A Content Analysis of ASCA Ethical Standards between 1972 and 2022

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Abstract

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of American School Counselor Association (ASCA) ethical standards ($N = 8$) from 1972 to 2022. Researchers have examined how other disciplines' standards convey meaning, tone, composition, and understanding to help guide ethical behaviors. This study was designed to gather and represent a historical account and detailed evolution of ethical standards for school counseling, school counselors, educators, supervisors, and students-in-training. Findings revealed ASCA ethical standards changed over time in tone, meaning, size, structure, scope of ethical practice, and expanded school counselors' ethical responsibilities. We found that changes in section titles, standards, and word count impacted meaning and interpretation. We provide recommendations for current and future versions of ASCA ethical standards based on our findings.

Keywords: Qualitative Content Analysis, Ethical Standards, School Counselors, American School Counseling Association

Ethical codes or standards are common among organizations and academic disciplines (Gruenbaum & Jotkowitz, 2009). Nearly all fields of educational training have some form of ethical standards to help govern a given profession's ethical practice. Groups or disciplines that lack a detailed understanding of their professional ethics may lead to unethical behaviors resulting in harm to populations they serve (Bell & Bryman, 2007). Ethical standards, endorsed by a profession's governing body, can provide positive outcomes for members and clients. Adams and colleagues (2001) discovered that executive boards and companies with ethical codes acted more ethically than groups or organizations without published and readily accessible ethical guidance. The members of a

professional organization with ethical standards are typically more aware of ethical concerns, know how to address ethical dilemmas, and feel supported in safe, consistent, and sustainable ways (Adams et al., 2001). Although researchers in other disciplines (e.g., De Waegeneer et al., 2016; Gaumnitz & Lere, 2004) have examined patterns, trends, and intent of ethical standards, no researchers have examined trends in content in the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) ethical standards. A thorough understanding of all ASCA ethical standards may provide meaningful insights on the creation and development of ethics in the profession, reflect the evolution of school counseling's professional identity, and inform revisions of future versions of the standards. Furthermore, exploring shifts in tone, keywords, word counts, and other structural changes (e.g., length and organization) may illuminate how leaders represent ethics in school counseling (De Waegeneer et al., 2016). In the present study, we aimed to inductively examine the content of all ASCA ethical standards using a systematic and comprehensive approach that is salient and relevant to school counselors, counselor educators, and the profession.

Ethical Issues in School Counseling

School counselors' ethical practice, including roles and responsibilities, remain critical to the profession of school counseling. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) defined ethics as "the norms and principles of conduct and philosophy governing the profession" (2022, p. 12). Remley and colleagues (2017) asserted that due to social change, school counselors have distinct roles that can create confounding obligations where they must navigate complex student issues while respecting parent or guardian rights, and must address difficult issues such as suicide and self-harm while maintaining ethical principles (e.g., confidentiality & fairness).

Much of the school counseling ethics literature is focused on the ethics governing specific topics rather than providing a broad and holistic overview of the ethical standards. Kennedy and Baker (2015) examined the ethical complexities of school counseling websites offering content to

help Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) students. White Kress and colleagues (2006) illuminated how ethical considerations and legal obligations for school counselors with students who engage in non-suicidal self-injury involve many evolving ethical standards. More recently, DeCino and colleagues (2018) explored how school counselors experienced ethical challenges when they were subpoenaed and testifying in court on behalf of students. Springer (2016) detailed how school counselors may struggle to ethically balance personal values and school policy or procedures when reporting allegations of child abuse to child protection services.

In a content analysis of articles published between 2008 and 2023 in *Professional School Counseling*, Falco and colleagues (2025) found less than one percent of published scholarly articles focused on ethical issues for school counselors. Although trade journal magazines and school counseling websites (see schoolcounselor.org & ASCA.com) provide guidance to navigate complex and difficult ethical issues that school counselors may encounter, the ways that ethical standards are constructed, communicated, and used to inform school counselors' behaviors remain largely unknown. Therefore, a targeted examination of the ethical standards themselves is needed. Understanding of the ASCA ethical standards broadly, rather than focusing on only specific components of an ethical issue, is critical to the profession and may help school counselors, supervisors, and educators understand their ethical obligations more thoroughly.

Ethical Standards or Codes Research

Professional Groups

Researchers in other disciplines outside of school counseling have analyzed ethical code documents for decades (Stevens, 1994). Bell and Bryman (2007) performed an exploratory content analysis of ten different academic and research-based associations' (e.g., American Psychiatric Association, American Sociological Association) ethical codes and discovered how these documents convey meaning through tone and structure. They found numerous codes were composed with

either *advisory* tones, which instructed readers to consider or recommend acting a certain way, or with *imperative* tones, which dictated readers must act a certain way to avoid doing harm. Thus, the relationship between the tone and meaning of each code implies how important the behavior of that code may be to the profession and the individual using it. Furthermore, Bell and Bryman (2007) suggested that as a discipline grows and further refines its professional identity, length of codes (e.g., number of individual codes and length of wording for each) typically increase in complexity and intent for its readers.

Ethical codes are critical ways that disciplines can promote ethical behavior and decision making. Gruenbaum and Jotkowitz (2009) found that medical students who were asked to create a set of ethical standards commonly recognized some key ethical principles that can guide forming healthy relationships with patients. Yet, the same students avoided creating ethical guidelines that addressed more controversial topics like abortion rights for patients. Gruenbaum and Jotkowitz (2009) also discovered that medical students are likely to overlook integrating key philosophical components, such as Hippocrates and Maimonides oaths. De Waegeneer and colleagues (2014) found that while ethical code documents exist in many disciplines, members of those disciplines may only be partially aware of the documents and codes themselves, thus limiting their effectiveness. They also found that ethical code documents paired with specific examples were more effective than deontological phrases (e.g., "do your duty") without explanation or rationale.

Researchers in related fields have evaluated how ethical codes may help organizations or disciplines (De Waegeneer et al., 2016). Adams and colleagues (2001) found that executive board members and other stakeholders in fields with ethical codes were able to resolve ethical issues more effectively compared to their counterparts at organizations without ethical standards. However, little research exists that broadly examines how school counseling ethical standards are represented, convey important meaning and values, and represent the school counseling profession.

American School Counselor Association

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) emerged from the Association of Vocational Guidance in 1953 (Gysbers, 2010). Since that time, there have been changes in professional identity, structural organization, and the purpose of ASCA. Gysbers (2010) documented how struggles with titles, names, and other key terminology posed considerable challenges for unifying the school counseling profession throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. For example, for nearly 50 years, leaders and scholars debated whether to use the terms *guidance*, *vocational guidance*, or other variations before settling on *school counseling* in the mid-90s. Accordingly, Lambie and Williamson (2004), asserted that school counseling's evolution, representation, and identity continue to influence how individuals and groups interpret the profession. If school counselors and other stakeholders consider the historical and social contexts shaping the current ethical standards (ASCA, 2022), more intentional and meaningful revisions to future standards may occur. Conversely, failure to account for the profession's history may lead to less insight directing its future (Remley et al., 2017).

In the past 50 plus years, ethical standard documents for school counselors have served a crucial role for defining the profession and providing school counselors guidance towards ethical practice (Johnson & Purgason, 2021). Currently, eight versions of the ASCA ethical standards (1972, 1984, 1992, 1998, 2004, 2010, 2016, and 2022) outline ethical practice for school counselors spanning an abundance of diverse topics and interactions with students, stakeholders, and legal guardians in school settings.

Purpose of the Study

To date, there is no content analysis of the ASCA ethical standards. Since studies on ethical standards or codes beyond school counseling (e.g., Bell & Bryman, 2007; Gaumnitz & Lere, 2004; Johnson et al., 2021) are useful to those professions, more insights could determine how ASCA

ethical standards have evolved over decades and currently guide school counselors, supervisors, and other stakeholders today. An inductive study exploring how stakeholders, leaders, and practitioners have framed the ASCA ethical standards over time can support ongoing efforts to better understand and develop ethics within the field (Gysbers, 2010). The purpose of this qualitative content analysis study was to explore the patterns, construction, and meaning of all ASCA ethical standards. The overarching research questions guiding our study were: "How have the ASCA ethical standards changed in size, content, structure, and composition over time?" and "What themes or patterns emerge from the ASCA ethical standards from 1972 to 2022?"

Method

We selected Schreier's (2012) qualitative content analysis (QCA) approach to guide our coding and interpretations of all ASCA ethical standards from 1972 to 2022 ($N = 8$). A QCA framework grounded in a social constructivist epistemological paradigm enabled us to use inductive and deductive approaches to iteratively and systematically code key qualitative features within each version and as one collective batch (Vears & Gillam, 2022). Through examining elements of tone, structure, and language, QCA researchers can recognize and understand how disciplines with a common mission view and make meaning of their identity reflective of their goals and intentions (Preiser et al., 2022). Thus, using a QCA approach allowed us to design a coding frame with multiple categories, classify pieces of data into categories, and do so in a flexible way that reduces data. QCA helped us understand the ASCA ethical standards from a systematic perspective within their historical contexts in ways that would not be feasible when collecting data from participants. Additionally, using a QCA and social constructivist perspective also allowed us to use reflexivity within the context of our experiences as former school counselors, educators, and professionals devoted to ethical training and practice.

Procedure

Guided by Schreier's (2012) recommendations, we conducted a QCA using six steps. First, we chose to examine all published versions of ASCA ethical standards and tailored research questions to reflect processes that would ensure a comprehensive and robust analysis. Official versions of ethical standards qualified for inclusion in this study only if they displayed the ASCA title and either "code of ethics" or "ethical standards." Documents exploring key topics in new standards or editorials highlighting key changes were excluded. All versions were obtained by either (a) requesting copies from ASCA (1984, 1998, 2004, 2010, and 2016), (b) downloading copies (e.g., 2022 version) from ASCA's current website (2025), or (c) downloading published versions from Journal Storage (JSTOR; 1972 and 1992).

For step three, we divided our codebook into two main components. First, we developed our inductive portion to allow for data-driven categories, subcategories, and insights to emerge with depth and context relevant to our study. Schreier (2012) suggested four different inductive strategies for developing data-driven codes. For our main inductive strategy, we utilized *subsumption* because it allowed us to create main categories and subcategories with flexibility as we examined additional standards in ways that expanded our meaning and understanding of ethics in school counseling (Schreier, 2012). Using a subsumption framework, Schreier (2012) asserted researchers should create their main data-driven categories first, then code all remaining data in either main categories or created subcategories. For example, our first coding frame and version of the codebook started with the 1972 standards and identified content related to multicultural competence in three areas (ASCA, 1973, Preamble., Section A.1. & Section A.2.) plus three other inductive categories. The final iteration of our codebook (i.e., the 2022 version) reflected multicultural competence in three categories, plus 35 subcategories. For example, important changes and implementations of social justice tenets were noted in thirty-four different individual standards (Preamble; Sections A.1., A.3.,

A.4., A.6., A.7., A.8., A.9., A.10., A.11., A.15., B.1., B.2., B.3.; Standards C.b., C.e., C.i., & F.b.) within the 2022 version. Following Schreier's (2012) subsumption framework, we also expanded other areas in our codebook on topics like technology and school counselor responsibilities reflective of change spanning fifty-plus years of school counseling ethical standards. Second, using prior content analysis studies on ethical code documents (Bell & Bryman, 2007; De Waegeneer et al., 2016; Gaumnitz & Lere, 2004), we added a deductive and descriptive statistical category to track changes in word count, number of sections, number of existing standards for each version, number of new standards created for each version, use of imperative verbs, and percentage changes from one version to the next. For example, if one version from the next increased in overall word count, we noted that number and calculated the percent change in an excel spreadsheet.

In step four, each team member independently read the 1972 standards and created general categories and subcategories for all standards. We used step four to pilot our study and help familiarize ourselves collectively with the 1972 version and refine our coding frame and codebook. For example, we created a main category for philosophical aim (general) and subcategory highlighting standards that matched a specific ethical principle (e.g., *veracity* or *beneficence*). Next, we reconvened and discussed our emerging categories, subcategories, and themes for the 1972 version. Then, the lead author organized each coder's interpretations and general coding. Next, we recoded the 1972 standards with our refined codebook and met a third time to discuss and finalize our categories, subcategories, and coding strategy. According to Vears and Gillam (2022), iterative coding with an inductive approach "…means the coding is not done only once for each document/transcript but is refined on the basis of comparisons between documents/transcripts and repeated" (p.113). After coding the 1972 standards for the final time, the research team wrote a summary paragraph representing a consensus version of our coding that captured the meaning, significance, and tone of the document (Schreier, 2012). Guided by the first two authors'

experiences as school counselors and school counselor educators, and Schreier's (2012) subsumption framework, we revised the content of our codebook by independently coding each version, gathering for research team discussions, and reaching consensus on coding. Consensus involved placing standards and themes in either existing categories or creating new spaces for emerging themes.

For step five, the lead author organized individual Google Drive folders for the remaining seven versions of ASCA standards. Each member was provided with a folder for the 1984 standards with their name, a copy of the standards, and codebook that contained our evolving categories, subcategories, and descriptive statistics of the 1972 and 1984 versions. We coded all remaining versions of the ASCA ethical standards in a sequential, step-by-step format, and stored all analysis in the main Google Drive folder. Our final coding sheet from a subsumption framework (Schreier, 2012) contained all descriptive statistics, key themes, visual images, and summary paragraphs for all eight versions in one complete document. The full coding document is available upon request.

Researcher as Instrument

Our research team consisted of four members with over 30 years of combined professional experience. Authors one and two are former school counselors with nine years of combined experience in elementary, middle, and high schools. They are currently school counselor educators with 19 years of combined experience training future school counselors. Author three is a counselor educator with a background in clinical mental health counseling. Author four is a developmental psychologist with expertise in child and adolescent development. Authors one, two, and three have extensive research and publication experience with content analysis projects. Authors one and three currently teach ethics for clinical mental health and school counseling students in CACREP-accredited programs.

Trustworthiness

We utilized seven strategies for trustworthiness in this study. First, we practiced reflexivity throughout all phases of our project design and analysis. According to Finlay and Gough (2003), reflexivity encompasses researchers' engagement in an ongoing and deliberate reflective practice during their projects. At the beginning of the project and during subsequent discussions, we disclosed and reflected upon our biases and assumptions. All members of the team recognized that the ASCA ethical standards play an important role in school counselors' ethical behaviors and values reflective of school counseling. One member acknowledged having no prior understanding of the standards, while the third author indicated having a general understanding as a clinical mental health counselor educator. Authors one and two, having school counselor experience and CACREP-accredited master's degrees in school counseling, were trained with the 2004 or 2010 versions, then used the 2016 or 2022 versions for training students and conducting research projects.

Next, we incorporated an external auditor at beginning or middle phases of coding and analysis. Creswell and Poth (2025) suggested external auditors can validate the researchers' findings, interpretations, and conclusions from the data. In this study, the external auditor was recruited for their expertise with content analysis, professional school counseling experience, and publishing manuscripts on ethical issues for school counselors. The external auditor reviewed our codebook, coding sheet, and emerging themes at two phases. First, after the 1972 and 1984 versions were completed, then at the midway point of our analysis after the 1998 version. We reviewed the external auditor's feedback, adjusted our codebook, and corrected any minor inconsistencies with our analysis process.

Third, as part of our initial coding, final coding, and final write-up we used thick and rich descriptions to provide readers with a comprehensive representation of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2025). We devoted considerable time analyzing and reworking our data to organize the

findings into detailed descriptions that allow readers to understand the composition, evolution, and salient themes pertaining to the ASCA ethical standards. We practiced prolonged engagement with the data through our process of obtaining all versions of ASCA ethical standards, scheduling meetings, coding, completing analysis, and reconciling external auditor feedback. The project began in summer of Fall 2023 and lasted through Fall of 2024. The lead author kept a detailed audit trail of each meeting that included our open and final coding, discussions of our interpretations, and insights into how we addressed discrepancies during analysis phases. The audit trail reinforced our efforts to be organized, systematic, and focused with our evaluations of all ASCA ethical standards (Creswell & Poth, 2025). Finally, all research team members agreed to each final coded version of every standard document ($N = 8$), reaching agreement on key themes, conveyed tone or meaning, and important nuance. Through this process, we were able to ultimately achieve triangulation of analysis (Schreier, 2012).

Findings

The following findings emerged from our QCA of all ASCA ethical standards between 1972 and 2022. Descriptive statistics are presented to provide word count, number of sections and standards, and other comparisons between each version. Significant themes highlight changes in content and topics, keywords, roles and responsibilities of school counselors, and tone of standards.

Descriptive Statistics

We coded each version of ethical standards for total word count, sections labeled with roman numerals or letters, individual standards, and percent change within each of these categories from one version to the next. Generally, word count gradually increased with each new version, with the largest percentage change from the 2004 to the 2010 version. The number of sections also experienced large changes, with the largest increase occurring from 1992 to 1998. The 2004 and 2016 versions showed reductions in the number of total sections. Overall, the number of individual

standards gradually increased with each new version. Table 1 highlights descriptive statistics for all

versions of the ASCA ethical standards.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for All ASCA Ethical Standards (N = 8)

Version	Words	% Change	Sections	% Change	# Standards	% Change
1972	1,225	--	7	--	38	--
1984	1,510	+19%	9	+22%	46	+17%
1992	2,140	+29%	9	0%	55	+18%
1998	3,031	+29%	24	+63%	65	+26%
2004	3,155	+4%	23	-4%	83	+28%
2010	4,920	+36%	29	+17%	136	+40%
2016	7,442	+34%	25	-16%	182	+25%
2022	8,695	+14%	26	+4%	227	+21%

Note: All versions of ethical standards were coded for word count, number of sections labeled with Roman numerals or letters, number of individual standards, and percent change from one version to the next in each category.

Significant Inductive Themes

Multicultural Standards

All versions of standards (*N* = 8) noted the importance of multicultural issues impacting

school counseling practice. Early examples (e.g., 1972) of multiculturalism and language guiding

school counselors were minimal yet present in the introduction or preamble sections. For example,

in the 1972 version, elements of multicultural competence are offered only within the premise and

tenet sections, whereas in the 2022 version discussion of military students/families (Preamble &

Section A.4. Academic, Career, and Social/Emotional Planning) and tribal communities (Standards

A.1g. & A.1.k.) are included for the first time.

Versions from 1984 and 1992 gradually increased multicultural language and targeted

guidance for school counselors. In the 1984 version, the Multicultural Counseling and Development

(MCD) standards were added as part of the preamble and more clearly codified ethical and

multicultural standards for school counselors. Later, in the 1998 version, individual standards

included more multicultural competence requirements for school counselors when working with

special groups in diverse settings. For example, in Standard B.1.c. it states that when interacting with parents or families, the professional school counselor "is sensitive to cultural and social diversity among families and recognizes that all parents, custodial and noncustodial, are vested with certain rights and responsibilities for the welfare of their children by virtue of their roles and according to law" (ASCA, 1998, p. 2). Multicultural competence for school counselors' ethical practice continued to evolve. Notably, in 2004 Section E.2. was titled "Diversity", whereas in 2010 it was renamed to "Multicultural and Social Justice Advocacy and Leadership." Currently, the 2022 standards reflect the most comprehensive, detailed, and intentional application of multicultural competence of school counselors since the standards began in 1972. Expanding on the 2016 standards, key terms like *equity*, *inclusion*, *oppression*, and *prejudice* were added to many standards in the 2022 version. For example, a comparison of the same standard from the 2016 and 2022 versions highlights key themes of inclusive action required of school counselors to promote multicultural competence:

> 2016: School counselors are culturally competent and sensitive to diversity among families… (ASCA, 2016, Standard B.1.d., p. 6).

> 2022: School counselors promote equity and inclusion through culturally affirming and sustaining practices honoring the diversity of families… (ASCA, 2022, Standard B.1.c., p. 7).

Technology Standards

Another key theme throughout most of the standards included the introduction and expansion of ethical use of technology for school counselors. The term technology was introduced in the 1992 standards in Section A. Responsibility to Students: "Members of under-represented groups are assured of equal access to computer technologies and the absence of discriminatory information and values within computer applications" (ASCA, 1998, Standard A.14., p. 86). Technology as an ethical concept remained relatively consistent in messaging and meaning through the 1998, 2004, and 2010 standards. In 2016, a sizable shift occurred, with an expansion of ethical

guidance for use of technology by school counselors. First, mentions of technology increased from four to seven and were placed in three separate sections. In Section A.5. Dual Relationships and Managing Boundaries, school counselors were instructed:

> Do not use personal social media, personal e-mail accounts or personal texts to interact with students unless specifically encouraged and sanctioned by the school district. School counselors adhere to professional boundaries and legal, ethical and school district guidelines when using technology with students, parents/guardians or school staff. The technology utilized, including, but not limited to, social networking sites or apps, should be endorsed by the school district and used for professional communication and the distribution of vital information. (ASCA, 2016, Standard A.5.d., p. 3).

In the 2022 standards, the term "technology" is used six times and within the same sections as the 2016 version. However, changes in wording stressed increased multicultural competence and equitable use of technology for all students (ASCA, 2022, Standard A.15.a.). Other key themes that increased throughout all standards included the introduction and rapid expansion of ethics pertaining to group work, dual or multiple relationships, references to laws such as Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and other key functions of school counselors.

Tone and Meaning

Keywords

The first major shifts in tone and meaning noted within each standard ($N = 8$) were keywords that identified and labeled school counselors, students, and other school leaders. Terms used to label students reflect the most change across all versions. In 1972, students were almost exclusively referred to as *pupils*. Twenty years later, in the 1992 edition, pupil was no longer used, and *counselee* was primarily used, while *student* appeared more frequently than in previous versions. By 2004, *student* was used more prominently, and *counselee* was eliminated. Similarly, the term *client* was

used frequently in the 1998 version and referred to students in standards that emphasized traditional counseling experiences or clinical applications (e.g., Preamble, Sections A.4, A.6, E.2, & F.2). Another area that reflected a shift in tone and meaning noted within each standard was the use of keywords that identified and labeled school counseling as a profession. The term *guidance* was used in 1972, 1984, and 1992 versions but was eliminated in the 1998 standards and all remaining versions.

Use of gendered, binary pronouns also significantly evolved throughout all versions of standards. In 1972, *he/him* were used exclusively throughout the code to refer to school counselors and pupils. For example, in Standard VI.A.2.: "The school counselor shall conduct *himself* in a responsible manner and participate in developing policies concerning guidance" (ASCA, 1973, Standard VI.A.2., p. 140). By 1992, *she/her* and *he/him* were used equally, but by 2022, all gender binary pronouns were eliminated, presenting the standards in a gender-neutral way. For example, a comparison of the same standard from 1992 and 2022 versions highlights the reduction in gendered pronouns and key terms for students/counselees regarding confidentiality:

> 1992: Informs the counselee of the purposes, goals, techniques and rules of procedure under which she/he may receive counseling assistance at or before the time when the counseling relationship is entered… (ASCA, 1992, Standard A.3., p. 85).

> 2022: Informs students of the purposes, goals, techniques, rules and procedures under which they may receive counseling. Disclosure includes informed consent and clarification of the limits of confidentiality (ASCA, 2022, Standard A.2.a., p. 2).

Finally, terms highlighting parents and legal caregivers were reflected in all versions of standards. *Parents* were used exclusively from 1972 through 1998 until 2004 when *guardians* were added. In 2016, *families* were used in places referencing parents and guardians.

Imperative Verbs

Another significant change that occurred across all ethical standards was the use of imperative verbs to introduce each standard. To begin, the lead author recorded each imperative verb for all standards across each version and recorded the percent change. For example, the 1972 version used six different imperative verbs to introduce ethical standards (*may*, *must*, *shall*, *should*, *will be*, & *without regards*). *Shall* appeared most frequently ($N = 23$) in all sections and generally set command tones. For example, in Section II. Principal responsibilities of the School Counselor to PARENTS, all four standards use *shall* as in, "the school counselor *shall* work with parents so as to enhance the development of the counselee" (ASCA, 1973, Standard A.1., p. 138).

In the 1984 version, imperative verbs changed by 92% and introduced new standards (e.g., *assists*, *delineates*, *establishes*, *follows*, *informs*, *makes*, *promotes*, *provides*, *respects*, *shall*, *supports*, *treats*, & *works*). Instead of using *shall* for commands, words such as *informs* and *provides* set more constructive and explanatory tones (Bell & Bryman, 2007). For example, in the section titled "Responsibilities to Pupils," the school counselor: "*Refrains* from consciously encouraging the counselee's acceptance of values, lifestyles, plans, decisions, and beliefs that represent on the counselors' personal orientation" (ASCA, 1984, Standard A.1., p. 85).

Each version thereafter evolved its use of imperative verbs, experiencing modest changes from one version to the next. In the 2022 version, only 26% percent of imperative verbs changed from the 2016 standards. For example, new imperative verbs in the 2022 version included *offer*, *know*, and *reflect*. These gradual changes reflect changes in the profession, moving to language that sets a tone of collaboration, focused practice, and professionalism rather than commands to be implicitly followed (Bell & Bryman, 2007). Table 2 provides a full account of all imperative verb changes across all ethical standards.

Table 2
ASCA Imperative Verb Changes

Version Year	Number of Standards Per Version	Number of Different Imperative Verbs	Percent Change
1972	38	6	0%
1984	46	13	+92%
1992	55	27	+66%
1998	65	36	+36%
2004	83	48	+33%
2010	136	54	+26%
2016	182	66	+42%
2022	227	73	+26%

Note: All versions of ethical standards were coded for number of standards, number of different imperative verbs, and percent change from one version to the next.

Expansion of Responsibilities

Professional roles and responsibilities for school counselors and related ethical practices greatly expanded across all versions. For example, the concept of maintaining confidentiality was present in the first edition and expanded significantly over time. In 1972, *confidentiality* appeared only once in Section III: Principal responsibilities of the School Counselor to FACULTY, ADMINISTRATION, AND COLLEAGUES: "the school counselor must maintain confidentiality even though others may have the same knowledge" (ASCA, 1973, Standard III.A.6., p. 138). In 2004, *confidentiality* emerged as a stand-alone section (A.2.) and was featured 17 times in 11 different sections (e.g., Preamble, A.2., A.6., A.7., A.8., A.9., A.10., B.1., B.2., C.2., D.1.). In 2022, *confidentiality* appears 25 times in eleven different sections (Preamble, A.2., A.3., A.6., A.7., A.8., A.14., A.15., A.16., B.2., & Glossary).

All eight versions of standards reflected key roles, collaborations, and connections with other stakeholders inside and outside of school settings. Early versions (e.g., 1972, 1984, 1992, & 1998) primarily emphasized interactions with teachers, clinicians, administrators, or families. In 2004, school counselor collaboration with professionals outside of schools demonstrated more targeted partnerships that emphasized ethical standards linked to training and supervision of school

counselor training. For example, in the 2022 version, in Section D: School Counseling

Practicum/Internship Site Supervisors, 13 new ethical standards suggested ways site supervisors

should interact with school counseling supervisees (ASCA, 2022). A few examples in the 2022

version included:

> …use culturally affirming supervision (Standard D.d.); avoid conflicting supervisory
>
> relationships (Standard D.e.); maintain technology competence (Standard D.f.); recognize
>
> differences in forms of communication during supervision (Standard D.g.); understand
>
> supervisee limitations (Standard D.k); consult with university instructors when supervisees
>
> need assistance (Standard D.m); acknowledge specific roles of counselor educators, site
>
> supervisors, and students to promote fairness across all interactions and activities (Standard
>
> D. n.). (ASCA, 2022, Section D, p. 9).

This expansion of roles and responsibilities specifically with site supervisors, interns, and other

stakeholders highlighted how standards have increased to include others beyond school settings yet

impact ethical school counseling practices.

Ancillary Resources

The final salient theme noted across all standards reflected changes in ancillary resources.

While the preamble has generally been consistent with introductions and key information for school

counselors and others providing guidance on how to interpret and apply the standards, there have

been changes in sections such as the purpose statement, references, and glossary. In the 1992 and

1998 versions, a resource list with key citations, contacts, addresses, and other relevant information

is provided for school counselors. A glossary was only offered in the 2016 and 2022 standards.

Finally, in most versions, there is some guidance or ethical decision-making model to help school

counselors navigate ethical dilemmas. In the 2022 standards, three models are provided to help

school counselors navigate ethical dilemmas from different perspectives. Prior to 2022, the Stone

(2017) model or general suggestions (e.g., versions 1984, 1992, 1998, 2004, 2010) were provided to help school counselors, and in the 1972 version there was no model to provide support or guidance.

Discussion

In the present study, we used Schreier's (2012) approach to qualitative content analysis to understand how all versions of the ASCA ethical standards from 1972 to 2022 have evolved. Our findings demonstrate several ways the ASCA ethical standards reflect the evolution of the ethical values and priorities of the school counseling field. Since the first version of the ASCA ethical standards in 1972, multicultural competence has been a constant focus of school counselors' ethical practice. Early versions reflected more minimal guidance about multicultural competence while recent versions expanded language across all standards and within preamble and purpose statements. In addition, phrasing of diversity, equity, and inclusion concepts in more recent versions (e.g., 2016 & 2022) highlighted how school counselors should take specific actions from social justice-oriented perspectives while working with diverse populations. In contrast, earlier versions indicated school counselors' ethical obligations were to only be aware of and understand under-represented groups (Johnson & Carrico, 2020). This finding aligns with Gysbers' (2010) assertion that "social forces such as gender, equity, multiculturalism, diversity, sexual orientation and social class also played a prominent role in shaping education and guidance counseling in the 1980s and 1990s" (p. 131). It also reflected calls for increased multicultural competence and social justice-based principles within the profession (ASCA, 2025; Placeres et al., 2022). The increased focus in multicultural competence for school counselors' ethical practice may be explained by shifts in cultural and social norms, targeted initiatives from ASCA, and an increased emphasis on professionals working in schools with all children (Johnson & Carrico, 2020; Remley et al., 2017). Reductions and elimination of gendered pronouns in the ethical standards (e.g., 2016 & 2022 versions) signaled language that promotes acceptance of students and school counselors of all gender identities.

Since 1992, technology has increased in relevance for school counselors' ethical practice (Steele et al., 2014). For several versions (1992, 1998, 2004, & 2010), mentions of technology were contained to a few sections and gradually increased with new standards. In the 2016 standards, technology became a more prominent topic guided by direct instruction, with detailed examples of how school counselors can ethically interact with students or other stakeholders using technological tools. In line with Steele and colleagues (2014), this finding suggests that as technology evolves, ethical standards related to technology must change. In the same light, specific technologies named in the standards quickly can become antiquated (Roberts et al., 2023). For example, school counselors today may use multiple ways of sharing student information electronically rather than using "facsimile" to correspond with parents, guardians, family, or relevant stakeholders as referenced in the 2010, 2016, and 2022 standards.

Generally, each version of standards was significantly revised compared to the previous version. Improvements in display, organization, and readability of sections occurred primarily in the 1998 and 2016 standards. While modern versions of standards were relatively consistent with formatting and display patterns, they showed a reduction in sections but an increase in total standards. Formatting, organization, and structure of the 1984 and 1992 standards mirrored other changes within ASCA (e.g., introduction of the national model and mindset applications). In turn, Gysbers (2010) noted how shifts within ASCA reflected more formalized changes across other key areas of education (e.g., creation of School to Work Opportunities Act). This finding suggests that from one edition of standards to the next, as roles and responsibilities of school counselors increased, more specificity, depth, and nuance was needed to perform those duties ethically (Huey et al., 2011).

The increased word count and overall length in each version warrants further discussion. The 1972 standards had slightly over one thousand words and was approximately one and half

pages. The latest version (e.g., 2022) included over eight thousand words in twelve pages of content. Researchers have suggested that overly expansive documents could lead to ethical codes being seen as "hollow phrases rather than becoming a vivid and effective instrument for guiding behavior in organizations" (De Waegeneer et al. 2016, pg. 595). Conversely, Bell and Bryman (2007) argued that organizations with ethical codes with increased depth, insight, and responsibility are more complex and sophisticated than disciplines with underdeveloped ethical codes and identities. Our findings suggest that over time, continuous and sustained increases in ethical responsibilities are reflected in greater complexity of the related professional standards. We suggest this finding requires more exploration for additional and targeted insight.

Significant changes in keywords (e.g., school counselors and students) across ethical standards reflect unique changes in professional identity and ethics for school counselors over time. In early versions, terms like *pupil* may have suggested influence from general educational fields, while terms like *counselee* and *client* may have suggested influence from the American Counseling Association (ACA) or other sources within counseling. Given that ASCA was a division of ACA for many years, terms and wording that reflected clinical approaches to treatment seemed to exist in multiple versions. Despite ACA's potential role in ASCA's development, later versions seemed to reflect greater distinction and shifts from a clinically focused language and ideas to school focused language (e.g., school counselors refrain from diagnosis; ASCA, 2022, Standard A.1.f., p. 2; Betters-Bubon et al., 2021). While only two versions (2016 & 2022) signal a more school-focused approach, the standards in general continued to utilize language valued by ASCA, the evolving nature of the profession, and promote stronger professional school counselor identities (Betters-Bubon et al., 2021). For example, since the 1920s, the term *guidance counseling* was commonly used before *school counseling* became uniformly accepted. In the early 1990s, ASCA leaders and scholars suggested terms like *guidance* should be replaced with *school counseling* to reflect school counselors' increased duties

beyond college and career support for students (Gysbers, 2010). Given that *guidance* was eliminated in the 1998 standards, this change was in line with other formal aspects of the profession and evolving identity (Lambie & Williamson, 2004).

Nearly all versions of ethical standards provided some ancillary resources for school counselors to address unethical behaviors, utilize trusted contacts for additional information (e.g., ACA mailing address), or reference definitions of key terms. Additions of decision-making models, glossaries, or references were explicitly provided in five of eight versions of standards and make suggestions for how school counselors resolve ethical dilemmas or understand key concepts relevant to school counseling. Although school counselors may utilize ethical decision-making models within the standards, why these models were selected and how effective they are for school counselors remains unclear (Brown & Armstrong, 2022; Johnson et al., 2022). Additionally, glossaries may provide needed definitions and clarification regarding key concepts for school counselors. Which terms are defined and by whom may help increase transparency and clarity for more ethical school counseling practice. For example, in the 2022 version, complex ideas such as *social justice* (Standards B.3.g. & C.i) and *prejudice* (Standards B.3.g. & B.3.k.) are absent from the glossary yet play a key role in defining ethical school counselors' practice.

Overall, given that language, key terms, tone, and concepts evolved with each new version, some limitations with the standards are inherently noted. While new versions of the ethical standards come out at regular intervals, cultural shifts and evolutions of the field's values may challenge school counselors' use of existing standards for their ethical practice (Remley et al., 2017). For example, the current version does not address the ethics of school counselors' interactions with Artificial Intelligence (AI). Thus, while each iteration of ethical standards aims to be accurate and relevant, rapid changes in society may limit relevancy and utility of the ethical standards shortly after publication (Huey et al., 2011).

All versions experienced at least 25% change in the imperative verbs used to introduce individual standards. Most notably, a 92% change between the 1972 and 1984 editions suggested school counselors were advised to *follow* ethical standards, rather than not *violate* them (Bell & Bryman, 2007). Nearly all codes evolved from starting with *shall*, *must*, or *may* to starting with *supports*, *reflects*, and *informs* in later versions. Compared to Bell and Bryman, (2007), our findings suggested that school counselors are instructed to follow principles (e.g., maintaining confidentiality) by encouragement rather than obey standards that must not be contradicted. Gaumnitz and Lere (2004) also discussed that ethical codes with certain tones may trigger emotional reactions and impact motivations of those obligated to fulfill them. This shift in imperative verbs seems to point to an intentional direction from the authors of the ASCA ethical standards and possible emotional reactions and motivations of readers. In short, nearly all versions of ASCA's ethical standards are framed to encourage school counselors to act ethically as a positive professional responsibility rather than as a negative professional mandate (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Gaumnitz & Lere, 2004).

Limitations

We noted several limitations for this study. First, we did not code any supporting literature or other supplemental resources (e.g., websites & editorials) that explained how versions of the standards should be utilized or interpreted. We wanted to evaluate the standards on their own merits; however, incorporating and coding of these supplemental resources may have augmented some of our results. Second, our study design reflected an *inductive*, qualitative research approach rather than a *deductive* approach. A deductive analysis may have generated different results. Third, given the volume of standards we reviewed (eight individual documents including 832 different standards plus ancillary information), other researchers could have utilized different qualitative strategies like *progressive summarizing, adaptive grounded theory*, and *contrasting* (Schreier, 2012) to generate different results. Fourth, given the expansive scope of this study, a deeper analysis of some findings

was limited. While Bell and Bryman (2007) performed four levels of analysis regarding tone of imperative verbs, due to the broad nature of our study, only one level of analysis was performed. Finally, although we took multiple steps to maximize trustworthiness, it is possible that our work in higher education and experiences as school or clinical mental health counselors may have influenced the findings.

Implications

Future Research

Our study provides several suggestions for future research. First, interviewing key stakeholders involved in creating new ASCA standards or revising current standards may provide important context and rationale behind continued changes. For example, recording, transcribing, and sharing decision making processes would offer more opportunities for ASCA members, counselor educators, and other key stakeholders to contribute insights and suggest changes to newer versions. Next, more content analysis studies on ethical codes from other related disciplines such as school psychology, social work, or teacher preparation are needed to contextualize the findings of this study. Future content analysis studies could examine all versions of the ACA Code of Ethics (e.g., 1961 to 2014) to decipher differences and similarities with our findings. Like other studies in related fields evaluating the effectiveness of ethical codes for members within organizations (De Waegeneer et al., 2016), more research is needed to decipher how school counselors interpret and use the ethical standards document itself. For example, researchers could explore how school counselors apply ethical standards during difficult situations (Johnson & Purgason, 2021) and if length, number of sections, or other nuanced aspects impact their comprehension and ethical decision making (Bell & Bryman, 2007; De Waegneer et al., 2016). Furthermore, a thematic analysis of ethical topics discussed on school counselor forums, in continuing education curriculum and training, or in other virtual spaces may illuminate gaps in current ethical standards. Next, a

systematic examination of how state or national conferences and state school counseling associations help support ethical practice in school counseling may also provide useful insights. Finally, in line with Bell and Bryman (2007), a deeper analysis of ethical standards regarding tone and implied meaning may reveal how certain standards signal evolving values of the profession and expectations of school counselors within the field.

School Counseling Practice

Our findings also offer implications for school counselors. Given that quickly evolving topics like technology may change dramatically from one version to the next, school counselors can make targeted efforts to determine the impact on their work. School counselors may utilize emerging research and guidance from ASCA between versions of standards with rapidly evolving topics like technology to remain ethically compliant. School counselors can create quick standard reference lists detailing which codes directly address technology and compare them upon new releases, amendments, or ongoing supplemental guidance from ASCA. Furthermore, the official ASCA website can serve as a quick and easy resource for school counselors' ethical needs. Additionally, ASCA leadership could consider amending and revising smaller portions of the ethical standards between major revisions that may help school counselors stay more current. Given many versions significantly changed from one to the next, minor adjustments along the way may help school counselors adjust to the ethical impact of technological changes. Finally, given that each new version of standards sometimes features nuanced shifts in key places, we encourage school counselors to deliberately set aside time and effort to fully comprehend new versions upon publication. District or building in-service days could be a useful resource for school counselors to discuss new changes within the standards with parents, students, or school personnel in their unique settings (Remley et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The ongoing evolution of ASCA ethical standards demonstrates school counseling's evolving values. In this study, we found that changes in ASCA ethical standards from 1972 to 2022 reflected increased focus on school counselors' responsibilities with students, key stakeholders, parents, guardians, and families. We suggest that ASCA ethical standard revision committees and key stakeholders should deliberately reflect upon how each new version of the ethical standards can be best interpreted and utilized by school counselors.

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