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Article 23

The CACREP 2009 Standards: Developing a Counselor Education Program Assessment

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Introduction

The purpose of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) 2009 Standards is to establish educational and programmatic excellence in counseling and to facilitate development of students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be effective counseling professionals (CACREP, 2009). Current standards came into effect July 1, 2009, including the expectation that assessment planning should be linked to student learning outcomes (SLOs). Though potentially controversial, connecting programmatic assessment with student learning outcomes has obtained significant acceptance in assessment practices. (C. Bell, personal communication, November 10, 2009).

Assessment and related evidence are basic to the accreditation process across higher educational venues and accrediting bodies. Yet from a design point of view, assessment planning can often look more *ex post facto* in nature, essentially occurring in the accreditation (or re-accreditation) year and in response to available data. Indeed, higher education leaders report that they struggle with the mechanics of assessment planning (Dwyer, Millett, & Payne, 2006). Moreover, linking assessment planning with student learning outcomes poses additional challenges because SLO definitions and examples remain within the realm of programmatic responsibility. In a series of white papers, the Educational Testing Service outlined some of the tough assessment problems

currently facing higher education institutions (Dwyer et al., 2006; Millett, Payne, Dwyer, Stickler, & Alexiou, 2008; Millett, Stickler, Payne, & Dwyer, 2007). Of importance to these discussions is the expectation that educational communities must develop and execute multi-dimensional assessment plans, grounded in scholarship yet programmatically discrete, whereby student learning outcomes are identified, described, and “linked back” to programmatic objectives, mission, and vision.

A mixed-method, evidence-centered approach to assessment planning encourages inclusive, systematic, and continuing student performance review and overall program evaluation. This methodology sanctions both quantitative and qualitative data collection, and in turn, empowers counselor educators to triangulate and utilize data when making programmatic decisions, implementing programmatic changes and innovations, and benchmarking students. Creswell and colleagues (2003) defined mixed-method as a design wherein quantitative and qualitative data are gathered and examined either simultaneously or sequentially, producing a complementary effect and permitting a deeper, more meaningful understanding of phenomena. Quantitative assessment methodologies have been traditionally favored among higher education institutions because measurement validity and reliability can be fairly easily established (Hanson, Creswell, Plano Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005; Millett et al., 2008). Nonetheless, such designs by definition limit or constrain data. Valuable information can go unnoticed and unevaluated.

2009 CACREP Standards Highlights

A full discussion of each CACREP 2009 Standard is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, we highlight and comment upon those 2009 Standards which vary significantly from the 2001 Standards and which also directly impact assessment planning.

In Section I.G, the standard states that counseling students are aware of counseling services provided by helping professionals other than counseling faculty. Growing self-awareness is a positive by-product of counselor preparation and can be enhanced through the counseling experience. Moving one step beyond the standard (Section I.G) and requiring students to engage in personal counseling as a part of their learning experience can have multiple benefits, including augmenting various student learning outcomes (e.g., practicum). Counselor educators may want to think about having their students engage in personal counseling outside the programmatic arena and within a confidential setting (e.g., university counseling center). It goes without saying that the content of the counseling event should remain outside the purview of counseling faculty.

The 2009 Standards also suggest that great care should be given to the admissions process. When evaluating applications, thought should be given to:

- Each applicant’s potential success in forming effective and culturally relevant interpersonal relationships in individual and small-group contexts
- Each applicant’s aptitude for graduate-level study
- Each applicant’s career goals and their relevance to the program (CACREP, 2009, p. 3)

It can be difficult to evaluate an applicant's potential predicated simply on information included in the typical application packet. To enhance the decision-to-admit process, the entire faculty could participate in reviewing applications. At least two faculty members should preliminarily agree that an applicant may be eligible for admission. Once a group of applicants has been identified for possible admission, additional information could be useful. Interviewing for doctoral cohorts is an established practice. The same practice could be implemented when admitting master's level students. In other words, those applicants who "look good on paper" could be invited to campus to interview with faculty.

Student retention continues to be an important responsibility for counselor educators, and Section I.P of the Standards reiterates this notion. Benchmarking students may be defined as an annual or bi-annual, full-faculty review of each student and his or her performance. Determining evaluative criteria (e.g., writing skills, professional disposition, etc.) and rating modalities is the responsibility of faculty. Subsequent to benchmarking, students receive letters letting them know the outcome of the benchmarking meeting. Where there are no concerns, the letter can simply read something like: *A current review of your work indicates you are doing well at this time. Congratulations on your continued success in the program.* In cases where faculty members have identified concerns, students should be referred to their advisors for further consultation.

The benchmarking process could also include a 2-step admissions process. Provisionally admitting students ensures that they will receive careful faculty attention and advisement in the first semester or two of their studies. Together, the faculty at large should make the decision to move (or not move) students from provisional to unconditional status. The 2-step admission process provides a natural yet fair and methodical "gateway" for student matriculation, and may be particularly useful in those occasions when student retention and transition from the program are the correct benchmarking decision.

Very little has changed with standard requirements concerning faculty and staff (Section I.U-Z.). Yet, from the point of view of assessment planning, additional issues of governance should be considered. A university infra-structure of strong leadership is necessary; however, it's at the programmatic level where strong leadership appears crucial. A leader focused upon positive assessment planning should have a clear understanding of the program's vision, mission, and objectives, and he or she must be willing to take responsibility for where "the buck stops." These leaders engender the trust and loyalty of those whom they manage, and they ground their leadership style in open and candid communication. They value and appreciate the work of others (Shaw, 1996).

A collaborative faculty, prepared to suspend (at least temporarily) self-interest and self-promotion, and focused upon "working for the good of the body," is important. This is more easily said than done. Within research-intensive university environments, promotion and tenure requirements remain weighted towards research and scholarship, placing teaching at a clear "second," and service at a very-distant "third" (Fogg, 2006). Done well, the assessment process is a time-consuming undertaking, and this poses real time-management challenges for faculty.

An assessment committee comprised of a subset of counseling faculty charged with writing the assessment plan and overseeing its implementation is key. Given the

concerns highlighted in the preceding paragraph, it seems reasonable to assume that this committee would be best outfitted with tenured faculty. This may work well for large, well-established counseling programs. On the other hand, many counseling programs operate with minimal counseling personnel. Most universities recognize and reward labor-intensive university service such as assessment and accreditation (e.g., class buy-out). Nonetheless, without a strong and correlating record of research and scholarship, service efforts surrounding the assessment process do not necessarily and positively influence promotion and tenure decision-making. Royce and colleagues (2006) note that the process of program evaluation should be closely aligned with standard research procedures, grounded in scholarship, and rigorous in design. Thus, at least one tenured counseling faculty member, with particular proficiency in programmatic evaluation and research practices, should be identified to (co)chair the assessment committee.

In Section II.B.1.2.3, program objective guidelines are outlined. Program objectives have always been a CACREP requirement. However, the 2009 Standards now clearly state that program objectives must be aligned with counseling best practices and curriculum. Faculty, students, and other stakeholders in the community should work together to develop program objectives, and systematic annual review of the program objectives ensures their currency and applicability. Writing or revising program objectives such that they reflect desired student knowledge, skills, and practices enhances the link between program objectives and student learning outcomes, which, in turn, produce evidence that program objectives have been met. If not already underway, counselor education programs should consider routinely holding faculty retreats. As well, establishing an external Advisory Council is a fruitful way to facilitate communication between university instruction and counseling practices in the field.

Within the counseling profession there is growing consensus that supervision of counselors *by counselors* is important. Unfortunately, few if any master's level counseling curricula include coursework in supervision. Site supervisors in the field often report that they learned to be supervisors "on the job." Thus, among site supervisors the issue of adequate expertise in supervision must be addressed. Site supervisor qualifications remain the same in the 2009 standards. On the other hand, in Section III.D the "push and nudge" to provide site supervisors with specialized training is evident. The importance of site supervisors to counselor preparation cannot be over-stated. Counselor educators should promote the ongoing professional development of their site supervisors through annual or bi-annual workshops or other continuing education. These learning opportunities produce multiple benefits, including increased expertise among site supervisors, opportunities for networking and information-sharing between site supervisors and university personnel, and strengthened partnerships between the universities and communities they serve.

Concluding Thoughts

When thinking about assessment, we cannot separate ourselves from the notion of accountability. The beauty of assessment planning is that it ensures counseling programs remain true to the CACREP standards, which, in turn, protect the student learning environment. When developing an assessment plan, the methodology should be rigorous yet transparent and understandable. As well, language must be simple and clear, forging a

common ground for discussions among higher education leaders and important stakeholders in the community.

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