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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet examines several issues in counselor and counseling program accountability. Issues in counselor accountability include credentialing, professional disclosure, documentation of activities, and linkage with outcomes. Program accountability issues involve stakeholders, availability of resources, documentation of activities, linkage with outcomes, and cost analysis. Eight steps are given for designing an accountability system for a counseling program. (NB)

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HIGHLIGHTS

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...An ERIC/CAPS Fact Sheet

Accountability in Counseling

Issues in Counselor Accountability

Credentialing. Credentialing is the process by which professionals demonstrate that they can do what they say they can do. As a system, credentialing consists of four interdependent and interrelated components: standards, accreditation, professional certification, and licensure.

- **Standards.** Professional standards define the requisite knowledge and skills to be addressed by counselor preparation programs and the expected ethical behavior of counselors. Standards are the core of the credentialing system.
- **Accreditation.** Accreditation assures that counselors receive training that meets the standards set by the profession. The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) is an independent, legally incorporated body that applies the standards developed and adopted by the American Association for Counseling and Development (formerly the American Personnel and Guidance Association) and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision. CACREP accredits entry-level graduate programs in school counseling, student personnel services in higher education, counseling in community and other agency settings, and doctoral programs in counselor education and supervision.
- **Certification.** Certification is the means by which the profession applies its standards to individual counselors. Those who meet certification standards may be listed in a register which enables consumers, potential employers, insurance carriers, government agencies, and allied service providers to identify professionals of demonstrated skill. Professional certification is intended to address the credentialing needs of counselors who practice outside school settings.
- **Licensure.** Licensure is the means by which state governments legally define and regulate the practice of a profession. At the present, very few states have counselor licensure laws, but many state divisions of the American Association for Counseling and Development are pushing their states to adopt such legislation. Professional counselors advocating licensure argue that, without it, anyone can claim to be a counselor and consumers have no legal protection against people who provide services that do not meet the profession's standards.

Professional Disclosure. A professional disclosure statement is a document in which counselors or counseling agencies inform potential clients of their theoretical/philosophical orientation, the nature of the services to be provided, and their qualifications to provide such services. Some counselors see professional disclosure as an alternative to credentialing; others see it more as an instrument of information and accountability.

Documentation of Activities. In addition to demonstrating that they can provide services that meet both professional standards and program needs, counselors must be able to provide evidence that they do provide such services. Here, an accurate and comprehensive record keeping system is critical. In settings where counselors' primary function is to see individual clients all day, client records may adequately serve this purpose. However, where counselors' functions are quite varied, a fair amount of creativity may be required to design a system that adequately reflects how the counselor spends his/her time without adding yet another form of time-consuming paperwork. In the past, this dimension of accountability has received relatively little attention because there has been a general belief that: 1) counseling as a process is difficult to document; 2) documentation procedures may interfere with the counseling process; and 3) documentation may violate clients' rights to privacy or confidentiality. While all three of these reasons may be valid, their existence is due primarily to the limitations of instrumentation and technology, not to the appropriateness or need for documentation. Demands for accountability are currently making it necessary to develop new and innovative documentation procedures that address the issues just cited. And, fortunately, the growing body of knowledge about the counseling process and improvements in technology are making such developments possible.

Linkage with Outcomes. Recently, the key word in accountability has been *results*. Consumers, administrators, and employers are not satisfied with only the documentation of counselor credentials and activities. They want evidence that these credentials and activities make a difference for the clients or students with whom the counselor is working. This can be particularly threatening to counselors because desired counseling outcomes are often difficult to specify; usually occur outside the counseling office; may vary from client to client; may occur without the client's awareness (e.g., subtle attitude or behavior modifications); and may involve a series of stages in which progress toward the long-range goal is difficult to demonstrate. To address these problems, a comprehensive and systematic program evaluation plan must be developed by persons who are knowledgeable in both program evaluation and counseling theory.

Issues in Program Accountability

Demands for program evaluation may arise either internally or externally and may be initiated either to *prove* a program's effectiveness or to *improve* its effectiveness. Demands for accountability almost always arise externally with the primary purpose of proving the program's effectiveness.

Stakeholders. Usually, the demand for program accountability is initiated by one or more of the various groups of people who have a "stake" in the program. Although the groups of stakeholders include counselors and other program

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staff, the stakeholders who most often insist on accountability are the consumers of the product (clients), the funders of the program (sponsors, taxpayers), and/or those who are accountable to a higher level of authority (program administrators). For most programs, an accountability model must incorporate ways to gather information that will meet each group's needs, but what most stakeholders are interested in is demonstration of results.

Availability of Resources. The first step in being accountable is to demonstrate that the capacity to deliver quality counseling services exists. For counseling programs, this means such things as: employing qualified counselors; keeping the client/counselor ratio at a reasonable level; providing on-going inservice and staff development activities; maintaining adequate physical facilities; providing adequate support services to counselors; and providing counselors and clients with the materials and equipment necessary to conduct planned activities.

Documentation of Activities. Program accountability must include documentation that the program actually does deliver the services that it says it can deliver. At the program level, this means that documentation will go beyond individual counselor activity logs and client records to include summary statistics such as: total number of clients served; numbers of clients served in various subgroups; total number of counseling hours provided; and total amount of equipment and supply use.

Linkage with Outcomes. The methodological problems of linking program outcomes to activities are similar to those for counselor accountability. However, the personal threat to the individual counselor may be somewhat reduced by the aggregation of data across counselors. Also, it may be possible to demonstrate greater overall client progress toward goal achievement in program studies than in individual counselor studies simply because of the increase in number of cases and the amount of data available for analysis. This would be particularly true in situations where client progress is likely to be very slow and clients are at various stages of goal achievement.

Cost Analyses. For most stakeholders, the bottom line in accountability is cost. Are clients getting their money's worth? Are institutional expenditures for the counseling department justified? Are guidance directors administering programs so as to get the most out of each budget dollar? A common source of confusion in cost analysis is cost-benefit vs. cost-effectiveness. In *cost-benefit analyses*, the "worth" of outcomes is estimated in terms of a single quantity, usually money. In *cost-effectiveness analyses*, the "worth" of the benefits of the outcomes has already been determined or at least accepted by stakeholders, and the primary focus is on costs of achieving the outcomes. Variations of cost-effectiveness include measuring the costs of outcome achievement at various levels (e.g., 50%, 75%) and comparison of the cost of alternative methods for achieving outcomes (e.g., individual counseling vs. group counseling).

Designing an Accountability System for a Counseling Program

1. **Identify stakeholders.** The first step in designing an accountability system is to identify your audience. Who will use the data?
2. **Clarify purposes.** Once all stakeholders have been identified, meet with representatives of each stakeholder group to determine how data will be used and what types of data are needed. Obtaining stakeholder input at this stage will be extremely effective in helping you be adequately prepared to meet future accountability demands. It will also set

the stage for collaborative teamwork and help reduce some of the we-they dichotomies that often cause communication problems.

3. **Specify program objectives.** To avoid potential problems due to differences of opinion regarding the "worth" of program outcomes, obtain stakeholder consensus on the relative importance of specific program objectives. Depending on the number of stakeholders involved and the diversity of their interests, this may consist of simply an open group discussion or it may require a formal needs assessment. In either case, having stakeholder priorities established will help you focus both your program activities and your data collection efforts.
4. **Identify activities needed to achieve objectives.** You, as a counseling professional, have the expertise to identify the counseling strategies that will be most effective in achieving program objectives, but you must help stakeholders understand these linkages if you want them to place any value on the documentation of your activities. One effective way to communicate this is to display each objective and its related activities diagrammatically. This can be particularly useful in clarifying the importance of collecting data on intermediate outcomes when ultimate outcomes may not be achieved within the period of the accountability study.
5. **Identify resources needed to achieve objectives.** Stakeholders, particularly those who have control over program resources, must understand what the program needs in the way of personnel, facilities, equipment, supplies, and even such items as positive public relations, if it is to effectively conduct the activities identified in the previous step. Here, again, an effective way to communicate these needs is to link each resource diagrammatically to the activity(ies) it supports.
6. **Specify the sets of evidence that will demonstrate that a) resources are available and used, b) activities are conducted as planned, and c) objectives are being achieved.** A good approach to generating useful and innovative types of data to collect is to ask stakeholders to respond to the question, "What would convince you that . . ." for each of the three areas listed. This not only helps you develop a complete data collection strategy, but also guarantees that the data you collect will be acceptable evidence to your stakeholders.
7. **Analyze costs.** You should be concerned primarily with reporting actual cost analyses, such as cost/client, cost/work hour, and cost/program component. It may be very important, however, to clarify with stakeholders what should be included in cost considerations so that you don't overlook something which they consider important.
8. **Prepare reports.** Find out when stakeholders will be expecting reports and clarify ahead of time how extensive a report they want. In general, the text of the report should be as brief as possible, with graphic displays (charts, tables, etc.) wherever appropriate. A preface that contains an "executive summary" highlighting the major points is almost always appreciated.

Note: A list of recommended resources on this topic is available upon request. Please direct inquiries to ERIC/CAPS User Services, 2108 School of Education. The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259 (313/764-9492).

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