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Undergraduate Minor in Counseling Program: Design, Implementation, and Reflection

Abstract

This article argues the benefits for having an undergraduate counseling program and offers suggestions for successful implementation. The presence of an undergraduate counseling program could be an additional method for growing the field of counseling. Specifically, the development of a Minor in Counseling for the undergraduate population is described and reflections from students and faculty are included to help elucidate how other counseling programs might follow suit.

Keywords

Counseling minor, undergraduate, program development

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For individuals wanting to become licensed professional counselors (LPC) or certified school counselors, the master's degree is the educational cornerstone of the profession. This has been the case since the 1960's and with growing numbers of graduate counseling programs becoming CACREP accredited (CACREP, 2016), there is currently no reason to expect this to change in the foreseeable future. While counseling-oriented doctoral programs around the country continue to produce doctoral-level practitioners and scholars, the vast majority of those seeking counseling licensure and certification will do so through obtaining a master's degree, which typically consists of entering a two-year (full-time), 48-60 credit program. Our sister fields of social work and psychology have a somewhat similar grounding in graduate-level training; however, unlike counseling, those two fields have an undergraduate presence, with psychology undergraduate programs being the most prominent.

Due to the lack of an undergraduate presence in counseling, college students and bachelor-level graduates may be unfamiliar with the field and the ways in which it is similar and different from social work and psychology. In turn, when considering the promotion of robust counselor identities in master-level students and expanding the field of counseling, a two-year program may not be sufficient (Coppock, 2012). The *20/20 principles* promoted by the American Counseling Association clearly agree in their statement on this issue, indicating that "The counseling profession should more actively work with undergraduates and undergraduate programs" (Kaplan & Gladding, 2011, p. 371). Therefore, creating undergraduate minor or major programs may have vast benefits for promoting the profession and introducing undergraduate students to the field.

Although there is virtually no research available specifically focused on the impact of students participating in a counseling minor or major program, undergraduate student involvement in general counseling coursework has shown to have positive outcomes. For instance, Estrada (2002) found that when undergraduate students participated in multicultural counseling training during a psychology course, their multicultural awareness and knowledge increased (compared to a control group). Further, Hill et al. (2008), in investigating undergraduate students' experience learning basic helping skills found that throughout the course of one semester, students increased their skill set by demonstrating stronger listening skills, increased exploration skills (i.e. reflections, minimal encouragers, open-ended questions, etc.), and increased empathy. Another study found that undergraduate students enhanced their counseling self-efficacy and learned to apply basic helping skills to a counseling session throughout the course of just one semester (Hill et al., 2016). Therefore, research suggests the benefits of undergraduate counselor training in building a foundation of counseling skills and developing multicultural awareness.

In our own University setting, a common misperception expressed by students is the belief that a psychology degree can introduce them to concrete skills and approaches in working with clientele, which in turn would better prepare them for a graduate degree in such practice. Upon failing to find such curriculum in that and other related majors, a significant number of undergraduate students have sought out master-level counseling faculty, to voice interest in obtaining knowledge and curricular experiences more aligned with the practice of counseling.

This history prompted us, the counseling faculty members of a private university and CACREP accredited clinical mental health and school counseling program, to consider the development of an undergraduate counseling program of some form. The creation of an

undergraduate program in counseling can offer a number of benefits to students, faculty, and the profession as a whole. Due to the scant literature on undergraduate counseling classes and programs, the authors seek to describe the development and implementation of one such minor program and offer a summary of student and faculty feedback and reflections from a recent program evaluation.

Background

In effort to learn more about our program and make improvements, we used the 6-steps of program evaluation. These included: (a) engaging stakeholders (i.e. students and faculty members), (b) describing the program, (c) gathering evidence (i.e. through surveys and reflective journals), (d) justifying conclusions, and (e) sharing lessons (Work Group for Community Health and Development, 2016). The impetus for the development of a counseling minor was based on three overarching aspirations: to enhance future student-counselors' professional identities (which could, in turn, potentially serve to strengthen the profession itself), to respond to the growing need for mental health services across all populations in society (SAMSHA, 2014), and to respond to the expressed desires of undergraduate students at our university.

Considering the first impetus, in order to enhance the identity of the counseling profession, it is necessary to expand beyond the graduate school curriculum (Coppock, 2012; Kaplan & Gladding, 2011). With so many graduate students beginning their studies soon after completing an undergraduate, many enter their graduate studies lacking understanding of some of the most foundational aspects of the profession. While psychology undergraduates have four years to build a professional identity, counseling graduate students seem to be just making sense of their professional identity right as they are preparing to graduate (Coppock, 2012). Consequently, an introduction to the profession of counseling during their undergraduate years

may offer a viable method for enhancing students' understanding of the unique attributes of counseling, including the history and philosophical perspectives of the field, as well as its practical applications.

Second, our country needs more mental health practitioners. Considering ongoing mental health and drug and alcohol challenges faced by individuals (SAMSHA, 2015), substance abuse and behavioral disorder counselors as well as marriage and family therapists have been cited as some of the fastest growing professions, with an expected growth rates of 31.4% and 30.6% respectively (Graves, 2014). The Bureau of Labor Statistics states that jobs in Mental Health Counseling and Marriage and Family Therapy will grow much faster than the average (19%) between 2014-2024 ([OOH, 2017](#)). Additionally, the World Health Organization recently stated that depression is now the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide, with rates of depression rising by more than 18% since 2005 (WHO, 2017). While undergraduate programs in counseling do not seek to supplant a graduate degree, they can provide initial skills and knowledge necessary for a paraprofessional position after college or during graduate training.

Finally, prior to the development of a counseling minor at our University, three of our six full-time faculty members had already been teaching one course a year in our University's undergraduate Human Services (HS) Program. Such a program had been viewed as a kind of 'counseling light' experience by students and faculty alike, due to a limited faculty expertise and practical application of the HS program. Coupled with critical suggestions from external department reviewers, it was determined that the HS program should be terminated. Faculty, however, each had a desire to remain connected to, and share the counseling profession with, the undergraduate population.

Additionally, many of the undergraduates had expressed a keen interest in training in counseling; these students were exceptionally intelligent, mature, and highly motivated. Thus, the undergraduate Human Services student population provided a pool of promising applicants for a graduate-level counseling program at the University. Due to the University's greater emphasis on the undergraduate experience, higher-level administrators were particularly supportive of efforts to develop undergraduate programs. Indeed, in advocating for program development with the administration, we asserted that such a program would offer greater curricular choice, potentially attracting a broader undergraduate student population to the University and funneling a greater number of students into the graduate program, to ultimately increase overall student numbers.

Describing the Program

There were a number of steps taken in the development of a counseling minor at our University. Initially, the faculty members explored the pros and cons of an undergraduate major versus a minor. There seemed to be a number of advantages in offering a minor, including: the ability for our limited number of faculty to teach all courses without having to hire additional instructors; the greater ease of recruiting student minors as opposed to majors (because, as a major, we would be competing against other, more established programs such as sociology and psychology), and; avoidance of the risk inherent with a counseling major, whereby such students may erroneously and harmfully assume that a major in counseling replaced graduate-level training necessary for clinical practice.

Following the decision to create a minor in counseling, faculty members sought to elicit our own students' interest and needs. Anecdotally and over the years, psychology majors at the University had expressed a desire for a minor that focused on applied skills and graduate school

preparation for careers in counseling, social work, and clinical/counseling psychology. An online survey of both Psychology and Sociology undergraduate students at our university sought to determine the level of interest in a counseling minor. Of the 75 respondents (62 Psychology majors, and 13 Sociology majors), 67 (89.3%) indicated some level of interest in such a program.

Faculty then sought to build evidence for the viability of such a program, as well as to design curricula through surveying universities around the country who had established similar programs. Survey items for assessing other programs included the following: curriculum design, connection to other programs, number of enrolled students, length of time the program had been in operation, types of jobs students were prepared for, and percentage of students who went on to attend graduate school. Most of the programs were developed based on a perceived need for more experiential curriculum and to teach skills that were not being covered in other course work, as well as for the purposes of graduate-level recruitment. Respondents spoke to the high level of student interest in a counseling undergraduate program, which in turn, suggested a program's sustainability.

Following the assessment of current practices and our own students' wishes, we sought to build support for a minor at our University. Because we expected that most counseling minor students would be Psychology and Sociology majors, we arranged meetings with those respective chairpersons. In those meetings, we explained that a counseling minor would complement a major by focusing on how research from their own disciplines could be applied in practice. In turn, with greater interdisciplinary support, student feedback, and a wide variety of program examples, we generated multiple iterations of what a minor in counseling would look like, including the creation of core program objectives and corresponding curriculum.

Program Objectives and Course Development

Programs objectives focused on three main points: (1) enhancing the identity of professional counseling; (2) teaching research-based practices, which required that students engage with the counseling research literature, as embedded across the curriculum; and (3) providing students ample supervised opportunities to explore and practice introductory skills of individual, group, and family counseling. These areas of emphasis are reflected in the following formalized program objectives

- Students will exhibit a strong understanding of the field of applied counseling, including its philosophical underpinnings and the theoretical modalities through which it is practiced;
- Students will understand, acquire, and demonstrate the basic counseling skills necessary for working with multiple populations consistent with an undergraduate level;
- Students will exhibit a strong understanding of the research findings related to the counseling field, counseling theories, and counseling skills

Outcome and assessment plans were developed for each of the above-mentioned objectives and the assessment procedures were integrated into the coursework within the overarching curriculum plan. Using the objectives and assessment plans as a guide, programmatic requirements were then established. The requirements for the minor include six three-credit courses (Table 1), one of which was already being offered through the Psychology department (Human Development).

Table 1

Counseling Minor Curriculum

Fall	Spring
COU 2000 Introduction to Counseling	COU 3100 Group Counseling
COU 3000 Counseling Theory & Skills	COU 3700 Family & Couples Counseling
COU 3400 Culturally Competent Counseling	PSY3200 Human Development

Maximum flexibility was built into the program by allowing students to take one or more courses without declaring a minor. Such a model allows students from a wide diversity of majors to ‘try out’ the program, to explore a tentative interest or unknown curriculum, increasing the likelihood of greater student recruitment following exposure to at least one course. In addition, although we encourage the completion of the Introduction to Counseling course first, students can take the courses in any order preferred.

An official proposal was submitted to the College’s Committee on Undergraduate Programs and after review, refinement, and adjustments, the minor was approved in December 2013 and we planned a slow roll-out of the curriculum beginning in the fall of 2014.

Student Recruitment Efforts

Advertising and student recruitment efforts began by seeking assistance from the Office of Undergraduate Studies, so that advisors could promote the minor. We asked psychology and sociology professors to share information about the minor in their introductory courses. In addition, we spoke directly to undergraduate students at the University Majors Fair and followed up with interested students via e-mail or through in-person meetings.

The Introduction to Counseling course was offered during the fall of 2014 and immediately filled to capacity with a lengthy waitlist. Since that time, all classes have filled,

most of them with a waitlist of students. Over time, the type of students choosing counseling courses has broadened, to include those in nursing, global studies, and business, for instance, as well as a growing number of students who are designing their own majors. In turn, these students offer word-of-mouth advertising potentials and lend direction for us, as faculty members, in unique recruitment and collaborative opportunities (such as the development of a minor in counseling for nurses).

Gathering Evidence: Student Summaries

To determine students' perceptions and experiences of the counseling minor, an online survey was designed and implemented in the spring of 2017. All current students involved with the program were surveyed (38). Of the 32 respondents (84% of the sample) who had taken at least one counseling minor course, 65% of were seniors and 25% were juniors. Most students surveyed had declared the minor (50%) and planned to complete all of the required coursework, and another 20% were planning on declaring the minor soon. Psychology majors made up the majority of the students (53%) and other common majors included Nursing (15%) and Communications (10%). The majority of the students (40%) initially found out about the minor from a professor or advisor, while others heard of it from a friend or classmate (29%), the department website (25%), or some other method (6%).

Through open-ended questions on the survey we sought to understand what initially interested students in the program and what they were hoping to gain from taking counseling courses. Many expressed that they had an initial interest in counseling but lacked a foundational knowledge base that they sought to develop. Others focused on gaining an understanding of basic counseling skills for a future profession or graduate school. A representative response for this was: "I was interested because I wanted hands on experience and exposure with counseling

to see if it was something I'd want to pursue in my graduate education.” Others had already decided to attend graduate school in counseling or psychology and wanted to be better prepared for that experience. Some described in detail how the skills and knowledge gained would directly help their development in other professions (nursing and teaching in particular).

Students shared a great deal in response to a question about how their experience in the minor influenced their future planning. Many responded that the coursework “affirmed,” “solidified,” or “reaffirmed” their desire to continue pursuing a career in counseling or a related field. Others spoke to how the courses provided them with skills and strategies to communicate better and manage individuals with whom they work. Some students shared how the courses helped them identify new career paths or refine their occupational purpose: “It has helped me define my personal mission, which is to empower individuals in organizations to achieve their full potential and find fulfillment in their work.” Ultimately, 34% of the respondents stated that they were “definitely” planning on applying to a counseling or mental-health related graduate program, while 38% stated that they were “likely” attending graduate school but were unsure what type of program they would attend.

Student responses to the question asking how the minor or the courses within it could be improved were very similar to what the faculty had been hearing from students in individual interactions. Mainly, the students desire more sections of classes to be available, for classes to be offered every semester instead of once per year, and for the program to allow more students into the class sections. Some expressed the challenges they had getting into the courses and others shared that they were disappointed that they could not complete the minor because there were courses into which they could not enroll. The students also suggested that the minor be

better advertised to first- and second-year students so that they could begin the program earlier in their undergraduate years.

Faculty Reflections

Three core faculty members who have taught in the minor program took time to reflect, through writing, on their individual experiences, responding to prompts on the following topics: the challenges and rewards of teaching in the minor, including how those experiences might differ from teaching graduate students; the benefits and potential concerns of the minor program, and; recommendations for faculty members at other universities who are considering developing an undergraduate minor.

Perceived Positives

The faculty expressed excitement in teaching in a counseling minor program, using phrases such as “a joyful experience,” “pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoy it,” “thoroughly enjoyable pedagogically,” and “invigorating.” One faculty member wrote about an increased sense of freedom and creativity in the classroom, in comparison to the more proscribed master-level curriculum, which was monitored by various accrediting and licensing bodies as well as State standards. Such freedom allowed her to deviate from a standard counseling curriculum, to make time for more active learning and the incorporation of regional, national, and global current events.

Faculty responses entailed many comments on the students themselves, including their high levels of engagement and energy in the classroom, their high levels of intelligence, and consequently how enjoyable they were to work with and to teach. One faculty member commented that there seemed to be a “freshness” and “heightened enthusiasm” with many of the students and that they seemed to have a bit less anxiety about taking risks and practicing skills

than graduate students. This professor wondered whether this enhanced risk taking related to the fact that the students had not yet identified counseling as their definitive career path, leaving them more willing to make mistakes and approach the topic in a more relaxed manner. One faculty member similarly approached teaching the undergraduates, and she considered the fact that she herself was more relaxed likely translated to the students relaxing.

Additionally, faculty reflected on how the variety of students (i.e. different majors, more male students, students of color, etc.) made teaching more enjoyable and the classes more enriching for all. They shared how teaching the undergraduates had allowed them to gain a stronger sense of the identity of the university and deepened their enthusiasm about being a part of it and feelings of connectedness with it. Graduate students may exhibit less sense of connectedness primarily due to taking night courses, while engaging off-campus with internships or jobs.

The benefits of teaching undergraduate students presented some challenges as well. Faculty found that there were some students who expressed less commitment to the course and were therefore less diligent with assignments and may have had attendance issues not normally experienced with graduate students. They each clarified that the vast majority of the undergraduate students exhibited high levels of commitment; however, the few students who were less assiduous stood out more clearly than an under-motivated graduate student.

Each faculty member perceived that the program helped educate a broader population at the University about the profession of counseling. They referred to multiple experiences of students sharing that before taking a counseling course, they had lacked awareness of the profession as a potential career choice. Faculty wrote that were amazed by how many students expressed how much they “love their counseling courses” and felt the courses had “opened their

eyes to a whole new set of opportunities.” One faculty member shared how being a part of (and a potential influencer of) this type of ‘illumination’ about a student’s vocational decision-making helped remind him of all the reasons he loves to teach.

Each of the three faculty members connected the undergraduate and the graduate students through their course work and they were able to witness both sets of students benefitting from such interactions. Graduate students acted as observers in practice sessions and were able to provide individualized feedback to the undergrads. They also presented on a range of topics and modeled various skills in many of the minor courses. Graduate students contemplating doctoral studies were able to engage in many of the tasks a typical teaching assistant might engage in. Students shared that these unique opportunities allowed them to be “on the other side” of training and felt they deepened their understanding of skills and theory and gained more confidence in applying their own skills.

Perceived Challenges

Programmatically, faculty members perceived several challenges or weaknesses to the counseling minor. They expressed some of the challenges related to whether or not the courses should be sequenced, the difficulties of larger class sizes (related to their graduate courses), and how to create the space in faculty schedules so that they can teach these courses (and therefore not instruct a graduate course that semester). In addition, the greater diversity of students, from majors to a greater number of males and students of color, required that faculty adjust teaching skills and knowledge, requiring shifts in awareness and pedagogy.

A common challenge expressed by each faculty member was questioning how to ensure that the undergraduate course content was unique enough from the graduate-level content. In one example, the faculty member shared that she taught both the undergraduate and graduate

skills courses using the same textbook and struggled to differentiate between the two courses. They discussed tailoring their courses developmentally to meet students where they were at, as opposed to replicating expectations, standards, and teaching behaviors at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. They anticipated this becoming more of an issue over time as graduates of the counseling minor program started to enter the graduate program at the institution.

In addition, while the faculty (and administration) recognized that their primary commitment was to the graduate program, each course that a faculty member taught at the undergraduate level reduced their capacity to teach at the graduate level, as well as limited time spent with the graduate students to work on research, thesis projects, independent studies, etc. Hence, graduate students received less of the faculty member's time and attention. When necessary, adjunct faculty have been hired to teach within the graduate program, while it has been difficult to find adjunct who are available during the day who can teach at the undergraduate level. Hence, the graduate students are potentially losing some of the positive influences offered by the full-time faculty members. However, administration has indicated that it is unlikely that the counseling minor program would receive a faculty line without transitioning into becoming a major in the college.

Lessons and Conclusions

Considering the many positive experiences noted by both faculty members as well as students, the authors would encourage other counseling programs to consider exploring the option of adopting a minor in their settings. Not only has it seemed to enhance our visibility as a program across the general college population (and faculty and administration), it has introduced the field of counseling to a distinct student population (i.e. undergraduate students), facilitating

unique connections between graduate and undergraduate students, and increasing the career satisfaction of those teaching in the program.

Although not explicitly discussed in our summary, undergraduate counseling students engaging in counselor training may benefit from improving their counseling skills, confidence, and self-efficacy related to counseling, similar to graduate students (Pascual-Leone, Andreescu, & Yervomenko, 2015). This suggests that engaging in counselor training, beginning in an undergraduate program may provide a solid foundation for students to become stronger counselors when they enter a graduate counseling program. Further, one university found that 76% of their 674 psychology students reported intending to enter a graduate program after they completed their undergraduate education, with 59% of the sample indicating they would be interested in working in a school setting (Stinnett, Bui, & Capaccioli, 2013). Perhaps, psychology majors who are enrolled in complementary counseling minors may become more aware of the school or clinical mental health counseling fields and, in turn, choose to pursue that path for their graduate focus.

Faculty members considering something similar should contemplate long and short-term plans for such a program and what types of resources might be needed for longer-term options, such as hiring new faculty to teach the courses or additional graduate assistants to help with course support. They should also work hard to seek the support of all faculty members in the counseling program, their department, and any other departments in their college or university that might be immediately impacted and can promote enrollment in the program. Due to our positive experiences working with students from a variety of majors, we suggest marketing the program broadly, beyond typical counseling-related majors.

Moving forward, the counseling profession should consider how undergraduate programs could become more standardized across universities. Notably, one study conducted outside of the United States, found that undergraduate counseling skills training courses were vastly different across programs and institutions (Aladag, 2013). Since there is no research investigating the differences between undergraduate counseling programs across the United States, ACA and CACREP would benefit from examining different programs and providing guidance on what they should look like. Due to the authors' challenges with differentiating between their undergraduate and graduate coursework, the profession would benefit by having basic written standards for undergraduate counseling coursework, in order to ensure that it complements graduate degree programs.

Lastly, during the initial stages of discussions in the development of such a program, we suggest that faculty members consider how the program could work with and for the graduate counseling program. The two programs could be mutually beneficial and more deeply entwined, even, than the model we offer (such as combining course sessions, requiring that undergraduates receive supervised or simulated counseling sessions from the graduate students, or engaging undergraduate students in faculty research). In addition, those hoping to create such a program should reflect on ways to offer unique undergraduate versus graduate-level curricular experiences, as well as tactics in recruiting top undergraduate students into the graduate counseling program.

Future Research

With the limited research available on students' engagement in undergraduate counseling minor and major programs, there are a plethora of research possibilities. Since the present article is meant to be exploratory and descriptive in nature, the authors recommend gathering formal

summative data to evaluate the training outcomes for students in the program. Additionally, in-depth interviews with current and former students in the program would lead to further insight on the experiences and challenges of engaging in a counseling program as an undergraduate student. Lastly, assessing students' counseling competencies and knowledge about the profession, as well as tracking their career trajectories, would provide a more comprehensive examination of the experience.

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