

West Virginia University
College of Human Resources & Education

EVALUATING COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY TRAINING COMPETENCIES

Overview

The Counseling Psychology faculty at West Virginia University approved the adoption of a competency-based evaluation model at its September 13, 2010 meeting. The American Psychological Association (APA) encouraged and supported our adoption of this approach in its re-accreditation letter of August 5, 2010.

In that letter, under Domain F: Program Self-Assessment and Quality Enhancement, the APA reminded us that the US Department of Education requires that, "...programs assess student achievement through outcome data on trainees while in the program and after program completion (APA, 2010, p. 5). In 2010 we chose to design our evaluation method using the *Competency Benchmarks in Professional Psychology* document that was approved by the APA's Board of Educational Affairs (BEA) and the Council of Chairs of Training Councils (CCTC) in professional psychology. With the advent of new Standards of Accreditation for Health Service Psychology, program faculty members elected to continue to utilize the benchmark competency assessment model, though we redesigned our benchmark competency tool to reflect the new training standards for Health Service Psychologists. Our new assessment instrument is called the "Behavioral Observation of Competency Scales" (BOCS) and assesses both profession wide competencies and area specific counseling psychology competencies.

Evaluating Competencies in Health Service Psychology

The benchmarks document focuses on three levels of trainee competency, (1) *readiness for practicum*, (2) *readiness for internship*, and (3) *readiness for entry to practice*. Based on the program of study currently in place at WVU in Counseling Psychology it seems reasonable to think we should evaluate trainees at the end of the first year in the program, prior to their beginning practicum that summer or fall, again at the end of the 2nd or 3rd year as they prepare to apply for the pre-doctoral internship match, and again following the final defense of the dissertation as that is that last point in the program of study over which we have any jurisdiction. Furthermore it would signal that the faculty believes the trainees are competent to enter into the practice arena in a manner consistent with the program's goals and objectives and as defined by whatever state licensing body is relevant to their career plans.

Therefore three versions of the Behavioral Observation of Competency Scales document was developed to assess 9 profession wide competencies (research, ethics and legal standards, individual and cultural diversity, professional values and attitudes, communication and interpersonal skills, assessment, intervention, supervision, and consultation/inter-professional/interdisciplinary). In addition, the BOCS assesses 6 area specific counseling psychology competencies to include professional identity, holistic and contextual worldview, developmental/strength-based focus, prevention, vocational, and social justice.

Each student will be evaluated by core counseling psychology faculty members under the oversight of the training director who will sign the evaluation form. Either the student's advisor or the training director will be responsible for meeting each trainee to go over the evaluation. The trainee will also sign to indicate the information in the evaluation was conveyed appropriately. In the instance wherein a trainee feels some element or elements of the evaluation were inaccurate, the standard appeal and/or grievance procedures will apply as outlined in the Counseling Student Doctoral Handbook.

The metric suggested by the document developers for evaluating the benchmarks is a frequency scalar and is shown below:

[0] Never/rarely	[1] about 50% the time	[2] Usually	[3] Almost always	[4] Always.
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Readiness for Practicum

This evaluation should occur sometime during Spring semester of the 1st year; by April 1. All the benchmarks comprising the level of trainee readiness are within the purview of the core faculty based on classroom behavior, performance, and achievement. In addition some elements will be observed more informally via interpersonal interactions and advising meetings.

For this evaluation period the student must receive an average score of 3.0 or better across all domains in order to be recommended for practicum training. Individual items/competencies not meeting this standard will be addressed with each student by the faculty as needed and any necessary remediation plans developed and put into place.

Readiness for Internship

This evaluation should occur after the successful completion of the comprehensive doctoral examinations and prior to the student submitting the APPIC application materials for the internship year in which they hope to match. This will occur either at the beginning of Fall semester of the 3rd year, or the 4th year if a particular student has either failed to match and/or decided to take a year prior to internship to complete the dissertation. Other time frames are possible if the comprehensive examinations should take place in January.

The faculty will consider a range of items for this review period that will include many of the same issues that comprised the previous evaluation *readiness for practicum*, but will also necessarily include performance on the comprehensive examinations. In determining a student's readiness for internship, the evaluations on file from the various on-site practicum supervisors and input from the classroom practicum instructors will, of course, play a central and highly significant role.

As with the previous evaluation, students will be asked to submit specific portfolio items to the faculty for review. At this level the expectations are considerably higher within each domain, and many new areas come under review. Therefore the same scoring rubric of "usually" will be required in order to demonstrate that an acceptable level of competency has been attained.

Thus on this evaluation the student must receive an average score of 3.0 or better across all domains in order to be recommended for internship. Individual items/competencies not meeting this standard will be addressed with each student by the faculty as needed and any necessary remediation plans developed and put into place.

Readiness for Practice/Final Evaluation

At this point in the candidate's training, the program will have made its final contribution to the student's professional development. The final evaluation serves as a summative document that attests to the new graduate's readiness to enter into the practice field as a post-doctoral fellow, supervised psychologist, or licensure candidate, depending on the statutes of the relevant practice jurisdiction and the candidate's professional aspirations.

Several new sources of data are utilized for this final evaluation period—the approved draft of dissertation, notes from the dissertation defense, the final evaluation from the student's internship training director and/or clinical supervisors; and any conference materials or publications.

The competencies at this juncture are defined and anchored by considerably higher expectations as befits career entry into professional practice leading to licensure as a Health Service Psychologist, perhaps within a few months of graduation, again depending on the licensure statutes of a particular state or jurisdiction. Therefore the average across all domains on the final, summative evaluation should equal 3.0 or better; “almost always”. We feel that requiring this advanced level of competency helps to safeguard the potential consumer of psychological services and to protect the public from inappropriate or substandard services.

Obviously, this document cannot serve a gatekeeper function for completion since the requirements for graduation cannot extend beyond the approved course of study for the doctoral degree culminating in a successful final defense of the dissertation research. However, the final evaluation document can serve as a source of pertinent and critical information for a licensure board, post-doctoral fellowship committee, or future employer.

In order for the document to be released, however, the graduate would need to consent to such use of his or her educational records. Even in the instance where the document were not released to a third party, the information contained therein could serve as a frame of reference to respond to legitimate and authorized requests for information on our graduates, within the limitations of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).