

## Preparing School Counseling Trainees in Professional Legislative Advocacy

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*Professional legislative advocacy is a pathway to improve the field of education as it may lead to policy changes that impact schools and the profession directly. Higher education faculty have the opportunity to infuse in their students the skills and confidence to become advocates for their respective disciplines. In this study on an approach to teaching, we developed a training intervention to teach and build school counseling trainees' confidence for engaging in professional legislative advocacy and evaluated its effectiveness in an initial study. Compared to pretest scores, the participants had significant gains in knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to professional legislative advocacy after the training intervention. Their posttest scores were also higher than a sample of school counselor trainees who did not participate in the training. We discuss the implications of these findings and suggested research directions.*

*Keywords: professional legislative advocacy, school counselor trainees, professional identity, school counseling*

The school counseling profession has a strong history rooted in advocacy for its professional identity and roles within educational settings. Advocates in the school counseling field have promoted establishing a clear identity within schools, decreasing high student caseloads, and shifting from the nomenclature of guidance counselor to school counselor (Field & Baker, 2004; Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Zyromski et al., 2019). These advocacy platforms aim to break down barriers for school counselors to impact the educational outcomes of students. Advocacy for the profession has been and will continue to be a key skill for school counselors. Similar key advocacy issues exist for other professions and disciplines.

Advocacy comes in various forms, such as social justice advocacy and legislative advocacy, and includes professional actions that can take place at the individual student, school, community, and systems levels (Field & Baker, 2004; Myers et al., 2002; Ratts et al., 2007). At its core, advocacy is a mechanism that helps enhance students' educational outcomes, improve the profession, and bring greater understanding to the public about the roles of school counselors (McKibben et al., 2017), and there is a call for school counselors to understand and practice advocacy through legislative means.

Farrell and Barrio Minton (2019) explicitly defined *legislative professional advocacy* as "advocacy related to legislation to improve or change policies that impact the counseling profession, clients, and counselors' ability to practice" (p. 144). An inherent need to prepare school counselors for professional legislative advocacy is merited in codes of ethics (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014), training standards (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2015), and widely adopted competencies (Ratts et al., 2007; Toporek & Daniels, 2018). The call to advocate for the profession is not new (i.e., Myers et al., 2002), and more research on the mechanisms to prepare school counseling trainees to be legislative advocates is warranted (Swank et al., 2019). In Field and Baker's (2004) study examining how school counselors define and engage in advocacy, other than writing letters, proactive and reactive forms of legislative-based advocacy were not included in the findings, which may suggest a need for informing and training school counselors to understand the importance of legislative advocacy. In response to these needs, we created an educational intervention embedded within a school counseling course to prepare master's level trainees to engage in professional legislative advocacy. We also examined the effectiveness of this intervention by conducting an initial study on its effectiveness to increase school counseling trainees' confidence in professional legislative advocacy.

### **Professional Legislative Advocacy**

Several authors (Bond, 2019; Farrell & Barrio Minton, 2019; Mullen et al., 2019; Swank et al., 2019; Thomas, 2019) described research related to the topic of professional legislative advocacy in education and counseling professions. Across research studies and participant groups, several common themes emerged regarding the process of developing leadership and advocacy skills. These themes included a shared desire to learn how to actively engage in advocacy work, along with hesitation to participate due to feeling unprepared or lacking the knowledge to advocate effectively. Additionally, many actively engaged participants identified a crisis or catalyst that motivated them to affect change in policies or legislation.

Researchers (Farrell & Barrio Minton, 2019; Swank et al., 2019) have emphasized encouraging counselors-in-training to develop leadership and advocacy skills. Farrell and Barrio Minton (2019) conducted a constructivist grounded theory study that explored the process of professional legislative advocacy with 15 counseling leaders. Professional legislative advocacy is critical for mental health care access and social justice advocacy by bridging the gap between large-scale professional issues and individual client welfare. Interviews with counselor educators resulted in the development of the *Three-Tiered Professional Legislative Advocacy Model*, which described three non-linear phases: Advocacy Catalyst, Advocacy Action, and Advocacy Training. The model outlined what motivated advocacy action, the types of advocacy activities, and how to improve advocacy training. Moreover, the model considered the personal characteristics that supported motivation and strength, counselors' decision-making process in advocacy, their perseverance, and the barriers to negotiating. In describing the advocacy training segment of the model, Farrell and Barrio Minton (2019) highlighted that training in leadership, advocacy, and professional legislative advocacy is limited in counselor education and suggested the use of collaboration and mentorship, self-directed training, and hands-on training in counselor education programs to teach the process of professional legislative advocacy.

In another qualitative study that examined participants' experiences with professional legislative advocacy, Swank et al. (2019) utilized a phenomenological approach to identify five themes of advocacy. The researchers analyzed the transcripts of eight semi-structured interviews and 17 written reflections collected from a group of students who experienced an advocacy trip and participated in the preparation and follow-up activities as part of their counselor education program. The five themes that emerged from the study included: (a) learning process, (b) redefining advocacy,

(c) influencing the legislative process, (d) empowerment and future advocacy, and (e) improvements. The *learning process* theme illustrated how students learned about advocacy beyond the classroom context by engaging in a day-on-the-hill experience. A day-on-the-hill experience involves visiting a state or federal legislator in their capital offices to discuss policy issues. The learned experiences included increased knowledge of current issues and the legislative process, increased awareness about the challenges related to the legislative process, opportunities to practice and develop advocacy skills (i.e., public speaking), and the benefits of advocating as a group. The *redefining advocacy* theme represented how students could reframe their sense of advocacy as a critical process to advocate for students' needs.

Within the theme of *influencing the legislative process* (Swank et al., 2019), students increased their knowledge of the importance and impact of building relationships between counselors and legislators to create change in legislation and policies impacting the profession. Additionally, students identified the importance of using their voices as a collaborative group, thereby increasing representation. The *empowerment and future advocacy* theme described how students reported feeling empowered by their experience and increased motivation to continue advocacy work for school counseling. Finally, the *improvements* theme explained how students valued preparation for the advocacy experience, which included instruction around steps for action and activities that increased self-awareness. Additionally, students also appreciated working collaboratively with classmates and faculty in advocacy groups and suggested a longer duration of advocacy experiences and improvements for training around effective communication with legislators. Swank et al. (2019) suggested that counselor educators can encourage students to see advocacy as an element of counseling. This perspective shifts the lens of advocacy away from being something unrelated and instead toward advocacy as a critical competency of counseling and service to clients, a crucial aspect of the development of multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (Swank et al., 2019).

Moreover, utilizing a multiple case study approach, Bond (2019) examined three educators' interview responses with local, state, and legislative advocacy experience. The study affirmed five previous suggestions in research for advocacy engagement: decide on which level of government to focus advocacy, concentrate on a particular area of education to emphasize, build strong relationships with policymakers, interact with policymakers of varying viewpoints, and work with constituents who are impacted by the policymakers. Likewise, three new themes arose from interviews, including: (a) motives for involvement, (b) personalization of advocacy, and (c) advocating to policymakers and other educators. The theme, *motives for involvement*, echoed Farrell and Barrio Minton's (2019) catalyst phase of advocacy and typically included events related to the educators' work, often experienced as a crisis. As a result, educators were motivated to "get involved and try to influence decisions" (Bond, 2019, p. 82). The theme, *personalization of advocacy*, illustrated how participants incorporated their own experiences and strengths into their advocacy processes. Participants found roles in organizations for advocacy that utilized their expertise and skills. Finally, the theme, *advocating to policymakers and constituents*, described how participants learned that successful advocacy involved working with various people across various positions and engaging others in dialogue while seeking common ground. Moreover, participants learned that advocates build relationships with policymakers, as well as with constituents. In essence, educators and advocates are engaging in a form of public relations. Bond's (2019) findings suggested that educators should look to the people and events that impact their work, reflect upon their characteristics and assets, and collaborate with all stakeholders to advocate for success and influence.

Further, Thomas (2019) explored the meaning that eight counseling students ascribed to their experience of professional legislative advocacy after having participated in an ACA Institute for Leadership Training. The findings resulted in ten main themes related to participants' motivators or impediments in leadership engagement, including (a) awareness, (b) faculty mentor, (c) involvement,

(d) incorporating legislative advocacy into the curriculum, (e) lack of confidence, (f) student learning and personal development, (g) legislative culture, (h) motivation, (i) student obstacles to professional legislative advocacy, and (j) problems in working with other professions. The themes illustrated that as a result of their participation in the ACA leadership training, participants reported increased awareness of the facets of professional legislative advocacy and indicated that the influence of a faculty mentor was the most significant factor in becoming involved in the training. Participants noted that involvement in a hands-on advocacy experience was valuable and reported wanting more opportunities for hands-on leadership experience. Further, participants expressed interest in learning more professional legislative advocacy content and having professional legislative advocacy preparation incorporated into both course curriculum and institutional culture. Students felt unprepared to engage in advocacy due to limited knowledge and skills actively. Thus, participants indicated an interest in expanding knowledge on professional legislative advocacy, developing leadership strengths, and strengthening their professional identities. Similar to the findings in prior research (Bond, 2019; Farrell & Barrio Minton, 2019), Thomas (2019) found that it was critical to consider how counseling students' values and beliefs support or motivate their legislative action. There were obstacles to engaging in professional legislative advocacy, including time constraints, financial strain, refusing responsibility and accountability, and limited preparation and instruction regarding professional legislative advocacy within the counseling program curriculum. There is a clear theme that professional legislative advocacy training, especially in the school counseling profession, is impactful and needed. Similarly, the need for professional legislative advocacy training is evident across various disciplines and professions (e.g., Alexander & Allo, 2022; Garner & McCarron, 2020; Sundean et al., 2019).

### **Description of the Professional Legislative Advocacy Training**

We created the Professional Legislative Advocacy Training, a five-hour training that included an experiential learning component to help prepare Master's level school counseling trainees to advocate on the legislative level regarding issues in the school counseling profession. Our aim for this training was to infuse more information and experiences regarding the vital role professional legislative advocacy plays in school counselors' job functions. We developed the content (i.e., information shared with school counseling trainees) and format (i.e., activities employed) of the training based on existing research (e.g., Bond, 2019; Farrell & Barrio Minton, 2019; Swank et al., 2019) along with additional literature on this topic (i.e., ACA, 2011). This training length accommodated a single course session and also involved an experiential day-on-the-hill activity. Educators can adapt the training as a one-time session or as an asynchronous activity. The training aimed to provide foundational knowledge regarding communicating with legislators and advocating for professional issues. Furthermore, the training provided a structured experience whereby the trainees could practice their legislative advocacy skills with actual legislators through the day-on-the-hill activity.

Implementation included two main elements, including classroom instruction that set the foundation for legislative advocacy. The two foci of classroom instruction were: (a) communicating and interacting with legislators and (b) identifying and speaking about school counseling legislation. The first part of the training involved discussing the legislative process, various communication strategies for legislative advocacy, and communication forms that result in the most significant impact. In addition, we taught content about the rules and routines for communicating with legislators by phone and during in-person meetings. During this time, students engaged in role-play exercises, practicing communication strategies with policymakers.

When teaching students about identifying legislative issues, we walked through state and federal advocacy pathways to learn about school counseling policies and the difference between state

and federal issues. The class activities included viewing association websites with legislative updates and reviewing policy alerts impacting the school counseling profession. If available, we invited legislative leaders to speak to the students about the issues they planned to address in the coming session. Significantly, this element of the training differentiates local, state, and federal legislative processes and issues. Furthermore, we discussed the method of identifying our elected officials and which committees they serve. The students integrated the current legislative issues with their elected officials' different positions or committees to tailor the conversation. The students also drafted an advocacy letter focused on a current issue, created an informational handout to share with the legislators, and described the current state and federal legislative issues impacting the school counseling profession.

The culmination of this project was a group trip to conduct a day-on-the-hill activity, which included meetings primarily with federal legislators in Washington, D.C. However, similar trips could be scheduled for state-level visits or even a visit to the local office of an elected official. If a physical visit is not possible, the class can conduct phone or virtual meetings or letter-writing campaigns. This trip has typically included scheduling meetings with policymakers or their staff members beforehand to learn about the process of arranging a meeting. Then, the group traveled to Washington, DC, and met with the legislators to advocate for the school counseling profession. Shortly after the meetings concluded, the group debriefed the experience and reflected on the major takeaways.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Our chief purpose for this study was to provide an initial examination regarding the effectiveness of professional legislative advocacy training on school counseling trainees' knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards professional legislative advocacy. Results from this study will inform the development of larger, more rigorous research studies testing the outcomes of training in professional legislative advocacy training. We surveyed school counselor trainees before the program, midway, and after the program. We also sought to compare the perceived knowledge, skills, and attitudes of school counseling trainees who participated in this program with the perceived knowledge, skills, and attitudes of school counseling trainees who did not participate in legislative advocacy training. The research questions that guided this study were: (a) Is there a change in school counseling trainees' perceived professional legislative advocacy knowledge, skills, and attitude across three-time points (i.e., pre-training, mid-training, and post-training)? and (b) Do school counseling trainees who completed professional legislative advocacy training have higher perceived professional legislative advocacy knowledge, skills, and attitudes than school counseling trainees who did not participate in the training?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The sample ( $N = 27$ ) in this study included mostly female ( $n = 24$ , 88.9%) with three (11.1%) male participants. The mean age was 29.91 ( $SD = 8.55$ ,  $Mdn = 26$ , Range = 23 to 57). Regarding race/ethnicity, most participants were White ( $n = 20$ , 74.1%) followed by Black/African-American ( $n = 5$ , 18.5%), Hispanic/Latina/o ( $n = 1$ , 3.7%) and multiracial ( $n = 1$ , 3.7%). The group that received the professional legislative advocacy training ( $n = 11$ ) consisted of 10 (90.0%) females and one (9.1%) male participant who were on average 25.09 years old ( $SD = .30$ ,  $Mdn = 25$ ), and who all identified racially as White. The comparison group included 14 (87.5%) females and two (12.5%) males who were on average 31.43 years old ( $SD = 9.76$ ,  $Mdn = 26.5$ ). The comparison group's racial/ethnic make-

up included nine (58.3%) White participants along with five (31.3%) Black/African American, one (6.3%) Hispanic/Latina/o, and one (6.3%) multiracial participant.

## Procedures

Before the initiation of the study, we received approval from the Institutional Review Board. Two pre-experimental research designs were employed to examine this study. First, we employed a one-group pretest-posttest design with a convenience sample of school counseling trainees. Specifically, we surveyed a sample of school counseling trainees ( $n = 11$ ) that participated in the professional legislative advocacy training that occurred as a part of their training program. The school counseling students were introduced to the study and invited to complete the surveys three times: (a) before the professional legislative advocacy training intervention started (Time 1), (b) halfway through the training, and before visiting with legislators (Time 2), and (c) after the professional legislative advocacy training intervention (Time 3). The survey packets were passed out to the students in unsealed envelopes. Students were invited to complete the packet, seal the envelope, and submit it to a member of the research team. This data collection process was employed for Times 1, 2, and 3. Participants also had a unique identifier that allowed the researchers to ensure anonymity. Of the 11 students invited, all completed the packets for the three-time intervals (100% usable response rate).

For the second design, we employed a posttest-only-nonequivalent comparison group design to compare the outcomes of this intervention with a group of school counseling trainees that did not complete professional legislative advocacy training. To achieve this aim, we surveyed a sample of school counseling trainees utilizing *ASCA Scene*, a social media professional networking site hosted by the American School Counselor Association. Specifically, the researchers posted on the ASCA Scene discussion board during the same week that the final survey was conducted with the students participating in the professional advocacy training intervention. We limited the number of participant responses from the ASCA Scene and closed the survey after achieving a sample of 20 participants. All participants were entered into a drawing for a \$25 gift card incentive for completing the study. Of these 20 participants, four reported training in professional legislative advocacy and were removed from the study.

## Intervention

The study participants were enrolled in a 15-week school counseling course that occurred in the final semester of a two-year full-time training program. Approximately five hours of instructional time spanning three two and a half hours of classes included content and activities specific to learning professional legislative advocacy, including a day trip to Washington, D.C. to meet with legislators. We described additional details of the intervention earlier in the article.

## Measures and Variables

Study participants completed a brief demographics questionnaire along with a measure adapted from prior research, which we titled the Professional Legislative Advocacy Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes Scale (PLAKSA; Rogo et al., 2014; Huntoon et al., 2012). The PLAKSA included 17 statements across three domains (perceived knowledge [4 items], perceived advocacy skills [4 items], and attitudes [9 items]) rated along a 5-point Likert scale resulting in ordinal data. Perceived professional legislative advocacy knowledge measured participants' perceived knowledge of legislative concepts and actions relevant to the school counseling profession. Perceived professional legislative advocacy skills measured participants' perceived abilities to actively engage with and approach legislative work.

Professional legislative advocacy attitudes measured participants' perceptions and feelings of interest in participating in the legislative advocacy training and activities. Some sample items included, "I understand the major provisions of the recently enacted education legislation related to school counseling" (knowledge); "I am able to effectively communicate my position to my legislators and/or their staffers" (skills); and "Meeting with legislators is a worthwhile use of my time" (attitude). The participants' scores were calculated by totaling and then averaging their responses on the scales. The internal consistency reliability for scores on the scale was strong, as indicated by Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .89 (Knowledge), .90 (Skills), and .96 (Attitudes). The PLAKSA did not have evidence for the validity of the measure because it was adapted from prior research following a similar research design and has not yet been subjected to formal psychometric testing.

## Data Analysis

Our initial examination of the data indicated that we violated the statistical assumption of normality. The lack of normal data coupled with the ordinal nature of the data led us to apply nonparametric analyses. For the first research question, we applied three Friedman tests, which allowed us to examine the differences in scores across the three-time points. If our results were statistically significant, we also applied a series of Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests to examine the differences more closely and evaluate the effect size using  $r$  (rank-biserial correlation; .1, .3, .5 indicated small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively; Sink & Stroh, 2006). We also applied a Bonferroni correction by using a  $p$ -value of .01 as a cutoff for significance. To analyze our second research question, we applied the Mann-Whitney U Test to examine the difference between school counselor trainees who complete the professional legislative advocacy training intervention and those who did not complete the intervention. We again used the  $r$  effect size for the Mann-Whitney U Test to understand the magnitude of the findings. Tables 1 and 2 present the findings from both research questions.

## Results

### Research Question One

In our initial research questions, we examined the impact of professional legislative advocacy training on school counselor trainees' perceived knowledge, skills, and attitudes. For the first research question, we hypothesized that school counseling trainees' perceived knowledge, skills, and attitudes would increase from pre-training (time 1) to mid-training (time 2) and again in post-training (time 3). The results of the initial Friedman Test indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in school counselor trainees' scores on the measure of perceived professional legislative advocacy knowledge across the three-time points,  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 2$ ,  $n = 11$ ) = 17.07,  $p < .001$ . A review of the median values showed an increase in knowledge scores from pre-training ( $Mdn\ rank = 1.00$ ) to the midpoint ( $Mdn\ rank = 2.41$ ) and at post-training ( $Mdn\ rank = 2.59$ ). Table 1 presents additional information. Three post-hoc Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests were conducted to examine the effect size of these differences. The first Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test identified a statistically significant increase in perceived legislative advocacy knowledge following initial participation in the training program (pre-training and mid-training),  $z = -2.95$ ,  $p < .01$ , with a large effect size ( $r = .89$ ). The second Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test that examined the differences between mid-training and post-training identified no statistically significant difference in participants' perceived knowledge ( $z = -.92$ ,  $p = .36$ ,  $r = .28$ ) between these time points. In the third Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, we compared pre-training and post-training data, which identified a statistically significant increase in perceived legislative advocacy knowledge from the start of the training until after it concluded,  $z = -2.94$ ,  $p < .01$ , with a large effect size ( $r = .89$ ).

**Table 1. Pre, Mid, and Post Score Comparison.**

Elements	Participants' Pre, Mid, and Post Score Comparison			$\chi^2$
	Time 1 <i>M(SD)</i>	Time 2 <i>M(SD)</i>	Time 3 <i>M(SD)</i>	
Knowledge ( $\alpha = .89$ )	3.25 (.54)	4.27 (.32)	4.39 (.36)	17.07*
Skills ( $\alpha = .90$ )	3.09 (.90)	4.61 (.39)	4.50 (.30)	14.55*
Attitudes ( $\alpha = .96$ )	4.09 (.50)	4.33 (.38)	4.31 (.32)	4.05

*Note.*  $N = 11$ , \* =  $p < .001$  (Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test), Scale range = 1 to 5

The results of the second Friedman Test indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in school counselor trainees' perceived skills to employ professional legislative advocacy scores across the three-time points,  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 2, n = 11$ ) = 14.55,  $p < .001$ . A review of the median values showed an increase in skill scores from pre-training ( $Mdn\ rank = 1.14$ ) to mid-training ( $Mdn\ rank = 2.64$ ) and at post-training ( $Mdn\ rank = 2.23$ ). We again ran three Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests to examine these results further. The initial Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test identified a statistically significant increase in perceived skills for legislative advocacy following initial participation in the training program (pre-training and mid-training),  $z = -2.81, p < .01$ , with a large effect size ( $r = .54$ ). The second Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test that examined the differences between mid-training and post-training identified no significant difference in participants' perceived skills,  $z = -1.16, p = .25, r = .22$ . In the third Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test we compared pre-training and post-training data, which identified a statistically significant increase in perceived legislative advocacy skills from the start of the training until after it concluded,  $z = -2.81, p < .01$ , with a large effect size ( $r = .85$ ).

The final Friedman Test results indicated that there was not a statistically significant difference in school counselor trainees' attitude scores across the three-time points,  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 2, n = 11$ ) = 4.05  $p = .13$ . A review of the median values showed an increase in attitude scores from pre-training ( $Mdn\ rank = 1.55$ ) to mid-training ( $Mdn\ rank = 2.14$ ) and at post-training ( $Mdn\ rank = 2.32$ ), but these differences were not statistically significant.

## Research Question Two

For the second research question, we explored the difference between school counselor trainees who completed the professional legislative advocacy training and a group of school counselor trainees who did not participate in the program. We hypothesized that school counseling trainees who completed the professional legislative advocacy training would have higher perceived professional legislative advocacy knowledge, skills, and attitude when compared to school counseling trainees who did not complete professional legislative advocacy training. Table 2 summarizes the findings of this research question.



**Table 2. Intervention and Comparison Group Score Comparison.**

Elements	Intervention and Comparison Groups		U
	Intervention ( <i>n</i> = 11) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Comparison ( <i>n</i> = 16) <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	
Knowledge ( $\alpha = .89$ )	4.39 (.36)	2.36 (1.02)	1.50*
Skills ( $\alpha = .90$ )	4.50 (.30)	2.25 (.99)	10.50*
Attitudes ( $\alpha = .96$ )	4.31 (.32)	3.48 (1.23)	57.00

*Note.* *N* = 11, \* =  $p < .001$  (Mann-Whitney U Test), Scale range = 1 to 5

The first Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a statistically significant difference in perceived knowledge regarding professional legislative advocacy for the school counseling trainees who completed the training (*Mdn rank* = 21.86, *n* = 11) and school counseling trainees' who did not complete the training (*Mdn rank* = 8.59, *n* = 16),  $U = 1.50$ ,  $z = -4.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .83$ . The next Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a statistically significant difference in perceived skills for professional legislative advocacy for the school counseling trainees who completed the training (*Mdn rank* = 21.05, *n* = 11) and school counseling trainees who did not complete the training (*Mdn rank* = 9.16, *n* = 16),  $U = 10.50$ ,  $z = -3.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .74$ . Both the first and second Mann-Whitney U Tests indicated large effect sizes. The final Mann-Whitney U Test revealed no statistically significant difference in perceived attitudes towards professional legislative advocacy for the school counseling trainees who completed the training (*Mdn rank* = 16.82, *n* = 11) and school counseling trainees who did not complete the training (*Mdn rank* = 12.06, *n* = 16),  $U = 57.00$ ,  $z = -1.53$ ,  $p = .134$ ,  $r = .30$ .

## Discussion

In this study, we aimed to explore the impact of professional legislative advocacy training on school counselor trainees' perceived knowledge, skills, and attitudes. We also sought to evaluate the process and methods for evaluating such training. The findings bring attention to the benefits of creating and evaluating instructional interventions within training programs to enhance school counselor trainees' ability and willingness to advocate for legislative issues impacting the school counseling profession. The results showed gains in the participants' knowledge and skills between the pre-training and post-training surveys. Interestingly, participants' attitudes toward legislative advocacy did not significantly change throughout the intervention. Thus, we gleaned from the results that school counseling trainees' thoughts about conducting professional legislative advocacy were likely not markedly impacted by the training, whereas their knowledge about this topic and their skills to implement professional legislative advocacy increased. In other words, school counseling trainees in this study might have experienced value in developing and practically applying content knowledge about legislative advocacy while not seeing gains in their attitude towards the topic. A reason for the lack of impact on participants' attitudes may be tied to a focus on training in general advocacy skills common for counselor education programs. It is possible that the trainees may have received high levels of training in their traditional academic programs that already shaped their positive attitudes regarding legislative advocacy on the topics related to the school counseling profession. Another possible reason for this finding is that the participants started the program with high scores for attitude; thus, the gains were not visible. A larger sample that has greater variance in pretest scores might produce different findings in this aspect of the study.

Regarding our second research question, we discovered that the students who completed the professional legislative advocacy training had higher scores in knowledge and skills compared to

students who did not complete such training. However, attitudes toward professional legislative advocacy did not differ. We interpreted this finding to mean that the trainees learned aspects of professional legislative advocacy that may not have been traditionally taught or covered at the time of the survey with this comparison group. Professional legislative advocacy is an important form of advocacy (ACA, 2011; Bond, 2019; Swank et al., 2019), but it may not be a significant focal point within training programs. Yet, the CACREP (2015) standards specifically note the need to teach legislative advocacy (Section 5. G. 2). Needless to say, some training programs may not dedicate sufficient course time to the topic of advocating with legislators and training in legislative advocacy comes through professional organizations at the state or national level. For example, one study examined the experiences of the ACA Institute for Leadership Training attendees (Thomas, 2019). However, it is unlikely that *all* counseling professionals will attend such training, and thus, there is merit in embedding professional legislative advocacy training within school counseling and other professional training programs.

The findings from both research questions paralleled the findings from prior research. School counselor trainees in this intervention study appeared to express excitement and vigor when it came to professional legislative advocacy. This finding was evident from their observed attitudes towards the idea of professional legislative advocacy. However, prior research, such as Thomas's (2019) study, showed that students might lack confidence due to limited skills and knowledge. In our study, the training helped increase the participants' perceived knowledge and skills for professional legislative advocacy, which could likely lead to increased interest in conducting professional legislative advocacy in the future.

Additionally, Swank et al. (2019) found that engaging in a day-on-the-hill experience helped to solidify the knowledge and skills associated with professional legislative advocacy. Our study adds an initial quantitative examination of the impact of training in this area for school counseling trainees, whereas the prior research examined this experience through qualitative means. The students in our study showed significant increases in professional legislative advocacy skills and knowledge. Thomas's (2019) study participants highlighted the importance of experiential activities in the process of professional development, which also emphasized the benefits of not only learning about legislative advocacy concepts but also engaging in experiential learning (i.e., day-on-the-hill).

### **Implications for Training School Counselors or Other Professionals**

Our findings indicated that school counseling trainees' perceived knowledge and skills may increase throughout professional legislative advocacy training that includes a day-on-the-hill experience. Thus, these results imply that counseling training or other professional training programs that do not already have opportunities for students to learn the valuable aspects of professional legislative advocacy can consider including these elements. This could include a series of readings, assignments, or invited guest lectures and panels that demonstrate different elements of engaging in legislative advocacy. Bond (2019) offered guidance on training educators for professional legislative advocacy that school counselor educators may find useful, such as engaging in various advocacy strategies to influence policy (e.g., writing letters, writing op-ed pieces), building relationships with colleagues inside and outside of the counseling profession to impact education policy, and learning from and collaborating with policymakers. Similarly, publications on advocacy skills (e.g., ACA, 2011) and activities to promote independent research on current local and national advocacy issues in the counseling profession could be used to create course lessons and discussions on professional legislative advocacy. Higher education faculty could adapt the intervention described in this paper to identify approaches to training students or professionals in this important form of advocacy.

In situations where educators are not familiar with professional legislative advocacy, attending legislative advocacy events held by local and national professional organizations could be useful for students. Higher education faculty could encourage students to sign up for state-level legislative training (e.g., ACA Institute for Leadership Training; Thomas, 2019) and day-on-the-hill events to enhance their understanding of this advocacy approach as well as visit websites of professional organizations to learn about current legislative issues. Other means to engage trainees in learning about legislative advocacy could include experiential learning activities where they write postal or email letters to legislators. Also, educators could coordinate phone calls, video conferences, or in-person meetings with local legislators as well as policy advocates and legislative liaisons in local, state, or national-level professional counseling associations. Any of these experiential activities could be paired with a lesson, activity, discussion, and/or reading related to professional legislative advocacy. Such activities can culminate in a research-based assignment or creative infomercial video to explore current legislative issues, present pertinent social justice considerations that impact professions and the diverse students and families served through the advocacy efforts, and provide practical avenues for professionals to advocate for and act on the identified issues.

Strategies for training students in professional legislative advocacy may apply to professionals across disciplines. For instance, teacher leadership development has received growing attention in recent years, with an emphasis on empowering teacher trainees to be active leaders in schools, districts, and policy change (Garner & McCarron, 2020; Smylie & Eckert, 2018). Our findings echo Garner and McCarron's (2020) study, in which experiential community-based partnership projects integrated with policy and advocacy course content enhanced teacher trainees' levels of engagement and self-efficacy as agents of change. Similar experiential activities (e.g., attending legislative hearings and developing an advocacy plan) have been infused into psychology coursework to increase students' advocacy efforts toward social justice (Alexander & Allo, 2022). Comparable trends can be seen in nursing education with a growing emphasis on educational strategies for increasing nurses' professional advocacy in health care governance (Sundean et al., 2019). Across professional disciplines, scholars emphasize the balance of (a) didactic instruction to increase students' foundational knowledge of leadership and advocacy, and (b) experiential opportunities to increase students' active engagement as advocates for their profession and the individuals they serve (Alexander & Allo, 2022; Garner & McCarron, 2020; Smylie & Eckert, 2018; Sundean et al., 2019).

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

This study has some significant limitations. First, the sample size of this study is limited and is not representative of all school counseling trainees. Second, the measures used in this study have not been developed using scale development practices and lack evidence for validity. Similar to the prior two limitations, the study's research design lacks the rigor needed to ensure that internal and external validity threats were mitigated. Furthermore, considering nonsignificant findings about participants' attitudes toward professional legislative advocacy, perhaps an added qualitative component could have provided additional information to explain participants' reasons for a lack of or limited changes in attitudes toward legislative advocacy during the training and intervention experience. Despite these limitations, the findings provided some initial insights into the benefits of training school counseling students in professional legislative advocacy. The findings also underscored the need for additional research on the impact of training curriculum on school counseling trainees' competence in professional legislative advocacy, such as the intervention presented in this article.

Future research could target some of the limitations identified in this study. First, researchers could standardize professional legislative advocacy training and evaluate it on a broader level. Creating a professional legislative advocacy intervention may include a study of counselor educators'

recommended content and practices associated with professional legislative advocacy. Standardizing the intervention may also include creating a virtual platform that increases access to professional legislative advocacy training opportunities and increases the sample size and diversity. However the intervention may be done, a more rigorous research design (i.e., quasi-experimental or experimental) is needed to validate the findings in this study. In addition, researchers can either use more psychometrically evidenced measures or develop a measure related to the topic of knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward professional legislative advocacy. Lastly, more research in general about professional legislative advocacy and its importance for the school counseling profession and professional identity is needed.

## Conclusion

Our hope for this study was to examine the impact of professional legislative advocacy training on school counselors' knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward engaging in this advocacy form. We found that the participants' perceived knowledge and skills increased from the beginning to the end of the training, while their attitudes remained consistent. We also compared scores from our intervention group with a nonequivalent comparison group and found that the training participants reported higher perceived knowledge and skills, though the attitude scores did not differ. While there were significant limitations, this study provided some initial evidence that professional legislative advocacy training may benefit school counselors in training, and these results guide the development of more rigorous research methods to test a larger-scale outcome study on training school counselors on this topic.

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