Competency-Based Guidance: A Systems Approach
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Overview

“What do counselors do?” This perennial question continues to drive the actions and communication of counselors in schools across the nation. Although education has undergone suggested definitional changes (Finn, 1990), most guidance programs have stayed the same. This remains true despite the fact that many of the educational-reform studies addressed guidance. Hoyt (1989) analyzed 29 reform reports and found that in 8 studies that addressed K-12 reform, three criticized guidance and only one called for more counselors. Also, in 13 studies that viewed education as preparation for work, only 6 called for an increase in guidance.

For the most part, guidance programs are essentially old models with elements added to adjust to new teaching and administration models. The time for change in guidance programs is imminent. However, with the financial constraints caused by years of political rhetoric and budget cuts, schools now have large classroom teacher-pupil ratios, as well as large counselor-student ratios. The idea of downsizing has led to more add-on responsibilities for already overloaded guidance personnel.

The Add-on Model results from reactive guidance programs and the lack of leadership in pupil personnel programs. First, guidance was established to help students match their skills with available job options. Then came the “add-on” of mental health counseling. Next was a move to emphasize college and university placement and to assist students with financial aid. The NDEA-V mission was to educate counselors to advise students match their skills with available job options. These trends led to programs that prepared counselors to do primarily individual and group counseling.

Paradigm Shift

Education is undergoing a new thinking. “Under the old conceptualization, education was thought of as process and system, effort and intention, investment and hope. To improve education meant to try harder, to engage in more activity, to magnify one’s plans, to give people more services, and to become more efficient in delivering them” (Finn, 1990, p. 586). Similarly, guidance has been stuck in an old model that was revised by reacting to other people’s priorities, by working harder, and by implementing systems of accountability for the services provided and the amount of time allocated to each process. Joel Barker (1987), in a video on futures, reviews Thomas Kuhn’s (1970) work on paradigm shifts, which claims that one’s view or perspective on a given subject serves as a screen, making it at times impossible to see conflicting information clearly. It might be this phenomenon that has kept us from recognizing the need to reframe the guidance field in a new light.

The Competency-Based Guidance (CBG) or “new guidance” approach identifies the student as the primary client and designs all reform efforts in terms of the results for students (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). This program is designed to guarantee that all students acquire the competencies to become successful in school and to make a successful transition from school to higher education, to employment, or to a combination of higher education and work.

Add-Ons versus CBG

Focus on Student Results: CBG is based on students’ need for a comprehensive, developmental guidance program. The difference between “add-on” services and CBG is a basic philosophic difference between offering students an opportunity to experience and benefit from guidance at their own request (services model) or providing a planned, sequential program in which counselors take responsibility for assuring that all students gain specific guidance-related competencies. Services traditionally have been based on student demand and local school need. Competencies are based on professionally identified educational, career, and personal/social needs of students.

Accountability: Accountability is now focused on student results. Traditionally, accountability in guidance used a role and function statement to define counselor duties and to approximate the amount of time spent on each function. In a CBG program it is assumed that students learn differently and that a variety of processes are required to ensure success for all students. In traditional programs, specific processes are established for all counselors, therefore, only some of the students can be expected to attain the desired competencies.

Teaming: Traditionally, counselors have worked as individuals attempting to meet all the needs of their assigned students. In the new approach, counselors work as a team using the unique interests and skills of each to accomplish results. This idea legitimizes the inclusion of differentiated staffing, which can lead to the possibility of career ladders. In addition, there is much interest in developing student support teams in which counselors, school psychologists, child welfare and attendance specialists, administrators, parents and others work as a team. Working closely as a team with others, reduces territorial disputes, reduces duplication of efforts, and expands the program to address all students.

Inductively Planned: CBG is developed by counselors, using research on student needs as the source in determining which student competencies should be addressed. Traditionally, counseling services have been designed based on needs assessments, i.e., asking teachers, students, parents, administrators, and community members what counselors should do.

Program Evaluation: CBG program evaluation is based on the number of students who demonstrate the competencies learned. Guidance services are usually evaluated on the number of students who acquire the specific guidance-related competencies to become successful in school and to make a successful transition from school to higher education, to employment, or to a combination of higher education and work.

Counselor Evaluation: Counselors are no longer evaluated in competition with their colleagues, with all counselors being measured by the same criteria (role and...
function statements). Now counselors are evaluated on their success in providing students with guidance-related competencies. A counselor’s success in this system is based on the ability to create, select, and implement processes to reach student results. Counselors are encouraged to work as a team in conjunction with the other pupil personnel professionals and other staff members to maximize the use of their individual skills and interests to reach all students.

**Management/Leadership:** The role of the administrator becomes one of negotiating results and plans, monitoring and appreciating processes, and coaching for new behaviors rather than simply directing the activities of the counselors and judging counseling effectiveness based on elusive criteria or criteria developed for use with teachers.

**Systems oriented:** The new approach is proactive. Counselors must reach out to all students rather than waiting for students to request services. It is developmentally designed to address expected concerns and needs associated with normal stages of development. It is preventive; planned programs occur on a systematic basis, before a crisis makes necessary emergency or remedial actions. This approach expands the skills of the counselor to encompass an educational component. Traditionally, counselors wait for the “teachable moment” and try, through crisis intervention, to assist students with problems. Assuring that a counselor is available at all times becomes a major concern for crisis-oriented counseling services.

**Summary**

The time for change in the structure of guidance programs has arrived. The new CBG programs offer an alternative to existing programs by making the paradigm shift to guaranteed guidance results. The way one sees and thinks about guidance must undergo a fundamental change if guidance is to escape from the add-on syndrome. The new approach focuses on the student as the primary client, not on the services being provided. By clearly identifying individual accountability for specific students’ results, counselors are encouraged to break out of established boundaries and to become more creative and to involve others in the process. Involving others also provides a way to share one’s skills, build a caring community, and expand the resources available to help students.


**References**


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