



THE COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY

DEPARTMENT OF ONLINE COUNSELOR EDUCATION

2025 Annual Report



Sandy Gibson
Department Chair, Professor
gibsonc@tcnj.edu



Lisa Cardello
Assistant Professor
camposa5@tcnj.edu



Kaitlynn Cornell-Mullane
Clinical Specialist
cornelka@tcnj.edu



Trevor Buser
Associate Professor
busert@tcnj.edu



Angela Banks
Clinical Specialist
banksa@tcnj.edu



Roman Petrocelli
Clinical Specialist
petrocer@tcnj.edu



Tricia Woodliff
Clinical Specialist
woodlift@tcnj.edu



Matthew Ercolani
Clinical Coordinator
ercolanm@tcnj.edu



Nicholas LaTorre
Assistant Director Career Counseling
latorren@tcnj.edu



Stefanie Paglione
Program Assistant
hitchne2@tcnj.edu



A Year of Growth and Innovation

Annual Letter from the Department of Online Counselor Education

Dear Community,

What an extraordinary year it has been for our Department of Online Counselor Education. Together, we launched The College of New Jersey's new Online Clinical Mental Health Counseling Program, a bold and community-driven initiative designed to prepare the next generation of counselors through innovation, accessibility, and excellence.

Over the past year, we have developed a full suite of courses, recruited our first cohorts of students, prepared a key group self-study, and built a Department of Labor–approved apprenticeship model, the first of its kind in the nation. Our team has grown from two to seven dedicated faculty members, and we are now in the process of hiring five more, further expanding our capacity to serve students and our community partners.

This program was truly built with and for the community, and our Advisory Board has been an integral part of its design and ongoing formative development. Their wisdom, collaboration, and deep commitment to the counseling profession have helped shape a program that is both rigorous and responsive to the evolving needs of the behavioral health workforce.

While this has been a whirlwind year of growth, creativity, and collaboration, we find ourselves filled with gratitude and excited for the year to come. We are delighted to share this Annual Report as a reflection of our collective accomplishments and as an invitation to continue learning, and serving together.

With appreciation,

Sandy Gibson

Sandy Gibson, PhD, LCSW, LCADC
Professor, Department Chair
Department of Online Counselor Education
The College of New Jersey

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Academic Quality Indicators (AQIs)

The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) requires programs to demonstrate ongoing commitment to excellence through a series of Academic Quality Indicators (AQIs). These indicators serve as benchmarks for assessing the effectiveness and use that data to propose continuous improvement of counselor education programs. Our department has identified nine Academic Quality Indicators that align with CACREP's standards. This annual report presents our progress on each of these nine indicators during our first year of program development and operation, highlighting how data-driven reflection, faculty collaboration, and community partnership have guided our growth and set the foundation for sustained excellence.

AQI 1: Analysis of KPIs

During the 2025-2026 Academic Year, our assessment plan called for the collection of data on all KPIs and the in-depth review of KPIs 1, 2, and 3. Inspection of results for all KPIs did not trigger an *ad hoc* review of any KPIs other than the ones scheduled for in-depth review during the 2025-2026 AY.

KPIs 1, 2 and 3 were assessed at two points in time. Following the table is a narrative description of the in-depth faculty review of KPIs 1, 2, and 3. The narrative includes our analysis of results, discussion, and program modifications. See Appendix A.

KPI 1: Professional Orientation and Professional Practice

Professional Counseling Orientation and Ethical Practice: Students will develop a professional counseling identity that includes how to engage in the profession of counseling, the role of social justice and advocacy in counseling, and ethical professional counseling practice (CACREP, 2024, 3.A.).

Analysis

KPI 1: Professional Orientation and Professional Practice was measured at two points in time, Introductory (I) and Reinforcement (R) KPI. Our benchmarks for both the I and R KPIs noted that 85% of students should meet the threshold.

At the Introduced assessment, students had an average aggregate median score of 2.3, while our assessment plan had a threshold of 1. One-hundred percent of students met or exceeded the threshold. We determined that we met KPI 1 at the I assessment.

We also reviewed the data at the Reinforcement (R) assessment with an average aggregate median score of 3.34. The threshold for the R assessment was set at 3, and 100% of students met or exceeded this threshold. Therefore, we determined KPI 1 was met at the R assessment. In view of data on the I and R assessments, we concluded that KPI 1 was met.

Discussion

At the I assessment, our initial impression was that an average aggregate median score of 2.32 was higher than expected, we were curious about that. We identified 11 outliers who scored a 5, which were deemed “proficient” in their very first course. We reviewed the faculty who were providing the outlier scores and identified that one faculty member was routinely rating students much higher than the other instructors and accounted for 100% of the outliers. Ten of the eleven students were from the spring session 2025.

At the R assessment, the threshold score was a 3.0. We inspected the individual counts and it appears most students scored a 3, which is on threshold. We did have a situation where a student was rated as a 4.5, which is not part of the actual scale. We met with our Senior Evaluation Coordinator, and he noted that 4.5 was derived from an early stage in our evaluation processes when we were using excel sheets rather than Canvas Outcomes. Now that we have converted to Canvas Outcomes for KPI assessment data collection, this is no longer a response option. No outliers were detected in the data.

Program Modification

Based on the discussion above, we decided to make changes in how we prepare faculty to complete student assessments. These changes included modifying the new adjunct orientation to include guidelines for using our KPI assessments (e.g., confirming shared understanding of each level of the rating scale), with allowable caveats for exceptional students. This same information is also shared with all faculty every term when the time for assessments is announced so that the resource is refreshed and readily available. Lastly, we will complete a mid-year evaluation of the raw data for KPI 1 to monitor for rater bias in scores and allow for immediate remediation. The Chair also had an individual conversation with this professor who assigned the outlier scores to understand their viewpoint and see how they perceive these new guidelines. We had a collaborative conversation about the guideline and there is better clarity for using the assessment measure.

KPI 2: Social and Cultural Identities

Social and Cultural Identities and Experiences: Students will integrate cultural context in the practice of professional counseling and apply culturally relevant skills for working with diverse populations

while striving to identify and eliminate barriers, prejudices, and processes of intentional and unintentional oppression and discrimination (CACREP, 2024, 3.B.).

KPI 2 was measured at two points in time, Introductory (I) and Reinforcement (R) Assessment levels of the KPI. Our benchmarks for both the I and R assessments noted that 85% of students should meet the threshold.

Analysis

At the I assessment, KPI 2: Social and Cultural Identities and Experiences had an average aggregate median score of 2.99, and the threshold was set at 1. One-hundred percent of students met or exceeded the threshold. At the I assessment, we determined that KPI 2 was met.

We also reviewed data at the R assessment. The average aggregate median score was 3.2, and the threshold was set at 3. One-hundred percent of students met or exceeded the threshold. We determined we met KPI 2 at the R assessment. In view of data on the I and R assessments, we concluded that KPI 2 was met.

Discussion

At the I assessment for KPI 2, the threshold was set at 1.0, which would reflect “novice” level. However, the average median score of 2.99 greatly exceeded the threshold, indicating that most students were deemed “competent” on this KPI. The data indicated that students were scoring more highly than expected on this outcome. This raised a question of whether the assessments were too simple for students, or if we had measurement error on assessments. Faculty reviewed the learning activities and assessment items related to this KPI at the introductory assessment period. We determined that the activities and assessments were appropriately challenging for students.

We also inspected the raw data with our Senior Evaluation Coordinator, reviewing the counts and assessing for outliers. It appeared that most students scored at the 3 or higher level. We then inspected the average aggregate median scores by instructor and determined that several instructors appeared to have assigned elevated scores—much higher than would be expected. The faculty decided to make a program modification to address this concern (see below). The data for KPI 2 at the R assessment were more in line with expectations of student performance: the average aggregate median score was 3.2, and the threshold score was 3.0. The faculty inspected the raw data to look at the counts at each level of the assessment. Most students scored as expected at level 3, which is competent. We did not have any issues of faculty rating students outside of the standard rating options. The faculty reviewed the learning activities and assessment items related to this KPI at the R Assessment period, and we decided that the

assessment was functioning as expected with a robust variety of activities and assessments. The faculty decided that no further action was needed to modify KPI 2 at the R assessment

Program Modification

Faculty determined that the elevated an average aggregate median score at the I assessment for KPI 2 was most likely due to measurement error due to rater bias (in this case, misunderstanding the rating scale associated with the measure). Consequently, we made program modifications that included modifying the new adjunct orientation to include guidelines for using our KPI assessments (e.g., confirming shared understanding of each level of the rating scale), with allowable caveats for exceptional students.. This same information is also shared with all faculty every term when the time for assessments is announced so that the resource is refreshed and readily available. Lastly, we planned to complete a mid-year evaluation of the raw data for KPI 2 to monitor for rater bias and to allow for immediate remediation. The goal is to support consistency in the use of the rating scale tied to this assessment. We took an additional step to ask course leads to review the canvas outcomes with faculty who are teaching their assigned courses.

KPI 3: Lifespan Development

Lifespan Development: Students will demonstrate knowledge and application of human growth and development, as well as related contextual dimensions, to the practice of professional counseling (CACREP, 2024, 3.C.).

KPI 3: Lifespan Development was measured at two points in time, Introductory (I) and Reinforcement (R) Assessment levels of the KPI. Our benchmarks for both the I and R assessments noted that 85% of students should meet the threshold.

Analysis

KPI 3: Human Development had an average aggregate median score of 1.9, while our assessment plan had a threshold of 1. One-hundred percent of students met or exceeded the threshold At the I assessment, we determined that we met KPI 3.

We also reviewed the data at the R assessment, which had an average aggregate median score of 4.48. The threshold was set at 3. One-hundred percent of students met or exceeded the threshold. Therefore, we determined we met KPI 2 at the R assessment. In view of data on the I and R assessments, we concluded that KPI 3 was met.

Discussion

At the I Assessment, KPI 3 had unusually high scores (an average aggregate median score of 1.9 compared to the threshold of 1). The faculty reviewed the learning activities and assessments related to this KPI. We determined that they were appropriate and well designed for the KPI. Next, the faculty inspected raw data and counts at I assessment for KPI 3. Many students scored at 3 or 4. We did not detect a pattern of outliers. We compared average aggregate median scores by faculty members, and the scores are well distributed between faculty members. One faculty member had a higher degree of variety in scoring. Some faculty generally were rating students higher than expected. Therefore, we decided to intervene at the level of the instructor to address rater bias (in this case, misunderstanding of the rating scale associated with the assessment).

KPI 3 at the R assessment had an average aggregate median score of 4.48. This was higher than expected. We expected an average aggregate median score close to 3.0 (threshold), and there were no outliers identified. The faculty inspected the raw data to look at counts at each level of the assessment, and most students were scoring as a 4 or 5. One faculty member appeared to have assigned elevated scores relative to what we would have expected at this stage of student development. We decided to intervene at the level of the faculty rater and provide faculty training on the use of the assessment. We also discovered a duplicate in the data. However, when examining the Canvas Outcomes platform itself, the data was not duplicated there. Therefore we were able to remove the duplicated items from the dataset, but did not need to modify the Canvas Outcomes platform. A note was made by the Senior Evaluation Coordinator to assess for duplicates in future data downloads and run checks for this. It was noted that we did not find this error in any of the other assessments. The removal of this duplicate did not significantly impact the average aggregate median score.

Program Modification

The faculty decided to intervene at the level of the faculty member to ensure understanding of the guidelines in using the assessment and support consistency in use of the measure. The Department Chair met with individual faculty to further educate about the assessment process and guidelines for use of the assessment. The data also informed program modifications that included modifying the new adjunct orientation to include guidelines for using our KPI assessments (e.g., confirming shared understanding of each level of the rating scale), with allowable caveats for exceptional students.. This same information is also shared with all faculty every term when the time for assessments is announced so that the resource is refreshed and readily available. Lastly, we will complete a mid-year evaluation of KPI data to assess for rater bias (in this case, misunderstandings of how to use the assessment rating scale) and to allow for immediate remediation. The goal is to increase interrater reliability in the use of this measure.

AQI 2: Student Success Committee Actions

The Student Success Committee gathered data on its operations and outcomes for the past 12 months. The Committee reported that there was only 1 student under a remediation plan in the past year. This student successfully completed the remediation plan and was able to avoid suspension or dismissal. Therefore, the Committee found that 100% of students on remediation plans in the past year were able to successfully complete the plan and avoid any further academic sanction. This outcome exceeded the benchmark, which stated that: “the minimum threshold for this AQI will be the successful completion of remediation plans and avoidance of suspension or dismissal for at least 85% of students who receive a remediation plan due to not meeting expected KPI benchmarks.”

Given the small sample size ($N = 1$), the Committee decided to review the remediation plan policy and procedures to determine whether any improvements were needed. The Committee broached this question with the entire faculty during the fall 2025 session. Faculty gave feedback on improvements needed at the initial step of the process, when faculty make a first attempt to resolve concerning behavior with a student. Faculty noted that adjunct instructors may need additional resources and training to become familiar with our steps and forms for remediation. Faculty also noted that they would value having a formalized way to recognize students who are excelling in various areas, such as learning outcomes or dispositions.

In view of this feedback, the Committee proposed the following program modifications, which were accepted by the faculty:

1. The Committee revised the Student Success Policy to clarify that individual faculty are tasked with making an initial outreach to a student in their courses, if the student is presenting with unprofessional behaviors/dispositions or academic difficulties. The committee made additional revisions to Policy to specify the role of the Career Counselor in the remediation process and to clarify the membership of the Student Review Committee (which oversees remediation plans for students, when faculty make the referral and a remediation plan is warranted). The faculty approved these proposed policy changes at the October 2025 faculty meeting.
2. The Chair of the Student Success Committee also created a new folder for adjunct faculty, including the Student Success Policy and a set of guidelines for adjunct faculty. The guidelines were designed to assist adjunct faculty in following the policy, when concerns arise in their courses about students' academic performance or behaviors/dispositions. The guidelines described the collaborative role played by course leads, when an adjunct instructor is working on a concern in this area. This step did not require faculty approval, as it was assembling resources so as to follow existing policy.

3. The Student Success Committee created a standard form for faculty to use (Faculty Outreach and Support Plan), when concerns arise in their courses about students' academic performance or behaviors/dispositions. The Committee also created a standard form for the Student Success Committee, called the Student Success Committee Remediation Plan, which the Student Review Committee will use when a concern about a student has been referred to the Committee for review and possible remediation.

AQI 3: Course and Faculty Evaluations

Faculty reviewed aggregated data on course evaluations by course. Data were analyzed on the following key course evaluation items.

- 1.) The course materials were well prepared and carefully explained.
- 2.) The course assignments added to my understanding of the course.
- 3.) The course examinations or written work reflected the content and emphasis of the course.
- 4.) The course methods for evaluating student work were fair and appropriate.
- 5.) The course increased my ability to critically analyze various ideas, arguments, and points of view.

Students rated courses on these items using a likert-type scale ranging from 1-5, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 5 indicating "strongly agree." The benchmark for this assessment was set at 80% of students rating the item with a score of 4.0 or higher. If more than 20% of students in a course rate any of the key items (quality of course materials, meaningful assignments, aligned assessments, fair student evaluations, and perceived impact of course) below 4.0, the course will be flagged for review by faculty. As part of this review, the faculty would assess areas needing improvement and develop an action plan for modifications in the following academic year.

Analysis indicated that all but three courses met benchmarks on all key evaluation items. The course evaluation data for all sections of CMHC 515 Research and Program Evaluation did not meet benchmarks on any of the 5 course evaluation key items in total. In line with our assessment plan, this finding triggered an additional analysis of data, inspecting student ratings on evaluations for this course by instructor. Faculty were able to review the aggregated data on course evaluations for CMHC 515 and noted that many of the findings for this course were based on small sample sizes (none of which exceeded 45% response rate). When only a small percentage of students complete course evaluations, such as two out of twelve, or nine out of twenty-seven, the resulting data becomes statistically unreliable and easily distorted. In these cases, a single student's response can significantly skew averages,

making it appear as though their individual perception reflects the consensus of the entire class when it does not. Low response rates also raise questions about representation, as research consistently shows that students who are either highly dissatisfied or highly satisfied are more likely to respond, while the majority who fall in between often remain silent. Consequently, the data tells us little about the experiences of most students in the course and offers no meaningful insight into teaching effectiveness or student learning. Moreover, there is limited scientific validity behind course evaluations in general; studies have found them to be influenced by factors such as instructor gender, race, course difficulty, and even grading leniency rather than by objective measures of teaching quality. For these reasons, results from such a small and potentially biased sample are not a sound basis for drawing conclusions or making evaluative judgments.

To support the privacy of course evaluation data by the instructor, only the chair reviewed these course/instructor level data. In view of the instructor-level data, the chair determined that the first cohort of students had the lowest rating scores, bringing the total rating to below benchmark, likely due the course having too many assignments, relative to other courses. The number of assignments impacted students' level of engagement in the course and instructors' ability to provide timely feedback on assignments. This data was collected anecdotally by students during the term, and also in course evaluation comments. Additionally, the chair determined that two sections were taught by one faculty member, who consistently had lower evaluations, compared to other instructors. Additionally some courses had students who chose 'not applicable' as response options which falsely drove down meeting the benchmark.

In view of the instructor-level data, the Chair decided to modify the course by reducing the number of assignments for students (specifically, all 4 JARS article review assignments were changed from individual to group assignments). This increased student ratings on the assignments from 25% meeting benchmark to 82%. This same dynamic was reflected in student ratings of the written work reflecting the content, with the first cohort of students having the lowest ratings, and assignment changes led to the course meeting benchmarks. The Chair met with faculty whose courses did not meet benchmarks to review course evaluations, explore areas of concern, and listen to challenges faced by the faculty.

There were wide variations in course evaluations for Group Counseling. The data indicated that the Group Counseling course did not meet benchmark on 2 of 5 items from course evaluations. Upon review by the Chair at the instructor level, data indicated that one specific faculty member had lower scores than the others, driving down the total outcome percentage meeting benchmark. The Chair met with this faculty member to discuss the course evaluations, provided opportunities for additional

training in online pedagogy, and personally supported their observation of the group experience and provided feedback to students as a model.

AQI 4: Site Supervisor Program Evaluations

At this time our first cohort of students is currently in Practicum. Therefore, there is no site supervisor program evaluation data yet. Our benchmark is that if more than 15% of site supervisors rate the program's preparation below Sufficient (a rating of 3.5), the program will conduct a review of its practicum and internship preparation curriculum and make necessary improvements. Written feedback will also be used to implement adjustments to curriculum, fieldwork preparation, and supervision training.

AQI 5: Student Site Evaluations

At this time our first cohort of students is currently in Practicum. Therefore, there is no student site evaluations data yet. In the future, if a site fails to meet any of the minimum thresholds for three critical aspects of the practicum and internship experiences (the quality of supervision, the adequacy of resources, and the availability of learning opportunities), the site will be flagged for review. The Clinical Coordinator will conduct a formal evaluation of the site to determine the specific deficiencies and discuss the results with the site supervisor. The Clinical Coordinator will work with the site to improve these areas by providing additional training for site supervisors, ensuring access to appropriate resources, or adjusting the student caseload to better align with the site's capacity. If a site consistently fails to meet the thresholds for supervision, resources, or learning opportunities over two evaluation periods within a two-year period, the program may remove the site from its placement options or limit the number of students assigned to that site.

AQI 6: Graduate Surveys

At this time our first cohort of students is currently in Practicum. Therefore, there is no graduate student survey data yet. Each year, the faculty will review the aggregated results of the graduate survey, comparing responses from different graduating cohorts. This trend analysis will help identify long-term patterns and determine if any recurring issues need to be addressed in the curriculum or fieldwork preparation.

As a benchmark, if more than 15% of graduates rate the program's preparation for professional practice below 3.5, the program will conduct a review to identify specific areas where the curriculum

or fieldwork components may be lacking. The review will involve analyzing the survey data to identify patterns or recurring themes in the feedback. This review will inform program modifications.

Additionally, the program will aim to achieve a 60% or higher response rate from the previous three graduating cohorts each year. If participation falls below this level, additional incentives or follow-up communication efforts (e.g., reminder emails) may be introduced to boost response rates.

AQI 7: Employer Surveys

At this time our first cohort of students is currently in Practicum. Therefore, there is no employer survey data. In the future, if more than 15% of employers rate graduates' overall performance or readiness for professional practice below 3.5, the program will conduct a thorough review to identify specific areas where graduates may be underprepared.

The faculty will conduct an annual review of employer feedback, comparing data from multiple years to track improvements and identify any recurring issues in graduate preparation. This trend analysis will help inform the program's strategic adjustments and ensure continuous alignment with employer expectations.

The program aims for a 50% or higher response rate from employers surveyed, ensuring that the feedback is representative of the range of professional settings in which graduates are employed. If participation falls below this level, the program may implement additional follow-up efforts, such as reminder emails or phone calls.

AQI 8: Advising Evaluation

The program systematically collects student feedback on advising through an annual Advising Survey (Appendix B. Student Advising Survey and Report from AY 24-25). The first survey was distributed to the Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 cohorts (n = 60), with a response rate of 33.3% (n = 20). Results demonstrated high overall satisfaction with advising (mean score 4.55/5), faculty accessibility (4.25/5), and the usefulness of group advising sessions (4.35/5). Students also reported the Advising Hub in Canvas to be easy to navigate (4.15/5) and expressed appreciation for faculty responsiveness. Areas identified for improvement included clarifying faculty advisor assignments, increasing visibility and outreach for online students, and expanding individualized support as students prepare for practicum and internship. Feedback also highlighted strong interest in supplemental workshops on topics such as private practice, interviewing, licensure preparation, and professional networking.

Building on these findings, the program has revised and expanded the Advising Survey, which will be distributed again in Spring 2026 (see 1.Q. Advising Survey - Spring 2026). The updated survey will continue to measure satisfaction with advising services but will also include more detailed questions about the frequency and effectiveness of faculty advising, career counseling, and support hours. It will further solicit student input on licensure preparation resources, career development programming, and advising equity across delivery formats. The results will be analyzed to inform continuous improvement of advising practices and to ensure that students have systematic opportunities to evaluate their advising experiences throughout the program.

Every January all students will be sent the Student Advising Survey via Qualtrics. The results will be reviewed in the February faculty meeting and recommendations for changes to student advising procedures will be documented in the meeting minutes. A modification of the Student Advising Survey will be completed to reflect these changes and capture new outcomes in the subsequent Student Advising Survey.

AQI 9: Fieldwork Placement Survey and Rates

The Department of Online Counselor Education at The College of New Jersey conducted a practicum survey to assess student experiences and support needs. With a 41% response rate (9 of 22 students), findings revealed that while most students were satisfied with their practicum sites and alignment with professional goals, several felt underprepared for field expectations and uncertain in using the Supervision Assist platform. Many respondents reported stress during the site search process and requested clearer timelines, earlier guidance, and more accessible resources. In response, the department has implemented multiple structural improvements: earlier field site searches, additional Supervision Assist trainings, weekly drop-in hours for site supervisors, and semesterly student focus groups co-facilitated by the clinical coordinator and career counselor. Additionally, new resources such as a YouTube instructional channel with dedicated playlists for students and site supervisors and a written timeline for the field experience have been created to enhance transparency, preparedness, and student confidence throughout the practicum and internship process.