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Article 32

Raising the Bar: The Debate Over How to Improve the Quality of Graduate Counseling Programs and Students

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Crowell, Jeri L., is an assistant professor in the School Counselor Education program at Fort Valley State University in Georgia. Dr. Crowell's training in both mental health and school counseling is a benefit to understanding the multiple roles expected of professional school counselors in the field. Her expertise is in ecological counseling as represented in her book (with Conyne & Newmeyer, 2008), *Group Techniques: How to Use Them More Purposefully*, which has been recognized as a practical combination of group work and ecological counseling, and in applications of Reality Therapy/Choice Theory.

Discussions around graduate admissions processes have been scattered throughout the literature (Hollis & Dodson, 2000; Jacobson, 1993; Lyons & Calicchia, 2008; Markert & Monke, 1990; Smaby, Maddux, Richmond, Lepkowski, & Packman, 2005). This article presents a mock debate in which the issue of "raising the bar," or increasing the requirements on admission for the students into two master's school counselor education programs was explored between two institutions at the 2009 ACES conference in San Diego, California. The debate was structured in line with the International Debate Education Association (n.d.). The debaters were from Mississippi State University

(MSU; a Research One university and predominantly White institution [PWI]), represented by Dr. Kimberly Hall, program coordinator of the School Counseling program, and from Fort Valley State University (FVSU; a land-grant historically Black college or university [HBCU]) in Georgia, represented by the interim program chair of the School Counselor Education program, Dr. Jerry Mobley. The moderator was Dr. Jeri Crowell, assistant professor in the School Counselor Education program, also from FVSU.

The debate began with each presenter making an opening statement about what led them to consider “raising the bar.”

JC: I will allow both presenters 5 minutes to make an opening statement about what led them to consider making the admissions standard more stringent. We will alternate who goes first but will begin, ladies first, with Dr. Hall.

KH: Thank you for the opportunity to be with you and share these important ideas. As the 2008-2009 school year was looming on the horizon, my administration expressed a concern about the quality of the graduates from our program and highly encouraged us to stick to our admission standards as much as possible. Our standards required an undergraduate GPA of 3.0 (on the last 60 hours of undergraduate work) and encouraged GRE scores of 800 or higher. However, over the past several years, many of the students we admitted fell below those standards. As a result, several students were unable to pass comprehensive exams or licensure exams and performed marginally in the classroom as well as during practicum/internship.

In 2008, we adhered to our standards and only selected students who met both the GPA and the GRE standards. Our class was smaller that year—we only had 9 students, compared to previous years, when we accepted 15-20. These candidates are beginning their second year in the program and will be discussed in detail as we continue. Overall, they have been excellent students and are becoming excellent counselors.

JC: Thank you, Dr. Hall. (Please hold your questions until both parties have presented.) Dr. Mobley, what happened at Fort Valley State University?

JM: I appreciate the opportunity to tell our story and explore these ideas with you. A new dean had been brought in to rebuild our College of Education and Teacher Education program; I was tasked with rebuilding school counselor education. While we had produced some excellent graduates in previous years, we also produced some very minimal performers, and we did not do well at gatekeeping the training process. The dean, Dr. Judy Carter, presented a new standard to us: “I don’t care if they have a 4.0, do you want your child or grandchild taught or counseled by them?” My job was to come up with a method for implementing that standard.

Remember, as an HBCU, we attract a predominantly African American student body and most of the standardized tests like the GRE and MAT do not adequately reflect the abilities of minorities and lower SES people (Fields, 1998) and these tests do not measure the qualities you want in a counselor (see discussion below). Take GPA for an example: a colleague of mine, who now has a doctorate and teaches in college, experienced several family upheavals while she was in school and performed poorly for

over a year as a result. As she and her family stabilized, she returned to doing excellent work. She none-the-less had several low GPA semesters that lowered her overall GPA. Even when the poor performance was self-inflicted, if they began to do better, you have a person who might contribute more as a counselor than someone who had always performed well. We are training counselors, not brain surgeons. Their GPA often does not indicate what occurred—to the contrary, it possibly eliminates them from future opportunities. And now the standard is higher than just academics.

JC: Thank you, Dr. Mobley. Since standardized testing seems to be part of this discussion, maybe we should take a minute and compare each schools' assumptions about, and experiences with, the GRE and/or the MAT. Dr. Hall back to you.

KH: Effective selection and training of counseling graduate students is critical to the success of the field. Failure to admit quality students only weakens the field. Many universities require the GRE prior to admission, and the most highly competitive universities have high minimum score requirements (Norcross, Hanych, & Terranova, 1996). With the mandate for increased accountability, counselor education programs have been asked to document outcome measures for their students. Both the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2008) and regional college associations, such as the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (2008) require documentation of effective programs. One of the primary measures of effective programs is student success on comprehensive exams. Our students complete the Counselor Preparation Comprehensive Examination (CPCE) for their comprehensives. A recent study (Schmidt, Homeyer, & Walker, 2009) revealed that undergraduate GPAs, GRE-V, and GRE-Q scores were predictive of student success on the CPCE. They found that the GRE-V was the most significant predictor of not only the CPCE-Total scores, but also of each of the eight CPCE subscale scores. Because counseling is verbal in nature, this result is not surprising. Limitations in verbal communication skills can obviously lead to problems in the counseling setting. Other studies have also concluded that GRE scores were valid predictors of success in graduate school. For example, a study conducted by Kuncel, Hezlett, and Ones (2001) found that GRE scores were valid predictors of graduate GPA, comprehensive exam scores, and faculty ratings. Furthermore, their study indicated that prior criticisms of the GRE's validity as situationally specific were in error. Becoming a competent, effective school counselor requires more than just counseling skills; students must be able to coordinate school-wide counseling programs, master knowledge related to warning signs and effective interventions for mental distress in children, and quickly problem-solve to effectively help preK-12 students and their families.

JC: Thank you, Dr. Hall. Dr. Mobley, what specifically is your understanding of standardized tests and the GRE and MAT?

JM: In their article Schmidt, Homeyer, & Walker (2009) also vigorously assert, "[T]he literature is discordant regarding the effectiveness of using GRE score as a predictor of success in graduate studies" (p. 227). I agree with Dr. Hall that the verbal part of the GRE does correlate significantly with the MAT (Meagher, 2008) and seems to predict first

year performance in graduate studies (Sampson & Boyer, 2001), but I have two concerns: 1) GRE and MAT do not do well at predicting personal growth (Stone & Hanson, 2002) and performance of counseling skills (Smaby et al., 2005), and 2) these limitations particularly penalize minorities (Sampson & Boyer, 2001). Sedlacek (2003) joined Sackett, Schmidt, Ellingson, & Kabin (2001) in saying, “My point here is to illustrate that a variety of measurements may be needed to achieve equitable assessments for all...to increase ethnic diversity, one should not be limited to cognitive measures alone” (§ 12).

One of the more elaborate studies looking at the GRE, graduate performance, and minorities (Sampson & Boyer, 2001) began their report by saying, “Its [the GRE’s] usefulness in predicting minority students’ success in graduate education has not been established without equivocation” (§ 4) and conclude emphatically stating, “GRE scores were less predictive of success in the first year of graduation for non-traditional age women and minorities, yet decisions about whether to admit minority students heavily rely on GRE scores” (§ 17). Counselor education programs need to consider “other factors” (§ 18).

What has been recommended (Johnson & Gentry, 2000) in addition to the traditional tests has been portfolios, written statements of purpose for applying or personal philosophy, research projects, publications, and productivity in other areas. Our process requires MAT or GRE scores and undergraduate GPAs but predominantly decides to advance students in the program based upon a semester-long performance on a writing rubric, research rubric, and disposition rubric.

JC: For the next part of our “debate,” both presenters will be given 10 minutes each to explain how they use standardized tests, grade point averages, and other things in admitting candidates into their programs. Dr. Mobley, we’ll begin with you.

JM: In the CoE [College of Education] we had for some time been struggling with performance measures, rubrics, for a variety of candidate skills. Replicating and adapting what the undergraduate teacher education program was doing, we developed eight outcome measures. Here’s how we applied them for admission.

We arranged a semester-long interview process that culminated in the application of three of the eight rubrics. With the support of the Dean of Graduate Studies and Continuing Education, we have begun to do what is now called “fast track” admissions, which allows students to have a semester of graduate school (up to 9 hours) prior to full admission to Graduate Studies with financial aid. In some situations this allows candidates to complete their admissions packet including references and GRE and MAT test scores. During their courses each professor completes the disposition rubric twice, a writing rubric in the scripted Career Counseling course on a summary of their career information on themselves, and a research rubric in the Fundamentals of Research Design course where they present a PowerPoint proposal of research they will complete during their program.

Most of the class performed well. While they complained that they did not receive the highest ratings on every scale, they were more than adequate. An assessment is entered into LiveText where it can be accessed by the student to go into their portfolio or aggregated to describe what happened during the semester.

Their performance, what they do in these courses, how they respond to each other and their professors, and their ability to rate well on the rubrics was strategized to be more valuable than their undergraduate GPA and GRE or MAT scores. The standardized test scores could be used diagnostically to determine who would need coaching for the comprehensive exam and state certification test.

JC: Thank you, Dr. Mobley. You have 10 minutes, Dr. Hall.

KH: At MSU, all students must submit their transcripts, GRE scores, letters of reference, and a statement of purpose as part of their application procedures. Then each program area within the department meets to review the applicants. During this meeting, we discuss people's scores, letters, and the reason they are entering the program (based on their statement of purpose), as well as any prior work experiences. From this discussion, a decision is made to either accept the student outright, accept the student provisionally, or reject the student. If a student is accepted provisionally, then they have to make a grade of B or higher on their first 9 hours. If they make a C or lower, then they are immediately dismissed from the program. We also have a policy that students are not allowed to make more than two Cs in the program, or any grade lower than a C. If they make a third C, or one D or F, then they are dismissed from the program.

Prior to 2008, we had several students who were dismissed from the program based on academics (made a third C, D, or F) and two who could not pass comps or the PRAXIS II. Of these three students, two were great with children and indeed had a passion for helping others; however, professors indicated that all of them were marginal students as well as counselors. They did not demonstrate the ability to critically analyze situations that clients presented to them and often struggled with providing direction in the counseling session.

Since 2008, all of our students have made grades of B or higher in all of their coursework (with mostly As). Professors have commented on how well students have performed in the classroom, and their Skills professor spoke highly of their ability to provide counseling. They are currently completing their practicum, which is 600 hours, in a K-12 setting, and I have heard nothing but praise from all of their site supervisors and administrators. Many of them are quite strong in advocating though, so we've had to talk about timing and the right way to say things...but few of our students before truly advocated for their role as a school counselor. I have been extremely pleased with this class and think they will become excellent school counselors.

JC: Thank you, Dr. Hall. While we will go into some case study examples of how each of these processes has worked on the next round. Does anyone in the audience have a question for either or both presenters?

JC: The next presentation is to present two case studies each, one relative success and one relative failure, that can be directly connected to the admission process. You have 10 minutes each, and we'll begin with Dr. Hall.

KH: While I think all of our current students are "successes," I do have one that really stands out. She's an African American student, who embodies the idea of a "perfect"

school counselor in my mind. She goes above and beyond in all classroom assignments, works perfectly as a group member, and really relates to children. She began her practicum at an elementary school that had never had a school counselor until this year, and then that school counselor was out on maternity leave during the first six weeks of school. Lakeisha hit the ground running. She began developing a comprehensive school counseling program by forming an advisory board, developing a school counseling mission statement, designing and administering a needs assessment, and forming an action plan for the year. She worked with parents and teachers by designing interventions that could be used at home and at school. She has really proven herself to be exceptional.

I don't really have an example for this year of a "failure," but I can see how GPA and GRE scores don't necessarily mean that the person will be a great counselor. To help with this, our department meets twice a year to discuss each student. We discuss not only their academic performance but also their dispositions. At this point, if any faculty member perceives that a student would not be a good fit for the counseling profession, then the advisor meets with that student to discuss the issue and a note goes into the student's file. If the student continues to display the same behaviors over the next semester, then the faculty will discuss the possibility of encouraging the student to seek a different profession, or if severe enough, will recommend that the student be dismissed. We have done this in the past for some of our school counseling students, but have not had to do so over the last year.

JC: Thank you, Dr. Hall. Continue to hold your questions until we have presented both perspectives. Dr. Mobley, you have 10 minutes.

JM: I have had many students in the last year who are excellent students and would probably be successes regardless of what we did, but the only male in our program last year is a particular success in my mind. (He has given me permission to talk about him because it would be difficult to obscure his identity.) He would not have gotten into many graduate programs with his undergraduate GPA of 2.42—we require 2.70—and MAT score of 38—we require 48. He was quiet in his first semester in the course, but he was responsive to feedback. He said at one point, "I see that this is going to be a total make over—you are going to review everything." And he rose to the challenge. I found phrases that he would write that were elegant but often obtuse and encouraged him to build on the concepts but get the language right. He has worked hard; he has succeeded. This attitude of working hard, learning and growing, overcoming personal and other obstacles makes him the sort of person, let alone counselor, that I would like my children and grandchildren to have as a counselor.

We also have a student who minimally passed the rubrics and indicated considerable basis for concern. (She has given me permission to talk about her because it would also be difficult to obscure her identity.) She wrote well, but she did not talk. If she was called on, she would respond minimally. We decided to maintain her in the program, but since school counseling is a leadership position requiring verbal engagement, we placed her on a contract; we insisted that she assert herself. When she no substantial change occurred in her second semester, we asked her to take a semester off and work on the skills we were asking her to develop, e.g., speaking up -- particularly using active listening, I-messages, and the four-step process of Reality Therapy. She might also need

to do something “to address whatever might be hindering her” from demonstrating initiative; “counseling might be useful.” These deficiencies would have been less noticeable without the performance measures, but with them the deficits demanded attention.

She has returned from her semester off and is doing better. She was in counseling over the summer. She agreed to audit the skills/theory class and has become an informal leader in that class. The faculty consensus of her performance is positive and her rubrics, particularly her Disposition rubric, has no deficits.

JC: Now that you have admitted two classes and gathered all of this information. What do you think you need to do differently? Dr. Hall?

KH: In 2008, we really stuck hard to our standards and did not admit any students provisionally. So if they didn’t meet both standards then they were rejected. This fall, we have lightened up a bit and admitted several provisionally, which means they have to make a grade of B or higher in their first 9 hours. Faculty believed that perhaps some students could prove themselves in the first 9 hours and overcome a lower GRE score or lower GPA. Students who were admitted provisionally, however, either had a lower GPA or a lower GRE score, but not both.

JC: Dr. Mobley, what might you do differently?

JM: Communication is probably the most important thing since the process we are using is different. We have an orientation before classes begin and repeatedly explain what the expectations are; we have them apply the disposition rubric to us and let them know that they will need to score at least a “2” on all of the items. But we need to do more.

The transparency of the process is also essential. The plan has been to use LiveText to compile and aggregate our data and is integral to the process. They enter materials into the system, we evaluate them in the system, the materials and assessments are inventoried there, and the program aggregates the data for reporting purposes. Students can enter LiveText and see how they are doing at any point. Getting the rubrics into LiveText has taken far longer than we would have ever guessed and has caused more trouble than anticipated. We hope this semester will see us getting everything up to date.

Alignment of the faculty inside the program and the program to the college are ongoing issues. Different perspectives around the rubrics and the measurement process make for stimulating conversations, and an annual review of the entire college’s processes keeps the process fresh and focused.

Better execution. The magic is in the details. Just do it better.

JC: Thank you, Dr. Hall and Dr. Mobley. And thank you audience for time well-spent.

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