



A school counselor shares lessons learned from applying for – and achieving – Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) status.

BY SHAWN GRIME, LPSC, NBCT

# All RAMP-ed Up

Imagine my excitement when I received my letter from ASCA stating my school had received the Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) designation. Then imagine my heartache when I learned several weeks later that I was out of a job due to staff reductions. Now you may be asking yourself why losing my job is an example of a RAMP success story. I promise that the story will end well.

I was in my third year as the lone school counselor at Liberty Center Middle School, a small, rural school in Ohio. I spent the three years prior as a science teacher in the same school. After my first year of teaching, my district moved from a K-6 and 7-12 building structure and created a distinct middle school based on a traditional middle school model. During this time, the two high school counselors were servicing the middle school students. With the secondary level expectations of testing, graduation, college applications, scholarships and the multitude of other

high-school-related duties, it became apparent there was a specific need for a school counselor who could devote the entire day to working with the students in the middle grades. I happened to be finishing up my graduate work at the time and was given the opportunity to step in as the new middle school counselor.

Most school counselors walk into an established position and spend several years molding their programs into something they can take ownership of. I, on the other hand, walked into school counseling nirvana and built a program from the ground up. This was a luxury I didn't want to waste, so I hit the ground running, using the ASCA National Model as my guide for what I eventually wanted my school counseling program to look like.

I spent two years creating, borrowing, tweaking and throwing ideas out the window in an attempt to create a program I knew was having a meaningful impact on my students. Although I felt I was having success with my students, things were chaotic, and I was functioning under a hit-and-miss mentality. I needed a way to pull all of the pieces together into a system that made sense as a whole. After receiving a mailing from ASCA promoting the RAMP designation, I knew I'd found the tool I needed to help organize my

program. The beauty of RAMP and the application process is that it finally made my school counseling program make sense. While the process was incredibly rewarding to me professionally, my school and its students were the true beneficiaries.

You may have entertained the notion of applying for RAMP once or twice yourself. If you're anything like me, I'm sure you can find many reasons to apply, as well as many reasons not to apply. No matter what your rational may be, my advice to prospective applicants has always been this: be ready to learn more about yourself as a school counselor and your school counseling program than you thought could be known. School counselors are a unique entity within the world of education. We're trained to always be thoughtful and deliberate in what we do. We are taught to evaluate research, examine results and self-reflect. Applying for RAMP will help you take these practices to the next level.

## It Takes Dedication

The RAMP application process took a solid 18 months to complete, from making the decision to apply on through putting the mailing label on the box of binders. These days you simply send in CDs with your application materials rather than a huge box of six-inch bind-

ers. But, the process still takes time.

I started the process at the end of the year prior to applying. To successfully navigate the process, I had to put in place what I would need for the following year. This was when I established an advisory council, which played a pivotal role in defining the program as I went through the RAMP application process.

Using input from the advisory council, I then addressed the foundation components of the program over the summer. Summer proved to be the perfect time to work on a mission statement, philosophy, goals and standards because I could devote my full attention to RAMP without the distractions of day-to-day school issues. The foundation components, while personally the easiest sections to complete, were the most rewarding and re-energizing sections to develop. To have a focus and purpose was incredibly empowering and set a strong professional tone for the school year. The rest of the

application fell into place as the year progressed. This was the one time in my life I didn't curse my obsessive-compulsive tendencies because they helped keep me on track and organized. The worst thing you can do is to allow the application process to overwhelm your time and energy. When that happens, you start losing sight of the personal growth that comes with RAMP, and it just becomes another item on your to do list.

### The Data Component

What proved to be the most challenging component of RAMP was working with data. I have spoken with several school counselors who have shared a self-diagnosed fear of data. Being a veteran science teacher, I was confident about my ability to collect, analyze and report data. Despite my high comfort level, I, too, was uncertain about using data in the context of my school counseling program. Like many school counselors, I relied on my gut as my gauge to how

successful my efforts were versus hard data. While some may have reliable guts, our internal perceptions aren't valid enough to truly answer the question, "How are my students different because of the school counseling program?"

We also fear data because we are scared we may discover we aren't being effective. This hit home when I collected and assessed data for a long-running homework intervention program that my gut had told me was having a positive effect, only to discover the data told me otherwise. I was floored at the program's ineffectiveness but was able to use that data to develop positive changes resulting in a better use of time and resources and greater student impact.

As school counselors, we must learn to embrace the knowledge we gain from evaluating data and remove the personal emotions we attach to those results. RAMP played a key role in changing my mindset about the need for data, and this positive change proved to be a

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pivotal benefit to my program down the road.

Throughout the RAMP application process, I came to the realization that, in addition to use of data, the other program component I needed to strengthen was my use of professional advocacy. The relationship between administrator and school counselor has long been a mystery, and my own relationship was no exception. My administrator and I shared a mutual respect and strong sense of collaboration, yet neither of us truly understood the expectations we had of each other. Prior to RAMP, my administrator had no idea that a standardized school counseling model even existed. RAMP became my sounding board in advocating for my school counseling program and myself as a professional school counselor. Having the building principal and a school board member involved in the advisory council and program foundational planning opened up avenues of understanding and communication that would have been difficult to establish otherwise.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, several weeks after achieving RAMP status, I learned I was being bumped out of my middle school counseling position due to staff cuts. With the budget cuts many have dealt with recently, this scenario has

been all too common for far too many of us. The happy ending to my story is although RAMP may not have saved my job, it did save my program.

Prior to the creation of my program, two school counselors serviced students in grades 6-12. When word of the downsizing came about, the request was made to return to the old service system, but administration saw the matter differently. They were pleased with the impact the separate middle school counseling program was having on student achievement and weren't willing to compromise that progress. Therefore, they made the decision to keep the middle school counseling program intact and required one of the high school counselors to move down so each would be able to focus on a smaller cross-section of students.

It's with great satisfaction that I can state RAMP did, indeed, help me advocate for my program and did, indeed, help change my stakeholders' perceptions of what I do, why I do it and how it affects students.

Anyone who knows me can attest that I can be a bit of an overachiever. My original intention to apply for RAMP was more self-serving than I would like to admit. A few weeks into the process, however, I had a major breakthrough and began

understanding the intended value of the ASCA National Model and RAMP. I realized that RAMP wasn't about strengthening a program through school counselor growth but strengthening a school counselor through program growth. RAMP opened my eyes to the vital link between the school counselor and the school counseling program.

Although many of us are effective school counselors, some of us, unfortunately, continue to work in ineffective school counseling programs. I cannot say enough about my experience applying for RAMP and the personal satisfaction I received for helping my school be the first RAMP school in the state of Ohio. Hopefully my experience has helped inspire you to take a leap of faith and make a commitment to grow as a professional by applying for RAMP.

You never know, I may just be going through the process again myself as I continue to grow in my new surroundings. ☞

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