

# Counselor Education at the University of North Florida: Mental Health Counseling Graduate Program Report for 2006

Faculty of the Mental Health Counseling program at the University of North Florida have developed and implemented a comprehensive set of procedures for summative and formative program evaluation. Data is gathered from numerous sources including, program faculty, advisory board members, current and former students, and off-campus, field supervisors. This report describes and summarizes evaluation data collected over the past three years.

## ***Faculty and Advisory Board***

Over the last three years, faculty have been faced with a number of programmatic issues related to the delivery and the evaluation of core course curriculum. Prior to 2004, the two counseling tracks within the Counselor Education Department of the University of North Florida operated independently. Late in the 2004 school year, administration, including the Dean of the College and the Department Chair held several meetings to discuss and initiate the development of common core courses to be shared by students enrolled in the Mental Health and School Counseling programs. It was decided common core courses would be beneficial to students and faculty met several more times during 2004-5 to establish curriculum experiences for core courses including MHS 6006: Introduction to Counseling, SDS 6310: Career Counseling, MHS 6201: Appraisal in Counseling, and MHS 6482: Personality and Human Development.

Faculty and advisory board for the Mental Health Counseling program reviewed course curriculum and identified needed revisions. Approximately one-third of the advisory board is comprised of alumni from the Mental Health Counseling Program at the University of North Florida. These particular board members suggested faculty revise MHS 6510: Group Counseling to include more experiential training as a group leader and fewer research papers. Concomitantly, advisory board members also suggested faculty consider devoting more time to crisis intervention training. Faculty were in full agreement with these suggestions and modified course content and syllabi for MHS 6510: Group Counseling to increase experiential learning opportunities and MHS 6401: Advanced Counseling in order to increase the amount of time devoted to crisis intervention education and training.

## ***Alumni Survey***

Mental Health Counseling faculty routinely evaluate program effectiveness by examining the opinions of program graduates. Every three years, faculty administer the UNF Mental Health Counseling Program Alumni Survey to student graduates. Approximately 64 students graduated from the program from Fall 2002 to Spring 2005. A survey packet, including cover letter containing information about informed consent and confidentiality, a set of instructions, a survey (sample attached to this document) and a self-addressed stamped envelope was mailed to each program graduate. Nineteen useable surveys were completed for a return rate of 29.6%.

## ***Survey Results***

Descriptive statistics revealed a majority of respondents (90%) were female. Review of the racial make up of survey respondents revealed 90% identified as Caucasian, 5% identified as Hispanic/Latino American, and 5% identified as Asian American. Program graduates were asked to indicate how much time past before they were employed as professional counselors in order to evaluate how well alumni from the Mental Health Counseling Program at UNF fared compared to Mental Health graduates from other institutions in the area. Those familiar with the profession know a great deal of competition exists for positions in the field of counseling within the Greater Jacksonville area. UNF alumni compete with graduates from other universities in

close proximity including, the University of Florida, the University of Central Florida, Florida State University, and the University of Phoenix. Data indicate employers perceive UNF Mental Health graduates favorably. Nearly 70% (13) of UNF program graduates participating in the study indicated they were employed as mental health counselors in less than one month after they completed the program. About 10% (2) indicated they obtained jobs within six months and another 10% (2) said they found work within a year. The final 10% (2) of the sample indicated they have not been hired as a counselor. However, of these, one respondent indicated she “*did not look for a job in Mental Health Counseling since I (she) found a higher paying position in another profession.*” Program graduates were also asked to indicate their current salary level. Nearly 48% (9) alumni indicated salary in the range of 0 to 25,000 dollars, 42% (8) indicated they received salaries in the range of 26,000 to 35,000 dollars, 5% (1) indicated a salary in the range of 36,000 to 45,000 dollars, and 5% (1) one indicated a salary in excess of 85,000 dollars a year.

#### *Evaluation of the coursework*

Program graduates were asked to indicate whether they found curriculum content and experiences for each course were effectual by selecting one of the following responses; strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, or strongly agree. Evaluations of courses were divided into two categories, a) most valued courses and b) least valued courses based on survey results. Alumni were also provided space to provide qualitative comments about the usefulness of each course.

#### *Valued Courses*

Program graduates identified the courses they perceived to be the most effectual and subsequently most helpful. Courses alumni agreed were most helpful were MHS 6006: Introduction to Counseling (94%), MHS 6400: Individual Counseling (95%) and MHS 6380: Internship in Mental Health Counseling (91%). Qualitative data revealed overall satisfaction with program instruction and training among program alumni. Sample comments included:

- “(The)... program prepared me to be a confident, reliable, resourceful, and knowledgeable clinician.”
- “Overall, all of the courses provided me with a wealth of information that prepared me for my career as a counselor.”
- “I felt well equipped when I got my first counseling job.”
- “I was extremely satisfied with the program in its entirety.”
- “My educational experience in this program was the best of my entire life including two bachelor’s degrees.”
- “Overall, I feel my education prepared me for the work field. I am very pleased with the program.”

#### *Least Valued Courses*

Alumni also identified courses they believed were least helpful. Lowest percentage of agreement about course helpfulness was found among the following courses, EDF 6480: Foundations of Educational Research (42%), MHS 6201: Appraisal for Counselors (52%), and SDS 6310: Career Counseling (68%). Qualitative data provided a more precise understanding of why these courses were deemed least helpful. Statements included:

- “I lacked understanding and interest in the appraisal and research classes.”

- “I identified EDF 6480 (Foundations of Education Research) as not helpful as a reflection of the out of department instructor.”
- “The Appraisal class was too heavily weight in determining reliability and validity. Most of us will never select a test. Test demonstrations would have been more helpful.”
- “Career counseling wasn’t helpful because I don’t do career counseling.”

### ***Survey of Field Supervisors***

Comprehensive program evaluations collect and review data collected from multiple sources. With this in mind, Mental Health Counseling faculty routinely evaluate program effectiveness by surveying field supervisors working with students enrolled in practicum and internship course work. A survey packet, including cover letter containing information about informed consent and confidentiality, a set of instructions, a survey (sample attached to this document) and a self-addressed stamped envelope was mailed to 28 field supervisors who provided clinical guidance for student interns. Thirteen completed surveys were mailed back for a return rate of 48%.

Program faculty administer the site supervisor survey to determine how field supervisors evaluate student intern’s knowledge, skills, and attitudes across five domains including counseling skills (6 items), counseling procedure (3 items), assessment and diagnosis (5 items) interpersonal skills (4 items) and overall assessment of preparedness (1 item). Participants were asked to respond to each item by selecting one of the following 0 = not observed, 1= poor, 2= adequate, 3= does well, or 4= outstanding. Data was analyzed using SPSS software. Mean scores were calculated for each item within the five domains. Results of the analyses and interpretation of the findings are presented below.

#### *Counseling Skills*

Analysis of the data for items included in this domain indicated that field supervisors believe Mental Health counseling student interns ability to perform counseling skills are adequate (Range 2.6-3.2, Mean =2.9, SD =.81). Student intern performance on 3 of five items was deemed “adequate” but closely approached the category of “does well.” Group counseling skills were the weakest area in the domain (M=2.6, SD=1.02). Conversely, supervisors indicated student interns couples *counseling skills were above average* (M= 3.2, SD =.62). However it is important to note approximately half of supervisors did not provide a rating for family or couples counseling skills. This is most likely due to the fact that neither of these counseling strategies were provided by the supervisor’s agency.

#### *Counseling Procedures*

According to the supervisors participating in this evaluation, student interns receive adequate training for performing counseling skills listed under the domain of “Counseling Procedures” as evidenced by a combined field supervisor mean score of 2.9. Specific skills received the following ratings. Supervisors rated student interns ability to prepare treatment plans was adequate (M= 2.9 SD = .83). Supervisors deemed the interns ability to set and hold to agreed upon session time limits was also adequate (M=2.8, SD =.57). However, ratings were highest for interns ability to prepare progress notes (M= 3.0, SD =.81).

#### *Assessment and Diagnosis*

Overall, supervisors rated student interns understanding and ability to perform counseling assessments and form appropriate diagnoses as “adequate” (M=2.8, SD=.96). However closer examination of the individual items under this domain indicate supervisors believe UNF interns demonstrated above average training and ability for some skills and below average for others. For example, field supervisors rated Mental Health counseling student intern’s “intake skills” to be

above adequate ( $M=3.1$ ,  $SD=.27$ ). It is important to note the low standard deviation score associated with this item as it indicates a high degree of agreement exists among supervisors indicating better than adequate intake skills are by a majority of student interns. Similarly, the mean score for "general knowledge of psychopathology" was also above the rank of "adequate" ( $M=3.0$ ,  $SD=.71$ ) indicating students from the program receive above par instruction related to the DSM IV-TR and mental disorders delineated within. Conversely, supervisors rated other skills associated with this domain somewhat lower. The mean score for "diagnostic skills" was slightly lower than "general knowledge of psychopathology" ( $M=2.8$ ,  $SD=.59$ ) perhaps indicating greater emphasis on the application of knowledge of psychopathology is needed. Skills associated with clinical assessment were also lower, e.g., "knowledge of assessment tools" ( $M=2.5$ ,  $SD=.96$ ) and "assessment and interpretation skills" ( $M=2.6$ ,  $SD=.96$ ), and correspond with alumni suggestions to improve the appraisal course by including more "hands on" activities.

### *Interpersonal Skills*

According to the ratings of supervisors participating in the survey, "interpersonal skills" of UNF student interns were well above adequate. In fact, student interns received the highest rankings for this domain of counseling skills ( $M=3.6$ ,  $SD=.63$ ). Rankings of student intern performance on separate items of the domain were as follows: "open to learning experiences," ( $M=3.7$ ,  $SD=.48$ ), "initiative" ( $M=3.6$ ,  $SD=.50$ ), "professional demeanor" ( $M=3.7$ ,  $SD=.48$ ), and "self-awareness" ( $M=3.5$ ,  $SD=.66$ ). These ratings can be interpreted to mean instruction aimed at raising student self insight included and behaviors expected of professional counselors included in MHS 6700: Legal, Professional, and Ethical Aspects of Mental Health Counseling, MHS 6800: Practicum in Mental Health Counseling, and MHS 6830: Internship in Mental Health Counseling is effective.

### *Overall Assessment of Preparedness*

Supervisors were also afforded the opportunity to rate the overall preparation of counseling student interns to determine if program instruction prior to the practicum and/or internship was deemed adequate. The data reveal that supervisors, in general, find program students to possess sufficient mental health knowledge and skills for successful practicum and supervision experiences ( $M=3.1$ ,  $SD=.48$ ). Again, it should be noted that the small standard deviation score indicates very little variance among supervisor perceptions and most believe UNF interns receive adequate instruction and training.

### *Conclusion*

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the overall findings of the evaluations included in this report. For example, data from both surveys examined in the report indicate that alumni and field supervisors believe overall academic instruction provided by program faculty is effectual for the preparation of professional mental health counselors. However, alumni did identify dissatisfaction with appraisal, career counseling and research courses. Specifically, alumni questioned the relevancy of these courses. Therefore program faculty could best improve the program doing through increased instruction and assignments which make the relevance of these courses more palpable. Additionally, overlap was evident in the suggestions of advisory board and the ratings of field supervisors. Advisory board members and supervisor ratings indicated the instructional content of MHS 6510: Group Counseling was less than perfect. Program faculty were made aware of the need to include more experiential training activities the group counseling course. Finally, field supervisor surveys indicated the student interns were adequately prepared but few supervisors described intern skills as outstanding. It would be helpful to revise the field supervisor survey used in the future in order to gather more detailed information. Qualitative comments might have served to clarify what supervisors perceive as the difference between adequate and outstanding preparedness.