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## Counselors' Job Satisfaction across Education Levels and Specialties

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# Counselors' Job Satisfaction across Education Levels and Specialties

## **Abstract**

The study examined job satisfaction of counselors in various specialties and also across educational levels. The researchers administered the Job Descriptive Index (JDI) (Balzer et al., 1997) and the results were analyzed using a multivariate analysis of covariance to measure differences for counselors in regard to satisfaction with the work tasks, present pay, promotion opportunities, supervision, work peers, and overall career. Findings indicated that Doctorate level counselors were more satisfied with promotion opportunities than Masters-level counselors, and counselor educators were more satisfied with promotion opportunities than mental health, school, or creative arts/other counselors. Ideas for enhancing graduate level career curricula and facilitating exploratory supervision for new counselors are discussed.

## **Keywords**

Counselors, job satisfaction, career, vocational specialization, exploration

# Counselors' Job Satisfaction across Education Levels and Specialties

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The study examined job satisfaction of counselors in various specialties and also across educational levels. The researchers administered the Job Descriptive Index (JDI) (Balzer et al., 1997) and the results were analyzed using a multivariate analysis of covariance to measure differences for counselors in regard to satisfaction with the work tasks, present pay, promotion opportunities, supervision, work peers, and overall career. Findings indicated that Doctorate-level counselors were more satisfied with promotion opportunities than Masters-level counselors, and counselor educators were more satisfied with promotion opportunities than mental health, school, or creative arts/other counselors. Ideas for enhancing graduate level career curricula and facilitating exploratory supervision for new counselors are discussed.

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Counseling is a diverse and exciting profession, but by no means is it one size fits all. There are many specialties in counseling and educational tracks that students and new professionals can pursue. Before someone invests the time and energy in becoming a counselor, however, it seems important to know if the vocation will be satisfying. Job satisfaction is often related to finding one's *fit*, the phenomenon of congruence between an individual and one's work (Cable & DeRue, 2002). Finding a fit contributes to overall job satisfaction (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Erdogan & Bauer, 2005; Erdogan, Kraimer, & Liden, 2004; Resick, Baltes, & Shantz, 2007). Job satisfaction continues to be relevant to study due to its historical (Crites, 1969) and present importance because work is so fundamental to people's lives (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002; Spector, 1997). Therefore, it is necessary to frame job satisfaction within an historical perspective and to demonstrate its relevance to today's counselors.

For the purposes of this study, job satisfaction is defined as the attitude a worker has about his or her job as compared to previous experiences, current expectations, or available alternatives (Balzer et al., 1997). Job satisfaction is not just a global measure of overall contentment with one's work. There are several elements that contribute to this construct (Cross, 1973). The main ones are the work itself (Ronan, 1970; Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969), present pay (Katzell, 1964), promotion opportunities (Porter, 1961), supervision (Katzell), and other people at work (Alderfer, 1967). Although these facets add to job satisfaction (Cross, 1973), the whole of job satisfaction is not necessarily equivalent to the sum of these parts (Scarpello & Campbell, 1983). To measure only global job satisfaction is to neglect major determinants of job satisfaction (Scarpello & Campbell) and therefore limits the findings for counselors. That is why instrumentation measuring the

various facets is essential to understanding job satisfaction for counselors.

Instrumentation was a primary limitation of previous similar studies examining counselor job satisfaction. Previous studies (e.g., Bane, 2006; Clemons, 1988; Morgan, 1987) measured the job satisfaction of counselors with the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (Weis, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967), an instrument that, although adequately valid and reliable, only provides an overall satisfaction score and fails to explain respondent satisfaction across different aspects of the job. Another limitation of similar studies pertained to their narrow sample. Whether sampling school counselors (Bane; Morgan) or focusing on psychologists who conducted psychotherapy (Delardo, 2007; Vyhmeister, 2001), the results of these studies were not generalizable to counselors of other education levels and specialties. Therefore, more research is needed to better understand counselor job satisfaction across key variables such as specializations and education levels.

Our study examined whether or not there are differences in the facets of job satisfaction among Masters-level and Doctorate-level counselors. These two groups were compared because it is still unclear how education level influences one or more of the facets of job satisfaction. Phillips and Hays (1978) found that among mental health workers who did not believe they were adequately compensated, those who possessed the minimum required level of training were as satisfied as workers with advanced training. Johnson and Johnson (2000) corroborated this with their finding that perceived over-qualification has a negative effect on job satisfaction. Clemons (1988) found that although there was a positive relationship between education level and compensation satisfaction, there

was no significant relationship between education level and general job satisfaction. Because the relationship between education level of counselors and job satisfaction is still unclear, the present study tested for differences.

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2010) indicates that there are nine disciplines of study within counseling: career, college, community, gerontological, marriage and family, mental health, school, student affairs, and counselor education and supervision. The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2010) currently has 14 active interest networks with new ones being created each year. Counselors creatively use their mental health training in everything from life coaching (Williams & Davis, 2007) to wellness orientations (Myers & Sweeney, 2008; Okonski, 2003) to creative arts therapies (Brown, 2008; Leventhal, 2008; Sherwood, 2008; Sommers-Flanagan, 2007), and it is apparent there are many paths to fulfilling careers in counseling. Because not much is known about the differences in counselor satisfaction across specializations, we focused our study on the following practice areas to compare: mental health counseling, school counseling, counselor education, and creative arts therapies. Therefore, our subgroups were selected because they represent the broad spectrum of specialties in counseling (ACA, 2009; CACREP, 2009; Drum & Blom, 2001).

Even though previous researchers (e.g., Bane, 2006; Clemons, 1988; Morgan, 1987; Vyhmeister, 2001) have attempted to answer the question, "How satisfied are professional counselors in their jobs?" specific insight into counselor satisfaction across education levels and specializations was not found. Satisfaction among psychologists (Delardo, 2007; Vyhmeister, 2001), school counselors (Bane, 2006;

Morgan, 1987), or counselor educators (Parr, Bradley, Lan, & Gould, 1996) by themselves has been previously examined. Many previous investigations (e.g., Bane; Clemons; Morgan) have also only measured job satisfaction as a global construct as opposed to the multifaceted phenomenon that it is (Balzer et al., 1997; Cross, 1973; Smith, Kendall et al., 1969).

The purpose of our study was to survey the job satisfaction of counselors across two key variables: education level and specialization. These are by no means intended to be comprehensive, but rather, these variables were chosen to lay the groundwork for future comparative studies. For the purposes of this study, there are two guiding assumptions about counselors and work: (a) those who are fortunate enough to be employed prefer to derive some sense of meaning from their work (Blustein, 2008), and (b) deciding how to actualize one's career potential lies largely in the individual (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002). Our study also comes from the perspective that counselors continually gain experience in a variety of practice areas until they find the fit, which relates to job satisfaction (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Therefore, our study has the potential to assist graduate students and young professionals in learning more about employment options that are available to them as well as what variables contribute to the job satisfaction of professional counselors.

## Hypotheses

H<sub>1</sub> There is no significant difference between Master's- and Doctorate-level counselors in counselor job satisfaction across the five Job Descriptive Index subscales when satisfaction scores have been adjusted for the number of years worked in the field.

H<sub>2</sub> There is a significant difference between mental health counselors, school counselors, counselor educators, and creative arts therapists in counselor job satisfaction across the Job Descriptive Index subscales when job satisfaction scores have been adjusted for the number of years worked in the field.

## Method

### Population and Sampling

This study had the following inclusion criteria: (a) counselors who have obtained a Master's degree or higher in counseling or a related discipline, and (b) counselors who continuously worked at least part-time in the counseling or counselor education field. The decision to use counselors who worked continuously at least part-time was determined in order to obtain a sample of professionals who were likely to possess a counselor identity. Everyone who met the first two criteria was included and statistical adjustments were made as appropriate at the end of data collection.

### Data Collection Procedures

In order to obtain an adequate sample size of counselors, we purchased a random list of 999 counselors from the American Counseling Association (ACA). To ensure a representative sample across each variable, a random list from the ACA was requested along with a random list from the following ACA divisions: Association for Creativity in Counseling and Association of Counselor Education and Supervision. An email request was sent to the random sample of counselors from the ACA and to five professional counseling listservs: Counselor Education and Supervision Network (CESNET), American College Counseling

Association (ACCA) list, a School of Psychology and Counseling list, a Drama Therapy list, and the American Dance Therapy Association forum. The drama and dance therapy lists were chosen to increase chances of obtaining respondents in the creative arts therapies. The email included a description of the study and a link to the secure online instrument. The online instrument included the informed consent document, a demographic questionnaire, and the Job Descriptive Index. The link was available for seven weeks and a total of six appeals were made for participation.

### **Participants**

Counselors completed a demographic questionnaire before taking the online satisfaction survey. There were an estimated 6,230 invited participants, but that could be an overestimate given the possibility of cross-posting on multiple listservs. Out of the estimated 6,230 invited subjects, 477 completed the survey, giving a response rate of 7.66%. However, since it is important to ensure that the survey instruments were completed without omissions (Smith, Budzeika, Edwards, Johnson, & Bearse, 1986) only 464 responses were deemed usable. Missing responses were assigned a distinguishing value (Smith et al.) so that in the event that a respondent completed one scale, but not another, then their completed responses could be analyzed and their missing responses excluded without throwing out the usable data all together.

Of the 464 respondents ( $N = 464$ ) in this sample, 73.3% ( $n = 340$ ) were women and 25.9% ( $n = 120$ ) were men. All subjects were over 18 years of age, were working in counseling, and had obtained at least a Master's in counseling or a related discipline. It is important to note that not all participants responded to all the

demographic questions; therefore, not all demographic characteristics totaled 464. Self-identified ethnicity of the participants included Caucasian, 86.0% ( $n = 399$ ); African-American/Black, 5.6% ( $n = 26$ ); Latino, 4.3% ( $n = 20$ ); Asian/Pacific Islander 1.5% ( $n = 7$ ); Multiracial, 1.3% ( $n = 6$ ); American Indian, .6% ( $n = 3$ ); and other, .6% ( $n = 3$ ). The highest education level obtained by the participants was a Master's degree for 58.2% ( $n = 270$ ) and a Doctorate degree for 41.2% ( $n = 191$ ). Number of years in the field ranged from less than 1 year to 45 years ( $M = 11.2$ ,  $SD = 9.53$ ).

Regarding professional demographics, the majority of participants worked full-time, 80.6% ( $n = 374$ ) and held a professional license or a school counselor certification, 77.2% ( $n = 358$ ). Participants were self-employed (9.7%,  $n = 45$ ) or employed with an educational or community organization, 87.3% ( $n = 405$ ). Specializations included mental health counselors, 47.0% ( $n = 218$ ); counselor educators, 20.9% ( $n = 97$ ); school counselors, 13.4% ( $n = 62$ ); and other, 18.7% ( $n = 87$ ). The other specializations included career, creative arts, marriage and family, college, substance abuse/addictions, and student affairs.

### **Job Descriptive Index (JDI)**

Wright, Cropanzano, and Bonett (2007) use the JDI to measure job satisfaction. Developed by Balzer et al. (2007), the JDI is a 33-item instrument that measures job satisfaction as a multidimensional construct with several principal facets (Balzer et al., 1997). The JDI is comprised of six subscales measuring facets of job satisfaction. These scales are as follows: 1) Satisfaction with work (5 items)



includes opportunities for creativity, task variety, amount of autonomy, degree of challenge, and job complexity; 2) Satisfaction with pay (5 items) refers to the attitude toward pay based on perceived difference between actual pay and expected pay; 3) Satisfaction with promotions (5 items) refers to satisfaction with company's promotion policy and the administration of that policy; 4) Satisfaction with supervision (5 items) refers to the idea that in general, the more considerate and employee-centered supervisors are the greater the levels of satisfaction; 5) Satisfaction with people on the present job (5 items) refers to the worker's degree of satisfaction with fellow employees, clients, staff, or others on the job; and 6) Satisfaction with job in general (8 items) refers to the worker's degree of satisfaction with the job in general most of the time.

The JDI provides a list of short phrases or adjectives and asks the respondent to select "Yes", "No," or "?" for Do Not Know. Half of the items are worded favorably (e.g. "creative") and the other items are worded unfavorably (e.g. "boring"). A "Yes" response to a favorably worded item indicates satisfaction, whereas a "No" response to a favorably worded item indicates dissatisfaction (Balzer et al., 1997). For the favorable items, the "Yes" receives 3 points, the "No" receives 0 points, and the "?" receives 1 point because a "Do Not Know" response is usually indicative of dissatisfaction instead of satisfaction (Balzer et al., 1997). The unfavorable items are reverse scored with "No" receiving 3 points and so forth. The scores are out of a possible 15 points for each scale (See Table 1) and the concluding total score represents the satisfaction level for that subscale only. For our study, none of the facet scores were added together for a total composite satisfaction score.

The JDI has been validated through multiple studies since 1959 (Balzer et al., 1997) and the results from these studies indicate that based on cluster analyses and factor analyses, the JDI measures were found to possess high levels of discriminant and convergent validity (Balzer et al.). This means that the JDI satisfactorily measures the specific facets of job satisfaction that it says it does. The JDI has the following alpha coefficients for its subscales (Balzer et al.): .90 for work, .86 for pay, .87 for opportunities for promotion, .91 for supervision, and .91 for coworkers. This internal reliability score range from .86 to .92 means that the JDI subscales are consistent across repeated administrations. Given the strength of its reliability and validity scores, the JDI is a reasonable measure to use when investigating job satisfaction (Kinicki, McKee-Ryan, Schriesheim, & Carson, 2002) and was an appropriate instrument for this study. Upon completion of data collection, all data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 18.0.

## **Results**

### **Statistical Analysis MANCOVA**

Since the researchers wanted to control for the effects of concomitant variables in a multivariate design, they used a Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (Mertler & Vannatta, 2005). A MANCOVA asks if there are statistically significant mean differences among groups on various dependent variables after adjusting for differences in one or more covariates (Mertler & Vannatta, 2005). Before running this type of analysis, certain assumptions had to be met. The researchers checked for normal distribution, homogeneity of variance, homogeneity of regression slopes, linearity, and multicollinearity. There were

not enough respondents in the creative arts therapy specialization or in any of the other reported specializations, so they were collapsed to an "Other" category for the statistical analysis. Once the MANCOVA assumptions were satisfied, the hypotheses were tested and the data were analyzed for group differences.

### Testing Hypotheses

*H<sub>1</sub> There is no significant difference between Master's- and Doctorate-level counselors in counselor job satisfaction across the five JDI subscales when satisfaction scores have been adjusted for the number of years worked in the field.*

Results from the MANCOVA revealed a significant main effect for education level (Wilks' Lambda = .95,  $F(6, 445) = 4.35$ ,  $p < .01$ , partial eta squared  $[\eta_p^2] = .06$ ) on the dependent variables. Tests of between subjects effects indicated that there was no significant difference between education levels *except* in the area of promotion opportunities ( $F(1, 362) = 15.36$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ ). Therefore, the null was accepted for the areas of work itself ( $F(1, .32) = .06$ ,  $p = .81$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ ), pay ( $F(1, 56) = 2.31$ ,  $p = .13$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ), supervision ( $F(1, 16) = .81$ ,  $p = .37$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ), people at work ( $F(1, .20) = .02$ ,  $p = .88$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ ), and the job in general ( $F(1, 3.98) = .13$ ,  $p = .71$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ ), but rejected in the area of promotion opportunities.

*H<sub>2</sub> There is a significant difference between mental health counselors, school counselors, counselor educators, and creative arts therapists in counselor job satisfaction across the JDI subscales when job satisfaction scores have been adjusted for the number of years worked in the field.*

Results from the MANCOVA revealed a significant main effect for specialization (Wilks' Lambda = .90,  $F(18, 1259) = 2.70$ ,  $p < .01$ , partial eta squared

$[\eta_p^2] = .04$ ) on the dependent variables. Tests of between subjects effects indicated that there was no significant difference between specializations *except* in the area of promotion opportunities ( $F(3, 179) = 7.59$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ ). Therefore, the null was accepted for the areas of work itself ( $F(3, 4) = .66$ ,  $p = .58$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ ), pay ( $F(3, 46) = 1.89$ ,  $p = .13$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .13$ ), supervision ( $F(3, 37) = 1.86$ ,  $p = .14$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ), people at work ( $F(3, 12) = 1.40$ ,  $p = .24$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ ), and the job in general ( $F(3, 11.25) = .38$ ,  $p = .77$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .00$ ), but rejected in the area of promotion opportunities.

A follow up univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used (Mertler & Vannatta, 2005) to enhance the understanding of the findings around promotion opportunities. The results indicated the dependent variable of satisfaction with promotion opportunities was significantly affected by education level, with Doctorate-level counselors being more satisfied in this area ( $F(3, 460) = 19.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

To determine the location of the significant differences between specialization groups, a Tukey Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) post hoc test was used. The results indicated that satisfaction with promotion opportunities was also significantly affected by specialization, with counselor educators being most satisfied in this area (See Table 2). The promotion scores of counselor educators were significantly different from mental health counselors, school counselors, and creative arts/other counselors at the ( $p < .01$ ) level.

### Discussion

To best understand the results of this study, it is helpful to return to the guided assumption stated in the beginning: those who are fortunate enough to be employed



prefer to derive meaning from their work (Blustein, 2008). Work can serve a basic need for survival, but it also serves as a means of self-determination (Blustein). Work as a way to self-determination means that individuals must find ways to sustain energy and motivation in their jobs even when faced with challenging career tasks (Blustein). If counselors can feel empowered to self-author their careers, this can enhance their sense of job satisfaction. Based on our results, clearly marked pathways to promotion is a way to do just that.

The results indicated that when it comes to satisfaction with promotion opportunities, counselors do, in fact, differ across education level and specialization. Doctorate-level counselors were more satisfied with promotion opportunities than Master's-level counselors, and counselor educators were more satisfied with promotion opportunities than any of the other groups of counselors (mental health, school, or creative arts/other counselors). These findings confirm the importance of advancement possibilities and their role in the job satisfaction of some individuals (Katzell, 1964; Ronan, 1970; Smith et al., 1969). A possible explanation for these results could be the importance of promotion within academia (Davis, Levitt, McGlothlin, & Hill, 2006), one example being tenure. Although tenure is not the only way to obtain promotions, it is an opportunity within higher education and a goal for which most counselor educators strive (Chapin, 2006). Because satisfaction with promotion opportunities refers to the organization's actual policy and the way it is administered, this sample of counselor educators could be satisfied because of the clearly stated expectations for advancing within their jobs. Mental health, school, or other counselors, on the other hand, might not perceive clear guidelines for promotion and what is required for advancement in their subfield.

The last major finding in the study that was not statistically significant, but valuable nonetheless, was that there were no differences in job satisfaction in terms of satisfaction with work, pay, supervision, peers and clients, and the job overall among counselors when controlling for the number of years in the field. This validated previous findings that regardless of education level or specialization counselors are equally satisfied in most areas of job satisfaction (Clemons, 1988). Counselors across education level and specialization can take heart in the fact that they can pursue whatever career or educational direction they want and may be just as satisfied as their counseling colleagues.

### **Implications for Counselors, Counselor Educators, and Supervisors**

This study has shown that counseling professionals across education level and specialization are generally the same in most areas of job satisfaction. Yet, most graduate students and new counselors are not aware of what opportunities exist for them as counselors (Busacca & Wester, 2006). In fact, 78% of surveyed counseling students from CACREP accredited programs said they were *considerably* concerned with acquiring more information about themselves and types of jobs within the field (Busacca & Wester). With the revised 2009 CACREP standards in place, today's graduate programs have an opportunity to provide counseling students with "career, avocational, educational, occupational, and labor market information resources" (CACREP, 2009, II 4b), to do career counseling with clients and also to better prepare themselves for the possibilities and challenges that await them in the profession (Blustein, 2008; Butler, 2005).

One recommendation for counselor educators is to enhance Master's-level

courses that deal with counselor development. Integrating a professional development focus throughout classes like Career Theories, Counseling Skills & Techniques, and Helping Relationships can facilitate new trainees' awareness throughout their program of how to successfully advance, how to develop their personal goals and abilities (Hansen, 2000), and how to actualize their career potential (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002). Doctorate-level counselors can benefit from a career development focus throughout their training as well. Classes such as Instruction in Counselor Education and Supervision and Consultation assist with teaching Doctoral students to become leaders, but in-depth seminar courses on how to use one's degree and navigate one's career path would benefit advanced students as well. Through creative and interactive ways of teaching counselor career development, graduate students of all levels can broaden their exposure to the field they are entering and understanding of what contributes to job satisfaction within it.

Several exercises could encourage student exposure and reflection. One option is using the Future Career Autobiography (Reh fuss, 2009). This simple exercise encourages students to consider their futures as they identify where they hope to be in life and what they hope to be doing in five years. Such an activity motivates exploration and clarification of promotion desires and goals. Another option is to facilitate self-awareness in career classes by using weekly reflection journals. Writing their ongoing thoughts and feelings about their career goals encourages self-exploration and further clarifies how they desire self and work to intersect (Savickas, 2006). A final suggestion to enhance graduate courses is to assign counseling specific career outlook projects. By assigning projects on obtaining occupational information specific to the counseling profession, counselors in training

would become exposed to the various ways to use their counselor training, as well as how to advance in their career, a key component to job satisfaction.

In addition to strengthening graduate curriculum, counselor educators and supervisors can also provide Master's students the information for specialty selection and educational paths, and Doctoral students the ongoing support in professional identity formation and advancement opportunities. Supervision is a valuable opportunity to foster the idea that career exploration is necessary at all levels of training and counselors should gain exposure to various professional conditions as a means of finding their fit (Busacca & Wester, 2006; Niles, Anderson, & Goodnough, 1998). Supervisors should openly dialogue with their supervisees about counseling specialties, their educational requirements, and how to advance within them. Counselor educators and supervisors alike have the unique opportunity to help graduate students and new counselors identify their ultimate career goals and what it takes to thrive and be satisfied (Oster, 2006).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Future researchers have an opportunity to build on our findings in the following ways: One possible direction is to explore work values. By comparing what counselors of each education level and specialization value in their jobs, light may be shed on the importance of promotion for counselor educators as compared to practitioners. Another possible research direction is examining the phenomenon of job fit across counselor specialties and education because job fit may also influence job and career satisfaction (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Resick, Baltes, & Shantz, 2007). The use of qualitative methods could also

provide a richer and deeper understanding of the relationships and factors that influence

counselor

job

satisfaction.

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APPENDIX

Table 1  
*Total Satisfaction Scores (N = 464)*

Subscales	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Work	464	14.14	2.38
Pay	464	6.99	5.03
Promotion	464	8.37	5.24
Supervision	464	11.53	4.54
People	464	13.42	2.98
General	464	20.00	5.51
Career	459	11.85	2.45

Scores out of a possible 15 points with the higher score indicating more satisfaction.

Table 2

*Tukey HSD*

Specialization	Specialization	<i>M</i> difference	<i>SE</i>	Sig.
Mental health counseling	School counseling	-1.28	.71	.28
	Counselor education	-4.59*	.60	.00
	Creative arts therapy/other	-.95	.63	.43
School counseling	Mental health counseling	1.28	.71	.28
	Counselor education	-3.31*	.81	.00
	Creative arts therapy/other	.33	.82	.98
Counselor education	Mental health counseling	4.59*	.60	.00
	School counseling	3.31*	.81	.00
	Creative arts therapy/other	3.64*	.73	.00
Creative arts therapy/other	Mental health counseling	.95	.63	.43
	School counseling	-.33	.82	.98
	Counselor education	-3.64*	.73	.00

\*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

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