
Toward the Development of a Program Evaluation Business Model: Promoting the Longevity of Counselling in Schools

Kelly Ernst

Hull Child and Family Services

Bryan Hiebert

University of Calgary

ABSTRACT

This article presents a model of comprehensive guidance and counselling integrated within a business context. Counselling services are broadly defined as products, supported or maintained through practices found in human service businesses. Evaluative information can be used as stimuli for stakeholders in developing accountability arguments directed at strengthening counselling services. The article concludes that using program evaluation to position counselling as a business with effective service products may enhance the long-term viability of comprehensive guidance and counselling programs.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente un modèle de programme intégré d'orientation et de counseling mis en pratique dans un contexte d'affaires. Au sens large, les services de counseling sont des produits soutenus et gérés à l'aide de pratiques trouvées dans les entreprises fournissant des services sociaux. Des renseignements d'évaluation peuvent servir d'encouragement aux parties intéressées lors de l'élaboration d'arguments visant à renforcer la responsabilité des services de counseling. En terminant, les auteurs suggèrent qu'il est possible d'augmenter la viabilité à long terme des programmes intégrés d'orientation et de counseling grâce à une évaluation de programme ayant pour résultat des services de counseling plus efficaces.

There is a growing literature that describes human service fields within a business context (Dobson & King, 1995; Iacobucci, 1997; Koocher, 1994; Stratford, 1995). In this regard, comprehensive guidance and counselling programs are similar to other human services and counsellors must often function as managers, supervisors, and marketers. Consistent with a business paradigm, counsellors are often asked to demonstrate outcome attainment and cost effectiveness. Unfortunately, counsellors often lack experience in entrepreneurial practice or access to business-oriented human service models. Thus, counselling initiatives may not survive without administrative and financial support for their implementation and maintenance.

This paper describes some important counselling program elements within a business-oriented paradigm, in the hope of offering suggestions that might increase the probability of continued or increased funding of school-based counselling programs. First we describe briefly the context from which a

business-oriented model arose. We then operationalize some critical elements of comprehensive guidance and counselling programs that can act as human service business products and describe some important business components that may act as supportive tools for counsellors and administrators. Finally, we summarize the model and some tools to assist practitioners to enhance their programs and advocate for the longevity of counselling programs within schools.

THE BUSINESS CONTEXT

As evidenced during the past decade, government funding for human services and education has decreased and an atmosphere of consumer management has taken root (Church, 1995; Dobson & King, 1995). This new business-oriented context defines students, clients, and funders as consumers who demand value in the services they pay for. Cost effectiveness becomes an increasing area of concern as governments and professional bodies begin to adopt an outcome focus (Dobson & King, 1995; Mitchell, 1990; Wilson & Pelletier, 1997).

Many writers note that this shift towards a business orientation produced difficulties for some professionals. Professional values tend to be aligned to the ethics and processes of counselling which often are perceived to be in conflict with the values of business (Dobson & King, 1995; Koocher, 1994; Margolis, Duckro, & Merkel, 1992). Further, there tends to be considerable resistance to business terminology within human services (Deming, 1993; Gray, 1992; Wilson & Pelletier, 1997). However, most counsellors have little formal training or experience in business and it is possible that those who criticize a business orientation within human services do so without evidence to support their opinions (Wilson & Pelletier, 1997).

Lopes (1994) reminds professionals that they must learn to compete in markets using terms of reference that relate to the context in which they are working. Most counsellors would agree that it is important to relate to clients in a manner that the client finds meaningful. In a similar way, counsellors need to relate to the business-oriented attitude of governments and school boards in a way that matches a business-oriented context. This may have benefits for counsellors working in comprehensive guidance and counselling. For example, it is possible that defining human services in business terms may assist in clarifying differences between business and service delivery program components (Weiner, 1994). Practitioners may be better placed to identify the separation between private and public interests and may better avoid dual role relationships between funding their services and providing those same services. Counsellors who operationalize their programs from a human service business perspective, may also derive assistance in clarifying those variables that contribute maximum program effectiveness.

Summary

Counselling programs may not survive without administrative support for their implementation and maintenance. The rise of accountability, with a corre-

sponding decline in funding for counselling programs, has produced a shift towards conceptualizing counselling services as businesses. Despite some resistance to define counselling within a business context, there may be some benefits in doing so. The model outlined in this paper is intended to assist counsellors in maintaining their programs and services in the current business-oriented context.

SERVICE DELIVERY PRODUCTS

Traditionally, counselling is viewed as a process directed at changing people's thoughts, feelings, and/or actions, to restore or prevent behavioural, emotional, and social dysfunction (Herron, Javier, Primavera, & Schultz, 1994; Kazdin, 1991; Kazdin, Bass, Ayers, & Rodgers, 1990). Woody (1991) suggests, however, that within a business context, professionals should adopt a product view of professional services. From this perspective, services and outcomes are viewed as products and which need to be clearly operationalized (APA, 1996; Margolis, Duckro, & Merkel, 1992; Woody, 1991). Program evaluation methods may be one tool to clearly operationalize the delivery of human services. An input-process-outcome framework can be particularly useful to describe the human service delivery process (Hiebert, 1994; Ernst & Hiebert, 1998; Gabor & Grinnell, 1994). Typically, such frameworks contain four components: system requirements, inputs, processes, and outcomes. We draw upon these perspectives to describe the business elements of comprehensive guidance and counselling programs.

System Requirements

System requirements refer to factors that are often a concern to funders, administrators, and managers (Ernst & Hiebert, 1998), such as: office ambiance, service boundaries, service modality, complexity and intensity of service, innovativeness of service delivery, program structure, and staffing models (Brekke & Test, 1992; Gabor & Grinnell, 1994; Hiebert, 1997; Pietrzak, Ramler, Renner, Ford, & Gilbert, 1990; Posavac & Carey, 1989). Hiebert (1997) suggests that such general factors enhance the perception of quality of service, but are not related directly to client outcomes. System requirements may be demanded by funders, but they usually have little to do with program effectiveness and may not have great value within a business paradigm.

Program Inputs

Program inputs refer to the resources, client characteristics, and design features operating within an agency that more directly affect the nature of the client-practitioner interactions (Ernst & Hiebert, 1998; French, Hiebert, & Bezanson, 1994; Kellett, 1994; Osborne & House, 1995; Pietrzak et al., 1990). Inputs also include program objectives and client goals, which are often used as baseline measures for determining client outcomes (Young, Gardner, Coley, Schorr, & Bruner, 1994). Inputs have greater potential as important service delivery variables because of their more direct link to client-counsellor interactions,

however, they most often are not directly connected to client outcomes. For example, it is likely that an agency with an adequate resource base will have a greater probability of providing effective services than an agency which is under resourced. However, it is difficult to demonstrate a cause and effect link between client outcomes and amount of resources available for services. Thus, input variables are important to track, but additional elements are needed to develop strong accountability arguments.

Process Variables

Process variables represent the service activities or therapeutic techniques intended to assist client change (Campbell, 1995; Drozd & Goldfried, 1996; Egan, 1994; Staff & Fein, 1994). Process variables can represent client activity or counsellor activity. Unfortunately, service processes are often overlooked or often confused with other service delivery components in program evaluation (Staff & Fein, 1994).

Process elements are important products in human service businesses as they differentiate one type of service from another and provide a unique identity for a service. In order to claim that a particular service is effective, it is necessary to document what the services is and demonstrate that the service plan is being followed. Only then is it sensible to assess which services are associated with specific outcomes for particular client problems. From a business perspective, identifying the processes that yield maximum counselling outcomes are an important element for consumers and funders of guidance and counselling programs.

Outcomes

Outcomes refer to changes in people's thoughts, feelings, actions, and relationships that restore or enhance functioning within one's individual developmental abilities (Kazdin, 1991; McEwan, 1995; Posavac & Carey, 1989; Pratt & Moreland, 1996). Outcomes are assumed to be the result of a process. Outcome indicators may be prescribed by professional, government, and/or funding bodies, however, frequently outcomes are not well defined and evaluators may inappropriately use input or process variables as indicators of service results (Perry Fagan, 1995; Schorr, 1994). Some writers suggest grouping outcomes into two categories: short-term or client output and long-term or client impact (Ernst & Hiebert, 1998; Flynn, 1997; French et al., 1994; Hiebert, 1994; Schorr, 1994).

Client outputs. Client outputs refer to the immediate and direct client-based results of intervention processes (French et al., 1994; Osborne & House, 1995; Pietrzak et al., 1990). These include indicators of client progress or goal attainment, i.e., the degree to which service goals have been attained compared to baseline levels (Pietrzak et al., 1990). Client outputs also include indicators of client learning, i.e., the specific skills, behaviours, attitudes, and knowledge clients acquire as the result of counselling (French et al., 1994; Hiebert, 1989).

Client outputs may be the most legitimate set of outcomes to study because clients and counsellors have more control over these variables than over other variables involved in counselling endeavours.

Client impact. Service impact refers to the degree to which presenting client issues have been addressed (Hiebert, 1994; Schorr, 1994; Seligman, 1995). Impact measures attempt to show that counselling has an observable and meaningful effect. These include factors such as: socioeconomic factors, recidivism, changes in patterns of interpersonal interaction, and follow-up standardized measures of psychological functioning. Impact outcomes often follow directly from client outputs. For example, students may learn anger management skills (client output) as part of a school bully-proofing program (process) and as a result there may be fewer fights on the playground (impact). Impact outcomes are important; however, counsellors should exercise caution when tracking client impact because frequently there are factors over which clients and counsellors have little control that affect impact variables (Hiebert, 1994). For example, if a child comes from a home where fighting is a normal and frequently occurring way of dealing with disagreement, it may have a negative influence on attempts to reduce bullying, even though the program per se is a well developed intervention. Thus, in program evaluation, it is important to track both client outputs (learning outcomes) and impact outcomes.

Deming (1993) suggests that when products of counselling are oriented towards result-based services, often there is increased probability that practice objectives and organizational mandates will be met. Funders and government bodies are increasingly concerned that contracted services have outcomes that are aligned with service goals. The most important product of comprehensive guidance counselling services may be their outcomes. When information pertaining to outcomes is shared with stakeholders, it may act as a stimulus for creating an increased resource base. In this context, the new commerce of the counselling industry may be the outcomes of comprehensive guidance and counselling.

Summary

We have described counselling services in terms of four broad business products: system requirements, program inputs, intervention processes, and program outcomes. Researchers often use a combination of these elements to evaluate the effectiveness of programs and increasingly, funders are requesting feedback regarding the outcomes of particular services. Evaluation of these four business products, especially the demonstration of counselling outcomes, needs to become a more central part of comprehensive guidance and counselling services. Clear evaluation, and presentation of the evaluation results, can act as stimuli for stakeholders to make supportive decisions for service contracting. We propose that all four categories are important variables to help create the initial elements of a program evaluation design that will then be embedded in a business framework. Counselling outcomes may be the most important product and viewed as the basis or commerce of comprehensive guidance and counselling.

SUPPORTIVE HUMAN SERVICE BUSINESS ELEMENTS

There are a number of business elements that may be used by guidance counsellors as tools to help organize, present, and disseminate evaluative information regarding their programs and services and thus help support the viability of comprehensive guidance and counselling programs in schools. Key to this approach is the identification of the organizational context and the business tools needed to improve service accountability.

Supportive Factors within the Organizational Context

Stakeholders. There are a multitude of stakeholders with interest in a comprehensive guidance and counselling program, and each component of the program likely has a particular subset of stakeholders who have serious interests in it (Barlow, 1996; Flynn, 1997; Hiebert, 1997; Posavac & Carey, 1989). Each group likely is interested in different types of issues, processes, or outcomes (French et al., 1994; Schorr, 1994). Thus, it is prudent that program evaluations target specific stakeholder groups and even invite those groups to be collaborators for evaluation design and/or implementation (French et al., 1994; Gabor & Grinnell, 1994; Osborne & House, 1995).

Stakeholder perceptions are an important variable to consider in program evaluation. Thus, it is important to tailor stakeholder information to the particular group for which it is intended. If evaluative information is meaningful and presented well, then stakeholders are more likely to give meaningful feedback regarding services and are more likely to suggest support for counselling services that demonstrate effectiveness in addressing client needs (Kellest, 1994; Pettifor, 1994).

Strategic planning. Strategic planning involves an organization defining its mandate, operationalizing its day-to-day functions, and allocating resources in a manner consistent with achieving its mission (Gabor & Grinnell, 1994; Weiner, 1994; Yenney, 1994). A communication process is established such that stakeholders provide meaningful input to and feedback on all aspects of strategic planning. The feedback affects how organizations plan and allocate resources and how professionals structure their interactions with clients. Thus, the evaluative information used as the basis for organizational improvement must be have a solid base. Program evaluation information based on clearly defined system requirements, inputs, processes, and outcomes can provide the basis for stakeholders to have more meaningful and worthwhile involvement in strategic planning.

Accountability as a Supportive Practice

Accountability systems are designed to increase the probability that clients will receive quality services, that harmful practices will be reduced, and that agency self-improvement will be built into service delivery (Brownlee, 1995; Cummings, 1992; McEwan, 1995; Posavac & Carey, 1989). Accountability methods help ensure that evaluative feedback is maximally useful and directed towards the enhancement of counselling services.

Quality improvement. Quality improvement methods are aimed at producing a continuous improvement process, which encourages flexible services that use never-ending information feedback cycles, called iterations (Barton, 1994), as stimuli for change (Brody, 1993; Deming, 1993). According to Barton (1994), iterations exist in nonlinear, self-organizing systems where there may be patterns of solutions operating within cyclical systems. The results from one cyclical system become stimuli affecting the operation of another system.

Counselling services can be perceived as having a number of interrelated systems, interacting together with several cyclical iterations to produce patterns among its multiple outcomes (Ernst, 1998). Studying one factor of a system in isolation from other systems may not lead to useful knowledge about the system as a whole. A service delivery iteration can be perceived as one cyclical system operating within a human service business that produces outputs, such as evidence of client goal attainment. The human service outputs act as stimuli for a business iteration, which, in turn, produces business outputs such as recommendations for changes in service delivery or resource reallocation. These business outputs act, in turn, as stimuli for the service delivery iteration, and so on. Deming (1993) emphasizes that cyclical patterns as described above often produce a large amount of data which may act as stimuli for quality improvement recommendations. He also suggests that when a system acts on the data to produce better products or services, such action enhances the business itself and stakeholder needs become more adequately met in the process.

Marketing as communicating results. Marketing can be defined as: Finding out what people need, designing a product that will meet that need, addressing that need, measuring the degree to which needs have been met, and informing stakeholders these results (Acklaw, 1990; Woody, 1991). Viewed in this way, marketing is virtually identical with the program development approaches used in most comprehensive guidance and counselling programs. This is in contrast with the view held by many counsellors that marketing is about self-interest and profit taking (Acklaw, 1990; Koocher, 1994; Woody, 1991). It is important for counsellors to realize that marketing is necessary in order to maintain a strong supportive network and may actually extend and support their programs (Acklaw, 1990; Yenney, 1994).

Many writers suggest that one of the best ways to ensure organizational survival is to target services at the main sources of need and use accountability information to demonstrate the effectiveness of those services (Dessent, 1994; Lopes, 1994). The organization can then use this information as a marketing tool to create a steady supply of clients (Woody, 1991) and inform stakeholders of its success. The combination of program evaluation and communicating results as a counselling marketing tool, helps sustain stakeholder support, improve service delivery, and create more desire for these same services.

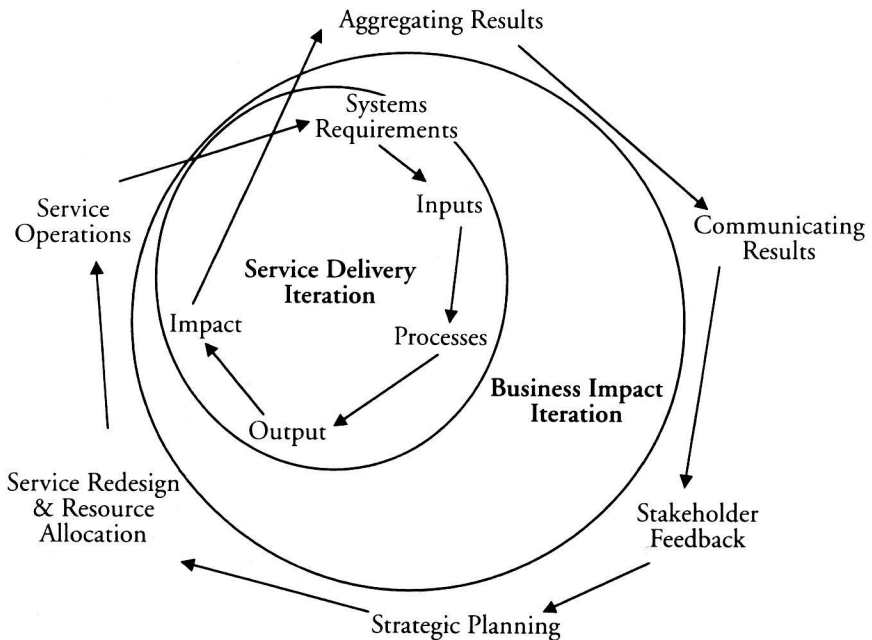
Summary

Program evaluation based upon quality improvement has the potential to improve program quality, enhance program reputation, and create greater demand for high quality programs (Cummings, 1992). Communicating program evaluation results (marketing) is an integral part of the development of effective client services. Marketing within a comprehensive guidance and counselling context, means involving stakeholder groups in the strategic planning processes and communicating results to all stakeholder groups. This in turn, creates support for specific services and ultimately affects the nature of a services delivered. We propose using the continual cyclical evaluation process, described by Deming and others, that links service delivery evaluation to the business operations of a counselling agency in a quality improvement loop. The use of quality improvement loops as a tool may help to operationalize program structure, enhance support for specific resource allocation, and provide direction for program personnel.

HUMAN SERVICE BUSINESS MODEL

The model we describe in this paper is based upon a number of interrelated concepts. The central concept is that human services can be integrated into

FIGURE 1
A Program Evaluation Business Model



a business paradigm. To do so involves defining human services as products grouped into: system requirements, program inputs, intervention processes, and service outcomes (both client outputs and impact). These products are maintained within human service businesses through supportive practices, strategic planning, seeking stakeholder feedback, and marketing or communicating results. Evaluative practices such as data aggregation are viewed as supportive practices. Knowledge about, and involvement in, service design and resource allocation, encourages stakeholders to support human service practices and organizational operations. The whole process is tied together using human service business iterations, where service delivery and business impact are interlinked within a context that encourages continuous improvement and enhanced services to clients.

Quality improvement loops ensure that information is circulated through the iterations. The communication of program evaluation results to stakeholders and program personnel is used as a stimulus for stakeholders to suggest recommendations for quality improvement. This feedback loop influences service design through the revision of service mandates and accompanying service products. A service delivery iteration evaluates the effectiveness of an organization's services. The business impact iteration assesses how services are valued and how they might be redesigned. The information resulting from one iteration acts as a stimulus for the following iteration and the process feeds on itself to provide more effective services.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to help counsellors conceptualize comprehensive guidance and counselling within a business context. As governments and other funders continue to emphasize results-based programming, business-oriented approaches take on greater importance. Counsellors need to be able to use these business concepts as tools in the promotion of their services. Conceptualizing human services as involving products within four broad categories (system requirements, inputs, processes, and outcomes) is a basic step in developing a business model mindset. Evaluating these products, in particular the outcomes of comprehensive guidance and counselling services, can provide meaningful feedback that stakeholders and funders can use as the basis for decisions about program support and resource allocation. Marketing program evaluation information to stakeholders can provide meaningful feedback for strategic planning. Program evaluation embedded within counselling services helps to create quality improvement loops that contribute to enhanced programs and services. Ongoing accountability feedback loops, based on sound program evaluation and integrated within service provision, will not only help counsellors orient themselves to a business-oriented context, but they may also help counsellors advocate for the continuance of comprehensive guidance and counselling services.

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About the Authors

Kelly Ernst is the Director of the HOMES-Muttart Research Project, an Alberta-wide research project based in Calgary, Alberta. He completed his dissertation in Educational Psychology at the University of Calgary in 1998 and has since conducted a number of program evaluations through his work with the HOMES project and private practice. Dr. Ernst has presented various topics in program evaluation at a number of provincial, national, and international conferences.

Bryan Hiebert is a Professor and Associate Dean in the Division of Applied Psychology, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta. Dr. Hiebert has published an extensive number of articles in program evaluation, comprehensive guidance and counselling in the schools, stress and wellness, counsellor training processes, and career counselling.

Address correspondence to Dr. Kelly Ernst, Director, HOMES-Muttart Research Project, Hull Child and Family Services, 2266 Woodpark Avenue S.W., Calgary, Alberta, T3E 2E7. E-mail address <kpernst@home.com>.