Surviving Economic Challenges to a Counselor Education Program:

One Response in Today’s Recession

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Abstract

This paper introduces the challenge of economic sustainability facing counselor education programs. A description of one program’s innovative response to this challenge is described, as well as the financial results and outcomes of an on-line student satisfaction survey with this new program. The implications of this innovation for the mission of the program and for future development and study will be offered.

*Keywords*: innovation, financial sustainability
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The studies of “best practices” in Counselor Education have historically focused on clinical treatment outcomes, the development of supervisees, program enhancement, and professional issues. These topics spring from the teaching, supervision, research, and service mandates of professors and students enrolled in these graduate programs. These emphases reflect internally directed and critical mandates to enhance and support the future of the counseling profession. However, programs are currently facing external mandates around issues of financial sustainability imposed by the current recession and by college and university administration seeking ways to maintain the financial health of the institution. Attention to this issue has emerged as a concern to all departments and programs as questions are raised about their financial stability and sustainability (Douglas, 2010; Kiley, 2011; Newfield, 2010).

The Current Status of University and Program Funding

The financial status of institutions of higher education and the programs housed within those organizations seems currently threatened by the ongoing economic recession. The present-day economic status of post-secondary institutions reflects a 30-year trend of flat funding by states (Newfield, 2010), with state appropriations contributing less and less toward to the costs of the university (Douglas, 2010). Universities have responded to this decrease in state funding by raising tuition, which has grown at four times the national inflation rate (Newfield), and by increasing expectations for faculty to secure external funding. However, as Newfield explained, opportunities for external funding in areas other than the sciences and technology are severely limited and have been further reduced at source as a function of the wide-felt effects of the
economic downturn. Therefore, opportunities for this funding are becoming less plentiful and more competitive, making reliance on their availability less certain on a continued basis.

In addition to decreased sources of external funding, reliance on tuition dollars seems also less certain than in the past years. Goodman (2009) also spoke to the alarming economic news of declining enrollments in higher education, leading to the 2009 rating by Moody’s Investors Services of a negative outlook to the higher education industry as a choice for investments and further threatening a flow of revenue.

As a result of these conditions, Jones & Wellman (2010) described the current fiscal situation on college campuses as one of “financial chaos” (p. 8) with overall reductions of state revenues leading to severe budget cuts on college campuses (June, 2011). The university in which this program was developed saw its state funding decrease from approximately 54% in 1995 to 9% in 2012. These reductions in funding fall most heavily on instructional functions, calling into questions the sustainability of programs and degrees. Newfield (2010) stated that the “current cuts and downsizing erodes instructional quality” (p. 613) and that the current plight of the university can be described as merely a “shadow of the dream of professional development and workforce readiness a college degree has traditionally promised” (p. 628). Universities are being faced with finding new ways to support themselves, and within universities that pressure is being felt on the college and program levels.

**Proposed Solutions**

Several solutions have been offered to address these financial shortfalls. Measures are proposed to cost-analyze what departments earn based on enrollments and what they cost (Kiley, 2011; NACUBO, 2010; Newfield 2010). Based on these reviews, with criteria still unexplained, the caliber of each graduate program would be evaluated (June, 2010). That evaluation then
shifts the mode of assessment of programs and degrees from mission-critical to financially self-sufficient. Douglass (2010) described strategies already in place, such as reducing course offerings, raising revenues via tuition, and cutting programs. Of particular concern to counselor education programs is the possibility of the elimination of high-cost/low-demand programs, with special focus on “graduate and doctoral programs, usually the highest cost and lowest-performing programs in the university” (June, 2010, p. 12). However, the most popular choice for addressing the current financial shortfalls, according to Garrett (2011), is a preference for generating additional revenue and external partnerships versus across-the-board budget cuts.

Kiley (2011) advocated that program faculty could not wait for funding to be restored and needed to act proactively in their own interests. The urge for budgetary transparency and funding structures to support educational goals must therefore become a faculty priority along with the missions of research, teaching and service. However, this is a challenge to faculty that few have assumed (Newfield, 2010). Given this challenge, it may be prudent for faculty to be aware of possible options to proactively address this issue. This was the position adopted by the Counselor Education program at the University of South Carolina.

The Response of the Counselor Education Program at the University of South Carolina

The Counselor Education Program at the University of South Carolina (USC) is housed in the Department of Educational Studies in the College of Education. The University is a large, state-supported, public institution offering undergraduate, graduate, doctoral and professional degrees. The Counselor Education Program offers two Educational Specialist (EdS) degree programs in K-12 School Counseling and Marriage, Couples and Family Counseling and the Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision. The program numbers about 60 masters students and about 35 doctoral students, supported by six full-time core faculty. In response to funding
concerns, the program decided to act proactively and to initiate the development of a Minor in Counseling. This initiative had three objectives:

- Generation of ongoing external sources of tuition dollars to support doctoral students and other program priorities
- Introduction of the graduate programs to undergraduates who require a minor and may be considering graduate study
- Ongoing funding to attract Ph.D. applicants from national and international populations

**Process of Development of the Counseling Minor**

Conceptualization of the Counseling Minor emerged in 2007 after a yearlong period of pondering the three objectives and searching the web sites of other nationally ranked counselor education programs for possible initiatives. In 2008 a memo was drafted, course titles were amended, and exploration of the institution’s protocol for formalizing a minor began. It was learned that no such procedure existed, with minor courses decided by the student and advisor based on unknown reasons and listed with no formal approval by the program in which the undergraduate student did decide to minor. So the creation and approval of the Minor in Counseling became the prototype at this institution for how to generate such a formalized minor concentration.

**Rationale for the Minor**

The following memorandum is included verbatim as a guide for other interested programs:

The Counselor Education Program in the Department of Educational Studies, College of Education, petitions for the formalization of a “Minor in Counseling”. This proposed minor would support undergraduate students’ learning about the profession of counseling
as a viable graduate degree track toward endorsement or licensure as a K-12 School Counselor or Marriage and Family Therapist. However, since professional training in counseling, and the ensuing endorsement and licensure on the state levels, rests with completion of a graduate degree, the selection of the undergraduate minor would help students decide if a career in school counseling or family counseling would be a solid vocational choice. The minor would introduce them to a wider understanding of counseling plus offer the opportunity for appropriate experiential learning in counseling skills.

The proposed minor would be comprised of didactic and experiential courses specific to the field of counseling, congruent with the stated Program Mission, and reflect the two specialization programs offered at the University of South Carolina (USC): the K-12 School Counseling program and the Marriage, Couples, and Family Counseling Program. Both these programs have earned national accreditation from CACREP, the accrediting body of the American Counseling Association.

Consistent with USC standards, the minor would consist of eighteen (18) credit hours, fifteen of which would be Counselor Education courses and one course in Educational Foundations. The six required courses or 18 credits, already listed in the Undergraduate Bulletin, are:

- EDCE 502: Guidance for the Classroom teacher
- EDCE 503: Family Counseling
- EDCE 510: Introduction to Counseling
- EDCE 570: Special Topics in Counseling
- EDCE 600: Communication Skills
EDFN 300: School in Modern Society

The six courses comprising the minor had been created prior to the formalization of the Minor in Counseling. Intended for either upper-level undergraduate students or beginning graduate students, the courses were numbered at the 500-600 level. Course content was intended to provide students in the minor with a beginning orientation to the profession of counseling and to the two specialist programs offered at USC. The courses were bundled formally to designate the expectations for the Minor in Counseling.

Content for each course would be summarized:

*EDCE 502 Guidance for the Classroom:* The purpose of this course is to provide the student with an overview of the major roles played by school counselors and other professionals as they observe, assess, and intervene with a variety of typical classroom behaviors across grade levels.

*EDCE 503 Family Counseling:* The purpose of this course is to provide the student with an overview of the Family Systems theoretical approaches to understanding and treating clinical issues.

*EDCE 510 Introduction to Counseling:* The purpose of this course is to provide the student with an overview of the counseling profession through readings, class discussion, experiential activities and site visits.

*EDCE 570 Topic in Counseling:* The purpose of this course is to provide the student with an overview of current issues and cutting-edge topics in the field of counseling.

*EDCE 600 Communication Skills in Counseling:* The purpose of this course is to educate the student in the application of micro-skills in counseling, which are fundamental in establishing a helping relationship in a multicultural context.
EDFN 300 Schools in Communities: The purpose of this course is to educate the student regarding the social, political, and historical aspects of diverse educational institutions in American culture with an emphasis on families, schools, and communities.

All course delivery is done through in-person instruction, allowing the instructor the experience of lecture, large group, and small group pedagogy. Course supervision is conducted by a faculty member who receives a one course release for the purposes of administration and teaching supervision for the minor. That faculty member is also responsible for the standardization of the content of the courses in the minor.

All minor course syllabi were created by core program faculty. This procedure was necessary as advanced undergraduate students could take minor courses for senior privilege, meaning that they could transfer two courses into graduate study in the counseling program so there needed to be certainty that the content and competency of the minor courses was equivalent to that of the graduate level course. While instructors can adapt and experiment with teaching methods, the contents and leaning assessments remain consistent between sections.

Potential instructors for the minor courses, all of whom are doctoral students in the program in Counselor Education & Supervision, must have completed the USC Graduate School’s mandatory Teacher Assistant training program, EDCE 830: Pedagogy in Counselor Education (a doctoral program requirement), as well as team-taught one section of EDCE 600: Communication Skills as a component of the doctoral internship class (EDCE 856). Therefore, second year and advanced doctoral students are eligible to teach minor courses. Selection of instructors for the first term of teaching in the minor is based on grades in those curricular experiences, quality of student evaluation ratings, and ratings provided by the instructor of EDCE 856. Subsequent teaching assignments are based on the strength of the student ratings, as
reported on the USC Course Evaluation Form, plus in-person observations and reviews conducted by a faculty member.

**Approval Process**

The protocol for the approval of this initiative fell under the administrative functions of the Associate Dean and then the Associate Provost for Academic Affairs. This proposal had to be approved by the Academic Affairs Committee of the Department of Educational Studies, supported by the Department Chair and the Basic Programs Curriculum Council (BPCC) in the College of Education. The minor program required approval by the BPCC, and then the Faculty Senate, before being posted as a bulletin change. Therefore, the minor program was on schedule for approval during Fall 2009 term, accepting students in the Spring 2010 term, offering classes in the minor in Fall 2010 term, culminating in two years of effort just to create the opportunity to offer the Minor Program in Counseling. The need for this lengthy approval process resulted from the absence of university protocols on the formalization of a minor concentration.

**Potential Income Generation**

Given the innovativeness of this program, prediction of the number of interested students was tentative at best. However, there was an expectation of a strong interest. A list of potential recruitment majors had been generated based on Fall 2008 enrollments (see Table 1). This list was generated as part of the rationale for the creation and marketability of the Minor in Counseling.

Potential income was predicted based on the following formula: $395/credit hour of undergraduate study -$145 (institutional tax) = $250/ credit hour or $750/3 credit course of net tuition revenue. Given that each student must complete at least 6 courses, each student choosing the Minor in Counseling would generate $4500 in post-university-tax College of Education
tuition revenues. A conservative estimate of 75 students, out of a current recruitment population of 4400, was forecast to yield a total of $337,500 of new tuition revenue.

**Costs of Implementing the Minor in Counseling**

It is planned that all teaching for the Minor in Counseling would be provided by fully-admitted Ph.D. students in the Counselor Education and Supervision Program. In addition, a clinical faculty member would assume the responsibility of monitoring the Ph.D. students who teach courses in the Minor to ensure the consistency, integrity and quality of this instruction.

- Instructors @ $3000/course x 15 classes: $45000 (to be paid by income generated by tuition)
- One clinical faculty member: $50,000 (support from COE)
- Total anticipated cost/group of 75 students: $95,000
- Potential profit: $337,500 – 95,000 = $242,500

**Results of the Evolution of the Minor in Counseling**

This section will report on three areas of outcomes: a) the financial results of the implementation of the Minor in Counseling to date; b) student feedback; and, c) marketing initiatives.

**Financial Results of the Implementation of the Minor in Counseling**

In an effort to accurately calculate the amount of revenue generated thus far by the minor in counseling and to determine the potential revenue to be generated, minor course rosters from the Fall 2010 to Spring 2013 semesters were analyzed to collect the required information. The university does not assign a code for the Minor in Counseling, as it does to any major area of study, so there is no technology-based information storage regarding these students. The goal of the analysis was to determine the number of students enrolled in the minor, the courses taken
thus far, and the courses to be taken in the future, assuming students complete the minor in counseling. Collection and analysis of this information was completed using paper copies of the class rosters to identify students in the minor program.

Analysis of the data from the class rosters provided the following information:

- 312 students from 37 major programs are currently or have previously enrolled in minor courses
- As of spring 2013, these students account for 713 enrollments in undergraduate courses
- Assuming these students complete all minor coursework, these students will account for 1,159 additional enrollments.

Currently, the post-tax revenue generated per course at this university for the College of Education is $750 per student per course. Using this dollar amount, students enrolled in the counseling minor courses have generated approximately $534,750 of revenue as of the end of the spring 2013 semester. Assuming this group of students completes all minor coursework, the college stands to make $869,250 in additional revenue over the course of the next few semesters, totaling $1,404,000 in post-tax tuition dollars.

**Student Feedback**

During the fall 2011 semester, surveys were sent to students identified as being enrolled in the minor classes requesting feedback related to the minor via class climate. Students were able to respond anonymously to the surveys online. Of the 126 students identified as currently enrolled in minor classes, emails were sent to 118 students who had valid email addresses listed in the university’s student contact list. Of the 118 students notified, 34 students responded to the survey (28.8%).
The survey asked the students to respond to questions related to their level of satisfaction with the ease of fitting minor courses in their schedules, their interest in taking minor courses offered during summer semesters, what they liked about the minor courses, and what they felt could be improved in relation to the minor courses. Student responses to the questions about what they liked about the courses and their suggested improvements tended to fall into several broad themes. The main identified themes were course content, preparation for future academic and career choices, professors, and online course availability/accessibility. Examples of student responses related to course content were as follows: “Exposes me to material I'm interested in, but wouldn't learn in my major,” “The classes offer many different perspectives,” “I like the depth to all of the classes,” and “Focuses on using communication and helping skills.”

Student responses related to course content indicated that students appreciated the opportunity for exposure to information not presented in their major coursework, different perspectives and the depth of information offered in the classes, and the focus on basic attending skills. Students enrolled in the minor had an opportunity to broaden their knowledge base and gain a basic understanding of counseling and the role of the counselor. Examples of student responses related future academic and career choices were as follows: “Giving a better idea of the subject to someone considering a Masters in Counseling,” “The intro class that I am currently in has definitely increased my awareness of the fields of counseling and whether or not I could potentially go into this field professionally. Minoring in counseling has been beneficial in my search to figure out what I want to do in the future,” “It gave me insight and experience to know if I wanted to purse the Ed.S. degree,” and “It gives students the opportunity to have some hands on experience with counseling and get a feel for what the field is all about,” “The classes help me to see if counseling best suits my personality and helps me gauge if I want to pursue it as a
career. I have a realistic insight on the many aspects of counseling whether through theories or practicing communication skills, and the classes are great resources to pursue my interests,” and “The class I'm in is mixed with graduate and undergraduate students, which offers a different perspective than just a class with undergraduate students. Being able to talk to grad students and getting their advice on grad school really helps me define my career goals.”

These responses illustrate interest on the part of undergraduate students in exploring the field of counseling and considering the pursuit of advanced degrees related to counseling. The minor in counseling offers students the opportunity to gain exposure to future academic and career interests while completing their undergraduate degrees.

Student responses also discussed course instructors. Students indicated that they appreciated opportunities to work with instructors who are or have been counselors and can bring clinical experiences into the classroom. While these responses indicated that students find many benefits to the minor in counseling, they represent a limited exploration of the perspectives of students currently enrolled in minor coursework. Greater student response to the surveys may have offered a wider variety of themes as well as a greater depth to the themes presented above.

Marketing Initiatives

The Program began marketing campaigns using online and brochure advertising. The program placed notice of the minor on the program website (see www.ed.sc.edu/ceopenpage). In addition, hard copy advertisements were created after gaining approval from the university for the use of the official university mascot as part of the marketing strategy. These flyers were distributed to current students, to undergraduate student organizations, and to the Council of Undergraduate Advisors. Anecdotal responses indicated an openness and receptivity by all
constituencies to these overtures. The program was repeatedly told that this is the first minor to be marketed in this manner.

The Counselor Education Program is still struggling with how to track students enrolled in the Minor. Currently a listserv of registered students is hand-generated from call roles and that list is utilized for communication with current students in the minor. The program still needs to determine how to receive copies of the Minor Declaration Form that students are directed to complete in declaration of their choice of minor and file with their advisors. Access to this information would allow for the creation of technology-based communication systems with those students.

**Discussion**

This section will reflect on the process and outcomes of this initiative as a guide for future enhancement. The process of conceptualization and authorization proved lengthier than anticipated. The existing faculty governance structure needed to be amended to incorporate the formalization of a minor, a task that had never before been attempted. Questions were addressed about whether the minor ought be treated as a major, requiring state-level approval, which courses qualified, and what changes to university publications needed to be made to notify the university community of its existence. In addition, once approved, the challenge emerged about how to inform students of its availability. Targeting undergraduate majors in psychology seemed successful, as currently over 50% of the students in the Minor are in that major field of study.

Consistent with the direction provided by Garrett (2011) for faculty to explore revenue-generating options, the minor can be described as successful. The current population will generate over $1,400,000 in new revenues for the college, and unlike external grants and contracts, the minor has no expiration or renewal process. The actual numbers of students
declaring the Minor, 312 at last estimate, far exceeds the expectation of 75 that earned the endorsement to proceed with its development. The presence of so many students may portend much greater interest than originally imagined, with a concomitant increase in revenue generation.

Given the growing numbers of students in the minor, a rationale for its development to support PhD students can be enacted. All the funding for this initiative is generated from tuition from the minor. It is believed that the level of funding would be competitive with those announcements appearing in recruitment advertisements for Ph.D. students through the CESNET ListServe. It is also anticipated that this level of funding will allow students to become more immersed in their doctoral study and more involved in mentoring experiences with faculty to learn the skills of research, teaching, and service that will launch their careers as counselor educators.

**Recommendations**

Colleagues in other counselor education programs may see this venture as an option to either address budget shortfalls or enhance current funding. The first step would be to determine whether the program already has sufficient courses to substantiate a minor and, if not, then attend to their creation. In addition, the program would need to investigate the process for formalizing a minor on that campus. Programs may also wish to consider the use of adjunct or affiliate faculty as instructors should doctoral students not be available.

From a fiscal standpoint, program faculty would need to understand the university’s budget management and tuition management systems so as to be able to predict income generation and the profitability for the college and academic unit. In these times of budgetary restraint, self-sustainability would be necessary and profitability an appreciated dividend.
Once approved, anticipating scheduling needs proves uncertain. The USC program has grown in scheduling from 12 sections of the 6 courses in Spring 2013 term to 24 sections for the Fall 2013 term. This expansion is a function of the rapidity with which the spring classes filled plus the generation of students wanting to register who could not register. Therefore, it is expected that all 24 sections will fill in the Fall 2013 term, leading the program to wonder whether even more sections need to be added to subsequent semesters. In addition, the program is still struggling with offering summer classes in the minor. The university is transitioning to year-round enrollment and, as this project proceeds and undergraduates will remain on campus for other classes, then summer classes in the Minor will be offered.

Areas for Future Research

Given the novelty of this program and its continuing development, the following four questions will be relevant for the continued growth and health of the minor in counseling.

1. How can the minor be advertised to and attract students from undergraduate disciplines other than Psychology?

2. Does this learning experience on the undergraduate level lead to an increase in the number of applicants to the Ed.S. programs or to an increase in the quality of these applicants as measured by undergraduate GPA, GRE or MAT scores?

3. Is there a saturation point or maximum level of enrollment for the minor?

4. Based on student input, how relevant is the content? What is missing? What could be replaced?

Conclusion

While the notion of “best practices” in counselor education has not traditionally included issues and programs around financial sustainability and vitality, the economic issues facing
universities may impose this added mandate on these programs. The contents of this paper have presented one program’s proactive response to these economic challenges and outlined the realized and anticipated rewards of such an initiative. As with all efforts at best practices, enhancement and strengthening will come from repetition of such an enterprise; however it is hoped that this description will provide interested programs with a foundation for how to implement such a program at their institutions.
References


Table 1

*Potential Recruitment Majors*

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<td>660 Visual Communications</td>
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<td>560 Criminology &amp; Criminal Justice</td>
<td>591</td>
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<td>331 &amp; 586 Exercise Science and Public Health</td>
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<td>160 Experimental Psychology</td>
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<td>910 Interdisciplinary Studies</td>
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<td>329 Physical Education</td>
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<td>650 Public Relations</td>
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<td>168 Religious Studies</td>
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