

Fitchburg State University

Behavioral Sciences Department
Graduate Mental Health Counseling Program Review

External Reviewer Report

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Function of External Reviewer

As requested by Fitchburg State University, I have completed a comprehensive outside review of the Clinical Mental Health Program's spring 2019 report. The function of the external evaluator was described as:

1. Provide feedback and give a broader context to the review
2. Review the self-study report and assess how accurately the document and information gathered during the on-site visit represent the current state of the program
3. Comment on the program's outcomes assessment plan and use of data collected through the process
4. Place the review in context of regional and/or national professional norms for the discipline
5. Offer recommendations for improvement and comment on the program's recommendations for self-improvement

External Reviewer Report

Guidelines for the written report included:

1. Assessing current state of the program
2. Assessing how well students are prepared for their intended career
3. Assessing the program's relationship to the university mission
4. Assessing the department plans for change and continued improvement
5. Assessing the effectiveness of the outcome assessment plan
6. Assessing how the department responded to the recommendations of the previous evaluator

To ensure that this report meets the expectations the content of this report has been formatted in the order as indicated above.

Actions Completed by Reviewer

1. Comprehensively reviewed program materials and developed on-site interview plan
2. Met with:
 - a. Dr. Alberto J.F. Cardelle - Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
 - b. Dr. Becky Copper-Glenz - Dean of Graduate and Continuing Education
 - c. Dr. Franca Barricelli - Dean of Arts and Sciences
 - d. Dr. Christine Shane - Chair of Behavioral Sciences Department
 - e. Jacalyn Kremer - Library Director
 - f. Department Faculty
 - g. Current Students
3. Composed report

Assessment of Current State of Program

In reviewing the FSU Mental Health Counseling program, it became apparent that the program is successfully meeting the goals of training well-prepared mental health practitioners. The commitment to internal and external assessments is applauded.

Strengths

1. Faculty- The greatest asset to the success of this program is clearly the faculty members and their dedication. The sole propeller towards excellence is their hard work which is a marvel considering their teaching loads are heavily embedded in undergraduate studies. Attention needs to be given to the structure of the program because the current design is a significant strain on faculty which “can result in a lack of communication between faculty teaching in the program” (self-report, pg 38). Despite faculty being pulled in multiple directions (i.e. teaching programs and alternative professional duties) they are able to execute a sophisticated and comprehensive professional program. Furthermore, the long-term dedication of adjunct faculty, some of which have taught for 18 years in the program, shows professional commitment and dedication to the program.
2. Focus on didactic and experiential learning- Showcased in report and supported by student and faculty interviews.
3. Innovative program elements- For example, it is not typical for programs to include an additional 50 hours of practicum. The supplement of this extra field experience is taxing on faculty in terms of implementation but provides a significantly positive impact on student learning and development. Students reported that the experience allowed them to “get their feet wet”, promoted their ability to network with other professionals, and enriched their ability to fruitfully participate in meaningful classroom discussions. The integration of this additional clinical field exposure within a diagnostically focused course is brilliant both for student learning and ethical behavior modeling.
4. Required course work- To fulfill all licensure requirements within a 60-credit program is very challenging and historically limits what a program can offer regarding elective courses. FSU does not offer any electives but has instead required courses that are typically used as the electives for core courses. This decision does not limit students but

rather enhances student licensure portability. For example, *COUN 8710 Family & Systems* is often an elective but a growing number of states require it for licensure. It is a common occurrence for student to move to a new state and not be eligible for licensure until taking this course. Graduates of FSU are well prepared to easily attain licensure in another state if they were to relocate.

5. Resources- Over the course of the assessment visit it was clearly evident that IT support and library services were outstanding. For example, the Library Director proved to be very responsive to faculty requests, acquired innovative video resources, and ensured an open line of communication. The department is also supported by administrative assistant, Gail Feckley. However, it would be worthy to note that if a CACREP self-study was conducted, Standard 1.V. which features concern over clerical assistance that is commensurate with that provided for similar graduate programs, would need to be assessed. Specifically, it would be necessary to provide supporting documentation that the student and program numbers under her responsibility are equivalent to other graduate program administrative assistants.
6. Student interfacing- Successful programs must make stakeholders a priority, such as current students. The program's use of a Student Representative ensures that students have a sense of empowerment, heightened buy-in to the success of the program, and guarantees department responsiveness.
7. Dedication to accreditation preparation- While the program does not have CACREP accreditation it is clearly making strides toward positioning themselves in that direction. For example, Provost Cardelle met with CACREP leaders, the program hired a consultant, and the curriculum and assessment materials are in accordance with most CACREP standards.
8. Dismissal process- As gate-keepers to our community it is critical that faculty members in the department are able to engage in retention, remediation, and dismissal processes. Faculty members are not only educators, but counseling professionals that place their own licenses on the line when endorsing emerging clinicians. It is critical that they have the ability to dismiss students and it was indicated that based on precedence set by FSU's nursing program that there was administrative support. It is of the utmost importance that

faculty in the counseling department continue to be supported in all remediation and dismissal decisions.

Limitations

1. Student Admission Process- The review process for student admission comes with lofty responsibility. If a student is admitted and then presents academic or disposition concerns the retention, remediation, and dismissal process can be time consuming and present the university with potential legal repercussions, not to mention the gate-keeping requirement of licensed professionals which threatens their license. Currently, the responsibility appears to be solely on the department chair, who is clearly vetting applications very discerningly based on a 79% acceptance rate. For a better distribution of labor and to ensure faculty have a voice in the process, it is encouraged that new student evaluation be adjusted to ensure a collective program decision from the onset. Furthermore, CACREP Section 1.L. states that entry-level admission decision recommendations are made by a selection **committee** that evaluates such factors as; career goals, aptitude for graduate-level work, potential success in counseling, and respect for cultural differences. Currently the department is meeting this criterion via their Stage I review which requires a career goals and diversity reflection paper, GPA, and disposition assessment reviews conducted by faculty.
2. Adjunct faculty as stakeholders- It appears that the chair is the only core program faculty member that interacts with adjunct faculty members on a regular basis. As prominent contributors of the curriculum it would enhance the program's efficacy by formulizing a structured method for adjunct faculty feedback on areas such as curriculum development. For example, there could be a specific faculty meeting in which they are invited to attend or a survey administered to them each semester seeking feedback which all the core faculty could review collectively. Making this adjustment would also assist the program in positioning themselves better for a CACREP self-study in the future. Additional commentary on adjunct faculty is included later in this report.
3. Clarity of responsibilities- Through the lens of CACREP (Section I.A) there is the requirement of, *"If more than one academic unit has responsibility for the preparation of students in the program, the respective areas of responsibility and the relationships*

among and between them must be clearly documented.” Due to the program being nestled within the Behavioral Science department and faculty teaching in multiple programs the clarity of the program and responsibilities would be concerning. Specifically, the “core faculty members” would need to be shifted to “core counseling faculty members” who would be able to provide their full attention to the success of this one program.

4. Advising- It appears that all advising is completed by the chair of the department, which according to the self-report is currently 89 students. Advising graduate level students who are seeking professional license, are balancing dynamic lives, are being assessed by the department at multiple stages and on dispositions, and may also select an accelerated or standard program of study, is a lofty responsibility for a faculty member. Nationally, based on a program of this size, the average advisee load would be less than 20 for any single faculty member. The student survey provided in the self-study indicated that students are pleased with the quality of their advising but clearly want to be able to meet and spend more time with their advisor. Distribution of the advisee load across counseling department core faculty would undoubtedly remedy this concern.
5. Faculty as resources to meet department demands-
 - a. CACREP Section I.R. states that a minimum of three full-time core, counseling department only, faculty members should be employed to sufficiently meet the demands of a program. It is suggested that FSU position themselves in this format to ensure that if they did decide to apply for CACREP accreditation the structure would already be in place. Furthermore, by doing so they will better enhance their identity as a graduate program with a clear counseling core faculty base, empower collaborative interest in the program’s success, extinguish the perception that only undergraduate teaching is valued towards tenure and promotion, better define labor roles to reduce burnout potential, establish a clearer understanding of the work required for the program’s general management and therefore allow for faculty to provide administration with a clear understanding of compensation needs.
 - b. Frankly, it is this reviewer’s opinion that the faculty are at risk of burnout and the success of the program is hinged on their amazing self-motivation to provide an

outstanding and community enhancing program. The workload to compensation ratio is askew and without some modification the university risks losing a very profitable program. I believe CACREP would also have similar concerns in reviewing CACREP Section 1.U., which emphasizes that the institution must recognize that counselor preparation programs require extensive clinical instruction and therefore teaching and advising loads, scholarship and service expectations need to be considered.

- c. Another concern, in relation to faculty as resources, is that of the fieldwork coordination. CACREP Section 1.DD. requires that a program faculty member or administrator is identified as the practicum and internship coordinator. To successfully complete this task (for both CACREP requirements and MA licensures) the coordinator is required to:
 - i. Coordinate fieldwork experiences (Section 1.DD)
 - ii. Respond to inquiries (Section 1.DD)
 - iii. Ensure student insurance coverage (Section 3.A.)
 - iv. Manage formative and summative evaluations of student performance (Section 3.C.)
 - v. Guarantee that site supervisors are aware and providing students with a variety of professional activities and resources (Section 3.D.), and individual as well as group counseling (Section 3.E.)
 - vi. Monitor direct, indirect, and supervision hours (Section 3.F.G.H.I.J.K.L.M)
 - vii. Orient, consult, and provide professional development opportunities to supervisors (Section 3.Q.).
 - viii. Provide comprehensive written supervision agreements (Section 3.R.)
 - ix. Collect comprehensive data for the program (Section 4) such as formal student evaluations of fieldwork site and supervisor.

In context of the 60-credit program, 12 of the credits, or 20% of the entire program of study, is based on this work. Clearly, this is a significant amount of responsibility for one individual. However, the faculty member that is charged with this task is also providing services for other programs (such as Human

Services) which is conceivably taxing to the faculty member and does not appear to have compensation-to-work-load equality. It would be inappropriate for a non-counselor to function as the coordinator of fieldwork experiences for this program and therefore it is the suggestion of this reviewer to remove the responsibilities of internship management of all other programs from the work load.

6. Budget- While the GCE provides financial support to the program for materials and supervision travel it appears that there is not a system in place in which the department chair has the ability to provide input and make recommendations regarding the development and expenditures of the budget, as evidenced by funds running out for supervision visits this past year. The ability for the department chair to have budgetary influence is required by CACREP in Section 1.CC.
7. Accreditation- Only CACREP graduates with an LMHC may bill TRICARE, the insurance provider of Veterans. Potential student candidates who are interested in working with that milieu are seeking degrees elsewhere, as reported in the self-study. The only nationwide initiative for licensure portability is based on graduating from a CACREP. In fact, some states have already passed laws that regulate that only CACREP graduates may attain licensure in their state. Seeking and securing CACREP accreditation will not only enhance the mental health counseling program at FSU but has the potential to positively impact enrollment numbers.

Assessment of Student Preparedness for Careers

The counseling program has been very intentional in aligning their curriculum with state and national standards to ensure that students are well prepared for their careers and are able to secure the necessary state licensure. Students were very eager to share their gratitude to the program and their perceptions of attending a program of quality and care. Areas of note include:

1. The curriculum requirement of two sections of psychopathology, one of which containing an additional 50 hours of field experience (beyond the minimum licensure requirements) is an indicator of a well-developed and intentional program design. The design ensures

that students are masterful in the scope of diagnostics which is critical for treatment planning and therefore has a significant impact on client success.

2. Students are comprehensively reviewed at 3 specific points during the program. In addition, there are mechanisms in place for faculty to trigger reviews based on concern or observation of needed support.
3. Students stated the components that best prepared them for their career were:
 - a. The small class sizes were “a huge bonus”.
 - b. Courses were “well-structured” and focused on the clinical “working alliance”.
 - c. They appreciated knowing their academic work was aligned with licensure requirements.
 - d. Recognized that the chair of their department was “the one you count on for everything”.
 - e. Adjunct educators were of the highest quality and allowed them learn “from the books and from the real world of the profession”.
 - f. Special attention was given to current events and covering a wide breadth of professional content.
4. Students noted their education might be enhanced with:
 - a. Some attention given to the process of third-party billing in the professional setting.
 - b. Increased support during the internship process such as finding best fit, understanding expectations, and finding the best fit for them personally.
 - c. To not only addressing licensure requirements during their ethics course but then again during their internships.

Assessment of the Relationship to the University Mission

The mission of FSU’s Academic Affairs features an emphasis on fostering an inclusive environment that centers on learning and service, professional growth, and campus wide collaboration. The universities mission highlights a commitment to excellence in teaching and learning, fostering lifelong learning and civic and global responsibility, and to provide economic, environmental, social, and cultural leadership to the community. By nature, counseling education

program missions tend to be well suited matches to global mission statements due to the core tenants of being helping professionals. However, it is worthy of note that the counseling program excels in its ability to highlight a clear relationship to FSU mission statements. Examples of this include:

1. A commitment to developing counselors who assist the community for the enhancement of well-being.
2. Basing educational structure on the developmental socialization model.
3. Balancing didactic and experiential learning which includes service to the community via fieldwork experiences.
4. Intentionally and comprehensively focusing on increasing student sensitivity to diversity and the clinical skills necessary to be effective facilitators.
5. Focusing on career and licensure preparation of students which inherently forges strong community relationships and produces professionals that become leaders in global responsibility awareness and public service.

Assessment of Department Plans for Continued Improvement

1. Strengthen assessment- The department has identified key areas to modify the clinical skills rubrics, has plans to continue their shift to electronic data collection to streamline the process, and further pilot assessments. Comments concerning the assessment plan are included in the next major report section.
2. Increase student enrollment, particularly diverse student enrollment- An area of focus for growth that the department has identified is attention to diversity recruitment, however, this is a national issue and one for which there is no easy solution. Focusing on marketing, increasing relationships with local agencies, and the development of an advisory board are sound strategies. An additional aide for attracting enrollment would be to attain CACREP accreditation.
3. Increase faculty involvement in the program- The lack of any full-time faculty dedicated to the counseling program and the overall small number of faculty that are involved in the program has resulted in difficulties in providing the type of support and growth that

would benefit the program. The self-study report has identified that increasing involvement can be accomplished by; forming a faculty focus group for adjunct faculty, increasing the member count of the graduate counseling committee, and increasing the load of faculty teaching in the counseling program. The need of support from the university administration is apparent and the achievement of this goal rests on their shoulders to ensure the ongoing success of the department. Ironically, and yet another symptom of the overburdening of faculty, only one faculty member is identified in the list of tasks related to this objective as the identified person for execution in the self-study report.

4. Address accreditation issues for the program- Peppered throughout this report is an ongoing commentary of the counseling program's alignment with CACREP standards and benefits for seeking accreditation. Meeting each semester to discuss the feasibility for pursuing accreditation is worthwhile, although an increased amount of frequency would show commitment by administration and hold them accountable to make a more aggressive stance towards securing CACREP accreditation.

Assessment of Outcome Assessment Plan

A new addition to the CACREP 2016 set of standards was "*Section 4: Evaluation in the Program*". An overwhelmingly large number of accredited programs have no such plan in place and therefore nationally there has been an upsurge of publications, workshops, and trainings on the topic. FSU's well-developed assessment plan is in line with CACREP standards, proving that they are well positioned for a CACREP self-study as well as being on the cutting edge and committed to excellence. This reviewer would be remiss in not pointing out that the development and implementation of such a robust assessment process is an outstanding accomplishment for a department with absolutely no dedicated core-faculty to the counseling specific programs; they deserve to be recognized for their work.

The current national standard in assessment requires that counseling programs have a documented, empirically based plan for systematically evaluating the program objectives and

student learning. Areas in which evaluation should be assessed are; 1) aggregate student assessment data on knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions, 2) demographics and other characteristics of students, and 3) graduates and their post-graduation employer's data (CACREP, Section 4.B.). The department of counseling's internal self-study report showcased data on student knowledge, skills, dispositions, and demographics. However, there was; 1) limited demographic data on applicants not admitted and graduates, and, 2) no follow-up studies on graduates as well as the employers of program graduates.

The three areas of evaluation stated above should also have individually designed strategies for; 1) data to be collected, 2) procedure for how and when data will be collected, 3) method for reviewing or analyzing the data, and, 4) a plan for using the data for curriculum enhancement (CACREP, Section 4.A.). The first step in designing an assessment strategy is having clear program objectives which the department of counseling at FSU has defined as; demonstration of effective counseling skills, engagement in professional behavior, displaying caring for clients, and demonstration of effective oral and written communication skills. In accordance with the program objectives, data is collected via disposition assessments, clinical skills rubrics, candidacy paper, test scores, role-plays, counselor work sample, and internship evaluations. Each data collection method has a specific Stage (1, 2, or 3) evaluation designation which determines when the data is collected as well as when it is reviewed and analyzed by the faculty. It appears that the only required stage is that of a clearly articulated plan as to how the data will be used for curriculum enhancement.

Suggestions

1. The current level of assessment being conducted without dedicated core counseling faculty is outstanding. Hence, it is encouraged that the program slowly expand their assessment work to include the courses that do not currently have formalized assessments (Human Growth and Development, Career Development, Group Counseling and Group Work).
2. Provided that an electronic method for data collection becomes more accessible (TK20), the program is encouraged to collect data on; 1) demographics of applicants not accepted, 2) demographics on graduates as well as post-graduate follow up on professional

trajectory and program satisfaction, 3) site supervisors, and, 4) employers of program graduates.

3. Outside of formally evaluating data for a report every five years, the department is encouraged to develop a formalized system of reviewing and analyzing data for curriculum enhancement yearly. Furthermore, it is advised that since there are no core faculty members dedicated to the counseling program and therefore heavily taught by adjunct faculty members, that adjunct faculty have an enhanced voice in this process. For example, adjunct faculty should be overtly made aware of their ability to contribute to the data collection process, such as disposition forms. They should also be made aware of any findings and offered the ability to provide feedback on curriculum changes and development.

Assessment of Department's Response to Previous Evaluator

Since the department's last review in 2014 they have shown dedication to aggressively take steps towards strengthening the program and have reaped the rewards of this by seeing an increase in enrollment since 2016. Areas of highlight include:

1. Shifting the program design to align with CACREP standards to position themselves for ease of accreditation success if they decide to apply. For example, they have strengthened their counseling identity by separating from Psychological Sciences and are now using COUN as course designations and have hired a CACREP consultant. Again, it is worthy of note that attaining CACREP would be very beneficial for the program because it would, a) positively impact new student recruitment, b) only CACREP graduates may third-party bill work with Veterans, c) nationally many states are implementing regulations that only CACREP graduates may secure licensure, and d) proposed national portability initiatives are being based on CACREP standards. A clear concern is the financial issue of hiring full-time faculty that meet the CACREP core-faculty standard. It is this reviewer's perception that to best continue the momentum towards CACREP, the department of counseling should shift to a three-member counseling core faculty design in which their sole duties are teaching and leading the counseling program, despite whether or not the three individuals meet CACREP's definition of a core faculty member.

In doing so the program will be able to establish and clearly define what the program will look like and how it will function with that design. Having the structure in place will help streamline the process in the event that appropriate hires are made at a later date.

2. Developed a 2-year accelerated sequence which is an excellent addition for attracting potential program candidates and shows a dedication to flexibility and a responsiveness to professional trends. Also, the program increased hybrid/online course options which is an indicator of meeting current trends and inclusiveness of learning styles. Now offering 5 courses with an online component is a significant adjustment and appears to be well executed.
3. Moved to the McKay building which has significantly improved the space for both students and faculty, especially in the area of fostering a sense of community. The clinical rooms and corresponding technology allow for the enhancement of learning and clinical skill development.
4. Established a clear method to showcase a dedication to the counselor education identity. Unambiguously, they changed the prefixes of courses, incorporated more courses into the curriculum that CACREP identifies as necessary counselor education components (substance abuse and crisis), all core faculty are members of the American Counseling Association (ACA), and participates in the Massachusetts Counselor Education and Supervision Association.
5. Made intentional steps to encourage new students to attend the GCE new student orientation. The previous reviewer encouraged a department specific new student orientation, which is a CACREP required standard. The program has made steps to strengthen their social media presence and electronic resources which may include an online orientation, increased student access to the handbook by placing it online, and GCE has added documents to Slate. While the program has not completely met the suggestion of having their own independent student orientation, it is not recommended to further pursue meeting the recommendation until there has been the establishment of three full-time core faculty members dedicated to the counseling and/or an additional program full-time hire.