teachers.

District-level support. The school district provides support and mentorship to the school counselors in the district, including those that are pursuing the RAMP recognition. The participants who referenced district-level supports all described a central office system that was knowledgeable of the RAMP process and some districts had even prioritized RAMP designation as a district wide goal and invested in professional development to support the counselors pursuing the designation.

We have a phenomenal central office support system, and because ... Again, there was some transition in central office a few years, but the new person who came into the position that oversees elementary counseling, she is very RAMP knowledgeable, and so anybody who is submitting for RAMP, we have to first basically submit it to her. She reviews the plan, she sends us feedback, and then we push it through the ASCA portal. Kind of like a pre-review before we get the real review (Participant G2, Interview, February 8, 2018).

Professional development. The school counselors describe having school counselor specific professional development opportunities regarding the implementation of comprehensive school counseling programs as a support for preparation of the RAMP process. These opportunities may be offered at conferences or as part of a district wide training. One of the interviewees from a lapsed RAMP school describes long-term
professional development provided from a cadre of lead RAMP reviewers that the entire
district has been receiving, “The trainings are absolutely phenomenal. They really are.”
(Participant L1, Interview, January 26, 2018). The cadre of trainers has been coming out
to conduct face-to-face professional development three times a year for the past two
school years. They also offer ongoing technical assistance and online resources for the
counselors in-between the in-person meetings. Participant L1 (Interview, January 25,
2018) also described the district bringing in a school counseling consultant to work with
the district’s counselors. Others sought out their own professional development to help
improve their school counseling program.

Principal. The school counselors who were able to successfully achieve the
RAMP designation mentioned the support of their building principal. The principal
allowed them to dedicate time to appropriate counseling duties and, in some cases,
encouraged them to complete the RAMP and re-RAMP process.

I've had two administrators in the 14 years I've been here and the first
administrator was very supportive and really was very non-imposing when it
came to working through the process, and cooperative, and gave me the freedom I
needed to design my program. And, honestly, after he retired, my principal that I
have here now is even more supportive. Like extremely supportive and I think it
comes from already being a RAMP school and her seeing the data and hearing the
kids and she sees the difference that it makes and she knows, she can see how
important this job is to our student population. And so, I feel like she's even more
supportive than what I had in the beginning (Participant G1, Interview, January
26, 2018).

The above quote mentions that the subsequent principal was also supportive of this
participant’s comprehensive school counseling program. This might suggest that it is less
challenging to gain the support of a building principal that moves into a school with a
well-established school counseling program. Participant C2 explains that she has had a
similar experience, “We've had one, two three… This is our fourth principal since 2007. And never once have we since lost a counselor or have been told by our principal that we need to be doing something different” (Interview, January 26, 2018).

**Supervisor/strong counseling team.** “Our Team Leader really pushed and led us through the process both times. Without her leadership, we probably would not have completed the process; especially the Re-Ramp” (Survey Respondent #82, May, 2017). Both the survey respondents and the interview participants mentioned that they had a strong leader in the supervisory role or a shared sense of teamwork with all of the school counselors to successfully complete the RAMP process.

We understood that everybody needed to contribute, and just more so than writing a narrative here and there. Just really looking at, Okay, who has the best, most thorough data from a classroom guidance lesson, or a small group, or whatever… Everybody contributed, and everybody contributed in different ways, but in a pretty equal way, so it wasn't just on one person's plate (Participant G2, Interview, February 8, 2018).

The evidence outlines a necessity for a team approach with supervisor buy-in. This aligns with the analysis in the following section, as many counselors pointed out a lack of effort from colleagues and lack of support from supervisors as a deterrent for reapplying for the designation.

**Pre-service training.** School counselors who were trained in graduate programs that aligned with the ASCA National Model (2012a) are better prepared to implement a comprehensive school counseling program and therefore achieve the RAMP designation. When discussing the preparation she received in her graduate program, Participant C1 elaborated,

I do want to say I think that's a big point. We had done a Closing the Gap project, and we did curriculum results reports, we did data and goals. All of those things
were familiar to me, which I don't think all the counseling educator programs had, at least, back then (Interview, January 30, 2018).

A subsequent interviewee articulated that having coursework explicitly teaching the components of a comprehensive school counseling program created the groundwork necessary for implementation upon her placement as a school counselor.

Even just coming in as a first year counselor, in my grad program, we had a specific class on the ASCA national model, so I understood it. Even though I had that class, going through the RAMP process, it was like - Oh, this is what it meant (Participant G2, Interview, February 8, 2018).

**State school counselor association.** The American School Counselor Association has a state chapter in each of the fifty states. The state school counselor associations may offer support to school counselors in terms of professional development via an annual conference or local workshops. Some of the state school counselor associations pay a portion or the entire RAMP application fee. Participant G1 stated that she paid for the application fee the first two times she applied for the RAMP process. However, by the time she had completed RAMP in 2016 the state school counselor association had a system in place to reimburse school counselors for their RAMP application (Interview, January 26, 2018). Participant C1 did not have the financial support from her state school counselor association but she became aware of the RAMP process at her state’s annual conference. There were breakout sessions detailing the RAMP process and an awards ceremony recognizing those from the state that had earned the designation, this created an awareness of the designation for her as a first year counselor that she did not have otherwise (Interview, January 30, 2018).

**Classroom teachers.** The RAMP process requires school counselors to implement a comprehensive school counseling program. As such, one of the components
of a comprehensive program is to deliver services by way of individual counseling, small group counseling and whole class lessons (American School Counselor Association, 2012a). Therefore, it is essential, from time to time, that school counselors have access to students during instructional periods. This sometimes presents a challenge but in half of the interviews I conducted, the classroom teachers were referenced as a support to the school counseling program. “I think now that even our core classroom teachers, when we go in and do our curriculum, they understand why we're using their classroom time and they trust us that we're doing things that are worthwhile for students” (Participant C2, Interview, January 26, 2018).

When schools have successfully implemented a comprehensive school counseling program, the entire school reaps the benefits of the data-driven program. Teachers are more willing to sacrifice their instructional time when they understand the benefits of classroom guidance. Participant L1 notes, “…a lot of school counselors will complain that teachers don't want them in their classrooms. I have never in my 22 years out here had a teacher that has not wanted us in there” (Interview, January 26, 2018).

In summary, many perceived supports made the RAMP process more attainable for some school counselors. Having a supportive administrator, district-level supports, school counselor professional development opportunities, adequate preparation in graduate school and a state school counselor association that provides supports for the RAMP application process were all deemed as helpful to be successful in the pursuit of the RAMP designation.
Theme 2: Challenges

The Challenges theme refers to the data where participants described the challenges of completing the RAMP process or barriers to pursuing a subsequent Re-RAMP designation. “Challenges” was the most frequently occurring theme throughout the study. It was mentioned multiple times by both survey respondents and interviewees. The challenges discussed included: time, stress, the subjectivity of the RAMP reviewing process, the designation wasn’t perceived as valuable, lack of teamwork or lack of team, lack of support or understanding from other stakeholders, an unreasonable school counselor to student ratio.

**Time.** The amount of time it takes to fill out the application was by far the most prevalent item mentioned in the entire qualitative dataset. The application is long, it has several components, many of the components require additional evidence to be included and each of the parts requires a written narrative summarizing the evidence presented. Many counselors articulated that the time commitment was too much and it took away from providing direct services to students if they attempted to do it during the school day. Others noted they were spending their evenings, weekends and summer vacations completing the actual application. “We began the process to Re-RAMP but discontinued due to the huge amount of time to complete the process. We felt our time would be better used serving our students and addressing immediate needs” (Survey Respondent #6, May, 2017). Survey Respondent #8 agreed, “time was the biggest roadblock” (May, 2017).

Five of the six interview participants also noted that time was one of the biggest hurdles to the process. Participant G1 has successfully completed the RAMP process
three times and had the designation eight of the last nine years and she affirmed the finding, “I would say the biggest challenge in completing is ... from my point of view, it's definitely, obviously, time to complete it. It had to be done outside of school. I did it in the summer” (Interview, January 26, 2018). Time was a pretty resounding challenge and the data lends itself to the conclusion that many of the counseling teams that have achieved the designation spent time outside of their contractual school hours to complete the application.

**Stress.** The process was stressful and overwhelming to many school counselors, especially those new to the process. “Participating in the RAMP process while working full time is incredibly stressful. For this reason, I am choosing not to Re-RAMP a second time. The benefits do not outweigh the stress for me!” (Survey Respondent #73, May 2017). Participant L2 discussed the stress of the work that went into an unsuccessful completion, “I guess, to be honest, there was a lot of stress at first. We tried to re-RAMP, we didn't get it. We were stressed and bummed” (Interview, January 25, 2018). Finally, even survey respondents that were not even employed at the school when they went through the RAMP process were sure the process would be too stressful to even attempt, “I have never been a part of this, but I have heard it is overwhelming and a ton of work!” (Survey Respondent #13, May 2017).

**RAMP reviewing process.** “Dang it, they just didn’t understand our setup” Participant L2 explains that the reviewing process presents a challenge, especially to those school counselors working in a non-traditional setting like a career center, “we can tell that the committee probably just didn’t understand fully some things that we did here, because we are so different, you know what I mean? We only have juniors and seniors in
our building” (Interview, January 25, 2018). Since the RAMP application is a portfolio type submission including many written narratives, the nature of the reviewing process comes with subjectivity.

RAMP reviewers score application using a thorough rubric. Over the years, the rubric has been refined and, the reviewing process revised, to help combat the issue of subjectivity (J. Cook, personal communication, January 21, 2016). However, it continues to be an issue of applicants feeling misunderstood by the teams of reviewers. Not only is the subjectivity an issue for first time RAMP applicants, some subsequent applicants are claiming the reviewing varies too significantly from year to year, “for a school that was seeking its third RAMP designation, the results seemed to indicate a variance in raters (between the RAMP years) rather than a noticeable inadequacy in our program” (Survey Participant #40, May, 2017). Interesting to note, the program’s coordinator pointed out that the purpose of the narrative is to provide the applicant a rationale and justification to inform the committee exactly how they are meeting the rubric’s guidelines as a measure to even out some of the misunderstandings. However, it is authoring those same narratives that many respondents claim make the process too time-intensive and one of the main barriers to even pursue the designation.

Lack of benefits. Going through the RAMP process or earning the designation lacked value for many respondents. Several survey respondents chimed in that the application was not worth the trouble and that there simply were not enough benefits associated with becoming a RAMP school. Survey Respondent #8 “chose not to renew due to the extensive, time consuming process with little benefits”. Survey Respondent
#16 agrees, “unfortunately, the time we spent becoming RAMP certified didn't pay off in our building” (May, 2017).

Some respondents specifically mentioned a lack of monetary benefits (Survey Respondents #1 and #70), which could translate into earning more if you were a RAMP school. Based on the responses, it appears that some elective recognition programs or designations incentivize educators with a stipend or increased salary on a district pay scale. The interview participants were less likely to discuss the lack of benefits associated with the process. Instead, the interview participants were more likely to expand upon the perceived benefits. These are outlined in the next section.

**Staffing turnover and teamwork.** Staffing turnover was one of the more prevalent barriers that kept RAMP schools from seeking a subsequent designation. Participant G2 had worked at a RAMP school earlier in her career and when she moved to her new school she noted “there was a lot of transition that was going on at that time period within the school, and I guess when they were supposed to be Re-RAMPing, they didn't end up Re-RAMPing” (Interview, February 8, 2018) she further details that school achieving RAMP the following school year. While the comprehensive program may still have been in place, the staffing turnover resulted in a 1-year lapse of their designation. Many of the survey respondents received the survey because they are employed at schools that had once held the designation. However, they commented in the open-ended response section to explain that they moved into the school after the designation and had no interest in pursuing a subsequent designation and/or did not know enough about the process to answer many of the survey questions. This could stress the importance of
hiring replacement school counselors with RAMP knowledge in order to increase the likelihood of sustaining the program.

Many respondents reported that cohesive teamwork was a necessity to completing the RAMP process. “One of the greatest challenges is having all counselors be prepared and committed to working through the RAMP Process” (Survey Participant #5, May, 2017). The process can be hindered if the entire team is not willing to participate or if any of the team members are less knowledgeable about the process. The less buy-in from co-counselors will result in more challenges and increased stress for the school counselors that end up leading the group through the process. Because the designation belongs to the school and not the individual counselor the work should be distributed evenly and with full department support it becomes an easier process for all involved.

**Lack of administrator support.**

Just as the previous section noted that a supportive administrator was a key factor for counselors successfully running a comprehensive school counseling program, an administrator who does not see the value or one who does not fully understand the role of the school counselor can be problematic.

There was changes in admin, which, of course, that sets the tone for the entire school, and as much as you can advocate for your position, ultimately these are the people that are also writing your evaluations at the end of the year, so you don't want to rock the boat too much. Sometimes extra duties were put on our plates, and things like that, that weren't necessarily school counseling related, but just general school related stuff. That caused a lot of issues with us having that time to pursue the re-RAMP process at that given point. (Participant G2, Interview, February 8, 2018).

Additionally, the open-ended survey respondents, comprised mostly of lapsed RAMP designees, cited the lack of administrator or district support as an obstacle in
pursuing a subsequent designation, “I looked into applying for RAMP this year, but received no support from district counseling department. Given my challenging demographics, I couldn't dedicate the time the application needed without support” (Survey Respondent #2, May, 2017). While multiple survey respondents noted they lacked support (Survey Respondents 4, 8 and 10) it is summed up best by Survey Respondent #14 who is just “not sure the stakeholders really understand RAMP nor its benefits” (May, 2017).

**Ratio.** The staffing ratio is too high to effectively implement a comprehensive school counseling program, thereby making it too difficult to pursue a RAMP designation. The industry’s recommended ratio is 1:250 (American School Counselor Association, 2012a) and the current national average is 1:491 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014). The interview participants had a school counselor to student ratio that ranged anywhere from 1:300 to 1:660 creating an obstacle in running an effective program. While many of the survey respondents reported being understaffed, Survey Respondent #6 reported a ratio of 1:984, explaining it is impossible to complete the RAMP process with that size caseload. Even caseloads double the national average prove to be a barrier as explained by Survey Respondent #22,

I understand the necessity to report all the information required for the RAMP/Re-RAMP submission, but with a caseload of almost 500 students, it becomes problematic and overwhelming to try to balance meeting the needs of my students and finding sufficient/appropriate time to complete the application (May 2017).

In conclusion, there are many barriers or perceived challenges that dissuade school counselors from seeking out a subsequent RAMP designation. The time and stress
that go into the application process, lack of support from administrators, the lack of value from the designation, an imbalance of duties or lack of teamwork within the counseling department and extraordinarily high school counselor to student ratios all contribute to a school counselor’s unwillingness to pursue a subsequent RAMP designation.

**Theme 3: Benefits**

The *Benefits* theme refers to the data where participants described the benefits of completing the RAMP process or Re-RAMP designation. “Benefits” was the most occurring theme throughout the qualitative dataset by interview participants. The benefits discussed included: recognition, improvement of the school counseling program, validation, accountability, advocacy, and reflection.

**Recognition.** All six of the interview participants mentioned the recognition they received for being a nationally recognized RAMP school being a worthwhile benefit. While some mentioned prominently displaying the RAMP plaque in their department or a banner noting the years they were recognized, others mentioned the recognition by their peers at the national conference. Beyond the recognition from the internal school counseling world, Participant C1 noted the effort of the association to expand the recognition to notifying the school district’s school board members and superintendent (Interview, January 30, 2018). Participant G1 noted that she has been called upon by a state legislator to consult on bullying legislation (Interview, January 26, 2018) and to work with other school counseling departments as she’s at the only RAMP school in her entire state. While Participant L1 is not currently at a RAMP recognized school, she still has the reputation of being a RAMP-knowledgeable counselor and this will aid her in securing a job if she’s looking to move to a different school within her district (Interview,
January 26, 2018). While many of the school counselors noted they were not actively into self-promotion, it was nice to be acknowledged for the accomplishment.

**Program improvement.** Again, all six of the interview participants described that one of the benefits of being a RAMP recognized school is that it either improved their practice as a school counselor by providing more intentional services or it contributed to better student outcomes in general.

I think the biggest benefit was it really made me take a look at what we were doing and how we were doing it. I think the time and task analysis is very beneficial. It, to me, it changes your focus and your thinking of how to do school counseling. From more of a reactive to a preventative [program] (Participant L1, Interview, January 26, 2018).

Participant C2 explains that in her large school with nine school counselors, the RAMP process has institutionalized best practices for her team. The school counselors sit down as a team and identify program goals for each grade that align with the school goals and divvy up the work of collecting the data and making changes, as needed. She elaborates to say the increased services to students is her driving force, “I mean, I think it's just better for kids. And if we're school counselors wanting to help kids, we should want to do it” (Interview, January, 26, 2018). Participant L2 had a very similar sentiment, if I know my students, or even my parents, have a need, that’s where I start. If that need doesn’t align with building initiatives or support that we have in our building, then I figure out a way to make that happen. I feel like the students and the parents always drive everything that we do (Interview, January 25, 2018).

**Validation.** “I mean, for us, I think it was just validation that we were doing the right work” (Participant L2, Interview, January 25, 2018). School counselors that had successfully gone through the RAMP process found the work validating and the recognition as an acknowledgement that their work is meaningful and important.
Participant C1 shared that the RAMP program, “has elevated the value of what they think I can do, and what a couns-... not me, but what a counseling program can do” (Interview, January 30, 2018). Implementing a comprehensive school counseling program can provide counselors a structure to ensure that the work they are conducting is meeting the needs of their students.

**Accountability.** The RAMP process provided an opportunity for school counselors to demonstrate their accountability. The application itself requires schools to have various goals that align with the overall school’s goals. In addition, Participant L1, explained that her state was piloting a school counselor evaluation system that aligned with the ASCA National Model (American School Counselor Association, 2012a). Therefore, schools that have the RAMP program in place would meet the benchmark for exceptional practice on the state issued evaluation (Interview, January 26, 2018). Survey Respondent #74 explains, “the RAMP process was somewhat helpful to evaluate existing programs” (May, 2017). The RAMP process requires continuous check-ins with the data to ensure that counseling lessons and interventions are effective. If the interventions aren’t effective, it doesn’t preclude schools from earning the RAMP designation, it allows them the opportunity to make changes to strive to improve the activities that will in turn improve the results.

**Advocacy.**

Once you do have that RAMP status, I feel like ... and I don't know if it's just me personally, but I felt like I could advocate just way better, just about my program, and about what I'm doing. It could help wean off some of those extra duties, or the miscellaneous tasks, or whatever that we're supposed to be doing, because, "Well, I'm a RAMP program. I've got to make sure that I'm doing X, Y, Z." Because that's the national standard. This is a national recognition. I think that
maybe that could be a huge benefit to a lot of people who maybe have a lot of extra duties (Participant G2, Interview, February 8, 2018).

Survey and interview participants detail many different ways the RAMP designation set them up to advocate for the department, the profession and their roles and responsibilities. Many saw having the RAMP process in place as a ticket out of the non-counseling duties often assigned to school counselors. Participant G1 explains how the designation has given her the confidence to advocate for the profession and the confidence to become a leader in her state school counselor association,

The whole thing over the years has been a huge advocacy piece. I feel like it's systemically changed a lot, a lot of things, like me, even, and how I do things and how I interact with people and it was like administrators would come to me if they had school counseling questions or needed some guidance in what to do about certain things or how to do things. And other school counselors would come to me. Because of the RAMP I started getting involved in my state organization and became a leader amongst my peers (Interview, January 26, 2018).

Reflection.

I think that it allows just an opportunity for reflection that we often don't have the opportunity to do on a daily, weekly, monthly, yearly basis a lot of the time. I know that sometimes you just feel like you're barely keeping your head above water, and but then when you do have the opportunity to RAMP, and be able to see the big picture, like, Here's the classroom guidance perceptions results, and here's how it made a difference in the end, in terms of their grades, their attendance, their behavior (Participant G2, Interview, February 8, 2018).

The participants cite that reflecting on their practice is one of the benefits of the process. Even though the RAMP process includes time-intensive narratives (something many described as a challenge), it is during this narrative process that they are able to really reflect on the data they are collecting.

Being able to analyze your scope of your program, and what you do. Just having that opportunity to do so. It is a very rewarding process, because it does allow you to use that opportunity to reflect on what you do on a day to day. Day to day, you might not see those results, but with the RAMP process, it does allow you that
opportunity to really investigate how students are different as a result of the program (Participant G1, Interview, January 26, 2018).

In conclusion, there are many benefits school counselors perceived to be valuable from completing the RAMP process. The national recognition, the improvements made to their school counseling program or school wide goals, the validation they receive, the ability to advocate for their role and profession and the reflection on their practice are all seen as important byproducts from going through the RAMP process.

**Areas for improvement.** Within the open-ended survey questions and the interview transcripts, several participants gave specific suggestions as to how the association could improve the RAMP process. This data didn’t tie directly back to my research question in terms of the willingness or unwillingness of a school to pursue the RAMP designation. However, given the patterns that emerged through the data, I felt it necessary to report those patterns in this section. These final patterns include: financial compensation, continuing education credits, marketing and revising specific parts of the actual application.

**Financial compensation.** Many of the survey respondents noted that they would be more inclined to apply for a subsequent RAMP designation if there was monetary compensation associated with the award. Participant G2 and Participant C1 would both suggest that conference attendance would be more affordable for RAMP schools.

Currently, the year the RAMP school receives their RAMP award they receive two free tickets to the awards dinner. However, they are still expected to pay for the conference registration, airfare and lodging. This is cost prohibitive for many individuals that do not receive a professional development budget.
**Continuing education units.** The association is an approved provider of continuing education units (CEUs) for many states. However, because the RAMP designation recognizes a school and not individual school counselors, the association has not been able to award CEUs for those individuals successfully associated with a RAMP school. Many participants stated that they would be more likely to maintain the RAMP designation if the RAMP process provided them CEUs, points to renewing their state license when it was time for recertification or even graduate credit hours. Many would like to see the RAMP designation evolve into a recognition, designation or even a certification for an exemplary school counselor.

**Marketing.** “How can ASCA reach out to administrators so that they have a guide, because our principals, I mean, they get it, but other principals, they like the idea, they just don't know what it looks like” (L2, Interview, January 25, 2018). Many participants agreed that the association is doing a good job of making RAMP professional development offerings available and ensuring graduate programs are aligning with the ASCA National Model (2012a). However, it is clear that it is not enough to just teach the school counselors how to be great school counselors – the association needs to provide the tools to school counselors to go out and advocate to principals and superintendents about the benefits of having comprehensive school counseling programs in the schools.

Additionally, participants suggested that the association provide communication regarding the schools that earned the RAMP designation to the state boards of education and even state lawmakers to highlight the recipients in each state. If there were more consistent recognition of the RAMP designation at various levels (e.g., school, district, state and nationally), it would provide many benefits to the profession and would aid
school counselors in making the case to focus on appropriate counseling duties.

Comprehensive school counseling programs and the RAMP designation need a marketing campaign that goes beyond school counselors to include a variety of stakeholders.

**Revising the application.** Many participants highlighted their least favorite part of the application and made suggestions as to what changes would be most relevant to their situation. Some participants feel that the Re-RAMP process could be abbreviated and many felt that the narratives or the essay at the end could be shorter. While many participants suggested a specific part of the application was irrelevant or arduous, another participant might contradict that comment by stating the same component was especially important. The data couldn’t pinpoint one consistent component that needed to be examined; however, this could mean that a one-size-fits-all application may not be right for every school.

**Meaningful mentorship.** While many school counselors noted that they were aware of professional development opportunities or experienced excellent graduate training, some felt that the association could do more in terms of mentoring schools that might be close to applying for the RAMP designation but weren’t quite ready. One of the suggestions from Participant C2 (Interview, January 26, 2018) was to expand upon a service the association was already providing for interested schools. Schools can currently sign up for one-on-one consultations from current RAMP reviewers in a one-time fashion. However, Participant C2 suggested that this mentorship carry on until the school is ready to apply for RAMP and then allow that same RAMP reviewer to be on the team that reviews the application. The thought behind this suggestion is that the RAMP
reviewer would be familiar with any unique characteristics of the school and could possibly decrease the subjectivity issues that were previously discussed.

Another suggestion from Participant G1 (Interview, January 26, 2018) was to cultivate emerging leaders and prospective RAMP applicants by encouraging them to volunteer their time as a RAMP reviewer. Currently most RAMP reviewers have RAMP experiences or are otherwise vetted through the association but Participant G1 suggests that the emerging leader could be added to an existing RAMP review team to become more familiar with the application process and to also gain experience as to what the reviewers are looking for. She explained that she thinks a barrier is confidence and people are intimidated by the application. However, if they could become more familiar with the application and become familiar with a school going through the process, it would be a worthwhile activity.

In summary, there were many areas in which people felt the association could improve upon including offering financial compensation, increased marketing of the program, making CEUs available to school counselors, creating meaningful mentorship opportunities and revising the actual application. While these areas of improvement did not directly relate to answering the research questions, they could still be helpful as the association intends to fine tune the RAMP program.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, I discuss the study’s results and present three overarching findings. I reflect upon these findings in relation to the study’s research questions and the reviewed literature. Other relevant findings that go beyond the research questions are also included in this chapter. Next, the limitations of this study are presented as well as suggestions for further research and implications for practice.

Findings

Upon analysis of the results presented in Chapter 4, three findings emerged from the data. The first finding provides insight into the first research question: *What similarities and differences exist between schools that decided to pursue a subsequent RAMP designation and those schools that did not?* The second finding provides insight into the second research question: *What factors contribute to a school’s willingness to pursue a Re-RAMP designation?* The third finding provides insight into the second research question: *What factors contribute to a school’s unwillingness to pursue a Re-RAMP designation?*

**Finding #1: Schools that have consistent staffing patterns at the time of their original RAMP designation and their lapsed RAMP designation report to still be implementing a comprehensive school counseling program.** This finding answers the first research question. *What similarities and differences exist between schools that decided to pursue a subsequent RAMP designation and those schools that did not?* When I began this study, I wanted to learn if schools that had once earned the RAMP designation were still implementing a data-driven, comprehensive school counseling
program even if their RAMP designation had lapsed. Put another way, were the lapsed RAMP schools no longer RAMP because they didn’t fill out the application? Or, had their school counseling program regressed and they were no longer using data to inform their school counseling services, decisions and interventions? The data collected two different stories: 1) Schools that had very little school counselor or administrator turnover were still implementing comprehensive school counseling programs; and, 2) Schools that had a great deal of school counseling staffing turnover were less likely to be running a comprehensive school counseling program.

**Questionnaire.** Because the questionnaire data was collected from a majority of lapsed RAMP schools, the questionnaire data was telling as to what school characteristics existed at schools that currently did not have a RAMP designation. The survey responses showed that many of the point of contacts completing the survey were not employed at the time the school achieved RAMP. Additionally, the counselor that spearheaded the past RAMP effort was no longer at the school at all. The questionnaire indicates that staffing turnover is high in general. The analysis also indicated that there was not a statistically significant relationship in the number of years a person has been in the profession or employed at their current school and the school’s current RAMP status. The number of people that could not answer the survey questions because they inherited the RAMP program and didn’t, themselves, continue the program may lead to different conclusions. One, the administrator and other stakeholders (e.g., classroom teachers, supervisors) did not have buy-in on the process and an awareness of what the RAMP designation meant for their schools in terms of student outcomes. Otherwise, one could assert that the replacement counselor would have been hired with the expectation to
sustain the comprehensive school counseling program. Alternatively, if the school counseling program does fall apart when the instrumental school counselor moves on to a new school, then the association needs to take a longer look at the purpose of the program. The association has been very intentional with ensuring RAMP is a school designation, but that raises the question of whether that is an accurate depiction of what is happening if the program is not sustainable with staffing turnover?

This finding is important because the association plans professional development activities and works with school districts to ensure this is a school designation. However, it appears that one or maybe two strong school counselors are spearheading the effort and the effort is not sustained once those individuals leave the school. This may suggest that the designation may not be a true reflection of the strength of the program as opposed to the strength of the school counselor leadership in the building. Or, the finding may emphasize the importance that at least one person per school counseling department have a good comprehension of the various components that make up a comprehensive school counseling program to lead the charge and embed the philosophy within the department.

Schools that had very little to no staffing turnover were still implementing a comprehensive programs regardless of their current RAMP status. However, they found very little value in the actual designation or did not have time to complete the application. Many sentiments aligned with Survey Respondent #11, “we run a comprehensive school counseling program but the amount of writing and paperwork required to Re-RAMP is more than can be done with our current counselor/student ratio” (May, 2017). Therefore, participants are reporting they are still doing the work, but they simply feel they do not
need nor want the designation. Further reasons why schools are unwilling to complete the Re-RAMP process are discussed in finding number two.

**Interviews.** The interviews provided me with insight into six different schools’ RAMP stories. The two interviews conducted with lapsed RAMP schools were conducted with school counselors who had been employed at the school for many years and therefore spearheaded the successful past RAMP designation. Participant L2 is currently a lapsed RAMP school, and explained that her school was unsuccessful in their last RAMP submission but that was a reflection of how they completed the application and not based on their actual school counseling program. She described needing to be more mindful about how they captured and presented their data in the RAMP application. When asked if she felt her program was RAMP-worthy she responded, “we're confident that we're looking at data, we're running groups, we're running lessons that align with our student needs. We just gotta make sure we present it in a way [in the application] that makes happy ears at the committee” (Interview, January 25, 2018).

Participant L1 works in a middle school and does not have a current RAMP designation. When her school first achieved RAMP she was one of two counselors with a caseload of approximately 330 students. Since that time, her co-counselor was de-staffed and there was not, currently, an effort by the district to replace that counselor. Therefore, Participant L1 now has a caseload of approximately 660 students and just does not have the interest or incentive to complete the RAMP application at this time. In an interview on January 26, 2018, she admitted that she had not held an annual advisory council meeting, a required activity under the RAMP process, due to the lack of time to plan or prepare for it. However, she is still doing every other component of the program.
including developing goals aligned with the school’s goals, collecting pre- and post- data on her lessons and planning interventions to close the gaps in her school. In summary, the interviews allowed me a deeper dive into the two lapsed RAMP schools. In both cases, the school counselors report that despite their lapsed status, they were still, in fact, implementing a comprehensive school counseling program.

Therefore, as it pertains to research question 1, the similarities and differences of RAMP and non-RAMP schools depended most on the amount of staffing turnover in the school counseling department. If schools had the same school counselors in place during the RAMP process, they were more likely to report implementing a comprehensive program. If the department had significant turnover, they could not answer the questions regarding the RAMP process and therefore would be less likely to report implementing a comprehensive program. This finding highlights the importance of the administrators’ role in finding high quality candidates to fill school counselor positions.

**Finding #2: Schools are more willing to pursue the Re-RAMP designation if they have a variety of supports in place and perceive the benefits of the designation to be valuable.** The results from this study indicate several important themes related to perceived supports and benefits of completing the RAMP and Re-RAMP process. These findings answer the second research question. *What factors contribute to a school’s willingness to pursue a Re-RAMP designation?*

In the following paragraphs, I provide a brief summary and interpretations of finding number three.

**Supports.** The participants of this study named several supports that were in place in their school, district or state that increased their willingness to complete the Re-
RAMP process. Some participants mentioned coming into the profession with a solid foundation because their graduate program prepared them to implement a comprehensive program. Some mentioned that they had a state school counselor association that supported them financially with the application fee or with professional development offered during the annual conference. Another support that participants mentioned was the individual consultations the district office could provide the school counselors regarding the RAMP process. Some central offices invested in long-term professional development and had paid for RAMP experts to conduct trainings. Some districts had very knowledgeable supports employed in the central office that served as technical assistance for the application process. However, the most prevalent support noted by survey and interview respondents was their school principal.

Each of the six interview participants detailed many ways that their principal supported their achieving the RAMP and Re-RAMP designation. Participant L2 explained that her principal had attended professional development about comprehensive school counseling programs before she was even employed. Her principal worked with a consultant to find a candidate that could revamp the current school counseling program to one that meets the needs of their unique student body (Interview, January 25, 2018). Survey Respondent #65 said, “If we didn't have administrative support, I don't think we could have done this” and was echoed by Survey Respondent #41, “the key to RAMPing is strong administrative support” (May, 2017). The comments all suggest that a principal who truly understands the value of having a comprehensive school counseling program is willing to ensure that the counselors are able to spend a majority of their time performing appropriate counseling duties and providing direct services to students as opposed to time
on non-counseling or administrative tasks. The data show a supportive principal contributes to the willingness to pursue a Re-RAMP designation.

**Benefits.** Schools that were willing to sustain their RAMP designation saw many benefits of achieving the RAMP status. Survey and interview participants note the RAMP process kept them accountable. The process requires the school counseling department to keep records of the data associated with all of the counseling lessons and interventions. The data paints a picture of the effectiveness of the program and the counselors can make real-time adjustments to best meet the needs of their students. Some counselors noted that components of the RAMP process were now being embedded in their district or state evaluation which ensures that those counselors running comprehensive school counseling programs can easily meet the expectations of those required by the evaluation (Participant L1, January 26, 2018; Survey Respondent #74, May, 2017). Many school counselors explained that completing the application provided them the time to reflect on their practice. They become so busy from day-to-day to take the time to stop, look at their data and how it contributes to the big picture and larger school wide goals. Reflecting upon the RAMP process gave them an opportunity to improve their practice. The most prevalent benefits noted throughout the data were those that highlighted the recognition the RAMP designation instilled upon them and the built-in advocacy platform the designation provided for them.

“Your name gets out there and you get calls from places that you would never have even think that anybody would even know you or think to call you” (Participant L1, Interview, January 26, 2018) describes that the designation has given her a reputation as being an expert in the field. She has received phone calls of congratulations from district
officials, been asked to guest lecture to graduate students and been contacted by lawmakers. Survey Respondent #61 thinks the recognition even within the profession is a valuable benefit, “being able to go to [the] ASCA [conference] was the icing on the cake and makes you feel so special to be recognized in front of your peers” (May, 2017). Participant L2 notes that especially in states that did not have very many RAMP recognized programs, the designation elevates you to a more elite status, “now we had this designation, we were known as a RAMP school” (Interview, January 25, 2018). The recognition associated with having the RAMP designation proved to be an important benefit that contributed to a school’s willingness to pursue subsequent designations. However, if the designation was not meaningful to a lapsed school’s stakeholders or if the school counselors didn’t have the platform to tout the achievement, it was deemed as an inconsequential label. This leads into the next most prominent benefit found in the data, advocacy.

School counselors who saw the school’s RAMP designation as a beneficial advocacy tool were more willing to pursue a subsequent RAMP designation. The data demonstrate that many school counselors used their RAMP designation to advocate for themselves and for their school counseling programs, especially in terms of using their time on appropriate counseling duties. Many of the school counselors became more confident in their advocacy strategies because they had this tool working in their favor, thereby giving them the backup to state how they should be spending their day according to their national guidelines and recognition. This connects to the respondents who reported feeling validated in the work they were already doing. The RAMP designation served as evidence that reaffirmed the work they were doing was meaningful for students.
This finding could inform the association of two things. First, that some school counselors are going to be natural advocates for their program. Second, the fact that many lapsed schools suggested the RAMP designation was worthless might not be comfortable boasting about their program’s results. This finding explains that the RAMP designation gave some recipients enough confidence to use it to their advantage when talking to principals and teachers about allowing them the time and space to do their best work. This could serve as a lesson for RAMP schools that don’t feel comfortable asserting their role and highlighting the work they’re doing in schools.

Finding #3: Three of the most prominent factors that contribute to a school’s unwillingness to pursue a Re-RAMP designation are time, a lack of support or understanding from school administrators and staffing turnover. The results from this study indicate several important themes related to the barriers school counselors must overcome in order to successfully pursue the Re-RAMP designation. These findings answer the third research question. What factors contribute to a school’s unwillingness to pursue a Re-RAMP designation? In the following paragraphs, I provide a brief summary and interpretation of finding number three.

Time. The time it took to complete the RAMP application was the prominent challenge found in the data. The survey responses, comprised mostly of lapsed RAMP schools, noted that they simply did not have the time to complete the paperwork associated with the designation. The application consisting of 12 components requires school counselors to keep detailed records of many school counseling components such as vision and mission statement, calendars for the entire school counseling department, goals, interventions, data and various results reports. Additionally, each of the 12
components requires a narrative to support the many artifacts that are included in the application package. Some respondents pointed out particular components that they felt were irrelevant, redundant or just too burdensome.

Submitting the weekly calendars feels like an unnecessary extra. I feel like, yeah, there is a little bit of accountability in that, but I also feel like sometimes it's not an accurate depiction sometimes. I guess just in the grand scheme of things, I think that it's more important that you are providing certain supports and certain services to students throughout the entire school year. Making sure that you have it broken down into a weekly calendar, I'm not sure that that's very helpful in a lot of senses (Participant G2, Interview, February 8, 2018).

Each of the interviewees could expound upon various components of the RAMP rubric they found to be over burdensome or unnecessary.

You had the video or the essay, right? That to me was hard again because, again, it was extra time, because it wasn't time that was gonna be used during the day that I'm here. And then also to kind of wrap up your program in one video or one essay, that's hard. How do you explain everything that you're doing in a concise way that people can get a good picture of your counseling program through an essay or a few minute video? That's the extra work (Participant L2, Interview, January 25, 2018).

While each of the interviewees identified components they felt to be too time-intensive, they each emphasized different components of the RAMP process instead of all focusing on the same component.

You're doing the work, you're doing the lessons, you're collecting the data, you're running the reports. Can it just be that? Do you really want to spend time at night writing narratives when you know you're doing a comprehensive program, or offering a comprehensive program? So that's how people's mentality is like that extra stuff, do we really have to do it to be RAMP? (Participant L2, Interview, January 25, 2018).

“The one that seems to get everybody riled up is advisory council. That's the one that I think holds some people back” (Participant L1, Interview, January 26, 2018).
The above evidence is just a sample of the data that appeared repeatedly regarding the time-intensive RAMP designation process. Many of the participants described spending nights, weekends and summer vacations completing the paperwork—and, none received additional compensation. Some of the people mentioned that their school district or state already require that they complete some or many of the components to meet annual evaluation goals, however, the act of detailing a year’s worth of their school counseling program and adding narratives to the data components and results’ reports seems to be an arduous task.

Another important factor to note is that up until 2014, RAMP was only a three-year designation, and moved to a five-year designation in 2015. This would mean that if a school counselor earned a RAMP designation, they would have only two years before they began working on the time-intensive Re-RAMP process. Unfortunately, the process to Re-RAMP takes approximately the same amount of time as earning the original designation. Many of the survey respondents had active RAMP statuses back when it was a three-year designation so the emphasis on time may be a reflection of the experience of those school counselors who saw repeating the process after only two years as an extremely daunting task.

**Lack of support and understanding.** “I looked into applying for RAMP this year, but received no support from district counseling department. Given my challenging demographics, I couldn’t dedicate the time the application needed without support” (Survey Respondent #2, May, 2017). Many of the respondents noted that without some type of support, the Re-RAMP designation just was not feasible, and they were unwilling to even attempt another application. Many times, the comments that suggested lack of
support went hand-in-hand with a comment regarding the apathy of various stakeholders regarding the recognition, “I also have virtually no district support to do so. There was little if any recognition at the school and district level when I earned the designation the first time”, (Survey Respondent #4, May 2017). This is in contrast to the school counselors that described a supportive administration and those that described having a reputation associated with being a RAMP school. Those that felt as if they were known for the designation clearly had an experience with one or many stakeholders that valued the designation, as opposed to what might be going on in a majority of the lapsed RAMP schools.

Participant L1 explains that the awareness of the program does not exist with her peers or state level stakeholders,

I don't know if it's not well known enough, it's just not important enough to people that ...where I see these other states have tons and tons of recipients from their state. I don't know if at the state level it's just not ... just doesn't have enough value for people to pursue it. Maybe it's a lack of education about it. I'm not sure what that factor is (Interview, January 26, 2018).

Her words ring true with a couple of other claims found in the data. There may not be state level buy-in for this respondent’s school because the state school counselor association may not provide the support that some of the other respondents described. If a state affiliate were hosting recognition events and inviting school board members and state leaders, it could drum up excitement and awareness for the program. If that is lacking, then there is very little incentive to work so hard for a recognition that essentially lacks recognition from anyone but the person that sought it out.

**Staffing turnover.** Before I disseminated the survey, I spent a great deal of time cross-referencing the association’s master database of RAMP recipients with schools’
websites to see if the contacts listed in the RAMP database listed the same contact name the association had been using. In several cases, the RAMP contact we had in the association database was no longer employed at that school. In many cases, entire departments had turned over. Because I was just informally cross-referencing this list, I didn’t keep track of the numbers of contacts that no longer matched versus those that did. However, this anecdote is supported by the fact that 82 percent of survey respondents reported staffing turnover in the counseling department and 84 percent of survey respondents reported administrator turnover. In this case, the counseling staff turnover is relevant because it may mean that the replacement counselors were not knowledgeable about the RAMP process or when a counselor left their position they may not have been replaced at all.

Four of the six interviewees experienced staff turnover within their departments and the other two interviewees were the sole counselor in their school. Even when the department is comprised of strong counselors knowledgeable about the RAMP process, there is still some time of adjustment during the transition. Participant G2 discussed this as being the reason why her school had a gap in their designation years. She moved to her current school from a RAMP school so she was very familiar with the process, but upon starting at her new school along with a new administrator, the team decided to take a year to regroup and start fresh. They earned the RAMP designation the following year. (Interview, February 8, 2018). Participant C1 has had a RAMP designation continuously since 2009 and even now that the comprehensive program has been somewhat institutionalized, she is questioning if she will be able to sustain it during the next
application cycle as she has recently been assigned more non-counseling duties by a new administrator.

I was talking to our assistant principal who's only been here, this is his second year, and said something about, You know, I guess I'm going to have to just do classroom guidance one week and then the next week not plan as much [in response to spending so much time responding to parents and individual incidents]… responding to those emergencies -- that's what I see your job as. You know what I mean? I came right back and said, well, not according to the standards of my profession. I said, we're supposed to be proactive, not just reactive (Participant C1, Interview, January 26, 2018).

The data explain that turnover within the counseling department makes pursuing a Re-RAMP designation difficult, even if the counselor is willing to do the work. If the counselor isn’t adequately trained in the ASCA National Model (2012a), then it is even more difficult and creates an unwillingness to even try. In cases where there is turnover within the administration, it could create a scenario where the school counselor is needing to continuously educate the new administrator of the appropriate role of the school counselor. This could put the school counselor in a position of justifying that certain duties should be assigned to other school staff in order to maintain the work of the comprehensive school counseling program.

In summary, the lengthy application process was the most prevalent in the research data. Schools that found little or no support from their school or district were less willing to pursue a subsequent RAMP designation. Finally, schools that had staffing turnover were less likely to be Re-RAMP schools and those that had sustained the RAMP designation cited it as being a challenge to completing the process.

In conclusion, school counselors that had support to complete the RAMP process and perceived the RAMP designation to be beneficial were more willing to pursue a
subsequent designation. The most frequently mentioned support was having a supportive
school principal. And, the most valuable benefits noted were the recognition associated
with the award and the leverage the award gave to school counselors to advocate better
for their role and profession.

The findings of this dissertation support some of the assertions in the reviewed
research literature. Primarily, when the principal understands the role of the school
counselor, he or she may have a better reason to support the counselors in their program
goals (Hatch, 2008). The school counselors interviewed described the validation of the
work they were already doing from other school staff, parents and students. This may
have been so gratifying because many stakeholders lack the understanding of appropriate
counseling duties, as described in the research (Hoyt, 1955; Gysbers, 2010; Cinotti,
2014). Most importantly, the school counselors believe that their intentional practices and
alignment to school improvement goals may result in positive student outcomes. Studies
conducted by Militello, Carey Dimmitt, Lee and Schweide (2009) and Ward (2009) also(assert schools that have implemented exemplary comprehensive school counseling
programs may be associated with various positive outcomes including academic
indicators and increased college placement rates.

Implications for Practice

This was an incredibly helpful research project to complete for my professional
setting. Working for the organization that awards this distinction, it was really fascinating
to take a look at the practitioner perspective as opposed to the administrative side of
RAMP. Many of the benefits that I have used in my advocacy work were validated after
sifting through the survey results and the interviews. A surprising finding to learn was the ways in which the counselors expressed how little the stakeholders in their education community were aware of or acknowledged the RAMP designation. One of the roles the association does well is disseminate information. The association could create and lead an awareness campaign to push out the benefits of the RAMP designation to education leaders including principals, superintendents and other stakeholders.

The creation of an administrator or district toolkit would also be a significant support to this program. Not only would it provide an awareness of the school wide benefits of having a RAMP program, but it could include the details about the time necessary to complete the valuable process. Having the data to demonstrate that many school counselors are completing the RAMP process in non-contractual times is important evidence that may be helpful in making the case for providing school counselors an extended contract and/or flexibility to work on the application during school wide professional development or teacher workdays instead of sitting through whole-school offerings that may not be as relevant to the school counselor.

Because the association regularly initiates collaborative projects with other associations (e.g., National Association of Secondary School Principals or AASA: The School Superintendents Association) there is an opportunity to present this toolkit with presentations at annual conferences, or articles in the associations’ publications, to name a few outreach strategies.

Many would like to see the RAMP designation evolve into a formal recognition, designation or even a certification for an exemplary school counselor. An individual designation should certainly be something to consider since the survey data showed that a
school counselor leads the process and if a RAMP school counselor isn’t replaced with a
RAMP school counselor the designation may also go by the wayside. Additionally, many
times the RAMP school counselor leaves one school and immediately achieves the
designation at their new school. Also, there may be a role for highlighting districts
supports. Many districts offer professional development time, support with the RAMP
application and even mandate certain components in their evaluation process. It would be
interesting to follow-up with these districts to see how much is being led by one
individual, what the outcomes looks like in terms of how many schools within the
districts have been awarded RAMP and how many can sustain the designation.

Since time was such a prevalent challenge throughout the data collection it would
be in the association’s best interest to address this upfront. First, it would be helpful if
school counselors had a good understanding of the time commitment before they start the
process to help ease the overwhelming sense of stress also found frequently in the data. A
healthy understanding of the data collection process as depicted by Participant G2, would
benefit prospective RAMP applicants,

I guess making sure that people understand it's for the previous school year, and
that during that particular school year, you need to be on top of your game with
the data collection, with making sure that you are monitoring your use of time,
that you're really getting your ducks in a row, because if you don't do that, and
then you try to RAMP, you're scrambling, and you're relying on old records. What
did I do this week almost a year ago? I don't really remember unless I have
detailed notes, or something along those lines (Interview, February 8, 2018).

An implication for the association is to create a digital best practices flow chart or
manual. It could take the applicant through a step-by-step timeline of how to be
successful in this process. Because we have successful schools with so many varying
characteristics it would be simple enough to create multiple toolkits for the various
school characteristics (e.g., elementary schools with one counselor, high schools with five or more counselors, low ratio, high ratio and more).

**Implications for Future Research**

There are many implications for future research. This study only sought to explore the reasons why schools were willing or unwilling to apply for a RAMP designation. Further research could be expanded to include central office staff to examine their knowledge of the RAMP process and what supports they have in place to assist schools in the endeavor. Similar research could also explore graduate programs training future school counselors to examine the level of preparation new school counselors have upon entering the field. Finally, an examination of state school counselor associations may be worthwhile as some states have several RAMP schools, some states have one and some states have none. The association could have a role in conducting or commissioning this research in hopes of packaging a series of best practices for each of the respective levels of pre-service or in-service trainings.

Future research could also be conducted to examine each of the 12 components of the RAMP application. Many respondents had specific recommendations to amend the RAMP application but none were consistent enough to spot glaring room for improvement. Perhaps this was because the survey and interview samples were too small or perhaps there is another reason. For example, some participants insisted that forming an advisory council and holding annual meetings was a pointless part of the process, while another interviewee would contradict that by claiming it to be quite essential. Additionally, the biggest challenges for some schools seemed to be the components other
schools perceived to be the most valuable. What resonated with me was that the RAMP process is not a one-size-fits all application. This, of course, makes sense given the vast variability among schools and districts.

**Conclusion**

The American School Counselor Association (2016b) created the RAMP designation in 2003 to highlight and educate others regarding the appropriate role of the school counselor. While this research study only focused on those schools that had lapsed RAMP designations or subsequent RAMP designations, it provided insight into the RAMP process from the practitioner standpoint. It was clear that school counselors faced supports and challenges going through the process, but those that sustained their RAMP designation reported benefits that made the process worthwhile.

As someone who advocates for the profession and truly believes that students benefit from having access to school counseling services, the RAMP designation is serving a meaningful purpose. The American School Counselor Association will benefit from learning more about how the schools and districts perceive the process. In addition, the association should be interested in always refining and improving the program to ensure it remains a tool to enhance the profession and that it remains a flagship program of the association. Ultimately, it is a goal of the association to greatly increase the number of schools seeking the designation and districts providing comprehensive supports and professional development to improve school counseling departments across the country. I believe the lessons learned from this study may assist with that endeavor.
APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

Research Questions:

1) What similarities and differences exist between schools that decided to pursue a subsequent RAMP designation(s) and those schools that did not?
2) What factors contribute to a school’s willingness to pursue a Re-RAMP designation?
3) What factors contribute to a school’s unwillingness to pursue a Re-RAMP designation?

Questionnaire
(To be distributed via Qualtrics)

1) I consent to complete a survey questionnaire.
   Yes/No
2) You can contact me to participate in an interview for this study.
   Yes/No
3) My school has a current RAMP or Re-RAMP designation
   Yes/No

1) Gender
   Male

   Female

   Other gender identity, please specify:

   Prefer not to answer

2) Ethnic identification (Select all that apply)
   American Indian or Alaska Native

   Asian

   Black or African American

   Hispanic or Latino

   Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

   White

   Other
Prefer not to answer

School Characteristics

3) School Location

Suburban
Rural
Urban
Other ______

4) percent Free/Reduced Rate __________

5) percent ESL population __________

6) Type of School

Public, Non-charter
Public Charter
Private/Independent

7) Approximate number of students in your school __________

8) Number of grades in your school __________

9) Approximate number of students in your caseload __________

10) Number of years as a school counselor __________

11) Number of years as a school counselor at current school __________

Background RAMP information

1) Were you instrumental in the decision as to whether or not your school would apply for the RAMP or Re-Ramp designation

Yes/No

2) Did you play a role in completing your school’s most recent RAMP application process?

Yes/No

3) Has the counseling department had staffing changes since your previous RAMP submission and the time of your possible resubmission?
Yes/No  
Explain: ________________________

4) Has your school’s administration had staffing changes since your previous RAMP submission and the time of your  
Yes/No  
Explain:________________________

5) Was the decision to seek the RAMP decision the school counselors’ choice or an administrative choice?  __________________________

Perceived Sources of Support for the RAMP or Re-RAMP

How would you rate your perceptions of support for completing the RAMP or Re-RAMP application as it pertains to your current school or district setting?  
Please select the statement you most agree with:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School and district factors</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support from central office/district staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support from school counselor specific professional development or in-service training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support from Principal or Administrative Team</td>
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Support from School Counseling supervisor or Counseling Department Head

Support from fellow school counselors in your school

Each of the school counselors in the department contributed to the application (select does not apply if you are the only school counselor in your building)

Please select the statement you most agree with in regards to the effort you put forth in completing the RAMP process.

Completion Process Factors

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree or Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The RAMP or Re-RAMP took too much time.</td>
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<td>The RAMP or Re-RAMP process was overwhelming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other school or district office staff instructed me not to pursue a subsequent RAMP designation</td>
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The RAMP or Re-RAMP process was stressful.

Perceptions of the RAMP designation. Please select the statement you agree with the most in regards to how you feel about earning the RAMP designation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree or Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>The benefits received from successfully completing the RAMP process made it a worthwhile experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Earning the RAMP designation was a valuable experience.</td>
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<td>The RAMP or Re-RAMP process addressed schoolwide needs.</td>
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<td>The RAMP or Re-RAMP process addressed students’ academic performance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The RAMP or Re-RAMP process addressed students’ social/emotional needs</td>
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</table>
The RAMP or Re-RAMP process addressed students’ college/career readiness

The school counseling department felt validated after receiving the RAMP designation.

The RAMP or Re-RAMP process provided me valuable insight into my school’s counseling program.

Other school staff (beyond the school counseling department) knew we were a “RAMP school”.

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Would you be willing to participate in a 30-45 minute telephone interview? 

Y/N
Appendix B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

(for continuous RAMP schools)

1. Why did your school counseling team originally decide to pursue a RAMP designation?

2. Can you tell me about the individuals who provided leadership throughout the RAMP process?

3. What would you consider the biggest challenges of completing the RAMP process?

4. Are there particular challenges in the RAMP process that you think can be eliminated or less difficult? If so, how?

5. What has been the biggest benefit(s) of completing the RAMP process for your school?

6. Did you feel supported in this endeavor? (By whom?) In what ways? If not, how could this have been improved upon?

7. In retrospect, what specific factors do you think are important to implement a successful school counseling program?

8. What factors are important to successfully apply and achieve the RAMP designation?

9. Are there additional benefits (tangible or otherwise) that you think would encourage more people to complete the RAMP process?
   a) What might those be?

10. Which stakeholders influence your role as a school counselor the most (e.g., administrators, parents, student populations, and other faculty or community leaders)?

11. Did any of the stakeholders contribute to your RAMP success?

12. Were any of the stakeholders aware that your team was going through the RAMP process?

13. Is there anything you’d like to share with me that went into your decision to Re-RAMP?
14. Is there anything else you would like to share about the process in general?

Questions specific for gap-RAMP schools?
(Ask all of the above questions)

1. What happened during the years between your active RAMP status?
   - Did staff stay the same? Describe any changes?

2. Were there school counseling programmatic changes during those years?

3. What led to the decision to apply for a RAMP designation after having the lapse?

Questions specific for the lapsed-RAMP group
(Ask questions 1-14 in first protocol and questions 1-2 in the gap-RAMP protocol)

1. Does your school currently have a comprehensive school counseling program aligned with the ASCA National Model?

2. How is your school counseling different now compared to the years you had the RAMP designation?

3. What would you change about the RAMP application process?

4. Would you ever consider applying for the RAMP designation again?
REFERENCES


Bardwell, R. (2005). What are the top five professional development areas of interest for school counselors? In American School Counselor Association (Ed.), *Foundations and basics* (pp. 250-252).


