Evaluation of Competency-Based Guidance Programs

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Overview

“The purpose of evaluation is not to prove but to improve” (Stufflebeam, Foley, Gephard, Guba, Hammond, Merriman, & Provus, 1971). Evaluation is a critical element in a student Competency-Based Guidance (CBG) program. Data provide counselors with immediate evidence that the processes and resources are providing the pre-determined competencies for all students. In effect, data show what is working and what is not working; it compares the actual results with the desired or planned-for program results.

Concerns and Obstacles

The following concerns and obstacles to CBG evaluation were reviewed by Johnson & Whitfield (1991):

1. Many programs face the problem of not having clearly defined student competencies (Johnson & Johnson, 1991). If the program is based on providing services, most of the evaluation efforts will focus on customer satisfaction and subjective estimates (attitudes) of the effectiveness of program efforts.

2. Many larger school districts have a department of evaluation and research, therefore, some school-based educators have come to believe that evaluation is the responsibility of district level personnel. Although counselors may be members of the committee called on to participate in an evaluation, the result is frequently seen as an activity external to the school.

3. There has been a fear of evaluation efforts because results are frequently reported in ways that are critical, rather than data being made available to improve guidance efforts.

4. There is “...confusion between tests and evaluation. Tests are seen as causing more paperwork with little return for the counselor” (Johnson & Whitfield, 1991, p. 4). Testing is a written demonstration of skills and only one way of many to validate student competencies.

5. There is fear that data will be used inappropriately, such as blanket comparisons of one school or district with others. When this is done without considering the differences in populations, budgets, mission statements, and socio-economic characteristics, it becomes a meaningless activity.

Evaluation data, when generated and used as part of the ongoing planning and implementation process, allows the flexibility to address needs as they occur. In addition, data provide important indicators of program activities that can be eliminated, thereby allowing counselors to reduce superfluous paperwork and tasks unrelated to student results.

Since many different models of guidance are used in schools, it is necessary to show similarities in terminology and to suggest what is to be evaluated, how to collect data, what population should be addressed, and when the evaluation processes should be implemented. Two sets of data can be compiled within two outcome categories: actual results attained and the related impact these results have on other behaviors. That is, under Immediate Results, there are Student Competencies to be attained and also Potential Impact caused by students attaining the pre-determined competencies. Counselors are only responsible for students’ acquisition and demonstration of pre-determined competencies, not for the impact because many other persons and programs may also be involved. The same is true for all results and their related impact. The authors can provide readers a detailed figure describing the above.

Guidance Program Evaluability

It is important that the guidance program be developed to include all the elements of a total or comprehensive program (Johnson & Whitfield, 1991), thus allowing one to trace linkages from the mission or purpose to goals and related student competencies, to processes, and to resources (Kaufman, 1991). An audit can be used to ensure that a guidance program is complete (Gysbers, 1991).

Two models of guidance that meet the demands of an evaluability audit are Gysbers and Henderson (1994) and Johnson and Johnson (1991). The Gysbers and Henderson models use three basic sets of elements and provide a process with criteria to complete the audit. Johnson and Johnson’s model uses a systems approach, including a mission, goals, competencies, management system, monitoring, and an advisory council. This competency-based model also uses an auditing process for system elements, with criteria for determining evaluability.

Steps to Evaluation

Evaluation is the collection and reporting of information that is useful in decision-making, to see whether or not objectives have been met and to look at the effects of a program (Johnson and Whitfield, 1991). Evaluation is a process designed to provide data comparing results with pre-determined purposes. Evaluation is not synonymous with research. Research focuses on whether one process is more effective than another and whether either one is more effective than no process in reaching a predetermined objective or goal.

In order to make evaluation meaningful to counselors, information must be collected that can be used systematically and objectively to plan and problem-solve within their program and to jointly plan and problem-solve within a department or school. The steps to evaluating a total guidance program are delineated by Johnson & Whitfield (1991, pp. 83-85), “planning and organizing, evaluation design, reporting results, and using the findings.” The steps for counselors to evaluate their efforts include the following:
1. The program must be audited to ensure the elements are in place and ready to evaluate.
2. A decision must be made on the purpose of a specific evaluation, that is, “What are we trying to improve?” Only the information needed to answer the evaluation question(s) should be collected and analyzed at any given time. To complete a comprehensive evaluation of the entire program may be important periodically but is not necessary on a regular basis.
3. A complete plan should be developed with the criteria for success specified and the means to collect the data defined.
4. A reporting format is agreed upon ahead of time and results are reviewed and recommendations made for changes supported by the evaluation findings.
5. Based on the recommendations, changes are made in the means (processes and resources) and a plan for implementing change is developed in which timelines and responsibilities are delineated.

How To Evaluate

Evaluation is the process of determining how well predetermined results or student competencies are met. There are three ways to collect data: (1) a student writes something; (2) a student demonstrates a skill or behaves in a different manner; or (3) a student verbally reports what has been learned.

It is important that the competencies (a) are assessed using predetermined criteria, (b) are evaluated during or at the end of each activity, (c) are recorded, and, (d) are verified for the students and the parent/guardian. Verification of competencies can be recorded in an Education and Career Planning Portfolio, by completion of an activity packet, through a group or individual conference, by way of a written notice or guidance report card sent home and/or by computer printouts which are used to track student progress.

Summary

Evaluation is the process of collecting and reporting data for the purpose of improving the guidance program; it is a major element of a CBG program. The results may show no improvement is needed, some changes should be made in the processes, or the desired result should be dropped from the program. A program audit ensures that the program is ready to be evaluated. Validating students’ acquisition of predetermined results entails assessing students’ written materials and observing their demonstration of skills and attitudes. Through a carefully designed follow-up evaluation, data can provide the necessary information on the impact of the total guidance program.

When evaluation data is collected, analyzed, and reported in a clear and timely manner, all those responsible for the program, including counselors, administrators, teachers, parents, and community members, become partners in feeling pride in what is being accomplished and share responsibility for helping to improve it.

References


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