

**TO:** Mike Mahon  
President and Vice Chancellor

**DATE:** May 6, 2015

**FROM:** Robert A. Boudreau  
Chair, Academic Quality Assurance Committee

**RE:** Master of Counselling Program, Academic Quality Assurance Review

In accordance with the U of L *Academic Quality Assurance Policy and Process*, the Academic Quality Assurance Committee approved the review of the Master of Counselling Program at its April 24, 2015 meeting.

The Program Review Committee for this review was comprised of Blythe Shepard (Program Review Coordinator), Thelma Gunn, Richard Butt, and Kas Mazurek. The review produced four documents:<sup>1</sup>

1. *Master of Counselling, Faculty of Education: Self Study Report* (received October 10, 2014) – Self Study Report, developed by the Master of Counselling Self Study Committee.
2. *Report of the External Review Committee on the Masters of Counselling Program, Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge* (received January 15, 2015) – External Review Report by William Borgen (UBC) and J. David Smith (UOttawa) based on their site visit of December 4 - 5, 2014.
3. *Response of the Self-Study Committee to the External Review Committee, Masters of Counselling Program, Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge* (received February 18, 2015) – response of the Self Study Committee to the external review.
4. *Dean's Response* (received April 16, 2015) – response to the review, written by Craig Loewen, Dean of the Faculty of Education, and Robert Wood, Dean of the School of Graduate Studies.

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<sup>1</sup> All documents are available upon request.

## Self Study

The Master of Counselling evolved from the Graduate Program in Counselling of the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology Program, and the Self Study Report notes that the program is still evolving and so this review will be the foundation of more in-depth analysis in the future.

There are strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for the program embedded throughout the body of the report:

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<b>Strengths:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The program seeks a balance of core/common elements with individual autonomy for instructors in the courses offered.</li><li>• The program attracts over 100 well-qualified applicants every year.</li><li>• Applications have risen from 33 in 2009 to 119 in 2014.</li><li>• The number of registrations in the program has remained steady since 2009.</li><li>• Withdrawal rates have dropped since 2008.</li><li>• There is a commitment that tenured faculty teach most of the courses in the program.</li><li>• Small class sizes of 20 students allow interactions with peers and faculty members.</li><li>• Designed for the working professional, the program provides flexible learning through online and classroom environments.</li><li>• Most faculty members belong to the College of Alberta Psychologists and ensure that the program aligns with current professional requirements and standards.</li><li>• Faculty members in the program engage in a range of research, regionally and globally.</li><li>• All faculty members in the program must have a doctorate in Counselling Psychology or a related field and be eligible for registration with the College of Alberta Psychologists.</li></ul>
	<p><i>Exit Survey/Focus Group Data:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students feel that the program and its course offerings are high quality.</li><li>• Students feel that faculty have a range of experience and expertise.</li><li>• Third year students like the program's flexibility, access, and cohort model.</li><li>• Students feel that the blended learning format offers a good balance between distance and face-to-face learning.</li><li>• Many third year students feel that the online delivery makes them accountable for their learning.</li><li>• Third year students feel well prepared to enter the profession.</li><li>• The quality of teaching is rated highly by students.</li><li>• Students are very satisfied with program advising.</li><li>• Students think that the technical support is excellent.</li><li>• Most students rate the quality of program resources as good to excellent.</li></ul>
<b>Weaknesses / Challenges:</b>	<hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sometimes, instructors have competing visions of the content and objectives of specific courses.</li><li>• Communication with students is not always clear.</li><li>• Students compete for practicum placement with students from other counselling programs. Practicum placements are very difficult to find.</li><li>• How to revise the program to ensure it remains competitive?</li><li>• How can the program more effectively use distance delivery and emerging technologies?</li><li>• How can the program continue to provide scholarships in light of budget restructuring?</li><li>• The program needs counselling lab space.</li></ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The program needs the latest technology to support its online instructional space.</li> <li>• The time commitment involved is not well communicated in advertising for the program.</li> <li>• I.T. support is not available during weekends and evenings.</li> </ul> <p><i>Exit Survey/Focus Group Data:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not all students agree that program expectations are reasonable or are clearly communicated.</li> <li>• Some students find that the blended delivery offers challenges in balancing learning with work and family demands and that it can be isolating.</li> <li>• Many practicum sites require a large number of hours (sometimes 30+ hours per week).</li> <li>• The requirement for students to come to campus once per term for face-to-face practicum classes can be inconvenient.</li> <li>• Course expectations can be mixed among the faculty.</li> <li>• Students believe they are disadvantaged in accessing scholarships and awards.</li> <li>• Student opinion on the quality of academic advising is mixed.</li> <li>• Students feel that orientation to the program is weak.</li> <li>• Support for Moodle is lacking.</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a Summer Institute experience.</li> <li>• Find ways for students to work with real clients.</li> <li>• Encourage more FNMI applicants.</li> <li>• Continue to build an assessment library and share it with other programs.</li> </ul> <p><i>Exit Survey/Focus Group Data:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop an advanced course on interventions.</li> <li>• Review the course sequence so that skills and interventions are reviewed just before practicum and that the third year is not overcrowded with project, portfolio, and practicum assignments.</li> <li>• Give students from B.C. the option to replace an elective with a course in family systems, which is required for certification in that province.</li> <li>• Give students realistic information about the time commitment required by the program.</li> <li>• Give students more information on the professional registration process.</li> <li>• Assign a practicum coordinator to the program to help students with their practicum placements.</li> </ul>
<b>Threats:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students currently have to arrange their own practicum placements, which is sometimes difficult.</li> <li>• Online teaching has heavy demands, especially the evaluation components.</li> <li>• There is heavy competition for students from counselling programs at other institutions, and also from the M.Ed. (Addictions Counselling).</li> <li>• New residency requirements from regulatory colleges.</li> </ul>

The report concluded with some reflections for the future of the program:

- Faculty must be responsive to: changes in the profession; changing demographics of applicants; needs of professionals in northern and remote areas; and increasing use of technology in the profession.

- Faculty are refining the program by reviewing its structure and sequence and by considering the horizontal integration of courses and assignments to make the transition to clinical work easier.
- Faculty should reconsider practicum requirements, given that many students struggle to find quality placements.
- Faculty must work with Information Technology staff to find better ways to connect with students and build community.

### ***External Review***

Overall, the External Review concluded that the M. Counselling program is of good quality. Faculty, staff, and Faculty of Education senior administration are effective and engaged in the program. The faculty are engaged in scholarship, research, and the professional aspects of counselling. Students have appropriate supports and report high levels of satisfaction with the program. Graduates are recognized by licensing and accrediting bodies. The program is aligned with the U of L and Faculty of Education strategic plans.

The External Review Report contained 18 recommendations for improving the program:

1. When the program begins, clearly communicate the program expectations for workload and time commitments at different stages of the program. Involve former students in developing these expectations.
2. Examine program and course requirements to eliminate redundancy and streamline learning activities across courses. As part of this, review how APA style is introduced and required across courses.
3. At the beginning of each course, provide a detailed course outline that clearly shows course requirements.
4. Give students feedback that is informative and timely.
5. In the Assessment course integrate practical assessment training.
6. In the program sequence, move the skills training and intervention course closer to the practicum.
7. Expand the range of teaching strategies and reduce reliance on discussion forums.
8. Continue developing and enhancing community networks for practicum opportunities.
9. Consider providing students with clinical experience before their final practicum, perhaps through a summer training clinic on campus.
10. Focus learning activities on developing integrated counselling skills and methods as a foundation for the practicum experience. De-emphasize secondary learning objectives such as APA style.
11. Provide a forum for faculty to discuss how the demands of teaching in an online format may interfere with their ability to do research and other scholarly activity.
12. Consider aligning the M. Counselling and M.Ed. programs to capitalize on the strengths of each program. For example: open pathways for transferring between programs for thesis completion of M. Counselling students; allow M.Ed. students to take blended learning courses; allow M. Counselling students to take courses to meet Council on Accreditation of

Counsellor Education Programs standards and certification and registration requirements in other provinces.

13. Find ways to track the employment and professional licensing outcomes of graduates. Also, find ways to increase response rates on student evaluation of teaching and the exit survey.
14. Explicitly state all admission criteria, to align admission decisions with the program mission.
15. Investigate if there is a systemic issue in the admission process or in the program that discourages older, rural students from applying.
16. Ensure technical support is available outside regular office hours.
17. Develop a system that compiles technical challenges related to online program delivery and suggested solutions.
18. Develop an institutional strategy for delivering on-campus services to students who are off-campus (like counselling or career planning).

The body of the report noted the following strengths of the program:

- The program aligns well with several of the objectives in the U of L Strategic Plan and the Faculty of Education Unit Academic Plan.
- Program curricula and learning environment are high quality. Program structure and content are comparable to other counsellor education programs in Canada.
- Graduates are well prepared for professional practice.
- The blended learning model provides a unique learning environment.
- The cohort model is critical to the success of the program.
- Students feel they are well-supported by faculty and staff, who are highly committed and engaged in the program.
- Faculty monitor student progress and quickly address learning or professional issues.
- Faculty stay informed about the counselling field, and keep the program aligned with licensing and certification standards.
- Faculty are skilled, knowledgeable, and well-qualified.
- Faculty of Education performance evaluation processes support quality teaching and scholarship in the program.
- Applicant interviews ensure the best qualified applicants are admitted.
- Technical support is effective.
- The M. Counselling degree is well recognized by professional bodies in Alberta.
- Graduates are being hired across a range of employment sectors.

Areas of improvement for the program include:

- Workload expectations are uneven across courses and between instructors. Sometimes workload expectations are not clearly communicated.
- Feedback on assignments is sometimes late or absent.
- Some students would like to know all course readings and assignments at the beginning of the course.
- The assessment course should be more focused on practical aspects, to better prepare graduates for clinical practice.
- Courses rely too much on text-based discussion forums. Live discussions, video lectures, and demonstrations are underused.
- The discussion forums have too much focus on APA formatting.
- Students are more interested in opportunities to practice clinical skills. There is a lack of skills training in the program.
- The two designated skills courses should be sequenced closer to the beginning practicum.
- Students have difficulties finding practicum sites. Some end up having a long commute.
- Response rates to course evaluations and exit questionnaires are low.
- The program could better serve students in rural and remote areas.
- Technical support personnel responding to support requests, informally, outside of their working hours is not sustainable.
- Students living outside Lethbridge have more limited access to student services.
- Support is lacking for students looking for practicum placements.
- There is some unevenness in the level of research and scholarship activity across faculty members.
- The degree is considered terminal, which leads to barriers in applying for a PhD program.

## ***Program Response***

The Self Study Committee responded to the External Review Report, clustering their own recommendations into five areas:

<b>1. Faculty and student workloads</b>	<b>Student workloads</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At several points during the program, clearly communicate to students the program expectations and financial costs. Review how information is communicated to students and when it is communicated. Also review the amount of course time required per week.</li> <li>• Examine course and program requirements, to eliminate redundancy, streamline learning activities, and balance expectations across courses.</li> </ul> <b>Faculty workloads</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor the workload of faculty who teach online.</li> <li>• Find ways to guarantee a non-teaching term each year for faculty who teach online.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Practicum</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and enhance community networks to boost practicum opportunities.</li> </ul>

<b>placements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider a training clinic experience, on campus or in the community, to give an opportunity to work with real clients before the practicum.</li> <li>Review course sequencing. Currently the skills course is taught one year before the practicum, and the intervention course is taught two years before.</li> </ul>
<b>3. Technical support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a process that allows technical support related to online delivery to be provided outside normal hours.</li> </ul>
<b>4. Curriculum</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure instructors provide timely feedback to students.</li> <li>Ensure instructors develop teaching approaches that do not overly rely on responding to discussion forum questions. Where possible, these teaching approaches should allow students to conduct counselling sessions and assessments with individuals from outside the program.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Administration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Find better ways to track the employment and professional licensing outcomes of graduates.</li> <li>The program does not have good program evaluation data as few students complete the online evaluations.</li> <li>Use an exit survey to capture data from a broader range of students.</li> <li>Review admission criteria to ensure admissions decisions align with the program mission. In this review, consider if there are systemic issues with the admissions process or the program that discourage older rural students from applying.</li> <li>Develop a strategy for delivering counselling and career planning services to online students.</li> <li>Consider aligning the Master of Counselling and the Master of Education programs.</li> </ul>

### ***Dean's Response***

In their response, the Dean of Education and the Dean of Graduate Studies addressed review recommendations by organizing their response into six areas:

<b>1. Messaging</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Graduate Programs in Education Committee (GPEC) will review communications related to the program and consider additional ways of communicating with students.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Course load and sequence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Program instructors must discuss with students the workloads for individual courses.</li> <li>The counselling instructor group will review the sequencing of courses so workloads are manageable for students and faculty and to address concerns about skills training before the practicum. Recommendations from this review will be forwarded to GPEC.</li> </ul>
<b>3. Discussion forums</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The counselling instructor group will draft a professional development plan to help diversify instructional methodology.</li> <li>The counselling instructor group will be encouraged to liaise with the Teaching Centre to explore other technologies that could be used in the program.</li> </ul>

<b>4. Placements and support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make the Coordinator of Counselling Programs position an ongoing position to monitor program development, implementation, and practicum placements.</li> <li>• The School of Graduate Studies will propose to create a new position, the duties of which will include coordinating practicum placements for all graduate students.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Evaluations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask the program faculty members to pilot an effective student course evaluation tool and look into ways to encourage students to complete course evaluations.</li> <li>• Task the Faculty of Education's Graduate Studies and Research unit with tracking graduates and their employment for two years after graduation.</li> </ul>
<b>6. Alignment of M.C. and M.Ed. programs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The counselling instructor group will consider including a thesis option for the Master of Counselling program and bring their recommendations to GPEC, EFC, and Graduate Council.</li> </ul>

The Academic Quality Assurance Committee is satisfied that the Master of Counselling program academic quality assurance review has followed the U of L's academic quality assurance process appropriately, and acknowledges the successful completion of the review.

Sincerely,

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IAN MACLACHLAN FOR:

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Robert A. Boudreau  
Chair, Academic Quality Assurance Committee

Cc: Andrew Hakin, Provost and Vice President (Academic)