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Article 23

Advocating for Minority Clients with Program Evaluation: Five Strategies for Counselors

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Over the past twenty years, evaluating the outcomes of counseling services has taken a central role in professional counseling practice (Leibert, 2006; Studer, Oberman, & Womack, 2006). Increasingly, counselors working in education and human services settings are expected to demonstrate effectiveness and efficiency in the services they provide to clients. Accountability has therefore become a routine expectation in virtually every counseling specialty. In order to meet accountability demands, counselors have been encouraged to utilize program evaluation methods for systematically planning, implementing, and evaluating outcomes of counseling services (Astramovich, Hoskins, & Coker, 2008). Concurrent with the increased emphasis on evaluating the outcomes of counseling services, multiculturalism, advocacy, and social justice have become major forces in counseling (D'Andrea & Heckman, 2008; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). Today's professional counselors are expected to have the knowledge and skills to advocate on a client's behalf (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2008; Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003) and to help clients develop the ability to self-advocate

(Astramovich & Harris, 2007). Major professional counseling organizations including the American Counseling Association (ACA), American School Counselor Association (ASCA), and the American Mental Health Counselors Association (AMHCA) have all endorsed the need for counselors to develop skills to advocate for minority and underserved client populations. In recent years, the specialty of professional school counseling has been particularly active in promoting advocacy among its practitioners (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007; Ratts, DeKruyf, Chen-Hayes, 2007; Trusty & Brown, 2005).

Although advocacy has become a major initiative among professional counselors, few concrete advocacy techniques have been developed for counselors to implement (Astramovich & Hoskins, 2008). Some pioneering work in professional school counseling has highlighted the potential of advocacy-based interventions (e.g., Bemak, Chung, & Sirosky-Sabado, 2005). Yet much of the literature on advocacy in counseling is more philosophical or theoretical in nature and may not be easily translated into counseling practice. Counselors who may aspire to advocacy work in counseling need more explicit examples of interventions. Specifically, counseling program evaluation can be an effective and action-oriented advocacy tool for counselors who may be working with minority and underserved client populations.

Overview of Counseling Program Evaluation

Considered a planned and systematic process, counseling program evaluation refers to the ongoing use of evaluation principles to monitor and assess the impact and effectiveness of counseling programs and services (Astramovich et al., 2008; Loesch, 2001). Program evaluation has been identified as an emerging best practice for counselors (Astramovich & Coker, 2007) and it has been featured in frameworks for counseling practice, including the *ASCA National Model* (2005). Counseling program evaluations can help counselors answer multiple questions about their programs and services

including how well clients are being helped, what services are most beneficial and effective to various client groups, and what gaps exist in current counseling services. Additionally, from an accountability perspective, program evaluation data can be effective in helping counselors demonstrate the effectiveness and outcomes of their programs to stakeholders (ASCA, 2005; Myrick, 2003; Studer et al., 2006).

Process of Counseling Program Evaluation

Counseling program evaluation can be conceptualized as occurring in two major cycles, one emphasizing the micro-level, or actual counseling services, and the other emphasizing the macro-level, or context of the counseling program. In a school setting, for example, the micro-level of program evaluation examines the specific services and interventions developed and implemented by the school counselor. On the macro-level, program evaluation looks at the impact of school counseling services upon the larger school environment and community. Accountability to stakeholders helps bridge the counseling program with the broader context of the school environment and the community. Ultimately, information gathered from each program evaluation cycle is then used to enhance the counseling services provided to students and their families.

According to Astramovich and Coker (2007), counseling program evaluation involves eight major steps including: 1) needs assessment; 2) identifying service objectives; 3) program planning; 4) program implementation and monitoring; 5) assessing program outcomes; 6) providing accountability to stakeholders; 7) gathering feedback from stakeholders; and, 8) strategic planning. Information gathered during each step in the counseling program evaluation process is used to inform practice and to help with decision making in later steps. For example, needs assessments can help identify specific counseling services that are desired by client populations. Information gathered from needs assessments can then help counselors make decisions about service objectives and specific counseling programs to offer clients. In turn, such program offerings

help counselors identify variables for measuring outcomes of services provided to clients. Counseling program evaluation therefore involves a cyclical process of developing, monitoring and refining counseling services with the goal of improving client outcomes.

Advocacy Strategies Using Counseling Program Evaluation

With its focus on systematically collecting and evaluating outcomes information, counseling program evaluation can be strategically used by counselors to advocate for minority client populations and for improved counseling services. Data collected from program evaluations can be used as an effective means to advocate with stakeholders for the resources and support needed to provide services to minority clients. Five advocacy strategies drawn from counseling program evaluation procedures are discussed below. Each strategy is based on a major step in the counseling program evaluation process.

Advocacy Strategy 1: Identifying Unique Needs of Minority Populations

Conducting needs assessments specifically with minority or underserved clients can help pinpoint the unique concerns of these populations. A primary means of advocating for minority clients involves an accurate understanding of the socio-political and cultural factors that influence their development (Lewis et al., 2003). Needs assessments can help counselors become more knowledgeable about the various issues faced by minorities and help counselors develop services that are targeted to address these issues. For example, a community mental health counselor working in an urban community agency may be interested in identifying the primary concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) clients seeking counseling services with the agency. Using a brief needs assessment questionnaire, the counselor may find that relationship issues are the most frequently cited concern of this population. In order to address these needs more specifically, the counselor could

then advocate that the community agency implement a relationship counseling group for its LGBTQ clients.

*Advocacy Strategy 2: Addressing Barriers to Accessing
Counseling Services*

A primary way counselors can advocate for minority and underserved client populations is to identify and address barriers to accessing counseling services. Minority clients may face many challenges to seeking counseling help including limited financial resources, travel difficulties, and the stigma associated with seeking help for mental health issues (Overton & Medina, 2008). Other barriers to accessing counseling services may be culturally based (e.g., not seeking help outside the family unit) or related to broader socio-political oppressive practices faced by minorities (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). Counselors need to be culturally knowledgeable and sensitive when addressing barriers to access, yet they must also be proactive in addressing issues which may not have been championed by other professionals (Bemak & Chung, 2008). For example, an urban school counselor recognizes that for an after-school parenting skills program to be successful, transportation and child care issues will need to be addressed. The counselor surveys parents interested in the program to determine ways the school can help them make arrangements to participate. The school counselor then reports the data to the school administration to garner resources for creating on-site child-care options and creating a car pooling network.

Advocacy Strategy 3: Developing Targeted Counseling Services

Counseling services offered to majority populations may be inappropriate or ineffective in addressing the concerns of minority clients. Counselors can advocate for minority and underserved client groups by developing interventions that target the specific needs of these populations. In order to be effective advocates, counselors must be active in creating opportunities for clients through their counseling services (Ratts et al., 2007). For instance, a career counselor at a predominately Caucasian state university might expand the career

counseling center and develop a mentoring program geared at encouraging minority students to pursue careers in education. Because the field of education is in need of more minority educators, the career counselor's mentoring program could create pathways into education careers for minority students.

Advocacy Strategy 4: Using Descriptive and Outcomes Data

A central component of counseling program evaluation involves the collection and analysis of data about the success of counseling services and interventions. From an advocacy perspective, descriptive and outcomes data can be a powerful tool for highlighting the needs of minority clients and in demonstrating the success of services provided to minority populations (ASCA, 2005; Gysbers, 2004). Descriptive data can be used to identify gaps in services or specific challenges faced by minority clients. In a school setting, a counselor might use descriptive data to show administrators the disproportionate number of minority students who are enrolled in advanced placement classes and to then advocate for developing opportunities and support for minority students to take advanced placement coursework. Outcome data about the program's eventual success could then be presented at a school board meeting in order to advocate for a district-wide implementation of the program.

Advocacy Strategy 5: Garnering Stakeholder Support & Resources for Counseling Services

A common goal of counseling program evaluation and advocacy efforts is to generate stakeholder support for specific counseling services and interventions. Information gathered at each stage of the counseling program evaluation process can be strategically used to help promote stakeholder support and generate resources for programs. As discussed by Astramovich and Coker (2007), accountability to stakeholders should be a proactive, rather than reactive, process. Counselors can actively advocate for minority clients by developing accountability reports and making presentations to stakeholder groups which highlight successes and

continued needs for the sustainability of counseling services. For example, a community counseling agency which has been funded by a grant to develop and implement an aftercare program for people in recovery from substance abuse, might use outcomes data to help demonstrate the initial effectiveness of the program. Based on the promising results, counselors at the agency could then seek additional grant funding to expand the program and offer targeted services for minority clients needing additional aftercare services.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Counseling program evaluation has great potential for use as an advocacy tool by professional counselors. Generally, counselors express an interest in conducting program evaluations; however they frequently report having very limited training or experience in evaluation methods (Astramovich, Coker, & Hoskins, 2005). Likewise, counselors generally aspire to adopt advocacy and social justice philosophies in their practice, yet may fail to do so because of concerns about creating too much conflict within their work setting (Bemak & Chung, 2008) or because it is difficult for them to identify specific advocacy interventions they might utilize (Astramovich & Hoskins, 2008).

In order to address these concerns, counselor educators should help counselors develop strong evaluation and advocacy skills during their graduate level training in order to help new professionals meet the continued calls to be advocates for minority clients. Furthermore, major professional counseling organizations should develop conferences and workshops that help practicing counselors put program evaluation and advocacy theory into practice. One approach to helping counselors actualize advocacy and social justice philosophy involves the active use of program evaluation methods in their counseling practice. Finally, professional counselors should seek opportunities for furthering their knowledge and skills in counseling program evaluation and advocacy by attending and presenting at professional conferences and by seeking mentors and supervisors who may help guide their development of these skills.

In conclusion, counseling program evaluation and advocacy have separately been major initiatives within professional counseling. Each offers important foundations from which counselors in the twenty-first century aspire to practice. Ultimately, by joining the philosophies of advocacy and social justice with the practical steps of program evaluation, counselors can address barriers to access and actively promote the provision of effective counseling services to minority and underserved client populations.

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