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ABSTRACT

A survey of course syllabi was conducted to discover how introductory counseling courses were taught, what they emphasized, what types of assignments were given, what textbooks were used, how inclusive the courses were about the expanding field of counseling, and how worthwhile the syllabi were. Results indicated a very diverse picture. There were many approaches to the teaching of introductory counseling courses, and some programs did not have a required introductory course per se. A great variety of texts were required, and the quality of course syllabi was very uneven. Questions arise as to how appropriate it is to have students begin their professional education by focusing immediately on the study of professional theory, skill training, or specializations such as career counseling or rehabilitation counseling. Results of the survey are appended, and references are included. (TE)

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A SURVEY OF INTRODUCTORY COUNSELING COURSES

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ABSTRACT

A survey of syllabi of introduction to counseling courses was conducted to discover how introductory counseling courses were taught, what their emphasis was, types of assignments given, textbooks used, how inclusive the courses were about the expanding field of counseling, and the quality of the syllabi themselves. The results indicate a very diverse picture. There are many approaches to the teaching of introductory counseling courses, and it appears that there are some programs that do not have a required introduction course per se. There are a great variety of texts which are required. The quality of the course syllabi was at best very uneven. Questions arise as to how appropriate it is to have students begin their professional education by focusing immediately on the study of professional theory, skill training, or specializations such as Career Counseling, or Rehabilitation Counseling

A SURVEY OF INTRODUCTORY COUNSELING COURSES

As counselor educators and recent authors of an introductory counseling textbook, we were curious about the process by which students in Counselor Education programs are taught. In particular, we were interested in focusing on the introductory counseling course. Preliminary data culled from meeting with colleagues at conferences and conventions suggested that there was a large variety of approaches to the teaching of the introductory course. We decided to survey a sample of counseling programs to discover how introductory counseling courses were taught, what their emphasis was, types of assignments given, textbooks used, and how inclusive the courses were about the expanding field of counseling.

METHOD

A commercial mailing list of two thousand colleges and universities was obtained. Every fourth listing was chosen, and letters were sent to heads of counselor education departments requesting their assistance to help us determine the nature and extent of the different approaches to the teaching of the introductory course. Instead of having each recipient fill out an extensive survey instrument, we simply asked to have a copy of the current introductory course syllabus sent to us. If more than one section of the course was offered, we requested a copy of each different syllabus. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was enclosed. Twenty-five percent or 123 responses were received for a total of 136 course syllabi. Three respondees stated that their campuses no longer had a counseling program. We also received three additional responses with the course syllabi omitted.

The syllabi were examined for their course titles, main emphasis, textbooks used, and course requirements. Course titles were grouped and tallied according to the following categories: general overview; overview with community counseling emphasis; school counseling emphasis; skill emphasis; theory and skill emphasis; counseling theory

emphasis; and other. All required textbooks were tallied, and rank ordered. Course requirements were grouped and tallied according to the following: papers of a personal nature; papers on cognitive course content; tests, exams and quizzes; and experiential activities.

RESULTS

Course Titles and Emphasis

Sixty three courses (46%) were taught as an overview of the whole counseling field. The topics of overviews usually ranged from skills, theories, ethics, research, and credentialing to group work, family counseling, career counseling, multicultural counseling and other counseling specialties. All overview courses varied as to which topics were covered. The most favored title for an overview course was Introduction to Counseling which appeared on 18 course syllabi (fig. 1).

Five courses (4%) were taught with a community counseling emphasis. Thirteen (10%) were taught with a school counseling emphasis, and seventeen (13%) with a skill emphasis which focused on the practice of individual counseling skills. Seventeen (13%) focused on a combination of theories and skills, and thirteen courses (10%) emphasized theories only. There were eight other types of introductory courses including rehabilitation counseling, student personnel work, and multicultural counseling. Titles of courses did not necessarily indicate their emphasis. For example, 18 courses with the title "Introduction to Counseling" were taught as an overview, three were taught with a skills emphasis, and two were taught with a theories emphasis.

Course Requirements

Course requirements included written papers and reports, both of a personal nature and of a course content nature, exams and quizzes, and assignments of an experiential nature (fig.

2). Thirty-three courses (24%) required papers of a personal nature. Of these, the most popular assignments were some sort of self-assessment regarding thoughts, feelings, and/or goals about becoming a counselor. Also popular were autobiographical requirements describing one's development as a counselor/person. Topics included cultural heritage, beliefs, influences, philosophy of life, nature of human beings, and values.

Sixty-four courses (47%) required papers on course content. By far the most popular of these, on 35 course syllabi, were papers on topics related to counseling such as current issues, or research. Also popular were reaction papers to journal articles appearing on 17 course syllabi. Tests and examinations were by far the most popular of all requirements with 100 or 74% of the course syllabi requiring one form of exam or other. There were forty-eight (35%) requiring final exams, and thirty-nine (29%) courses with midterm examinations. The most required experiential activities were student presentations, interviews of practicing counselors, and the making of video/audio cassettes demonstrating various counseling skills. Unique assignments included having students write general articles for publication, having students submit insight cards or personal sharing sheets to instructors, and having students detail how a required amount of out-of-class hours were spent acquiring knowledge about the field of counseling.

Textbooks

There were 163 textbooks assigned from the 136 course syllabi. Only required texts were tallied. Some instructors used no texts, others used as many as five. (fig. 3). In a large part because there was no agreed upon emphasis on approaches, there was no consensus on either required or recommended books. There were no recommended books chosen more than once. There were no dominant texts in the field. The most often chosen text was Gibson & Mitchell, Introduction to Counseling and Guidance, 2nd Edition selected on

12 course syllabi (9%). There were 53 texts chosen only once. Among the unique required texts were How to Win Friends and Influence People, and The Tao of Poo.

Course Syllabi

Course syllabi were examined for their contents. (fig. 4). One hundred and three syllabi (74%) stated the instructor's name; 110 (81%) gave the textbook or course materials required; 100 (74%) contained goals or objectives; 97 (71%) incorporated course requirements; 95 (70%) had evaluation criteria; 91 (67%) had a schedule of topics; 78 (57%) contained a course description or purpose; 33 (24%) included a course outline; 27 (20%) had a bibliography. As a result, most of the syllabi were not up to CACREP or NCATE standards.

DISCUSSION

The introductory course in counselor education appears to be a very idiosyncratic type of course. There are many approaches to the teaching of this course, and it seems as though there are some programs that do not have a required introduction course per se.

While this study represents a limited sample of a large field, it is quite clear there is no consensus about (or) on one overwhelmingly preferred approach to the teaching of the introductory course in counseling. Counselor educators are quite creative in their approach to the teaching of this course. In fact, while our study did not specifically pursue the question, it appears obvious from the nature of the responses that at several universities, entering students could begin their counseling program with different courses, depending apparently upon the semester in which they were entering. This fact may help to explain why over half (54%) of the programs surveyed offered introductory courses which might better be classified as specialty courses, e.g., skill development and theories courses.

Given that this field at one time was oriented almost exclusively toward the education of school counselors, it is interesting to note that only ten percent of the courses in this survey had an emphasis on school counseling. Four percent had an emphasis on community counseling. Guidance also used to be a major area of emphasis in this field. The term guidance was included in the title of only two of the most popular books reported in this study, and in 12.5% of all the course syllabi received.

"Introductory survey" courses:

Even within those courses clearly taught as introductory courses, we found a diversity of approaches. While the traditional requirements of a term paper, a mid-term examination, and a final examination represents the modal approach to the teaching of this course, there was a wide variety of ways of structuring the course, including requiring no term papers and no examinations (See figure 2).

Since many students enter an introductory counseling course wondering how well suited they are to pursue a degree in the field, several (or) many (or) some introductory courses are designed to help the student do some self-exploration in addition to acquiring knowledge related to the counseling field. The syllabi of these courses indicate that some part of these courses were devoted to the learning of some basic counseling skills.

Several (or) many (or) some overview courses were organized along the lines of the eight major areas of the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) exam. In most cases, the accompanying textbooks for these particular courses also closely followed the areas covered by the NCC exam. There were two major content exceptions to this rule: almost all the survey courses had 'units' on the history of the counseling field and on counseling theories, areas not covered by the NBCC examination.

"Non-Survey" courses

The results of the study determined that there were three major forms of "specialized" introductory courses; a skills training course, a theories course, and a combination skills and theory course. The skills training course generally has students learn a prescribed set of counseling skills following guidelines developed by authors such as Carkhuff (1957), Egan (1986), or Ivey (1980). The courses focusing on theories typically assign a textbook covering a variety of counseling theories. The skills and theories courses obviously combine both of the above approaches.

The question arises as to how appropriate it is to have students begin their professional education by focusing immediately on the study of professional theory and/or specific skill training without any introductory preparation whatsoever. In the case of the theories course, this may be the only time a student might be exposed to systematic study of a variety of counseling approaches. On the other hand, if there is an additional theories course later on in the students' course of study, why is it so important to begin with a focus on theories? This issue is of concern particularly because contemporary discussion of the nature of counseling theory, (Blocher, 1987; Peterson and Nisenholz, 1987) and in light of the evidence that success in counseling is not related to theoretical orientation.

Similar questions about appropriateness as a first course could be raised about other non-survey courses such as Career Counseling, Rehabilitation Counseling (unless this was a part of a specialized program) and Multicultural Counseling. Offering a skills-training course as an introductory course doesn't raise quite as many questions. Students who may decide not to continue with a degree in counseling should benefit personally from all the attending, listening, and responding skills which they attain. Those that continue with the program definitely will have a substantial skill base on which to build. Some programs even call such an early course a "pre-practicum." It is a case of beginning with specifics

and then moving to more general topics. In medicine, it would be like beginning with a course on office and operating room procedures. The question of placement of such a course is definitely of concern.

Textbooks

Because of the diversity of approaches to the teaching of the introductory course, there are a great variety of texts which are required. There is no one truly dominant text or texts (fig. 3). The top five texts reported in this study together account for only about one-third of the courses sampled. As would be expected from the results noted above, there is a variety of skills, theories, and survey types of texts represented. It is perhaps surprising that one of the top eight books in terms of usage in this study was a book with a 1981 copyright (Shertzer and Stone). This undoubtedly says a great deal about the quality of Shertzer and Stone's work, but in a field that has been changing dramatically in the last decade, it may also raise questions about how up to date those particular courses are.

About (or) regarding recommended books, as might be expected, there was an incredible diversity of suggested books with no clear patterns emerging. Some of the unusual books were Animal Farm by George Orwell and The Stranger by Albert Camus.

The course syllabi

The quality of the course syllabi was at best very uneven. It ran the gamut from a single page to 15 pages; from very vague guidelines to extremely detailed behavioral objectives and precise schedules. Give the current standards for syllabus preparation by NCATE and CACREP, both of which call for specific objectives, clear grading standards, etc., only about 5% would meet these criteria. Sometimes the name of the university and the instructor were not included, not to mention office hours, office phone numbers, etc. In reviewing the syllabi, the question was raised as to how many of these courses may have

been taught by adjunct faculty -- this was another item not investigated by this study. In any event, whether the courses may change in the future, accrediting standards should at least force the course syllabi to be more elaborate in the future.

SUMMARY

A survey of syllabi of introduction to counseling courses was conducted. 136 course syllabi from 123 colleges were received and reviewed. The results indicate a very diverse picture about the types of introductory courses offered, the types of course requirements, textbook and recommended reading, and the quality of the syllabi themselves. Questions have been raised about the appropriateness of offering certain types of courses as introduction courses.

figure 1

MOST POPULAR COURSE TITLES AND EMPHASIS

#	COURSE TITLE	EMPHASIS
18	-INTRODUCTION TO COUNSELING	overview
4	- PRINC. OF GUIDANCE	overview
3	- INTRODUCTION TO GUIDANCE	overview
3	- INTRODUCTION TO GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING	overview
3	- FUNDAMENTALS OF COUNSELING	overview
3	- INTRO. TO GUIDANCE & COUNSELING	school
3	- INTRO. TO COUNSELING	skill
2	- INTRODUCTION TO THE FIELD OF COUNSELING	overview
2	- ORIENTATION TO COUNSELING	overview
2	- COUNSEL. PRACTICE	skill
2	- TECHNIQUES OF COUNSELING	skill
2	- COUNS. THEORIES & PROCESS	theory & skill
2	- INTRO. TO COUNSELING	theory

figure 2

MOST POPULAR COURSE REQUIREMENTS IN EACH CATEGORY

I. PAPERS, REPORTS, ETC.

A. OF A PERSONAL NATURE

- 6 What are your thoughts, feelings, and goals regarding becoming a counselor?
- 6 Autobiography about your development as a counselor/person including cultural heritage, beliefs, influences, philosophy of life, nature of humans, values, etc.
- 4 Analysis of your communication style

B. COURSE CONTENT

- 35 Term paper on topic(s) related to counseling/research
- 17 Reaction papers to readings
- 7 Book reports/reviews/critiques

II. TESTS, EXAMS, QUIZZES

- 33 Final exam only
- 5 Midterm exam only
- 52 Both midterm and final
- 8 Three exams
- 8 Regular quizzes

III. EXPERIENCES

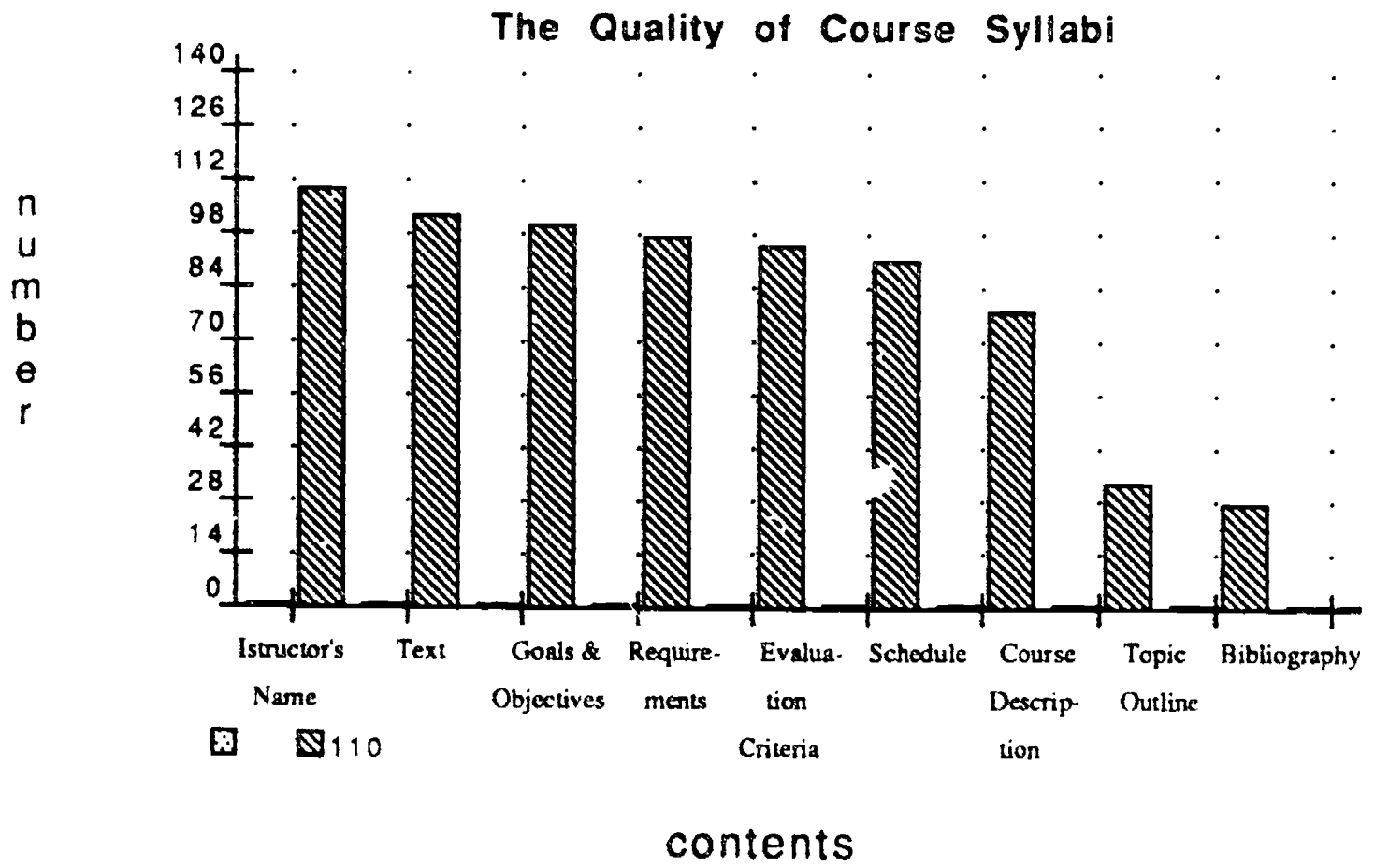
- 22 Be responsible for individual/group class activity/presentation
- 21 Make a video/audio cassette demonstrating various counseling skills.
- 20 Interview a counselor/other helping professional.
- 14 Visit counseling setting such as county mental health agency.
- 12 Participate in a counseling session or sessions with a practicum student/counseling lab/counseling center/licensed counselor and report on it.

figure 3

MOST POPULAR BEGINNING COUNSELING TEXTBOOKS

<u>AUTHOR</u>	<u>TITLE</u>	<u>YR.</u>	<u>#</u>
Gibson & Mitchell	Introduction to Counseling and Guidance 2nd. Ed.	1986	12
Blocher	The Professional Counselor	1987	8
Peterson & Nisenholz	Orientation to Counseling	1987	7
Egan	The Skilled Helper 3rd. Ed.	1986	7
Gladding	Counseling: A comprehensive Profession	1988	6
Belkin	Introduction to Counseling 3rd. Ed.	1988	6
Corsini	Current Psychotherapies 3rd. Ed.	1989	6
Corey	The Theory and Practice of Couns. and Psychotherapy	1986	5
Hershenson & Power	Mental Health Counseling	1987	5
Shertzer & Stone	Fundamentals of Counseling 4th. Ed.	1981	5

figure 4



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