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*Article 6*

## **Why Counselors Shouldn't Let Testing Leave Them Behind**

Janet E. Wall

### **Why Use Tests and Assessment?**

Assessment plays a pivotal role in the profession of counseling. Basing judgments, decisions, and interventions specifically on information acquired in some systematic and objective way is of major importance in the life of a practicing counselor. Decisions relating to marriage and family counseling, career counseling, academic counseling, addictions counseling, and mental health counseling often require the use of observations, interviews, surveys, rating scales, and checklists, as well as more formalized assessments and tests. Failing to use tests and assessments when and where they are appropriate limits the effectiveness of a counselor in serving his or her clientele.

Fremer and Wall (2004) suggest that there are some five major uses of assessment or test results:

- Selection and Placement
- Diagnosis
- Accountability and Evaluation
- Identifying Trends or Progress
- Self-Discovery

Each of these uses has applicability in counseling situations. Selection and placement can involve job selection, college placement,

placement into special programs, and so on. Use of test results for diagnosis helps counselors recommend appropriate clinical or education interventions. In the area of accountability and evaluation, counselors can judge the effectiveness of programs and make adjustments in the programs as necessary; identifying trends and progress can provide information on longer term effects of certain clinical practices, programs, or conditions. Assessments also can help counselors judge their own effectiveness. Objective and credible self-discovery information can prompt persons to seek counseling assistance and/or make decisions about themselves and their future.

For the school counselor, the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has placed testing in the forefront to all school personnel. Not only does the federal law mandate testing at several grades, it more importantly requires data-driven decision making and accountability. It forces educators to specify state standards, organize the curriculum and instruction around those standards, and align the assessments to those state standards. The changes and outcomes mandated by the law have both positive and negative aspects; but the bottom line is that testing and assessment is, and will continue to be, a visible and ubiquitous part of the life of counselors and educators.

NCLB clearly impacts the policies and practices of teachers, educators, parents, students, *and counselors*. In a study of school counselor activities, 93 percent of those surveyed reported that their guidance activities included “testing and having tests interpreted for career planning purposes (for example, interest inventories, vocational aptitude tests)” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003, p. 36). In that same study, a majority of counselors (58 percent) indicated that required state assessments for high school graduation had a mostly positive effect on education in their schools (p. 32). Furthermore, about 20 percent of counselors reported spending more than 20 percent of their time on academic testing (p. 70).

In a survey of members of two counseling-related organizations, the Association for Assessment in Counseling and the American School Counselor Association, Elmore, Ekstrom, and Diamond (1993) found that 74 percent of those completing the survey indicated that tests were a very important or important part of their work. The

American School Counselor Association's (2003) *National Model for School Counseling Programs* includes the guidance that "school counselors should be proficient in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of student achievement and related data" (p. 49).

### **What are the Key Benefits of Testing and Assessment?**

**Objectivity From Technical Quality.** Probably the foremost benefit of testing and assessment is objectivity. High quality assessments provide results that reduce the influence of personal subjectivity and bias. Results from carefully researched and properly developed assessments do not change substantially from time to time, unless there is a particular intervention or external influence. The results tend to be consistent and reliable. There is empirical evidence that the use of the assessment results is appropriate and reasonable for the purpose for which they are used. These statements speak to the primary technical characteristics of assessments—reliability and validity. Reliability and validity evidence are necessary precursors to objectivity.

Counselors should know about the various types of reliability measures that are available and reported by test developers. They should evaluate that information in light of the decisions to be made from the assessment to assure that the reliability is adequate for that use.

Particular attention needs to be paid to the validity of the test results. Does the assessment make sense when looked at from a logical perspective? Does it have what is called face validity? Will the assessment provide information that the individual knows some particular knowledge or has a particular condition? What evidence is given that supports this use? This might be called content validity. If an assessment purports to predict a future outcome, do studies show that there is a strong and positive relationship between the results and a future condition? This is called criterion-related or predictive validity. Is there evidence that the assessment measures what it purports to measure? This is called construct validity.

**Cost Effectiveness.** Using objective assessments can provide

information about large numbers of individuals with the least expense. It would be ideal to be able to spend considerable time with individual clients and students to gain an understanding of their current situation and assess their future condition; but generally, counselors are unable to do so because of time and resources constraints. Objective assessments are often able to supply information on a variety of topics in a comprehensive manner, in a relatively short period of time, and at a comparatively low cost.

Delivering certain tests and assessments by computer and/or the Internet can save time and resources (Bennett, 2001; Sireci, 2004). However, the use of technology-delivered assessment raises considerations such as comparability of paper/pencil and technology-delivered test results, test security, appropriateness of computer adaptive testing, and computer accessibility that are important when employing information communication technology with assessment (Wall, 2004a).

**Fairness.** Objective measures and the accompanying data can be more fair because personal bias is minimized. Because there are differences in outcomes for some individuals or groups, however, some tests and assessments are often thought to be unfair, or even biased, by some individuals or groups. Good tests and assessments are designed to measure particular concepts or constructs, and they are accompanied by evidence that shows that, in fact, measure what they purport to measure. Items on quality tests generally undergo bias review by qualified persons and also undergo various analyses using specific statistical techniques. Good tests do not attempt to differentiate people based on race, gender, ethnic background, or by any other factor not relevant to the construct being measured.

If differences on test results are found, they should be considered an opportunity to make relevant and positive changes for affected individuals and groups. If a blood pressure monitor identifies a dangerously high reading for an individual or group, is that assessment unfair or biased? Clearly the information from such an assessment or test should encourage further investigation to identify the causes for such differences and to act on that information by making appropriate changes or interventions.

## What Do Counselors Need to Know?

Regardless of the work setting, counselors that use assessments must understand the various factors that enable them to use testing and assessment in the most competent, credible, helpful, ethical, and professional manner.

The American Counseling Association (ACA, 2003) recently approved *Standards for Qualifications of Test Users*. In that document, counselors are cautioned to “use tests and assessment in counseling practice to the degree that they possess the appropriate knowledge and skills” (ACA, 2003, p.1). The document lists and explains the following standards that counselors should meet:

- Skill in practice and knowledge of theory relevant to the testing context and type of counseling specialty.
- A thorough understanding of testing theory, techniques of test construction, and test reliability and validity.
- A working knowledge of sampling techniques, norms, and descriptive, correlational and predictive statistics.
- Ability to review, select, and administer tests appropriate for clients or students and the context of the counseling practice.
- Skill in administration of tests and interpretation of test scores.
- Knowledge of the impact of diversity on testing accuracy, including age, gender, ethnicity, race, disability, and linguistic differences.
- Knowledge and skill in the professionally responsible use of assessment and evaluation practice.

Many sources are available to counselors to facilitate their acquiring or augmenting assessment competency. University courses in assessment should be part of a counselor preparation program. To enhance and hone specialized counselor skills, various professional associations offer workshops and other professional development activities. For example, the Association for Assessment in Counseling

and Education (AACE) focuses on assessment issues of particular importance to counselors. It provides conference presentations, continuing education opportunities, journals, and monographs that aid the counselor in understanding assessment issues. Two examples of pertinent AACE monographs are *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing—What Counselors Need to Know* (AAC, 2002), and *A Parent’s Survival Guide to School Testing* (AAC, 2003). Reviewing various professional standards and ethics statements is an excellent way to identify what the assessment, counseling, and education professions consider critical knowledge and skills expected of test users in the areas of test selection, use, and interpretation. In addition to the ACA standards mentioned earlier, some of the more relevant standards and principles are the following:

American Counseling Association. (1997). *Code of ethics and standards of practice*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education. (1999). *Standards for educational and psychological testing*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

American School Counselor Association & Association for Assessment in Counseling. (1998). *Competencies in assessment and evaluation for school counselors*. Alexandria, VA: Author.

Joint Committee on Testing Practices. (2000). *Rights and responsibilities of test takers: Guidelines and expectations*. Washington, DC: Author.

Joint Committee on Testing Practices. (2002). *Code of fair testing practices in education*. Washington, DC: Author.

Other resources on testing and assessment can be found on

various Web sites. Wall (2004b) has created a webography that compiles Internet assessment resources for educators and counselors.

### **Counselors as Assessment Leaders**

Some counselors have a strong distaste for testing and assessment, but more enlightened counselors understand that having objective data and being knowledgeable and competent in the area of assessment can set them apart and put them in a position to play a key role within the profession. By embracing testing and assessment, counselors can be positive role models and leaders in the counseling community. It is with the foundation of objective data that counselors can make improvements, recommend changes, and initiate positive actions that enhance the profession. Most importantly, the use of tests and assessments facilitates actions that can help those individuals whom they work to serve.

Testing pervades nearly all aspects of society today; these include education, licensing, life planning, jobs, promotions, decision-making, legal decisions, mental health, insurance, interventions, life progress, and more. Few other experiences in our lives have as much impact as testing and assessment with regard to our opportunities, activities, and future possibilities. The use of assessment by counselors gives them a fundamental and integral role in society—a leadership role—unmatched by other professionals. Savvy, competent, and confident counselors should welcome such a role and life-changing opportunities.

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Wall, J. (2004b). Internet resources in educational assessment: A webography. In J. Wall & G. Walz (Eds.), *Measuring up: assessment issues for teachers, counselors and administrators* (pp. 757–770). Greensboro, NC: ERIC Counseling and Student Services Clearinghouse.