

THE PROFESSIONAL CORE COMPETENCY AREAS

Russell J. Bent

*Wright State University
Dayton, Ohio*

The participants at the Mission Bay conference, the 1986–1987 midwinter meeting of the National Council of Schools of Professional Psychology (NCSPP; Bourg et al., 1987) supported an emphasis on key functional competencies of psychologists that would define a single, unified core or foundation for professional psychology programs. The chapters in Part II of this volume were, in earlier versions, the preconference papers at the San Antonio conference on the core curriculum, NCSPP's 1989–1990 midwinter meeting. They build on and refine the work begun at Mission Bay.

It is critically important that the idea of the competency areas should serve as a flexible guide for curriculum development. The curriculum should be sufficiently stable and explicit to define psychology as a profession. At the same time, it should be flexible enough to allow for diversity, growth, creativity, and organized development of new competencies and truly advanced applications. We also need to assure ourselves and the public that all practitioners have fundamental competencies, thereby ensuring a connectedness and a source of integration among all professional psychologists.

The competencies discussed in the next six chapters were based on a review of expert opinion, a review of empirical work, an analysis of current and future practice skills (Bent & Cannon, 1987), and a model for a developing knowledge base (Jones, 1987). The Mission Bay conferees moved to integrate skills and knowledge with attitudes or values. The result was the six key functional competencies elaborated in this section: relationship, assessment, intervention, research and evaluation, consultation and education, and management and supervision. The complexity of contemporary practice requires that professional psychology curricula include more than individual assessment, psychotherapy, research, and aspects of the psychology discipline knowledge base.

The competencies are fundamental clusters of integrated knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are used in practice applications by the professional psychologist. The competencies, at a basic or foundation level, constitute a single, unified core curriculum for all professional applications. The competencies are unified further in the mature role functioning of the professional psychologist, gaining more breadth and depth with added training and experience.

Knowledge, skills, and attitudes do not stand alone, but merge into competencies that are invariably complex blends. Seldom is any activity predominantly knowledge, skill, or attitude, except in early education and training. For example, research has a strong knowledge base, but the productive researcher must also acquire related skills and integrate proper attitudes. The competencies, observable throughout the various activities of psychological practice, are capable of being evaluated.

San Antonio Conference

As chairperson of the San Antonio conference professional core competency section, I put forward preliminary descriptions of the six competency areas to each of the authors who prepared a preconference paper. A major task for the San Antonio conference was the development of a useful, consensual definition for each competency area, which would serve to guide further curriculum development. Each definition had to allow flexibility and creativity while preserving a sense of commonality. The global definitions were to serve as roots for strong, diverse growth. Each program would specify its own detailed definition of the competency areas in relation to its mission and its definition of the psychologist graduate, the eventual practitioner.

The chapters in this section address the basic or core level of each competency. The chapters represent particular specifications and elaborations of each competency area and, therefore, are intended to be aspirational rather than prescriptive. In the form of preconference drafts, they were designed to stimulate and provide a basis for conference deliberations. For the complete conference definition of each competency, the reader should refer to the conference resolutions.

In addressing the competencies, the Mission Bay resolutions include two important points. First, the term *client* should be used in a broad sense to include individuals, couples, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Second, diversity should be addressed explicitly in all competencies (see Davis-Russell, Forbes, Bascuas, & Duran, chap. 20).

Although the conference resolutions provide much more detail, the six professional core competency areas can be defined briefly as follows:

1. *Relationship* is the capacity to develop and maintain a constructive working alliance with clients.
2. *Assessment* is an ongoing, interactive, and inclusive process that serves to describe, conceptualize, characterize, and predict relevant aspects of a client.
3. *Intervention* involves activities that promote, restore, sustain, or enhance positive functioning and a sense of well-being in clients through preventive, developmental, or remedial services.
4. *Research and evaluation* involve a systematic mode of inquiry involving problem identification and the acquisition, organization, and interpretation of information pertaining to psychological phenomena. Professional psychologists systematically acquire and organize information about psychological phenomena and often engage in the general practice of science.
5. *Consultation* is a planned, collaborative interaction that is an explicit intervention process based on principles and procedures found within psychology and related disciplines in which the professional psychologist does not have direct control of the actual change process. *Education* is the directed facilitation by the pro-

fessional psychologist for the growth of knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the learner.

6. *Management* comprises those activities that direct, organize, or control the services that psychologists and others offer or render to the public. *Supervision* is a form of management blended with teaching in the context of a relationship directed toward the enhancement of the competence of the supervisee.

Perspectives on the Professional Core Competencies

The competencies can be defined at varied levels. The levels vary in generality (focus), complexity, and experience. The foundation or core level should be generic to all programs, should be the most general, and should require the least professional experience. The more focused or special proficiency level should be differentiated, drawing on foundation experience. Finally, the specialty level should be the most focused (including a focus as a generalist), and the psychologist should be very experienced with the capacity to conduct a complex practice.

An overview of the generality, complexity, and experience manifest in the competencies at different levels of graduate psychology training is given in Table 1.

Much of what is basic and is included in the professional core in all our current specialties could be taught in 2 years of foundation-level teaching. If postdoctoral training and experience with advanced certification were to become necessary to qualify specialties through a national system of certification, programs would need to prepare students with a solid foundation and with one or more special proficiency areas, leading to later career specialization.

New specialty certification is emerging. For example, boards for forensic psychology, neuropsychology, and marriage and family psychology have joined the American Board of Professional Psychology, and others are in negotiating positions. Appropriately, professional psychologists are no longer satisfied with decades-old specialty areas. Therefore, educational programs must be more flexible and responsive in preparing candidates for the established, the new, and the emerging specialties. In moving toward curricular reform, programs should be able to ensure an adequate foundation for general or specialty practice while educating students in one or more areas of special

Table 1
Competencies at Different Levels of Graduate Psychology Training

Year	Competency
1 and 2	Foundation work
3	Special proficiencies
4 (internship)	Constructive balance of general and focused practice
Postdoctoral training, continuing education, experience, and practice style	Specialty, including general practice

proficiency (emphasis) in preparation for the option of specialization at the postdoctoral level. Programs should have the curricular flexibility to relate to the new and the emerging specialties. At the same time, the new and the emerging specialties should have more flexibility to relate to curricular innovations in the educational programs.

A major argument for a competency-based curriculum is that the competencies can be operationally defined in a manner that allows for explicit evaluation. The NCSPP 1991-1992 midwinter conference will focus on the relation between the competency-based curriculum and methods of evaluation. Such evaluation will contribute to program development, quality assurance of programs, and quality assurance of graduates.

Challenge of Curricular Reform

Undoubtedly, adoption of a core competency curriculum will necessitate some changes in the way we currently think about psychology training curricula. We need to think creatively about finding ways to meet the challenges before us.

Perhaps the time has come to move more concertedly toward a full-calendar-year program. Such a format would allow for reasonable curriculum expansion and the development of full-service, program-administered service centers. Program hours and continuity may be increased without adding to the total number of years required to complete the program.

There must be more flexibility and creativity in our curricula. Think of the ideal curriculum as one that embodies the teaching of the competencies by integrating scientific and professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Often too little of the practitioner perspective is incorporated into classroom work; too little discipline-based or scientific perspective is incorporated into field experience. There must be more balance.

The competencies should not be considered solely as the province of single courses, but rather as being distributed among a number of courses; as being taught in supervised practice, and as developing through the program's culture, through role modeling, through relationships among students, and so on.

The curriculum is more than formal classroom work. Almost 40% of the curriculum involves fieldwork under supervision. Modeling by faculty and by supervisors, relationships developed while studying with peers, the professional socialization of the student, attitude and value development, and much more constitute the curriculum.

The ideal curriculum should reflect about 60% foundation-level activities and 40% special proficiency or special emphasis activities. Most of Year 1 should be foundational; Year 2 should be a mix of foundation concerns and special proficiency pursuits; and Year 3 should emphasize special proficiency material. Some specialization may begin at the internship level, but specialization should be completed at the postdoctoral stage.

There seems to be little question that curriculum development requires more detailed, cooperative planning among faculty. In our program at Wright State University, the curriculum committee has been restructured to include the coordinator of each competency area. Each coordinator, in turn, heads a subcommittee of faculty who have major teaching responsibility in that particular competency. The structure has been very productive thus far.

We should not believe that graduates are "finished products." Rather, when students receive their doctorates they are professionals who are reasonably prepared to embark on lifelong development as practicing psychologists. Much will happen, perhaps most, as careers develop. Remember, from the acorn . . .

The challenge of the core professional curriculum, the competency-based curriculum, is clear. The rewards appear to be worth the effort involved in instituting curriculum reform. The excitement of creative change permeated the San Antonio conference. The following chapters on the competency areas reflect the creative potential of these new directions.