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Counseling Psychology program nationally ranked

by: Kathy Quirk

The School of Education's counseling psychology program has been ranked among the top 10 such programs in the country. The program, one of four areas in the Department of Educational Psychology, was ranked eighth nationally in the Chronicle of Higher Education's rankings on a list that included top programs such as those at Boston College, Teachers College and Penn State. The area educates psychologists who specialize as counseling psychologists. The focus is on preparing students who are multiculturally competent to work in an urban environment. The area also specializes in educating psychological scientists for research in counseling psychology.

Counseling psychologists work with individuals on a wide variety of issues, explains Nadya Fouad, professor of educational psychology. While some work in schools, others work in community settings and even in private practice. The doctoral program is accredited by the American Psychological Association.

"Our program is very young compared to many. To be ranked in the top 10 in our 11th year is very gratifying," Fouad says.

"I was looking for a program in counseling psychology that had a multicultural focus and was in an urban community," says Neeta Kantamneni, a graduate student in the program. "Dr. Fouad is doing a lot of work in that area, and that helped attract me. It has been a fantastic experience."

The field offers broad opportunities, says Fouad. "In the real world, the type of work a counseling psychologist does may depend on the setting. Some work in private settings; others serve leadership roles in community agencies." Others may work in private practice or in work force development, helping individuals with career transitions. Other graduates have gone on to work in hospital settings; for example, helping children with eating disorders or those who have difficulties managing a chronic illness.



Neeta Kantamneni

"Counseling psychologists have to be good communicators, leaders and collaborators," Fouad says, because they often work as part of a team of professionals to help patients.

The program's focus on a multicultural approach is one of its strong points, says Associate Professor Azara Santiago-Rivera. "We have one of the best models in multicultural competencies. We infuse multiculturalism into the curriculum."

That multicultural approach is important because counseling psychologists increasingly are working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. "There is a large demand for people with multicultural competencies," says Fouad, especially in urban settings. Most graduates of UWM's program do move into these urban settings, she adds.

Graduates of the program are able to work effectively with diverse populations, being sensitive to cultural and ethnic differences – the client's social context and values. There's also an increased need for counselors who are bilingual, able to speak Spanish or Hmong, for example, she adds. Different cultural and language backgrounds often impact both the challenges a client faces and

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potential solutions, say Fouad and Santiago-Rivera. In fact, some of Santiago-Rivera's research has focused on how clients access and relive events differently in their native language than when they are talking about them in English.

Needs in urban, non-majority populations can be very different from those in traditional majority populations, says Fouad, and counselors have to be aware of the cultural context when working with clients. "You need to consider the individual's environment, their cultural values, their access to resources – all the dimensions that influence that person's problem."

While not everyone in urban areas is living in poverty, and poverty doesn't always lead to mental health problems, it can be a potential factor, says Santiago-Rivera. Living in poverty creates a lot of stress and strain on families and family members. Being unable to access services because of income adds to the stresses, she notes. "One reason for having a program such as ours is to help people who work in urban settings to understand that dynamic."

While some students are interesting in doing research in the area, others come into the program because they are interested in doing clinical work. "I love working with people out in the community," says graduate student Roseanne Illes, who plans to eventually work in the Latino community. Counseling psychology, adds Kantamneni, can be a positive in working with clients, because it focuses on clients' strengths.

"Most people come to therapy because they're in some pain," says Fouad. "The ideal outcome is to help activate hope that there will be a change and they can start to access resources."

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