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Article 41

Needs Assessment: A Key Evaluation Tool for Professional Counselors

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Needs assessment methods have been promoted by counseling researchers and practitioners for several decades (Cook, 1989; Erford, 2008; Newton, Angle, Schuette, & Ender, 1984). Information gathered through needs assessments may help professional counselors in various specialties to identify critical needs of the populations to whom they provide services. In today's era of managed care and educational accountability, needs assessment data can play a central role in advocating for funding and resources to provide counseling services to clients (Astramovich & Hoskins, 2009). This article reviews basic needs assessment concepts and highlights a four stage needs assessment approach for use by professional counselors.

Counseling Needs Assessment Concepts

In the field of professional counseling, needs assessments have been used in various practice settings including schools (Cohen & Angeles, 2006), universities (Harrar, Affsprung, & Long, 2010), mental health agencies (MacDevitt & MacDevitt, 1987), and correctional facilities (Laux et al., 2008). The needs of various demographic groups have also been examined to help identify their unique counseling needs including children and adolescents (Drefs, 2002; Kroll, Harrington, & Bailey, 2000), refugees (Chung & Bemak, 2002), rural clients (MacDevitt & MacDevitt, 1987), and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (Smith, McCaslin, Chang, Martinez, & McGrew, 2010). These published needs assessments suggest that professional counseling practice is ultimately enhanced when practitioners recognize the specific needs of the populations which they serve and then implement targeted counseling services to address those needs.

In general, needs assessment refers to the evaluative process of gathering and interpreting data about the need for programs and services (Gupta, Sleezer, & Russ-Eft, 2007). Needs assessments often serve as a foundation upon which organizations make decisions about where to invest their resources and what populations to target for their services (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). In addition, needs assessment information can help organizations and individuals prioritize their services and refine existing programs to

meet the needs of various subpopulations (Astramovich, Hoskins, & Erford, 2008). Organizations that seek funding through grants and foundations often must conduct needs assessments in order to demonstrate a demand for the services they provide (Soriano, 1995).

Needs assessments may be conceptualized as part of the larger counseling program evaluation process that helps inform counseling practitioners about the outcomes of their services and the impact of their programs on various stakeholder groups (Astramovich, Hoskins, & Coker, 2008). Counseling needs assessments should therefore specifically help counselors refine existing programs or create new services designed to meet specific client population needs in order to provide optimal outcomes. For example, a counseling agency in a demographically diverse urban setting might use needs assessments as a means for identifying the types of small group counseling services that should be offered. In an era of budget reductions and increased competition for funding, the agency may thus maximize its impact by providing critically needed services to the community. Ultimately, professional counselors may use needs assessment data as one means to advocate for services with minority and underserved client populations (Astramovich & Hoskins, 2009).

Erford (2008) distinguished data-driven needs assessments from perception-based needs assessments. A data-driven needs assessment relies primarily on existing data as a means for objectively identifying needs of client populations. Conversely, perception-based needs assessments utilize surveys and focus groups to identify the subjective needs of various client populations. Ultimately, utilizing both data-driven and perception-based needs assessment methods can provide critical information to counseling organizations and professional counselors to inform the planning and delivery of their counseling services (Astramovich & Coker, 2007). The following four stage model for conducting counseling needs assessments utilizes information gathered from both data-driven and perception-based methods.

Four Stages of Counseling Needs Assessment

Stage One: Identify Guiding Questions and Goals

Counselors planning to conduct a needs assessment should begin the process by identifying specific guiding questions and goals. Effective guiding questions can help counselors focus their assessment in order to provide the most useful information. For example, a school counselor may be interested in assessing the counseling needs of students receiving special education services. In this case, guiding needs assessment questions might include: "How do students receiving special education services currently utilize counseling?" and "What gaps in counseling services exist for students receiving special education instruction?"

Guiding questions are then helpful in the identification of specific goals for the needs assessment. Without a clear goal or purpose, needs assessments may generate data that is unclear or not applicable to the counseling setting or process. Continuing with the previous example, the school counselor then might develop the following three goals for the needs assessment: 1) Identifying ways children in special education currently utilize counseling services; 2) Identifying specific counseling programs and services that might

be helpful for children in special education; and, 3) Identifying potential barriers to accessing counseling services.

During the development of guiding questions and goals, it is essential to consider the feasibility of carrying out the needs assessment, especially in terms of the volume of information to be gathered and the manageability of the data. If too many guiding questions or goals are identified, the needs assessment evaluation process could become overwhelming (Soriano, 1995). Ultimately a needs assessment must be realistic in its scope for it to be successfully implemented. Therefore, generating a few guiding questions and goals will help keep the process focused and manageable.

Stage Two: Identify Populations to be Assessed

Once guiding questions and goals for the needs assessment have been determined, the next stage of the process involves specifically identifying the population or populations from whom information will be gathered. Various stakeholder groups may have different perceived needs and gathering as many perspectives as possible can help ensure that all voices are heard. In school settings, counselors might assess the needs of students, parents, teachers, administrators, as well as needs of the local community. In community agency settings, counselors might assess the needs of current and former clients, counselors working for the agency, supervisors, and advisory boards. Finding convergences in the needs of various populations being assessed can help counselors and counseling organizations to prioritize their services (Astramovich, Hoskins, & Coker, 2008).

After target populations have been identified, counselors must then consider the number of individuals who will participate in the needs assessment. For example, a large community agency may have a caseload of over 450 clients who are being seen by 20 different counselors. If a supervisor is interested in assessing the needs of clients as they transition to aftercare, it may be unfeasible to assess all current agency clients. Instead, a smaller sample of the current client population could provide meaningful data to help address aftercare concerns. In this situation, the supervisor may ask each counselor to identify three current clients about to transition to aftercare to participate in the needs assessment. This would provide a more manageable sample of about 60 clients from whom needs about aftercare could be assessed.

Stage Three: Collect Needs Assessment Data

Collecting needs assessment information should ideally come from perception-based measures as well as objective or archival data sources. Data collection methods should be focused in order to answer guiding questions and address the goals of the assessment. Three essential means for collecting needs assessment data include survey instruments, focus groups, and exploring existing data sources.

Survey instruments. Survey instruments offer counselors an efficient way to collect perception-based needs assessment information. In general, needs assessment survey instruments should be simple to complete and as brief as possible while still gathering necessary data. Survey instruments may include demographic questions, scale questions, ranking questions, and open-ended questions. The specific types of questions utilized will be based on the guiding questions and goals of the needs assessment.

Obtaining demographic information from respondents allows for later disaggregation of the results based on various demographic variables (Erford, 2008). For example, a college counselor conducting a needs assessment of students seeking career counseling might want information about participants' sex, age, ethnicity, and number of college credits completed. These variables could help identify unique needs of subgroups that may not be reflected in the overall findings.

Scale questions can be helpful in determining levels of agreement or disagreement about a particular topic or levels of interest or importance of a particular service. Needs assessments often use point scales with lower numbers representing lesser agreement or interest and higher numbers representing greater degrees of agreement or interest. A commonly used 5-point scale might utilize the following descriptors: Strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. By assigning numbers to each point on the scale (i.e., 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree), results can be analyzed quantitatively with means and percentages. An example of an item that might be assessed with this 5-point scale is: "I am interested in following-up my counseling by attending a structured weekly aftercare group".

Ranking questions can be helpful in prioritizing the needs of specific populations. For example, a school counselor might conduct a needs assessment of students to help inform the content of classroom guidance lessons. A needs assessment instrument could ask students to rank from high to low their needs for guidance lessons on specific topics. Results from this ranking question could then help the counselor plan to address the highest expressed needs in upcoming classroom guidance lessons.

Open-ended questions are another means for gathering data that can provide more individualized and richer information about needs. Often a series of scale or ranking questions is followed by an open-ended question to allow for elaboration by participants. Examples of open-ended questions that might be used on a counseling needs assessment include: "What are your primary support systems?" and "What small groups would you be interested in attending?"

Focus groups. Another useful means for gathering perception-based needs assessment information involves conducting structured focus groups. In this approach about five to ten participants from a target population participate in an information gathering session led by a facilitator. An advantage of focus groups is the dialogue that can occur as the facilitator processes answers to questions being posed of the group. As major themes emerge during the discussion, the focus group facilitator records the perspectives of the members and provides a summary of the key findings. An inner city mental health counseling agency might conduct a focus group with leaders in the local community as a way to identify the counseling needs of low-income community members and to help identify funding sources for counseling services.

Existing data sources. In addition to perception-based needs, counselors can often utilize existing data as a means for more objectively identifying the needs of various client populations. In school and college settings, counselors may examine campus-wide data about class enrollment, attendance, grade point averages, and drop-out patterns as a means to identify needs among the student population. In community settings, statistics about suicide rates, drug and alcohol abuse, and epidemiological data can be means for identifying potential client needs. Ultimately by analyzing existing data

along with gathering perception-based needs information, counselors will have a broader perspective on the needs of their client populations.

Stage Four: Analysis and Interpretation of Data

The final stage of the needs assessment process involves careful analysis of the data and interpretation of the findings. Results from survey instruments may be analyzed and graphed with spreadsheet software and focus group results can be summarized into a list of key findings. Careful analysis of the data also may involve disaggregating the results by various demographic groups (Erford, 2008). For example, disaggregated results from a needs assessment about aftercare might show that minority male clients have the highest expressed need for aftercare services. These findings might help inform the agency to focus special attention on the aftercare planning of its minority male clients.

Findings of counseling needs assessment can have important implications for the mission of the counseling program and the specific services offered to clients. Translating identified client needs into specific program goals and objectives helps counselors and counseling agencies to monitor the outcomes of services and to assess if the needs of clients are being appropriately met. Finally, conducting needs assessments should be considered as part of an ongoing counseling program evaluation process that helps professional counselors ensure optimal services and outcomes for their clients (Astramovich & Coker, 2007).

Conclusions

Counseling needs assessments offer several benefits to professional counselors and counseling organizations. Conducting needs assessments can help counselors identify potential gaps in services and can help counselors refine their services to fit the needs of the various demographic groups they counsel. Needs assessment findings can also be integrated into a larger counseling program evaluation process that can ultimately strengthen the quality of services offered to clients. In years to come, the profession of counseling will undoubtedly be shaped in part by the unique needs of client populations in our changing world.

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