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School Counselor Leadership: A Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Hope, Caseload, and Location

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Abstract

School counselors play a vital role in promoting equity and student well-being in school communities, yet ecological challenges may limit opportunities for meaningful engagement in leadership. This study explores the predictive role of hope, caseload size, and geographic location on school counselor leadership engagement. Using a hierarchical regression analysis with 79 school counselors, we found that hope significantly predicted overall school counselor leadership involvement as well as each of the five leadership subscales: interpersonal influence, resourceful problem-solving, systemic collaboration, social justice advocacy, and professional efficacy. Caseload and setting were not significant predictors of leadership engagement alone. These findings suggest that hope is a meaningful internal resource that may empower school counselors to engage in leadership, even in the face of systemic barriers. We provide implications for school counselor training, practice, and research and offer hope-building strategies to strengthen school counselors' leadership capacity across diverse educational settings.

Keywords: School counselors, leadership, hope, caseload, geographic location

School counselors are key to promoting the well-being and academic success of all students in the schools they serve (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019a). Beyond delivering direct counseling services like individual or group counseling and classroom curriculum, school counselors engage in leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change throughout their work with a multifaceted group of educational and community partners (e.g., students, family members, administrators, teachers, other mental health providers; ASCA, 2022). Over the last

decade, there have been increased calls for more proactive school counseling services that address the increased severity of youth mental health needs and various socio-political challenges impacting education systems (Lambie et al., 2019; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022; Savitz-Romer et al., 2024). These calls to action necessitate that school counselors exercise leadership skills to promote equity, safety, and inclusion for all students (ASCA, 2022). However, many individual, institutional, and community factors can influence school counselors' abilities and opportunities to engage in leadership (McMahon et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2018). In this study, we aim to explore possible internal, institutional, and community predictors of school counselors' leadership, including hope, caseload size, and location.

Leadership in School Counseling

Leadership has been recognized as a core component of the school counselor's role, particularly in efforts to close opportunity and achievement gaps and promote equity in educational systems (ASCA, 2019b; Martin, 2002). ASCA (2019a; 2025) situates foundational themes of leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change that guide school counselors and their programs. Within this model, leadership is viewed as essential to the delivery of equitable, student-centered services. Thus, leadership is part of ethical school counseling practice, and school counselors are expected to exercise leadership when implementing programs, addressing systemic barriers, and working across roles to promote positive educational outcomes (ASCA, 2022). This conceptualization of leadership as both a professional expectation and a mechanism for systemic change is now firmly embedded in the school counseling literature and professional standards (ASCA, 2019a; 2019b; 2022; 2025).

There are multiple frameworks for school counselor leadership, such as transformational leadership (Gibson et al., 2018), distributed leadership (Janson et al., 2009), or the Change Agent For Equity model (Mason et al., 2013). Young and Bryan (2015; 2018) developed a framework for

assessing school counselors' and school counseling supervisors' leadership practices in alignment with the ASCA National Model themes and comprehensive school counseling program implementation. Their framework consists of five dimensions of school counseling leadership: interpersonal influence, resourceful problem solving, systemic collaboration, social justice advocacy, and professional efficacy. *Interpersonal influence* describes how school counselors establish relationships with school partners and understand the overall school culture and vision for change. *Resourceful problem-solving* is how school counselors navigate challenges through innovation and goal-oriented methods. The third dimension, *systemic collaboration*, describes how school counselors work alongside school leaders to initiate new programs that address school and student goals. The dimension of *social justice advocacy* discusses how school counselors respond in the face of adversity, particularly when advocating against inequities or oppressive practices. The final dimension, *professional efficacy*, measures the school counselors' belief in themselves to be leaders and captures their sense of self-confidence to enact change in their school counseling role.

Researchers have a robust understanding of the components and contributing factors of leadership in school counselors. Both individual factors, such as age, years of school counseling experience, and prior leadership experiences (Lowe et al., 2018; Mullen et al., 2019), as well as sociocultural and systemic factors (Hilts et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2018) are contributors to successful leadership engagement. Inappropriate activity assignments, high student-to-counselor caseloads, or role misperceptions can also create barriers to leadership engagement (Fye et al., 2017; Hilts et al., 2019; Hilts et al., 2023). These various context factors can lead to time and resource constraints, causing school counselors to experience burnout, compassion fatigue, or moral injury, and opening opportunities for ethical distress (Kim & Lambie, 2018; Um & Bardhoshi, 2025). In some school settings, like rural communities, there may be unique barriers to leadership, such as

professional isolation, access to fewer mental health providers or college access programs, or expectations to serve multiple roles (Boulden et al., 2022; Boulden & Schimmel, 2022).

In this study, we conceptualize contextual factors as the structural and ecological conditions that shape school counselors' work environments (McMahon et al., 2014). Specifically, we focus on caseload size and geographic location (e.g., rural, suburban, urban) as two variables that may influence access to leadership opportunities. We believe these two factors are specifically important because they intersect with broader systemic conditions, such as school climate, availability of resources, and community supports, that may further enable or constrain school counselors' leadership engagement. To investigate these relationships, we draw from McMahon et al.'s (2014) ecological model of school counseling, which emphasizes that counselors' practices are embedded within nested systems ranging from individual to institutional and broader community contexts. From an ecological school counseling perspective, schools are ecosystems with a series of interconnected subsystems, each of which influences school counselors' work (McMahon et al., 2014). Therefore, a school counselor's individual factors, the institutional conditions of their school, and their larger community contexts each inform the school counselor's engagement in various school counseling tasks. Applying the ecological school counseling model to our study, hope represents an individual resource, caseload reflects an institutional-level condition, and geographic location captures broader community influences.

Hope

In the present study, we defined hope in accordance with Snyder's (2002) Hope Theory, which conceptualizes hope as a cognitive and motivational construct. According to Snyder (2002), hope requires an identified goal, possible steps for achieving a goal (pathways), and the motivation to act toward a goal (agency). Scholars have found hope to be a positive predictor of well-being indicators, particularly for professionals at higher risk of burnout, including nurses' job satisfaction

(Hu et al., 2022), teachers' happiness (MacIntyre et al., 2022), and child welfare clinicians' resilience (Pharris et al., 2022). In recent years, school counseling scholars have reported similar findings about the influence of hope for school counselors. For instance, scholars in the United States and internationally have found hope to be predictive of school counselors' self-efficacy (Ender et al., 2019; Niles et al., 2024a) and job satisfaction (Niles et al., 2024b). More recently, Niles and colleagues (2025) examined how hope predicted school counselors' work activities, including counseling, consulting, coordinating, curriculum, and non-counseling activities. Their findings demonstrated that hope significantly predicted key school counseling activities, including counseling, consulting, and coordinating. Overall, hope appears to predict not only the ways school counselors feel about their work (e.g., Ender et al., 2019; Niles et al., 2024a; Niles et al., 2024b) but also the activities they engage in at work (Niles et al., 2025).

Presently, scholars have yet to examine hope as a predictor of school counselors' engagement in leadership activities; however, scholars in related fields have explored hope in relation to leadership. For instance, Virella (2024) conducted a qualitative exploration of 28 school principals' hope levels during incidents of crisis and recovery. Principals with high hope levels demonstrated common characteristics, including a stronger focus on achieving goals, an optimistic state, future orientation, a flexible and adaptive approach, and strong professional networks of support (Virella, 2024). Thus, hopeful leaders may have the ability to envision change, advocate for change, and pursue change (Freeze, 2025). Given school counselors' responsibility as agents of change, the findings from related professions highlight the importance of investigating hope as a potentially relevant factor for school counselors' leadership activities.

Caseload

Empirical studies generally support the notion that lower caseload ratios are associated with more positive outcomes for both students (e.g., graduation rates, college enrollment, attendance;

Brown & Knight, 2025; Donohue et al., 2022; Kearney et al., 2021) and school counselors (e.g., well-being, job satisfaction; Bardhoshi & Um, 2021; Mullen et al., 2021). Efforts to reduce school counselors' caseload ratios are often positioned as a valuable, proactive strategy for enhancing the delivery of comprehensive school counseling programs (Brown & Knight, 2025). ASCA recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1 (ASCA, n.d.), emphasizing that reduced caseloads enable counselors to implement direct counseling services, like individual and group counseling, classroom instruction, and consultation. When school counselors are not overburdened by excessive caseloads, they can be more accessible to students and readily available to address their career, academic, and social-emotional needs (Brown & Knight, 2025; Donohue et al., 2022; Kearney et al., 2021). These findings reinforce the argument that reducing caseloads can create the conditions necessary for school counselors to engage more meaningfully in both direct service and systemic leadership efforts.

Yet, several of these studies emphasized that caseload alone does not fully explain student or counselor outcomes. For example, Liu et al. (2024) found a nuanced interaction between caseload ratio and student racial composition on academic achievement. These findings were contradictory to previous research showing significant relationships between lower caseloads and positive student outcomes, and researchers suggested that "ratio effects should not be evaluated alone" (Liu et al., 2024, p. 9). Similarly, Goodman-Scott et al. (2018) found that while lower student-to-counselor ratios were associated with higher student GPAs, unexpectedly, higher ratios were linked with increased graduation rates in some contexts, further complicating the narrative. Several scholars have also noted that grouping caseload into broad categorical variables (e.g., above or below the 250:1 threshold) may obscure important within-group variation or mask contextual factors such as school climate, caseload structure, or resource availability (Kearney et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024). School counselors serving schools with a higher percentage of low-income students, larger overall student

enrollment, or fewer school counseling or mental health staff may experience broader systemic challenges beyond caseload alone.

Geographic Location

While caseload size is an important institutional factor influencing school counselors' ability to engage in leadership and implement comprehensive school counseling programs, its effects do not occur in isolation. Geographic location, or whether a school is situated in a rural, suburban, or urban community, can influence access to resources, shape school-community relationships, and define the professional context in which counselors work. For instance, in rural areas, strong community ties and a shared place-based identity can foster trust and support for counselor-led initiatives, which may position school counselors as natural leaders and advocates within their schools (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022). However, smaller settings can also present challenges, such as resistance to change, dual relationships, and limited access to peer consultation or professional supervision (Boulden et al., 2022).

In urban and suburban schools, counselors may benefit from greater proximity to mental health providers or post-secondary institutions; yet they may also navigate more bureaucratic systems, experience higher rates of student transiency, or compete with district-level priorities for student success (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2020; Eckert, 2019). Counselors in urban settings may face high student-to-counselor ratios and a broader range of student needs linked to systemic inequities such as housing instability, poverty, or community violence (Brown & Knight, 2025; Donohue et al., 2022; Hilts et al., 2023). Suburban schools, often perceived as well-resourced, are quickly becoming more racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse, yet related institutional supports may be lagging (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2020). Thus, suburban school counselors may face an invisible workload, where work demands are high (i.e., larger caseloads) but resources (i.e., federal initiatives, staffing) are limited (Brown & Knight, 2025; Mullen et al., 2021).

Across all settings, access to leadership opportunities may vary not only by the size of the counseling team or the school structure but also by how the school or district conceptualizes counselor leadership (Eckert, 2019). In some smaller schools, leadership roles may emerge informally due to necessity and close-knit staff relationships, while in larger systems, formal leadership may require navigating complex administrative hierarchies (Eckert, 2019). In this way, geographic context intersects with structural and relational dynamics to either constrain or support counselors' leadership engagement and capacity to implement comprehensive services. It is evident that many community factors, both within and outside of counselors' control, can contribute to complex dynamics for leadership engagement.

Purpose of the Study

Given that leadership is a core component of school counselors' roles and ethical responsibilities, the purpose of this study is to explore the degree to which school counselors' individual, institutional, and community factors predict their leadership practices. In recent years, school counseling scholars have identified the ways that the individual factor of hope, the institutional factor of caseload size, and the community factor of geographic location each influence school counselors' work activities. However, to our knowledge, no studies have examined the degree to which the three factors specifically predict school counselors' leadership activities. In addition, no known studies have explored the three factors as predictors together. Thus, in this hierarchical regression analysis, we examine the degree to which hope, caseload size, and geographic location predicted school counselors' leadership activities. Using the ecological school counseling model (McMahon et al., 2014) as our theoretical framework, we determined that our analysis should reflect the nature of nested systems and advance beyond examining the individual to include institutional and community factors as predictors of leadership. This study adds to the current literature on

school counseling leadership by examining hope as a potential predictor of leadership activities. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. To what extent does hope predict school counselors' engagement in leadership practices?
2. Do caseload size and geographic location predict school counselors' leadership practices after controlling for hope?
3. Does hope significantly predict each of the five leadership subscales (systemic collaboration, interpersonal influence, professional self-efficacy, social justice advocacy, resourceful problem-solving)?

Method

Procedures

We obtained approval from the institutional review boards at both authors' universities prior to beginning our study. Using convenience sampling methods, we recruited school counselors throughout the United States. We compiled names and contact emails of professional-level members from the directories of multiple state-level school counseling organizations. Additionally, we shared our recruitment invitation to the ASCA discussion forum. We used the tailored design method (Dillman et al., 2014) in our recruitment procedures and sent an initial recruitment email with the Qualtrics link to invite participants to complete our survey. We also shared this message and survey link to the ASCA discussion forum. After two weeks, we sent a follow-up email and posted a follow-up invitation to the discussion forum, with a final reminder email and post shared an additional two weeks later. Participants could choose to opt out of the study and recruitment communications at any time. Participants began the survey by reviewing a consent form and indicating whether or not they agreed to participate in the study. Although recruiting via emails and discussion forum posts allowed us to reach a wider audience of possible participants, we are not able to know the precise number of school counselors who viewed our calls for participants; therefore, it is not possible to

calculate an accurate response rate. This limitation is consistent with challenges noted in online survey research, where response rates are often difficult to determine when participants are recruited through electronic postings (Granello & Wheaton, 2003).

Participants

This study included a sample of 79 professional school counselors across the United States. The mean age of participants was 45.9 years (*SD* = 11.3). Participants reported an average of 10.8 years of school counseling experience (*SD* = 8.8), ranging from 1 year of experience to 33 years of experience. The majority of participants reported identifying as female (*n* = 69, 87.3%), followed by male (*n* = 10, 12.7%). Participants reported identifying as Asian or Southeast Asian (*n* = 1, 1.3%), Black or African American (*n* = 12, 15.2%), Latino/a/e/x (*n* = 4, 5.1%), and White (*n* = 58, 73.4%). We allowed participants to choose multiple racial identities or to self-describe; three participants (3.8%) selected both Latino/a/e/x and White, and one participant (1.3%) indicated a preference to self-describe. Participants' ethnicities included Hispanic (*n* = 7, 8.9%) and non-Hispanic (*n* = 72, 91.1%). Participants' geographic locations included suburban (*n* = 46, 58.2%), rural (*n* = 17, 21.5%), and urban (*n* = 16, 20.3%) settings.

All participants indicated they were currently practicing school counselors, with most employed full-time (*n* = 76, 96.2%), followed by part-time (*n* = 2, 2.5%). One individual described their role as a counselor substitute for the district. Our sample included school counselors in Pre-K through 12th grades, with some participants indicating they worked at a single level and some at multiple settings. Specifically, participants reported working at the elementary school level (*n* = 23, 29.1%), middle school level (*n* = 20, 25.3%), high school level (*n* = 20, 25.3%), pre-K and elementary school levels (*n* = 6, 7.6%), pre-K through middle school levels (*n* = 4, 5.1%), elementary and middle school levels (*n* = 1, 1.3%), middle and high school levels (*n* = 2, 2.5%), and elementary through high school levels (*n* = 1, 1.3%). Participants' reported caseload sizes ranged from 13

students up to 750 students (M = 359.6, SD = 159.7). The number of school counselors at participants' school sites ranged from 1 to 8 (M = 2.2, SD = 1.5). More than half of the participants worked at a school receiving Title I funding (n = 41, 51.8%), indicating their school is a federally funded school serving higher percentages of students from low-income families.

Instrumentation

Demographic Questionnaire

Participants completed a 17-item demographic questionnaire developed by the researchers. The questionnaire surveyed participants' social and cultural identities (e.g., racial/ethnic identity, gender identity) as well as professional school counseling (e.g., caseload size, years of experience) and setting (e.g., school size, level, location) characteristics. Participants self-reported their caseload size by entering a whole number into an open-response box. Participants' location was assessed as a categorical variable with three levels (rural, suburban, urban). For regression analyses, two dummy-coded variables were created using rural as the reference group (Urban vs. Rural; Suburban vs. Rural).

School Counselor Leadership Survey

The School Counselor Leadership Survey (SCLS; Young & Bryan, 2015; 2018) is a 28-item self-report measure designed to evaluate the leadership activities of school counselors and school counseling supervisors. Each item is rated using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*) regarding the frequency of participants' current perceptions, behaviors, or practices. Some example items include, "I consider myself a leader," "I know and promote my school's vision," and "I accomplish goals with certainty and confidence." The scale consists of five dimensions: (a) interpersonal influence, (b) resourceful problem-solving, (c) systemic collaboration, (d) social justice advocacy, and (e) professional efficacy. In their initial validation of the scale, the individual factors had good internal consistency with Cronbach's alphas ranging from 0.81 to 0.88 and a total scale

alpha coefficient of .95 (Young & Bryan, 2018). In the current sample, the SCLS demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .94 for the total scale. The subscales' reliability scores ranged from .77 to .87 (see Table 1), indicating acceptable internal consistency. These values are consistent with those reported in prior studies (e.g., Hilts et al., 2023; Mason et al., 2023), where subscale alphas ranged from .67 to .83.

Adult Hope Scale

The Adult Hope Scale (AHS; Snyder et al., 1991) is a 12-item self-report measure for assessing individual levels of hope with two subscales corresponding with Snyder's hope theory (i.e., agency and pathways; Snyder, 2002). Each item is measured using an eight-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*definitely false*) to 8 (*definitely true*), where participants select how well the statement describes them. There are four items on the "pathways" scale, four items on the "agency" scale, and four filler items. An example of a pathway item was, "I can think of many ways to get out of a jam," and an agency example is, "I energetically pursue my goals." Snyder and colleagues (1991) found that the subscales showed good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from .63 to .80 for the pathway subscale and .71 to .76 for the agency subscale (Snyder et al., 1991). The Cronbach's alpha for the current sample was .86 for the pathways subscale, .82 for the agency subscale, and .90 for the total scale, indicating good internal consistency with the present sample for both subscales and the entire scale.

Data Analysis

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) to determine the minimum required sample size for detecting a medium effect size in a multiple linear regression analysis. Assuming a medium effect size ($f^2 = .15$), an alpha level of .05, statistical power of .80, and four predictors, the analysis indicated that a minimum sample size of 55 participants would be needed to detect a statistically significant effect. We screened participants' responses to demographic

questions and removed four participants whose responses indicated they were not practicing school counselors (e.g., district-level leaders, retirees). The final sample size of 79 met a priori power and was deemed adequate for hypothesis testing.

Prior to conducting regression analyses, preliminary assumption checks were performed to ensure the data met the requirements for multiple regression. Missing data were assessed using Little's MCAR test, which was not significant, $\chi^2(406) = 418.26$, $p = .33$, indicating that the data were missing completely at random. Descriptive statistics indicated that all variables were within acceptable ranges for skewness and kurtosis ($|z| < 1$), with the exception of caseload. Two cases exceeded the conventional threshold of $|3.29|$ ($z = 6.95$ and $z = 3.46$), indicating extreme outliers (Osborne, 2013). Based on further inspection of these cases (i.e., disproportionate to school size and number of counselors), these cases were deemed unrepresentative of the broader sample and, thus, removed from the dataset. Following the removal of outliers, missing values were addressed using mean imputation for the hope, leadership, and caseload variables. There were no missing values for location. All remaining caseload values fell within $|z| < 1.08$.

A Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the residuals were normally distributed, $p = .24$, which was supported by visual inspection of the histogram and Q–Q plots. Scatterplots of standardized residuals against predicted values confirmed that the assumptions of linearity and homoscedasticity were met for all predictors. Standardized residuals fell within ± 3, suggesting no problematic outliers. Tests for multicollinearity indicated acceptable tolerance values (all > .70) and variance inflation factors (all < 1.5), suggesting that multicollinearity was not a concern. Independence of observations was assumed, given the cross-sectional design of the study.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations among all continuous variables are presented in Table 1. Hope demonstrated a strong, positive correlation with overall school counselor leadership ($r = .67$, $p < .01$), as well as with each of the leadership subscales, which ranged from $r = .34$ to .68 (Table 1). As expected, the leadership subscales demonstrated positive correlations with overall leadership. Since the subscales were not included as predictors in the overall regression, multicollinearity was not an issue. Caseload did not significantly correlate with most variables; however, it demonstrated a weak, positive correlation with resourceful problem-solving ($r = .26$, $p < .05$).

Table 1

Correlations Between Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	*M*	SD	α
1. Caseload	-							355.14	163.72	-
2. SCLS	.20	-						5.66	.61	.94
3. SCLS-II	.09	.85**	-					6.12	.62	.83
4. SCLS-SC	.16	.68**	.50**	-				5.14	.96	.78
5. SLCS-RPS	.26*	.86**	.71**	.45**	-			5.51	.75	.84
6. SCLS-SJA	.03	.70**	.53**	.28*	.52**	-		5.77	.84	.77
7. SCLS-PE	.14	.79**	.62**	.39**	.60**	.68**	-	5.61	.94	.87
8. AHS	.07	.67**	.60**	.48**	.68**	.34**	.42**	6.80	.82	.90

Note. SCLS = School Counselor Leadership Scale – Total Score; II = Interpersonal Influence; SC = Systemic Collaboration; RPS = Resourceful Problem-Solving; SJA = Social Justice Advocacy; PE = Professional Efficacy; AHS = Adult Hope Scale. * = $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Primary Regression Analysis

To answer the first and second research questions, we conducted a hierarchical multiple regression. Guided by McMahon et al.'s (2014) ecological model of school counseling, predictors were entered into the hierarchical regression in an order that reflects the nested nature of ecological systems. Specifically, intrapersonal resources (hope) were entered first, followed by organizational-

level conditions (caseload), and finally broader systemic influences (geographic location). This order reflects the progression from the most proximal, malleable factor (individual hope) to more distal and structural conditions (school- and community-level contexts).

In Step 1, hope (continuous) was entered as an individual personal factor and accounted for 45.5% of the variance in leadership ($R^2 = .455$, $p < .01$), demonstrating a large effect size (Sink & Stroh, 2006). In Step 2, we entered caseload (continuous) as an organizational variable, which increased the explained variance by 2.2%; however, this change was not statistically significant ($\Delta R^2 = .02$, $p = .08$), and caseload did not significantly predict leadership ($\beta = .15$, $p = .08$). In Step 3, we added geographic location (two dummy-coded variables; Urban vs. Rural, Suburban vs. Rural) to examine the extent to which the systemic-level factors predicted participants' leadership. The third and final step contributed an additional 3.1% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = .03$, $p = .10$). In Step 3, counselors in urban schools reported significantly higher leadership than those in rural schools ($\beta = .210$, $p = .04$), while suburban vs. rural differences were not significant ($\beta = .18$, $p = .08$). The final model (hope, caseload, and location) demonstrated a large effect on school counselor engagement ($R^2 = .51$; Sink & Stroh, 2006), while hope remained a significant predictor ($\beta = .67$, $p < .001$) of leadership across all models (Table 2).

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Predicting School Counselor Leadership Practices

	B	SE	β	R^2	*p*
Step 1				.46	
Hope	.50	.06	.67		<.001
Step 2				.48	
Hope	.49	.06	.66		<.001
Caseload	.00	.00	.15		.08
Step 3				.51	
Hope	.49	.06	.67		<.001
Caseload	.00	.00	.15		.07
Urban vs Rural	.32	.15	.21		.04
Suburban vs Rural	.22	.13	.18		.08

Dimensions of Leadership

To examine whether hope predicts specific subscales of school counselor leadership when controlling for caseload and location, we conducted a series of multiple regression analyses. We used each of the five subscales of leadership (systemic collaboration, interpersonal influence, professional efficacy, social justice advocacy, and resourceful problem-solving) as outcome variables. Hope was entered in Step 1, followed by Caseload and location (urban and suburban, with rural as the reference category). To address potential inflation of Type I error, a Bonferroni correction was applied (adjusted $\alpha = .01$).

Across all five of the regression analyses, hope significantly and positively predicted leadership across all five subscales ($p < .001$). The strongest associations were observed for resourceful problem-solving ($\beta = .66$) and interpersonal influence ($\beta = .61$). Hope also significantly predicted systemic collaboration ($\beta = .47$), professional efficacy ($\beta = .41$), and social justice advocacy ($\beta = .34$).

In terms of caseload and location, there were only significant results at the $p < .01$ level in the interpersonal influence dimension. Suburban school counselors scored significantly higher than those in Rural settings ($\beta = .30$, $p = .01$). For the resourceful problem-solving subscale, caseload demonstrated a small, trending association when entered after hope ($\beta = .21$, $p = .013$), though this effect did not remain significant after applying the Bonferroni correction. No other ecological predictors, including caseload, reached significance for the remaining leadership subscales after correction.

Discussion

School counselor leadership has been widely recognized as a critical component of comprehensive school counseling programs (ASCA, 2019a; Mason et al., 2023; Mullen et al., 2019), yet research continues to explore the factors that foster or inhibit school counselors' leadership in

practice. While ecological factors such as caseload size and school setting may create barriers or opportunities for leadership practice, emerging evidence suggests that internal psychological resources, like hope, may play an equally or more powerful role. Thus, we sought to examine how hope predicts leadership engagement among school counselors as a resource that enables individuals to envision goals, generate pathways, and persist through challenges.

For the first research question, we examined whether hope, as an individual, personal resource, predicted school counselors' engagement in leadership practices. Hope was a significant and robust predictor explaining nearly half of the variance in leadership. This finding aligns with a growing body of literature positioning hope as a critical resource in professional helping roles. Prior studies have demonstrated hope's role in increasing school counselors' self-efficacy and job satisfaction, even in the presence of burnout or stress (Ender et al., 2019; Niles et al., 2024a; Niles et al., 2024b). Moreover, school counselors' hope levels appear to predict the school counseling activities in which they engage, with higher levels of hope predicting more counseling, coordinating, and consulting activities (Niles et al., 2025). The present study extends these findings and suggests that hope may also be instrumental when school counselors step into leadership roles, supporting the idea that hope is essential for initiating and sustaining change in school systems (Snyder, 2002). In this way, hope may serve as a motivational foundation that empowers counselors to engage in leadership, advocacy, and systemic change, regardless of structural conditions.

For the second research question, we examined whether an institutional variable (caseload size) or a community variable (geographic setting) explained additional variance in school counselors' engagement in leadership practices. Caseload and setting were not significant predictors of overall leadership, suggesting that structural factors may not influence whether school counselors engage in leadership behaviors. Our findings align with research emphasizing that, while influential, caseload does not operate in isolation and may interact with other variables to shape counselor

outcomes (Kearney et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024). Similarly, differences in school setting (urban, suburban, or rural) were not significant predictors of overall leadership, although literature suggests that geographic context can influence the types of leadership opportunities available, particularly in under-resourced or professionally isolated settings (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; Eckert, 2019). Together, these findings suggest that ecological variables, like caseload and location, may shape the environment in which leadership occurs, but are not sufficient on their own to explain whether or how school counselors engage in leadership roles.

When examining each of the five leadership subscales, hope emerged as a consistent and significant predictor across all five dimensions of the School Counselor Leadership Survey, even when adding caseload and location to the model. The strongest associations were observed with resourceful problem-solving (RPS) and interpersonal influence (II), suggesting that school counselors with higher levels of hope may be particularly skilled at navigating complex challenges (RPS) and fostering collaborative relationships (II). This aligns with existing literature identifying hope as a motivational resource that supports adaptive problem-solving and relational engagement (Snyder, 2002; Virella, 2024). While the inclusion of hope reduced the predictive weight of structural variables, location showed only limited effects. Specifically, suburban school counselors reported higher interpersonal influence than rural counselors, while other location comparisons did not meet the corrected significance threshold. This suggests that while hope consistently drives leadership engagement, ecological affordances may create subtle differences in relational aspects of leadership. For example, school counselors may benefit from community supports such as greater access to professional networks, peer collaboration, or leadership structures that facilitate engagement (Boulden & Schimmel, 2022; Eckert, 2019).

Although caseload and location alone were not significant predictors of the leadership subscales, a small, trending association emerged between caseload size and resourceful problem-

solving (RPS) when hope was included in the model. This suggests that school counselors with larger caseloads coupled with higher levels of hope may demonstrate an enhanced ability to use problem-solving to navigate systemic challenges. Prior research has suggested that high caseloads limit time and capacity for leadership (Hilts et al., 2023; Mullen et al., 2021), yet this finding points to the possibility that workload demands may also activate certain leadership behaviors, such as creativity and innovation in problem-solving. While this pattern should be interpreted cautiously, these results provide additional nuance to the professional conversation regarding caseloads and echo prior findings that underscore the importance of both structural and psychological resources in supporting school counselor outcomes (Kearney et al., 2021; Niles et al., 2024a).

Together, these findings suggest that hope is a meaningful internal resource that supports leadership engagement among school counselors, even when accounting for ecological challenges such as caseload and geographic setting. The consistent predictive strength of hope across all five leadership domains highlights its relevance in school counselor training and practice. Moreover, the emergence of caseload and setting as significant predictors for specific subscales points to the importance of attending to structural realities in which school counselors operate. These results have important implications for how school counselors are prepared, supported, and empowered to lead in diverse educational contexts.

Implications for School Counselor Practice and Training

Our study offers insights for school counselors across diverse ecological contexts. First, our study reinforces the value of hope as an intrapersonal resource for school counselors. When school counselors have higher levels of hope, they feel better about their work and engage in more school counseling activities (Ender et al., 2019; Niles et al., 2024a; 2024b; Niles et al., 2025). Our findings build upon previous studies to suggest that hope also benefits school counselor leadership practices. Aspects of school counselors' leadership activities may naturally draw upon the processes of hope;

for instance, hope and leadership share a future orientation (e.g., goals), envisioning possible solutions (e.g., pathways), and the motivation to take action (e.g., agency). Inherently, school counselors are leaders in their school setting, and their leadership activities may emerge through comprehensive school counseling programming, communication with caregivers, consultation with community resources, and service on school improvement teams, among other activities (ASCA, 2019b; 2022). Such activities require school counselors to develop future goals for students and school communities, consider possible ways to reach their goals, and engage in necessary action (Snyder, 2002). Thus, school counselors across geographical settings can benefit from strategies that bolster hope.

Many societal and community factors, like location, are fixed, meaning school counselors are not able to change them directly. Thus, limitations may exist in local resources that could subsequently impact school counselors' engagement in leadership activities. Conversely, hope is a malleable construct and is influenced by intrapersonal and interpersonal practices (Herth, 1992; Murphy, 2023). Self-care and emotion regulation strategies, such as meditation, breath awareness, journaling, and creative arts, can promote an individual's sense of hope (Collins et al., 2018; Munoz et al., 2018). Setting small, achievable personal and professional goals can foster a sense of hope as individuals experience growing success in goal attainment (Snyder, 2002). School counselors may find it useful to set scalable leadership goals to engage in long-term changes for the school community and reduce personal burnout (Um & Bardhoshi, 2025). For example, rather than aiming to present a data-informed presentation to the local school board, a school counselor might deliver a presentation on attendance or mental health referral trends to their department or school-level leadership team. Engaging in smaller, manageable tasks can increase an internal sense of hope while fostering confidence in leadership skills.

Interpersonally, school counselors may feel a sense of hope when connecting with others in their professional or personal communities. Connecting with other school counselors, whether locally or through state and national organizations, may provide school counselors with outlets for brainstorming and relational problem-solving (Boulden et al., 2022; Robinson et al., 2018). Building networks of fellow school counselors, trusted colleagues, former professors, graduate program cohort members, and mentors helps school counselors feel an increased sense of hope and develop strategies for engaging in leadership activities. These connections may also lead to opportunities for professional leadership roles such as organizational service, mentoring new counselors, or supervising pre-service school counselor trainees. Additionally, engaging in collaborative leadership with other school-based mental health professionals can also promote hope by distributing responsibility and creating a shared sense of agency toward common schoolwide goals. Hope fostered through meaningful relationships may also support the interpersonal influence dimension of school counselor leadership (Young & Bryan, 2015; 2018); thus, increasing hope may also influence a school counselor's leadership behaviors.

Because our study found that hope predicted participants' overall leadership as well as their subscales of leadership, hope-building strategies would be helpful to build into school counselor training and professional development. Counselor educators can incorporate hope-building activities into their andragogical approaches with school counselors-in-training. In counselor education courses, hope strategies and hope models may be especially relevant when teaching school counselor trainees about engaging in leadership (Freeze, 2025). For instance, counseling faculty may ask students to envision and describe future leadership goals and possible avenues for achieving their goals. Counselor educators and students can then brainstorm about the potential barriers, available resources, and possible actions that students might take. Hope can serve as a complement to teaching about data-informed practices by framing data not only for measuring student outcomes,

but also for establishing and tracking leadership goals. Teaching school counselor trainees a hope-centered process for leadership may provide them with strategies they can implement in their future school counseling work. In turn, future research could assess the effectiveness of such pedagogical interventions.

Lastly, school counseling supervisors and mentors can include hope-fostering strategies to support school counselors. Supervisors can engage supervisees in practices for setting intentional leadership goals, brainstorming strategies for overcoming barriers (i.e., resourceful problem-solving), affirming supervisees' strengths, and addressing beliefs about leadership potential (i.e., professional efficacy). Additionally, supervisors and mentors can model for supervisees and mentees the ways they have engaged in leadership, navigated contextual and unexpected challenges, and solved problems. Integrating hope and leadership into school counseling practice and training may help to bolster school counselors' leadership engagement in their present and future work.

Limitations and Future Research

Although our findings provide valuable insights, our study is not without limitations. First, although our study met minimum power requirements ($N = 79 > 55$), our overall sample size was small, which creates limitations when comparing groups within the sample. Additionally, the number of participants in rural, suburban, and urban settings was uneven, with a larger number of participants in suburban settings. This uneven distribution limits the generalizability of location-based findings and may explain why some variables (e.g., setting, caseload) approached but did not reach significance. Scholars may find it useful to replicate this study with a stratified sample of school counselors to ensure larger, equivalent samples are represented from each geographic region. Relatedly, the majority of our sample reported identifying as female and White. While our sample reflects national trends in school counselors' reported identities (e.g., 74% White, 87% female; ASCA, 2023), it also creates limitations in generalizability as compared to a sample with more

diverse identities and perspectives. Researchers may also choose to replicate the study with a stratified sampling method based on participants' socio-cultural identities (i.e., gender, race, ethnicity) to address this limitation.

Additionally, our study was cross-sectional in design, which creates limitations in understanding the longer-term impacts of hope. Longitudinal or intervention-based studies could help determine whether increases in hope lead to sustained leadership engagement or whether engaging in successful leadership activities reinforces hope over time. This study also relied on self-report measures, which present the risk of participants providing socially desirable answers, rather than true responses. Given that our surveys asked participants to report their work-related behaviors and activities, it is possible that participants' reports do not accurately reflect their actual leadership. Another limitation of self-report data is that participants' perspectives of terms like urban, suburban, and rural may vary, and we did not provide specific parameters or definitions for these terms. Similarly, school counselors may have varying definitions of caseload based on their unique job roles and responsibilities. For example, when the school has multiple school counselors but does not clearly define caseload responsibilities. School counselors' work experiences can vary significantly between schools and districts, often tailored to the unique needs of each school setting. In addition, since data were collected during the spring semester, responses may have been influenced by seasonal differences in counselors' workloads and leadership opportunities. As such, these factors may have contributed to variation across participants' reports. In future studies, it may be useful to incorporate additional types of data collection, such as school achievement data, student outcomes, or qualitative methods, to explore school counselors' experiences of hope and leadership.

Moreover, our findings raise the possibility that hope and leadership may operate bidirectionally. In other words, hope may foster leadership behaviors, and successful leadership may, in turn, reinforce hope over time. Relatedly, scholars may also consider whether hope serves as a

mediator or moderator between structural conditions and leadership engagement. Future research with larger and more diverse samples may be better positioned to test these relationships.

Finally, our study did not account for the potential influence of additional variables on participants' leadership activities. These additional variables may include administrative support, community resources, training opportunities, school climate, family engagement, and socioeconomic status that may interact with hope to promote leadership engagement. Scholars may consider incorporating these and other factors in future research related to school counselors' levels of hope and leadership activities.

Conclusion

In recent years, hope has emerged as a critical factor in supporting school counseling practice (Ender et al., 2019; Niles et al., 2024a; 2024b; 2025). This study builds upon previous studies and offers empirical support for the role of hope as an internal resource that supports school counselor leadership across diverse educational contexts. While ecological influences, like caseload and geographic location, may influence school counselors' environment, hope emerged as a consistent predictor of leadership engagement within our sample. These findings highlight the relevance of individual, intrapersonal resources, like hope, for promoting leadership practices that benefit students and schools.

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