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Assessing Individual Student Progress: Meeting Multiple Accreditation Standards and Professional Gatekeeping Responsibilities

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Abstract

Counselor education departments are often required to meet multiple accreditation standards that include assessment of individual student learning. Additionally, faculty in counselor education departments are responsible for acting as professional gatekeepers. The authors propose a model for assessment of individual student potential at the time of program admission. In addition, a comprehensive assessment process applied as students make the transition into clinical fieldwork is described.

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Counselor education departments are often required to meet multiple accreditation standards that include assessment of individual student learning. Additionally, faculty in counselor education departments are responsible for acting as professional gatekeepers. The authors propose a model for assessment of individual student potential at the time of program admission. In addition, a comprehensive assessment process applied as students make the transition into clinical fieldwork is described.

Keywords: Assessment, gatekeeping, CACREP standards, NCATE standards, student progress

In an age of accountability and data-driven results, counselor education programs are challenged with devising mechanisms for assessing individual student progress. The 2009 Standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) call for systems of evaluation that incorporate the "assessment of student learning and performance on professional identity, professional practice, and program area standards." (CACREP, 2009, p.8). While this component of program evaluation is clearly outlined, a precisemethod for assessing individual student progress is absent from the standards and must be developed by counselor education departments.

In addition to meeting the CACREP standards, counselor education programs throughout the country are often required to conduct on-going self-assessment activities in response to other external forces and accrediting bodies (Rabinowitz, 2005).

Regional associations of colleges and schools, including the New England Association of Colleges and Schools (NEASC, 2010) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2007) are examples of external accrediting bodies with a growing impact on the assessment activities in counselor education programs housed within schools or colleges of education in accredited institutions. The assessment requirements outlined by such bodies tend to rely on outcome-based measures of student proficiency and may or may not be easily linked with the CACREP standards for program level assessment, creating a set of challenges for counselor education departments.

In the context of a school or college of education, counselor education programs are often idiosyncratic. While they fit on many levels into this larger structure, there are aspects of training and expectations regarding students' professional behavior

that are unique to counselors. For example, counselor educators are responsible for ensuring that students display attributes and behaviors consistent with the American Counseling Association's ethical standards (ACA, 2005). This charge requires that counselor education departments move beyond assessment of specific counseling skills and content knowledge, and consider how to appropriately monitor and evaluate behaviors and attributes that are clinical and interpersonal in nature.

This notion of monitoring individual student progress within counselor education programs in non-academic areas has been addressed within the literature over decades (Bernard, 1975; Keppers, 1960; Sweeney, 1969), originally focusing on broad concepts such as selective retention and due process. These broadly defined practices then evolved to include identification and remediation practices in cases involving impaired students or students exhibiting behaviors inconsistent with ACA's Code of Ethics (2005) (Bemak, Epps, & Keys, 1999; Bradley & Post, 1991; Forrest, Elman, Gizara, & Vacha-Haase, 1999; Frame & Stevens-Smith, 1995; Iovacchini, 1981; Olkin, & Gaughen, 1991). In 1999, Lumadue and Duffey proposed a model for evaluating trainee competence in counselor education programs in the context of "professional gatekeeping". This concept of gatekeeping has remained at the forefront in the body of literature pertaining to the evaluation of individual student progress in counselor education departments, and involves defining mechanisms for determining that graduate students possess and demonstrate appropriate clinical and professional attributes (Foster & McAdams, 2009; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; Wilkerson, 2006; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Foster and McAdams (2009) define gatekeeping as "the responsibility of all counselors, including student counselors, to

intervene with professional colleagues and supervisors who engage in behavior that could threaten the welfare of those receiving their services" (p. 271), and describe the gatekeeping role as a fundamental obligation for faculty in counselor education departments.

The most current literature proposes an emerging theory whereby the gatekeeping function is conceptualized as consisting of three phases: (a) the preadmissions screening phase, (b) the postadmission screening phase, (c) and the remediation plan phase (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). This theory was derived as the result of a study of eight counselor educators currently teaching in CACREP-accredited master's level counseling programs. Participants were interviewed and asked to describe how they define gatekeeping, how they conduct gatekeeping activities, and how they define their role as professional gatekeepers. All of the participants reported that the role of professional gatekeeping is important and represents a fundamental responsibility for counselor educators. Participants also held consistent views regarding how they define this role, indicating that professional gatekeeping involves the monitoring of individual student progress to ensure that impaired or incompetent practitioners are blocked from entering the field as professional counselors. In terms of conducting gatekeeping activities, themes emerged from the data reflective of the three-phase process described above.

The implementation of formalized procedures for conducting professional gatekeeping has been empirically supported (Gaubatz & Zera, 2002). These researchers found that the rates at which deficient students advanced through their programs without remediation were significantly related to the formalization of the gatekeeping procedures employed. Faculty

in programs that used more formalized procedures reported significantly lower rates of deficient students' slipping through the cracks to become professional counselors. In addition, the potential emotional and practical backlash of conducting gatekeeping activities has been shown to diminish with accurate identification of incompetent practitioners using behaviorally-focused methods of evaluating student potential and progress (Kerl & Eichler 2005).

Described here is a formalized, behaviorally-focused assessment system that has been developed and applied at the time of admission (preadmission), and prior to entry into clinical fieldwork (postadmission). Our goal has been to develop a model of assessment of individual student progress for departments of counselor education: practices that are grounded in theory, formalize gatekeeping procedures, and meet the assessment standards of multiple accrediting bodies. These assessment practices have been designed to provide a framework for making student-centered, data-driven decisions. The department under discussion includes CACREP-accredited school counseling and clinical mental health counseling programs. In addition, the counselor education department described here is housed in a Graduate School of Education and Allied Professions (GSEAP) that is accredited by NCATE (2007).

Background

In addressing assessment mandates, initial efforts were focused on the collaborative development of a conceptual framework for GSEAP designed to meet the NCATE standards for accreditation. Because this department is part of an institution of higher education with a long-standing and deeply ingrained mission, the conceptual framework was precisely reflective of this larger mission. In response to this conceptual framework, a unit-wide (GSEAP) assessment data collection system was developed to meet the NCATE accreditation standards for assessment. This assessment system includes five unit-wide proficiencies that are evaluated at five transition points along the training continuum. In accordance with the NCATE nomenclature of describing and assessing the acquisition of content knowledge, professional skills and professional dispositions appropriate to accredited disciplines within the specified unit, our unit (GSEAP) has linked the first proficiency to the acquisition and assessment of content knowledge and the second proficiency to the acquisition and assessment of professional skills. Because of this university's commitment the internalization of its mission, there are three proficiencies linked to the demonstration and assessment of appropriate dispositional attributes. These five unit-wide proficiencies are then assessed at the following transition points, as determined by individual departments within the unit (i.e., each identified proficiency is not necessarily assessed at every transition point): (a) program admission, (b) entry to clinical fieldwork, (c) exit from clinical fieldwork, (d) graduation, and (e) employment. We subsequently worked to link the NCATE assessment standards and the unit-wide proficiencies with the 2009 CACREP assessment standards for individual student progress (i.e., assessing student learning and performance on professional identity, professional practice, and program area standards). We paired NCATE nomenclature with the language used to describe assessment activities in the 2009 CACREP standards, and linked these standards to the unit-wide proficiencies (see Table 1). The described assessment

activities were then developed within this overarching framework and grounded in the emerging theory of gatekeeping.

Program Admission

In choosing assessment activities to implement at the time of program admission we deliberately focused on effectively assessing dispositional characteristics (i.e., attributes reflective of an appropriate professional identity) of program applicants. At this point along the training continuum, we do not expect applicants to possess a sophisticated knowledge baseof the counseling profession (i.e., evidence of learning related to program area standards) or higher-level counselingskills (i.e., evidence of skills related to professional practice). Our goal at this point is to ensure that potential students possess professional attributes consistent with the ACA Code of Ethics (2005). Disposition is defined as "a natural or acquired habit or characteristic tendency in a person or thing", suggesting that it may be difficult to teach this to students (iGoogle, 2010). Therefore, we deliberately focus efforts during this particular transition point on assessment practices that screen out applicants that may not possess dispositional attributes consistent with success as a professional counselor.

Admissions Process

We currently hold two rounds of admissions per academic year: one during the fall semester and one during the spring semester. We have conceptualized our admissions process under the assumption that there are quantifiable criteria that are predictive of successful completion of a graduate level program in counseling (Schmidt, Homeyer & Walker, 2009; Smaby, Maddox, Richmond, Lepowski, &

Packman, 2005) and begin our admissions process with an application review. Using an Application File Review Rating Form (see Appendix A), faculty rate applicants on (a), writing proficiency (as evidenced in a written statement required with each application), (b), academic potential (as evidenced by undergraduate grade point average and grades in anygraduate coursework that have been completed), (c), dispositional potential (as evidenced by experience as well as letters of recommendation), and (d), overall fit with the counseling profession and this program (as evidenced by the completed application packet). Items on the Application File Review Rating Form rate academic, clinical, dispositional, and overall potential. We have developed a scale for scoring this form that identifies applicants as below target, target or above target, as these categories are identified in the NCATE assessment standards as a methodology for making student-centered decisions. Applicants who receive target or above target overall ratings on the Application File Review Rating Form are invited to Admissions Day.

Admissions Day is a daylong experience that is comprised of informational panels presented by faculty and currently enrolled students, and group and individual interviews with a faculty/current student team. During the faculty panel applicants are introduced for the first time to the concept of on-going systematic assessment and our commitment to, and intentional emphasis on, professional gatekeeping. We present our shared view of the program-level assessment process, and emphasize that this process is anchored in our commitment to professional gatekeeping. We have conceptualized the role of professional gatekeepers as consisting of "acts of professional care and responsibility rather than as acts of betrayal or punishment" (Foster & McAddams, 2009,

p. 277), and we stress this characterization within the context of the faculty panel. Currently enrolled students then reinforce this theme during a student panel that allows applicants the opportunity to hear directly from students. Faculty are not present during this portion of Admissions Day, allowing the applicants to freely and openly interact with currently enrolled students.

During the group interview, applicants are presented with several scenarios and asked to discuss and process their reactions to the described situations. Our primary goal in presenting these scenarios is to screen for unprofessional behavior or attitudes that are inconsistent with the ACA Code of Ethics and admit students who are open to feedback, respectful of the learning process and committed to a high standard of professionalism. Examples of the scenarios we use include: (a) During a class a fellow student makes a comment that you find offensive based on your perception of intolerant racial or ethnic undertones. How might you respond?, and (b) Imagine you are a faculty member who has planned a mandatory meeting for students. One of the students expected to attend this meeting did not attend. When asked why she did not attend, she advises you that she simply could not fit it into her schedule. How might you respond to her answer? A faculty member and a current student facilitate this discussion and complete a Group Interview Rating Form (see Appendix B) on each of the participating applicants. Using a Likert-type scale, applicants are rated on their ability to listen and their demonstrated comfort with issues of diversity. This form also derives ratings of applicants' interpersonal skill level with items that measure the extent to which they function as a positive and contributing group member. In addition, applicants' ability to self-reflect is assessed with items that measure the extent to which they present personal reactions to the scenarios reflective of respect and openness to feedback.

Individual interviews are then conducted by a faculty/current student team and provide an opportunity to ask applicants specific questions. The individual interview begins with several open-ended questions. Subsequent questions focus on issues of diversity and social justice, again placing the emphasis on the assessment of dispositional potential, specifically as it relates to a personal orientation of inclusion, social justice, and advocacy. For example, applicants are asked: (a) Describe your experiences with diversity, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. How do you think these experiences will inform your work as a counselor? (b) How might you define social justice, and (c) How might you relate social justice to counseling? The interviewers then complete an Individual Interview Rating Form comprised of items that measure applicants' ability to think critically, present in a professional manner, provide answers reflective of openness to issues of diversity, multiculturalism and social justice, and demonstrate an ability to reflect on themselves in relation to others. Admissions Day ends with a debriefing session among faculty and student participants to review interview data. Following the debriefing session, participating students leave, and program faculty make the admissions decisions using the Counselor Education Admissions Summary Scoring Rubric (see Table 2). Using six items that summarize academic, clinical and dispositional potential for success in our department, this rubric includes composite scores based on applicants' ratings on the Application File Review Rating Form, the Group Interview Rating Form, and the Individual Interview Rating Form. A scoring methodology has been developed to identify below target, target and above target ratings on the

assessed attributes. Applicants identified with above target potential are accepted into the department, along with several applicants with overall ratings at the target level.

New Student Orientation

The final portion of our overall admissions process is a required New Student Orientation. We use this opportunity to further explore and define the role of gatekeeping as a fundamental component of our overall assessment process. We have developed a detailed student handbook that is distributed during this meeting. The handbook acts as a contract between the student and the department, and we stress the importance of referring to it on a regular basis. Included within the handbook is a "Verification of Understanding" that we have adapted from similar documents in use at Rollins College in Florida and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. We require students to sign and hand in the Verification of Understanding within the first week of the semester during which they begin their program of study. This process holds students accountable for reading and agreeing to the terms of the Counselor Education Student Handbook, the Graduate School of Education and Allied Professions Catalog, and the American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics (2005). The Verification of Understanding also ensures that students have familiarized themselves with two forms we use throughout the program as assessment tools. These tools, the Evaluation of Counselor Behaviors (ECB) (Bernard, 2008), and the Interpersonal Characteristics Survey (ICS) (University of New Orleans, 1997), specify the precise clinical and dispositional-related behaviors that will be assessed throughout training and provide the incoming student

with a transparent picture of assessment practices that will be implemented as they move through the training process.

Entry Into Clinical Fieldwork

The next major transition point along the training continuum is entry into clinical fieldwork. This transitioncreates assessment challenges for counselor education departments. Students who may have performed well up to this point because they are academically strong can encounter difficulties specifically related to taking on the role of professional counselor. Using standard-setting methods ofevaluating student performance in areas that might not be easily assessed using strictly academic methods has been repeatedly established (Hensley, Smith, & Thompson 2003; Stephenson, Elmore, & Evans, 2000). To assess professional identity development (i.e., dispositional attributes) and levels of professional practice (i.e., skills) we have developed an evaluation process that we refer to as the Practicum Assessment. It is at this point along the training continuum that we have chosen to conduct a comprehensive, individual assessment of each student within the department.

Counseling Relationships and Skills

Leading up to the Practicum Assessment, and in preparation for this comprehensive evaluation, we collect specific and uniform data on students, assessing behaviors we have identified as important to success within our programs, at the end of the Counseling Relationships and Skills course. It is our expectation that students will take Counseling Relationships and Skills within the first semester they are enrolled in our department. This course involves the teaching and practicing of basic counseling skills, skills that might not be as

easily assessed in more didactic courses. We have identified this course as a marker for assessing students' professional identity development and their level of professional practice, providing us with details regarding potential for successful completion of the clinical training components within the program. In requiring that students take this course during their first semester, we are able to provide feedback on these non-academic components of training early on, allowing students and faculty to process this feedback before a tremendous investment into the training process has been made.

At the end ofthe Counseling Relationships and Skills course, we collect data on each student using a shortened version of the ECB (ECB-S) and the complete ICS. Because we use these assessment tools throughout their program of study, this experience provides students with an initial rating on the specific skills and behaviors measured via these tools, as well as a sense of their clinical and dispositional achievement at this early point within their training. In addition, using these behaviorally-focused tools allows us to make data-based decisions regarding individual students' fit within the counseling profession, as we have established quantitative criteria for below target, target, and above target performance.

Practicum Assessment Process

Once students have successfully completed the Counseling Relationships and Skills course, along with other prerequisite coursework, they can apply for Practicum. Students complete a brief Application for Practicum and we identify a faculty meeting in which we review all of the practicum applications for the upcoming semester. This review process involves a comprehensive assessment of each practicum applicant that includes assessing

academic (i.e., learning and performance on program area standards), clinical (i.e., learning and performance on professional practice), and dispositional (i.e., learning and performance on professional identity) success and potential. We have refined and quantified this process, using the data that have been collected on all practicum applicants.

Current GPA is used to assess academic success and potential. Students' grades in the Counseling Relationships and Skills course, along with scores on selected items from the ECB-S administered at the end of Counseling Relationships and Skills are used to assess clinical success and potential.In addition, we use students' scores on the ICS and scores on a different set of selected items from the same administration of the ECB-S to determine dispositional success and potential. Finally, individual faculty impressions gathered through interactions with the identified students, possibly as instructors or advisors, are discussed and processed. Again, specified quantitative criteria that define above target, target, and below target scores in the areas of academic, clinical, and dispositional achievement and potential have been developed and each student is rated accordingly on what we refer to as the Practicum Rubric (see Table 3).

In addition to generating rubric scores and data for assessment purposes through this process, we identify specific feedback to impart to each student. Upon the completion of this faculty meeting, letters are sent to all practicum applicants that include specific feedback on academic, clinical and dispositional strengths and challenges. Students are required to meet with their academic advisor upon receipt of this letter in order to review their progress within the program to that point. This meeting is intended to support students as they transition into the intensive clinical

component of their training and provides an opportunity for faculty to act as professional gatekeepers.

As a result of the practicum assessment process, we are able to accurately identify issues of concern based on behaviorally focused assessment tools, and pinpoint specific skills that individual students can target as goals in subsequent courses and clinical fieldwork experiences. We provide specific feedback to every student at this major transition point, and we support our commitment to professional gatekeeping using this well-defined post admission screening process (Ziomek-Daigle, 2010). Individual meetings with an academic advisor offer additional support and encouragement to students as they begin their clinical work in professional settings.

Impact of Assessment Practices

The impact of the assessment practices described here has been tracked over the course of two academic years. During this time, we have held four rounds of admissions. While our acceptance rates for these admissions rounds remained consistent with rates over the past six years, current data further clarify why individual candidates were either accepted for admission or rejected. In fact, we are able to identify precise reasons for the admissions decisions made.

The current cohort of students in our programs represents the first group to participate in all of the practices described here. Therefore the data we have collected and analyzed thus far is limited. However, the number of students who have been asked to exit our programs has decreased. While a total of three students were asked to leave our programs over the two-year period prior to the implementation of the described assessment practices, none have been asked to leave over the past academic year. In addition, level of clinical and dispositional skills as measured on the ECB-S and the ICS has increased over the past two academic years, and Practicum Evaluation Scoring Rubric scores indicate an increase in the number of students rated as target and above target in clinical and dispositional areas. More sophisticated data analyses are not possible at the current time due to insufficient sample size. We are currently designing a study to evaluate the impact of these practices, expecting that we can conduct a substantial study within the next two academic years

The assessment methodology described here represents one department's attempt to develop a model for assessment of individual student progress that meets the multiple standards for accreditation often placed on counselor education departments. The implementation of this behaviorally-focused system has enabled this department to identify challenging student issues early on and with great specificity. Transparency surrounding our role as professional gatekeepers is a central theme within our department, and guides ourassessment activities. These practices have provided the basis for developing a model for assessing individual student progress in counselor education programs that is anchored in theory and practice, and supports ongoing feedback.

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Appendix A
ADMISSIONS PROCESS - APPLICATION FILE REVIEW

Name:

_____

Phone: _____   Email: _____

Undergraduate GPA: _____   Major: _____

Application for: MA in CMHC: _____   MA in School Counseling: _____   CAS:_____

Reviewer: _____

Please rate the candidate on the following criteria:

	Weak			Strong		UA*
Academic/Clinical Potential						
1. Undergraduate GPA	1	2	3	4	5	
2. Related coursework	1	2	3	4	5	
3. Graduate work	1	2	3	4	5	
4. Letters of recommendation	1	2	3	4	5	
Knowledge & Experience Base						
5. Related work experience	1	2	3	4	5	
6. Related volunteer experience	1	2	3	4	5	
7. Reported life experience	1	2	3	4	5	
Fit with program orientation and direction						
8. Ability to articulate an understanding of diversity issues	1	2	3	4	5	
9. Ability to articulate an understanding of counseling	1	2	3	4	5	
Communication Skills						
10. Written skills	1	2	3	4	5	
11. Professionalism of application packets	1	2	3	4	5	

*UA = unable to assess

Comments: invite for an interview: _____   reject: _____

Appendix B
GROUP INTERVIEW RATING FORM

Candidate's name_____   Date_____

Interviewer's name_____

Please rate the candidate on the following criteria:

	Weak				Strong
1. Professional presentation	1	2	3	4	5
2. Verbal expression	1	2	3	4	5
3. Evidence of bias	1	2	3	4	5
4. Ability to think critically	1	2	3	4	5
5. Ability to listen	1	2	3	4	5
6. Ability to relate to others	1	2	3	4	5
7. Level of enthusiasm	1	2	3	4	5
8. Attending skills (voice tone, body posture)	1	2	3	4	5
9. Ability to be reflective	1	2	3	4	5
10. Ability to articulate an understanding of the counseling profession	1	2	3	4	5
11. Overall strength of the interview	1	2	3	4	5

Interviewer comments:

Author Note

Dr. Virginia Kelly is an Associate Professor at Fairfield University. She has conducted

several presentations and consultations in the area of program-level assessment and assessment

of individual student progress.

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