
Computer Applications in Counseling: Some Practical Suggestions

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Training, supervision, and the practice of counseling can all be enhanced with computer technology. This article discusses how.

Today there is increased interest in computer applications in the counseling and guidance field (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1983; Gauschell, 1984; Myers & Cairo, 1983). The purpose of this article is to synthesize the use of computers in conjunction with counseling and guidance. Because there have already been many articles on computer-assisted vocational and educational information systems (e.g., Harris-Bowlsbey, 1983; Super, 1970; Tiedeman, 1983), we will not discuss this application.

The major asset of the computer is its information handling ability. The microcomputer brings information storage, handling, analysis, and retrieval to the counselor in a way that has never before been available. Given the importance of the information function in counseling and guidance, the microcomputer provides the following possibilities:

Storage of Records. General institutional records and records specific to counselors, such as client and student information, counselor daily activities logs, and reference material, can be maintained. Storage on microcomputer disks is more efficient than through paper-and-pencil files. Records are more readily accessible and can be updated more conveniently. Used interactively with a word processing program, records can then be easily accessed for letter or report writing. Some examples of storage systems are PFS:File and PFS:Report (Software Publishing Corp., 1982) and Quickfile II (Apple Computer Co., 1983). One note of caution, however. Confidentiality of records, as always, is important because computer-wise clients may be able to alter records. Therefore, the use of passwords, identification keys, and counselor diligence is extremely important (Sampson & Pyle, 1983).

Needs Assessment. Several programs have already been written and are available for specific student needs assessment (Instructional Enterprises, 1983; Katz & Shatkin, 1983; Simms & Jensen, 1983). These game-type programs are "played" by individuals who learn about themselves by obtaining profiles and explanations. The programs automatically store item and total scores on disks so that counselors can assess respondent attitudes, values, or needs. There are similar programs for other client populations. Such information can provide a basis for program development for client or group intervention.

Counselor Research. The microcomputer allows counselors to maintain specific records for assessing the effectiveness of a counseling program or of specific intervention strategies. Counselors can use data obtained from the above needs assessment instruments and from tests, questionnaires, or inventories designed to measure specific client parameters. From a research perspective, the microcomputer can be used to collect, store, and analyze the data. The reports can be written using word

processing programs. Appleworks (Apple Computer Co., 1983) is an example of an integrated software package that would allow a person to use a report-writing program to retrieve data created by a different program.

Counselor Accountability. The microcomputer provides a means for easy maintenance of counselor activity records and for compilation of accountability reports (Crabbs, 1983). Specific software programs such as the Counselor Accountability System (Instructional Enterprises, 1983) and Listhandler (Silicon Valley Systems, Inc., 1982) provide systematic procedures for storing data in a manner that is readily classifiable, accessible, and retrievable. Accountability is facilitated by the computer's ability to analyze effectiveness on outcomes, across goals, and with specific interventions.

Counselor Information Service. With the microcomputer, counselors working within schools or other institutions can offer scoring services for analyzing staff-made tests. As a result, they can obtain continuous assessment data about the progress of individuals within specific groups or for comparisons across groups. This approach creates two desired effects. First, counselors can have updated current data about individual progress. Second, counselors can be seen (and rightfully so) by staff as being interested in the total institutional enterprise. Cooperation between professionals should be enhanced.

Educational Placement. Counselors can use already existing word processing software such as Screenwriter II (Sierra On-Line Inc., 1982), Bank Street Writer (Broderbund Software, 1982), and Wordhandler (Silicon Valley Systems, Inc., 1982) to develop automated production of college or job applications, resumés, and reference letters. Choosing an appropriate word processing package is very important. Several computer magazines (e.g., *Personal Computing* and *Personal Software*) regularly evaluate applications packages. The best package would be easy to use, would allow the writer to create both resumés and form letters, and would have changeable printout capabilities. Counselors could present examples of both resumés and letters of application on the computer and then either let the applicant fill in the blanks or develop her or his own credentials. Use of the computer would also help the counselor and his or her staff keep track of where individuals have applied and any additional desired information. The application possibilities here are constricted only by the creativity of the counselor, the capabilities of the applications software, and, of course, institutional parameters.

Public Relations. Word processing, mailing lists, graphics, and data-base software provide counselors with the tools to produce many kinds of letters, reports, and new items to be used in promoting any counseling function. Progress reports, letters of information concerning specific topics, "happy-grams," and so forth can be produced easily and targeted to specific groups for mailing or distribution. These kinds of software also allow such

documents to be personalized automatically in a manner consistent with the uniqueness of individuals.

Two application areas currently being developed are developmental assessment and counseling simulations.

Developmental Assessment. Instrumentation could be developed to assess various developmental domains, learning modes, learning environments, and institution environments. These in turn can be scored easily and quickly on the microcomputer. Data collection of this kind can vastly improve the counselor's ability to organize needed resources and to provide conditions for optimum growth.

Counseling and Guidance Simulations and Computer-Assisted Training. Decision making, problem solving, course-major choices, and simulated life events are all simulations that can be used in counseling and guidance training (Phillips, 1983). The computer can be used to provide the stimulus and analysis. Individual interventions, small groups, and large group settings can be used for follow-up discussions and for tailoring counseling interventions to the needs of individuals.

IMPLICATIONS

As counselors, we need to keep up with new trends in our field and within society at large. We are continuously assessing the impact that those trends may have on our profession. Computer technology has been with us for a number of years; however, with the advent of the microcomputer, it is currently much more usable. We have been slow to capitalize on its applicability, limiting it to a data analysis tool. Perhaps this slow response is due to the rather mechanical, logical demeanor of the computer and ignorance about counseling and guidance by those knowledgeable about computers. One of the most important things to happen in recent computer history is the development of computer software by those people in our field—counselors and counselor educators who know counseling and the counseling profession.

Counselors must learn the potential uses and abuses of computers if they are to guarantee that their clientele will benefit from technology. Counselors and counselor educators for the most part shy away from technological involvement. It is our opinion that through appropriate and well-planned conferences and enlightened training programs, counselors can become con-

versant with computer technology, learn to use available and applicable computer software, and enhance their humanistic perspective. Humanism and technology should not be viewed as being in opposition. A more helpful perspective is to consider these two components as mutual cornerstones for counseling and guidance in the present and future.

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