A Systemic Approach to Program Evaluation and Student Learning Outcomes in Counselor Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe the role of program evaluation in counselor preparation, with special attention to student learning outcomes and Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) standards. A systemic approach to continuous evaluation and student learning outcomes implemented by one counselor education program at a private university in the Southeastern United States will be presented. Additionally, a case example to illustrate the process of assessment for a student from admission to graduation will be offered, as well as a discussion of the benefits and challenges to the implementation of the assessment program.

Keywords: counselor education, assessment, program evaluation, learning outcomes
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Even in the light of serious financial constraints, there is an increased emphasis on program quality and student outcomes in higher education (Brenneman et al., 2010). Accountability demands in the current academic climate ensure that the pursuit of quality in counselor education programs remains a high priority. Likewise, the 2009 standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) require accredited counselor education programs to demonstrate student learning outcomes. Therefore, programs must continuously demonstrate what knowledge and skills students gain through ongoing and systematic program evaluation (Brott, 2006; Osbourne & House, 1995).

Program evaluation is a high priority for higher education in general and for CACREP-accredited counselor education programs in particular. Engaging in program evaluation promotes credibility for the counseling profession. The existence of a set of procedures to demonstrate accountability is characteristic of a mature and publicly acknowledged profession (Matarazzo, 1977; Vacc & Charkow, 1999). Indeed, self-regulation of programs is crucial to the credibility of counseling as a profession. Program evaluation provides important information to students who are considering entering a counselor education program, and it can assist employers when choosing among graduates from a variety of graduate counseling programs (Vacc & Charkow, 1999).

An increased emphasis on program evaluation in the 2009 CACREP standards is in line with the overall demand from the public for institutional accountability. Like all higher education, counselor education programs are accountable to a broad array of constituents (Hubbell, 2007). Employers and licensure boards want evidence that graduates of counselor
education programs will have the proper training and preparation to perform successfully as professionals. Prospective students want reassurance that they will be receiving a quality educational experience that will adequately prepare them for their future careers as counselors and also provide them with a competitive edge among potential employers. Finally, the widespread presence and influence of the internet and media publications such as *U.S. News and World Report* drive the demand for accountability data among additional counselor education program stakeholders (Warden, 2010).

The demand on higher education institutions to be accountable for evidence that student learning is occurring is a reflection of a larger trend in higher education accreditation (Cashwell, 2008). Thus, the language of the 2009 CACREP Program Area Standards was revised to emphasize student learning outcomes (SLOs). SLOs in counselor education programs describe what students learn during the course of their study and encompass the acquisition of general educational goals; required levels of skill and competence; and the personal, interpersonal and professional attitudes and dispositions necessary for success in the field (Warden, 2010). SLOs can provide evidence of program effectiveness. Additionally, SLOs can demonstrate accountability to students, future employers, licensure boards, and consumers of counseling services. SLOs allow programs to demonstrate that counseling students can actually perform required skills in practice.

In the transition phase to full assessment and documentation of student outcomes, CACREP has stipulated that counselor education programs develop a comprehensive assessment program that addresses continuous program evaluation as well as student learning outcomes for each program area (Urofsky, 2008). The purpose of this article is to describe a systemic approach to continuous evaluation and student learning outcomes implemented by one counselor
education program at a private university in the Southeastern United States. Additionally, we will present a case study to illustrate the process of assessment for a student from admission to graduation. Finally, we will discuss the benefits as well as some of the challenges to the implementation of the assessment program.

**Student Learning Outcomes: A Multi-systemic Approach**

Developing a continuous evaluation system that evaluates student learning with respect to accreditation standards can be a daunting and confusing task for counselor education programs that historically do not have effective models and procedures for implementing these systems. In addition, the process involves the cooperation and support of the program faculty, university administration, and other constituency groups (e.g., alumna/e; practicum and internship supervisors; employers). In order to transition to a system that provides meaningful evaluation of student learning, the counselor education faculty developed a multi-systemic approach.

One level of attention involved the recognition of the department’s place within the mission and values of the University. It was essential that the program align with the core values and direction of the larger university in order to ensure support from the administration. As a faculty, we believe that the extent to which the administration supported the efforts of counselor education programs is directly related to the perceived value the program has to the University and the degree to which the program’s goals and objectives align with those of the University. It has been our experience that unless a program is valued by the University administration, a constant struggle ensues with regards to securing crucial resources and the necessary support in meeting national accreditation standards with regards to student learning outcomes.

An important first step within the counselor education program in the developmental process was to systematically centralize data collection and identify program strengths and areas
of growth. The faculty met regularly to evaluate the current curriculum and to make the revisions necessary to meet the new standards. Additionally, input from the Advisory Board, a group comprised of faculty, students, alumni, and community partners who meet annually, was incorporated. This process involved examining program philosophy, values, mission, objectives, syllabi and other program requirements in order to determine where and how the program was currently meeting the standards and to identify gaps. It was critical to ensure congruence throughout the program by maintaining the integrity of commitment to the development of culturally competent and self-reflective counseling practitioners, while meeting credentialing requirements and making certain that students developed comprehensive knowledge and competence in counseling skills. The faculty engaged in meaningful discussions regarding the nature of student learning outcomes and how these could be effectively measured in our unique profession. How did these standards actually relate to the practice of counseling? What real world knowledge and skills did students need? How could the program learning objectives be related to artifacts for measurable results? How could we map the artifacts to the program curriculum? And, how could we gather data and aggregate it for continuous improvement? In addition, it was essential to define program responsibilities and a hierarchy of authority.

In order to address congruence throughout the program, faculty sought to align our mission statement with the goals, objectives, courses, and overall assessment system. This process led to the development of a program flow chart, which helped ascertain the continuity between the values and philosophy that undergird our program and the placement of key assignments and activities to evaluate student learning outcomes. Faculty committed to making meaningful changes rather than creating assignments for the sake of creating assignments to measure outcomes.
Another aspect of this process involved the change from more traditional input based teaching to learning-centered and outcome-based education. Chenail (2009) describes the triadic relationship between teacher, student and content, where the teacher and student work together to achieve transparent learning objectives. This collaborative model is designed to transform standards into real-world, practical skills and knowledge that can be taught to students. The program designed critical tasks targeting learning objectives aimed at evaluating student competencies on the CACREP Program Standards at transition points throughout the program. The faculty, in conjunction with the advisory board, looked at courses and assignments to determine where we were already teaching this material, evaluated what we needed to add, and revised and created key assignments across courses that would measure the standards. Additionally, faculty focused on utilizing assessment of learning objectives to determine what students have learned and to refine and improve teaching methods. The emphasis shifts to what is learned rather than what is taught.

The key assignments and tasks focused on both formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment is used to teach competencies and skills that are developed earlier in the program, while summative assessment reflects a final assessment of learning on a given skill during Internship, Comprehensive Exams, and Portfolios. Courses are developmentally sequenced so that skills build progressively along the lines of Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956) which define the level of performance that is expected for a particular point in a student’s professional development. Students develop knowledge, gain comprehension, and are given opportunities to apply, synthesize and evaluate learning. Students and faculty work together to develop a planned program that develops a
sequence of coursework to guide them through the particular program they have entered (e.g., clinical mental health counseling, marriage, couple, family counseling, school counseling, etc.).

Some questions to consider when incorporating SLOs into courses include identifying the outcomes, that is, how will the student apply this skill in daily practice as a counselor? Next is to identify measures, that is, how will mastery of this knowledge/skill be measured? From this point faculty can determine pedagogical measures to assist in student learning. Finally, a comprehensive plan to implement the assessment plan is developed that must be systematically reviewed by faculty for effective implementation.

In addition to developing key assignments across courses, the faculty developed rubrics to define learning objectives, criteria of work, and levels of performance developmentally appropriate for each assignment. Rubrics are the foundation of assessment and guide the learning process and help to democratize the student-teacher relationship (Gehart, 2008). Rubrics assist counselor educators in delineating between the competency and incompetency of counselors-in-training (Hanna & Smith, 1998). A critical piece of this process involves sharing and discussing the rubrics with students. When students are actively involved in the assessment process, it promotes confidence in students’ ability to become effective practicing counselors (Yunker & Stinson, 2001) and teaches them to become better at self-assessing and self-learning (McTighe & O’Connor, 2005). This process ties directly to the value placed on developing self-reflective practitioners.

Rocco (2007) provides guidelines for developing rubrics that help counselor educators clarify what is required for student performance on each level of the rubric, and describing what educators need to see in order to determine a student’s skill. Levels of proficiency reflected in the rubrics correspond with awareness, knowledge, and skills demonstrated by students.
Students who achieve a rating of “Exceptional” or “Mastered at developmental level” are able to apply the standard to a person or persons who are different from the student, thus maintaining a focus on developing culturally competent counselors. The assessment system is designed so that students are flagged when they do not meet the developmentally appropriate level for a standard on a given assignment. This process is discussed in further detail in the following hypothetical case example of a student progressing through the program.

**Case Example**

Student X is interested in the Counselor Education program at a small southeastern CACREP-accredited (2009 standards) program. The counselor education program has three accredited programs; a school counseling track, a clinical mental health counseling track, and a marriage, couple, family counseling track. The school counseling program is NCATE-accredited and state approved.

Aside from the requisite University application, students begin the admissions process with a required on-site group interview. The Admissions Committee, consisting of the Counselor Education faculty, reviews the admissions application of the prospective student after completion of all graduate school and program requirements. If the prospective student meets all requirements (e.g., 3.0 GPA, MAT score (415) or GRE score (50th percentile), three letters of recommendation, statement of purpose and a favorable interview), the student is admitted. Once admitted and assigned an advisor, the student and advisor meet to plan out a program of study (e.g., Planned Program).

According to the CACREP guidelines (CACREP, 2009), once a year, a student meeting is held to disseminate information regarding the counselor education program. This meeting is critical as information concerning requirements for successful progress through the program as
well as any new information concerning the university is communicated. Students are then asked to meet with advisors from the three programs to welcome new colleagues and discuss/ask/answer questions or issues concerning specific programmatic tracks.

All admissions criteria, planned program of study, and any subsequent program requirements are entered into the assessment system designed by faculty members. The assessment system has three tiers or transition points. These key points in the program determine if counselor candidates are prepared to proceed to the next stage in the program. The assessment process examines the candidate’s knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions. The tier/transition points are discussed below.

**Tier/Transition One**

1. Admissions criteria (including group interview)

2. Maintain a 3.0 GPA (no more than 2 “C’s” throughout tenure in program, one “C-” and the student is removed) throughout the program.

**Tier/Transition Two**

For each activity in Tier Two, Student X is evaluated by faculty and/or site supervisors using a rubric on a 5-point Likert scale (1= deficient; 5= exceptional). This allows quantitative data to be entered into the assessment system to track individual student learning outcomes.

1. A Student Competency Progress Report is completed in the beginning counseling skills course. Students meet with the professor to discuss progress in three different areas: completion and quality of academic assignments; professional growth and development; and counseling competencies. The professor shares strengths and areas for growth with the student. This is done once at mid-term and at the end of the course. A student
cannot receive below a “B.” Receiving below a “B” results in the student retaking the course before moving into Practicum.

2. Advancement to Candidacy application is completed at 18 credits. This application consists of the student completing a one-page reflective paper on three areas, that is, academic progress, personal progress, and professional progress. The student is also required to outline the portfolio competencies and articulate to where the courses and projects completed thus far correspond to the seven competency areas (discussed below).

3. As identified by the faculty, each course has many different types of student learning outcomes (SLOs); for example, students in all three program tracks take the Research and Statistical Analysis course early in their program. The capstone experience for students in this course is to complete an original research proposal. Instructors for this course complete a rubric for each student with student learning outcomes specific to certain aspects of this assignment, such as demonstration of APA style knowledge and the ability to select data analysis procedures appropriate for the research hypothesis, etc. Instructors are asked to evaluate students on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = deficient; 5 = exceptional) for each student learning outcome. In this fashion, instructors complete rubrics with student learning outcomes for other courses throughout the student’s progression through the counseling curriculum. However, there is one specific CACREP SLO that must be completed successfully in order to move forward. These specific SLOs were discussed at length when moving from the 2001 standards to the 2009 standards. Alignment of the SLOs to the standards and how the student would continue to develop counseling skills and higher-order critical thinking skills was considered to not only meet the standard but enhance the student’s knowledge, skills and awareness counseling base.
4. At each faculty meeting, a portion of the meeting is set aside to discuss any faculty member’s student concerns. If a persistent problem arises, the faculty member fills out a Report of Student Concern and meets with the student to discuss the concern, and the student has the opportunity to address the concerns raised. There are times when the instructor may have specific additional outcomes for the student to complete in order to exhibit knowledge of that particular skill set. For example, the student may be asked to take a writing course outside of the department, participate in counseling, or take a break from the program. The student may be given a timeline in which to complete these outcomes before continuing in the program. The Report of Student Concern is placed in the student’s file. Follow-up with the student takes place through the faculty advisor.

5. Once the student advances to Practicum, counseling skill evaluation begins outside the purview of the faculty. The site must be approved by the faculty before the student begins. Supervisors working with CMHC or MCFC students must hold the requisite license (e.g., LMHC, LMFT, LCSW or Licensed Psychologist). School counseling students are supervised by state certified school counselors. Of course, it would be in the best interest of the student to be supervised by an individual holding a license and/or certification in the field(s) of school counseling, clinical mental health counseling, or marriage, couple, family counseling; however, many sites do not have supervisors with those particular licenses. The University site supervisor meets with the on-site supervisor to discuss Practicum requirements and to determine if the site is an appropriate fit for the student. Once the site is deemed appropriate, the student must go through any training or other requirements (e.g., fingerprinting, background checks, etc.) before beginning. For the MCFC program, some students complete the Practicum experience at an off-site
placement with bug-in-the-ear supervision with the University site supervisor, whereas other students may complete the experience at a different site. On-site supervisors communicate regularly with university supervisors, whether by phone, on-line or in-person to discuss the student’s progress. University site supervisors visit the site at least three times during each semester to observe the student’s progress. The site supervisor and student each fill out an evaluation discussing the physical site, the supervision process, and advancement of skills. It is asked that this be done collaboratively so that both the student and the faculty member can learn from the process. Not all sites are successful, but through this type of collaboration (both with students and site supervisors) is where parties learn whether or not the site will provide the necessary direct and indirect clinical hours as well as clinical supervision. A letter grade is given. A student must receive a “B” or higher to advance to Internship I.

6. As the student successfully completes Practicum, they go through similar processes for Internship I and II. Depending upon the site (e.g., school or agency setting), the student will move or stay at the particular site. In the School Counseling program, students must complete a high school placement, as they are certified PK-12 when they graduate. For the CMHC program, some sites require the student to stay throughout the year long process (e.g., through the three semesters of Practicum, Internship I and Internship II). The evaluation process is similar and there are specific CACREP SLOs for the students to complete. A grade of “Pass” is given for each Internship experience.

Tier/Transition Three

1. Students must apply for graduation and pay a nominal fee.
2. Students must successfully pass the Counselor Preparation Comprehensive Examination (CPCE). Scores are determined after each administration. To achieve a passing score, a student needs to obtain a score that is equal to or greater than a z score of -1.25 (1.25 standard deviation units below the national mean score). Students are given three opportunities to succeed.

3. Students must successfully pass a written and oral portfolio. Each competency area is evaluated using a rubric and entered into the assessment system. The written portfolio covers seven competencies (e.g., Professional Identity, Advanced Counseling Skills, Legal and Ethical Issues, Cultural Issues, Personal Growth and Wellness, Technology Skills, and Specialty area). The specialty area (e.g., focusing on divorce, LGBT issues, blended families, etc.) is discussed through the student’s tenure in the program. It is not expected that this is the only targeted specialty, but one the student has chosen to focus on while enrolled in the program. Students must write a one-page reflective paper on each area and discuss their development in each of the seven competencies. The portfolio is developmental and students are asked to show how knowledge and skills have progressed.

4. The oral defense is tied to the mission of the department and students are required to discuss their identity as an ethically informed professional; how they are aware of their personal strengths and resiliency; how do they appreciate diverse cultures; how do they critically think and creatively express and what will their commitment be to professional and community service. Similar to the written portfolio, students are asked to discuss the development in each of the above mentioned areas. The students may use whatever creative style they choose to orally defend the portfolio. There is a time limit to the oral
defense and faculty members evaluate both the written and oral defense (“expectations not met;” “acceptable;” or “target”). If unsuccessful in any area of the oral defense, the student must remediate.

5. After successfully defending the portfolio, the student is asked to fill out an anonymous exit survey on their experience in the counselor education program. This is the final piece of information entered into the assessment system.

It is through this kind of systematic gatekeeping process that a student’s progress can be measured as they meet the different student learning outcomes designed by faculty members. If unsuccessful at any point, the student can be remediated; however, there are specific outcomes that must be met in order to progress to the next tier/transition point. These outcomes are clearly delineated, and, if unsuccessful, the student has the option to self-select out of the program or be removed by faculty and/or administration. It is only through careful and thorough examination that counselor education programs can learn how to better monitor program and student progress.

**Considerations for Implementation for Counselor Education Programs**

Faculty and adjuncts must be trained in when and how to utilize the assessment system. Administrative support for entering data, and maintaining and managing the assessment system is crucial. For example, it can be helpful for faculty to receive enough copies of the SLO rubrics for each student in the specific courses they teach at the beginning of each semester. One individual who is dedicated to providing administrative support to the department can spearhead the effort to disperse rubrics to faculty, collect completed rubrics, enter the data in the computerized assessment database, and flag those students who did not meet the expected outcomes for discussion at faculty meetings. Alternatively, some departments may choose to implement an entirely paper-less system, in which faculty may independently enter rubric scores
directly into an electronic tracking system. Moreover, faculty should have an ongoing systematic plan for regularly evaluating the implementation of the assessment program by faculty and adjuncts. Finally, faculty can designate an annual time period where the data from the year are analyzed and discussed to monitor student growth and progress. During this time, faculty can discuss ways to refine and improve teaching objectives and methods. Assessing Student Learning Outcomes is an on-going developmental process. Continually revising courses based on student feedback and new information reflects a commitment to life-long learning.
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