

Assessment of Older Persons: Training and Resources

By: [Jane E. Myers](#) and Terrance L. Peterson

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Abstract:

A survey of counselor education training programs and test publishers indicates that some training in assessment with older persons is being done, although available instruments are limited.

Article:

It has been well established that older persons constitute an important target population for counselors (Blake, 1975; Myers, 1983). Shertzler and Linden (1982) noted that all counselors, regardless of theoretical orientation or client population, are called on to conduct assessments of their clients. Because the population of the United States is rapidly aging and because counselor preparation programs are training increasing numbers of gerontological counselors to work with older persons, it is important to examine the extent of professional preparation and resources for conducting assessments with this special population.

The October 1982 special issue of *Measurement and Evaluation in Guidance* (MEG), titled "Assessment of Older Persons" (Myers & Rimmer, 1982), raised a number of important issues. The primary purpose of the issue was to explore the various assessment instruments available for use with older persons. Several key areas of concern, including assessment of counseling needs of older persons, life satisfaction, attitudes, death concerns, retirement readiness or maturity, and leisure, were targeted. The majority of instruments surveyed in the issue had several characteristics in common. First, they were developed specifically for use with older persons. Second, they had some type of norms available for older populations. Third, most of them were neither developed nor distributed through major test publishers. The third characteristic, in particular, has resulted in somewhat limited knowledge and accessibility to many of these instruments. The extent to which major test publishers have either developed tests for use with older people or renormed available instruments for use with this population was not determined.

Another concern raised in the 1982 issue of MEG was the extent to which counselor preparation programs have integrated knowledge about aging into existing courses dealing with assessment and appraisal. The standards of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Services Programs (1982) require that preparation programs have an assessment course, but the exact content is not specified. Various authors have suggested the need to include testing procedures for minorities (Oakland, 1982), and older persons represent a minority. It seems, therefore, that assessment courses could reasonably be expected to include some content related to older persons, especially in the increasing number of programs that purport to train gerontological counselors.

This study was undertaken under the auspices of the Association for Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development's Interest Group on Adult Development and Aging to develop baseline information regarding two issues: (a) the availability of tests, through major publishers, for use with older persons; (b) the extent to which assessment procedures for older persons have been integrated into existing counselor preparation programs.

METHODOLOGY

A two-phase approach was used to gain information on the dual concerns specified above. A questionnaire was mailed during each phase. Instructions for each questionnaire included a definition of older persons as those ages 60 and above. A self-addressed return envelope was enclosed to encourage responses. Only one mailing was sent to counselor educators; a second was sent to the test publishers because of a low initial response rate. In the first phase, a brief questionnaire was developed and mailed to a selected list of 21 major test publishers. The list was obtained from the most recent edition of a major assessment textbook (Anastasi, 1982). The publishers were asked to answer four questions to determine (a) if they published any instruments suitable for use with older people, (b) if older persons were part of the norm groups for these instruments, (c) if special norms for older persons had been established for any of their instruments, and (d) if any of their instruments had special formats such as large print or large answer sheets available for use with older persons. Publishers were asked to list titles of instruments where applicable.

In the second phase, a brief questionnaire was mailed to the department chair of 484 counselor preparation programs identified in *Counselor Preparation, 1983—85* (Hollis & Wantz, 1983). Five questions were asked to determine (a) whether the counselor preparation program included any educational experiences designed to prepare students in the assessment of older persons; (b) if so, whether these experiences were within the required general assessment course; or (c) whether a specialized course was available to provide training in the assessment of older persons; (d) whether practicums and field experiences in assessment with older persons were provided; and (e) what types of such experiences were provided.

RESULTS

A total of 9 questionnaires were received from test publishers, representing a 43% rate of return; 261 questionnaires were received from counselor educators, representing a 54% rate of return. Of the 9 test publishers who responded, 7 indicated that they published instruments appropriate for use with older people. These included one individual intelligence test, several achievement and interest tests, and specialized instruments to test memory, retirement activity, and life satisfaction. Of 6 publishers who indicated that older persons were part of the norm groups for these tests, 1 indicated that older people were part of the norm groups for all of their tests. Only 3 publishers indicated that special norms had been established for older persons for any of their instruments, and 3 indicated that special formats were available for older people for some of their instruments.

The responses of the counselor educators can be found in Table 1. This table shows that 36% ($n = 93$) of the responding departments reported having opportunities to train students in the assessment of older persons. Of these experiences, 39% were offered in the required general assessment course and 11% ($n=11$) were offered in a specialized course in assessment of older persons. Almost one-third of the departments indicated they provided practicums and field experiences in assessment of older persons.

TABLE 1
Responses of Counselor Educators

Question	Yes		No		Total
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
1. Do you offer experiences to train students in assessment of older persons?	93	36	168	64	261
2. If yes, are these experiences within the required general assessment course?	51	39	80	61	131
3. If yes, do you have a specialized course that provides training in assessment of older persons?	11	11	91	89	102
4. Do you provide practicums and field experiences in assessment with older persons?	68	30	158	70	226

Table 2 provides a further breakdown of Questions 1 and 4 by regions of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES). The most extensive preparation for assessment of older persons occurs in the southern, north central, and north Atlantic regions, respectively. These three regions also reported having the most courses for the preparation of gerontological counselors (Myers, 1983) as well as the greatest number of related assessment practicums and field experiences.

Respondents providing experiences in assessment of older persons were asked to describe those experiences. Of those who responded, 3 reported that students were encouraged but not required to conduct assessments with persons of all ages in the regular appraisal course; 1 indicated that assessments of older persons were required in the regular appraisal course; 8 indicated that such assessment experiences were available through their campus gerontology centers; and 1 reported the experiences were covered in an advanced assessment course. Available practicums and field experiences in assessment of older persons were reported by 38 of those responding. These experiences occurred in settings where students could work with older people if they chose that experience. In all cases such experiences were elected and not required.

TABLE 2
Affirmative Responses of Counselor Educators to Questions 1 and 4

Question	Region					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
1. Assessment preparation for work with older persons	20	29	25	6	12	92
4. Practicums and field experiences available?	16	17	19	7	6	65

Note. Region 1—North Atlantic; Region 2—Southern; Region 3—North Central; Region 4—Rocky Mountain; Region 5—Western.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that counselor education programs are beginning to provide experiences in assessing older people. The inclusion of such experiences in counselor preparation programs is a sign of recognition of the existence of special skills and issues related to appropriate assessment of this population. The elective nature of these experiences, however, also seems to indicate that counselor educators do not consider them as essential or required skills in the entry-level preparation of counselors.

The rapidly expanding number of older people in our society, coupled with the increasing demand for psychological services for these individuals, warrants consideration of including assessment skills with older persons as a basic requirement of counselor preparation. The current *Standards for Preparation in Counselor Education* (ACES, 1979), in the appraisal section of the common core, identify the importance of considering ethnic, cultural, and sex-related variables in the appraisal process. It seems that age-related factors should be an equally important consideration. As proposals are developed for increasing the specificity of assessment preparation standards (Loesch, 1983), the importance of required experiences that provide exposure to a broad range of ethnic, cultural, sex, and age characteristics should be seriously considered.

Test publishers also seem to be making efforts to begin providing assessment tools that are appropriate for use with older persons. Specific normative data for this population, however, are sparse. The development of normative information, especially for older people in independent living situations (rather than institutional settings), is a critical need.

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