

MS in Counseling and MS in Rehabilitation Counseling  
Comprehensive Examination

Grant Response to the  
Office of Institutional Research, Assessment and Planning Grant

Submitted by

Christopher Lucey, Ph.D., LPCC, MFT  
Coordinator, Counselor Education

And

Charles Arokiasamy, Rh.D.

Department of Counseling, Special Education and Rehabilitation  
California State University, Fresno

## **MS in Counseling and MS in Rehabilitation Counseling Assessment Grant Report**

### **1, What was your project about? What did you do?**

This proposal received funding to further develop and analyze the utility of the MS in Counseling and MS in Rehabilitation Counseling Comprehensive Examinations. The programs traditionally used a paper and pencil administration of the exams that limited any thorough evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the number of test items from the various content areas was limited. Funding was also requested for the Rehabilitation Counseling program to obtain data on the performance of its students on the Certified Rehabilitation Counseling national exams.

The MS in Counseling program's comprehensive examination was first initiated in the 1999-2000 academic year and during its most recent administration, approximately 90% of all students enrolled in the program participated. The MS in Rehabilitation Counseling program's comprehensive examination was developed in the 80s and periodically revised. It is routinely taken by almost all the students enrolled in the program with an occasional student doing project or thesis for their culminating experience. The comprehensive examinations are viewed by the program as an integral assessment tool in measuring student learning of counseling competencies and is included in the Student Outcomes Assessment Plans (SOAP) of both programs.

Students enrolled in the MS Counseling with Options in Marriage and Family Therapy, Counseling and Student Services or Rehabilitation Counseling may elect to choose the Comprehensive Examination for their culminating experience during the final stages of their program. (This Comprehensive Exam option does not preclude doing a project or thesis for those students desiring more research preparation.) Students in the 60-unit Marriage and Family Therapy option must complete 40 units by the end of the semester in which they take their exam, students in 48-unit Counseling and Student Services option must complete 27 units by the end of the semester in which they take their exam. Students in Rehabilitation Counseling take the comps in the third or fourth semester of the program.

The two-part counseling examination consists of 100 multiple-choice questions and essay questions. Approximately 50% of the multiple-choice questions come from the program's common core counseling courses and the balance come from specialization content areas. Scores of seventy percent (70%) or above on each section is needed to pass. A Faculty Review Committee comprised of two program faculty evaluate the essay portion of the exam according to an established scoring rubric. If there is a discrepancy in scoring between the two readers as to whether the essay passes or fails then a third

faculty member is assigned to review and score the essay question. The average of the three scores will be the final score for the essay. The essay portion requires an integration and application of theory and practice to a case vignette. The rehabilitation counseling is similar in format and grading procedures as the counseling exam except that it has 125 questions from 12 rehabilitation counseling knowledge domains listed in the SOAP plan and in the certification and accreditation standards.

During the Spring 2006 semester various computer-testing software packages were examined to determine the best fit for the programs and which best met the goals identified above.

During the Summer of 2006 a final decision to use Blackboard was made as it seemed like a good option and provided the information needed. Blackboard is currently used by the university, and is familiar to faculty and students. Once Blackboard was chosen test banks were created.

During the Fall 2006 semester, the first administration of the MS in Counseling Comprehensive Examination was given and data gathered. The MS in Rehabilitation Counseling continued to computerize and develop test banks and first administration of the computerized version of the exam is scheduled for April 17, 2007.

In addition, the procedures for enrolling students for the exam were developed and fine tuned and a pre-test was created to provide students with some indication of the test format and to aid in assuring students were accurately registered for the comprehensive exam..

**2. Why did you do it? What did you want to find out or what were you trying to measure and for what purpose?**

Creating an extensive bank of test questions from the 20 content areas in counseling and 12 knowledge domains in rehabilitation counseling covered in the respective program's curriculum was seen as a first step in improving the exams quality. Data was collected and analyzed to discern the quality of test items and evaluate patterns in student performance. This will allow for a longitudinal item analysis across multiple administrations of the exam. Long-term goals include performing an analysis of the exams reliability and validity and generating questions randomly from each content area.

**3. Did you run into any problems? If so, what were they and how did you resolve them (assuming that you did. If you didn't resolve them, is there something that would help?).**

The use of Blackboard was a bit of a challenge at first and we will continue to need assistance in organizing and analyzing the data. However, department

faculty more familiar with Blackboard were helpful in developing and organizing the examination.

#### **4. What were your findings?**

Students from each of the program options are required to take a common core section of the exam prior to questions within their specialization areas. Post-analysis of the exam revealed that student performance regardless of program option on the core section of the exam was not significantly different. In addition, student performance on the core section was indicative of their performance on the specialization section with the exception of the higher education students.

Students enrolled in the higher education option scored significantly less well on the specialization area of the exam despite performing similarly to other counseling options on the core section of the exam. This may be a function of the test or the teaching of the material covered in the exam. Both are currently being evaluated.

Using funding from this grant, the rehabilitation program obtained data on the performance of its students in the national certification exams for the past 3 years. Ninety percent of the students passed the CRC exam in their first try and only 56% of the graduates who took the exam for certification or recertification. Students can take the exam in their final semester and of those who took it while in school, 90% passed on their first try. Some students elect to take it after they graduate or even years later when they need it for a new job. When they take it later as graduates, they don't do as well having only a 56% pass rate. It is most likely that most of the graduates had been out of school for a while. The students performed better than the national average in 8 of the 12 domains and the graduates worse than the national average on all domains. Although the faculty will be looking closely at those domains in which our students performed below the national average, it is not a major concern because our students scored very close to the national average in those domains: Job Development & Placement Services Nat Av – 1.33, our score 1.31.; Rehab Services and Resources 1.18 vs 1.17; Case load management 11.63 vs 11.60; Medical, Functional and Environmental implications of disability 1.22 vs 1.21. Case load management had the largest discrepancy of .03 points. Based on student performance, the program curriculum appears to do a good job of covering the knowledge domains required by the field.

#### **5. How did you use the findings or how are you planning to use them?**

The MS in Counseling and MS in Rehabilitation Counseling continues to add questions to the test-bank. During the spring 2007 examination, the MS in Counseling will include 25 to 30 experimental questions. These test questions

will receive no point value but would be analyzed for inclusion on future test administrations.

Faculty in the Higher Education Specialization of the MS in Counseling are in the process of reviewing and revising questions for the up-coming spring administration of the examination. Faculty are also reviewing course material and required texts to ensure uniformity across coursework. Students enrolled in the higher education option scored significantly less well on the specialization area of the exam despite performing similarly to other counseling options on the core section of the exam. This may be a function of the test or the teaching of the material covered in the exam. Both are currently being evaluated.

Finally, a student satisfaction survey is currently being developed for the MS in Counseling students to collect student feedback on the process/procedures associated with test administration. An example of feedback provided by several students following the first administration of the examination was to have the questions asked during the essay component of the exam already typed-out on blackboard so that test-takers simply respond on screen. Other feedback suggested that the essay response be submitted via blackboard rather than being printed manually.