**Universitas Negeri Padang & Ikatan Konselor Indonesia**
**Editorial Office:** Jurusan Bimbingan dan Konseling | Faculty of Education | Universitas Negeri Padang
Jl. Prof. Dr. Hamka Air Tawar Barat, Kota Padang, Sumatera Barat, 25130, Indonesia.
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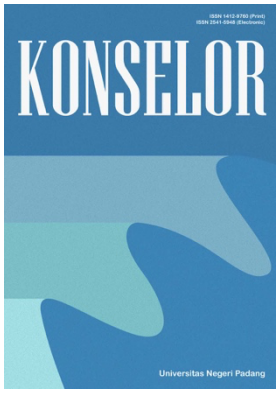
Volume 14 Number 4 2025




KONSELOR

ISSN 1412-9760 (Print) | ISSN 2541-5948 (Online)
Editor: Rima Pratiwi Fadli

Publication details, including author guidelines
URL: https://counselor.ppj.unp.ac.id/index.php/konselor/about/submissions

# Profiling Creative Competence, Cultural Literacy, and Career Readiness among Guidance and Counseling Students as a Basis for Developing a Digital-Art and Local-Wisdom Learning Model

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**Article History**
Received: Monday, October 20, 2025
Revised: Thursday, December 11, 2025
Published: Wednesday, December 31, 2025

**How to cite this article (APA)**
Afriyati, V., & Misbahudin, A. (2025). Profiling creative competence, cultural literacy, and career readiness among guidance and counseling students as a basis for developing a digital-art and local-wisdom learning model. KONSELOR, 14(4), 365–379. https://doi.org/10.24036/02025144159-0-86

**The readers can link to article via** https://doi.org/10.24036/02025144159-0-86

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ISSN 1412-9760 (Print)
ISSN 2541-5948 (Electronics)

Original Article

KONSELOR
Volume 14 Number 4 (2025)
https://doi.org/10.24036/02025144159-0-86

# Profiling Creative Competence, Cultural Literacy, and Career Readiness among Guidance and Counseling Students as a Basis for Developing a Digital-Art and Local-Wisdom Learning Model

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**Abstract:** This study presents baseline data on the levels of creative competence, cultural literacy, and career readiness among students in the Guidance and Counseling Study Program, informing the design of a learning model that integrates Digital Art and local wisdom. Using a descriptive quantitative design, the study involved 290 students across semesters, genders, and ethnic backgrounds. Data were collected via a validated questionnaire comprising three operationalised competency constructs and analysed using descriptive statistics. Results show that cultural literacy had the highest mean percentage (35.5%), followed by career readiness (33.2%) and creative competence (31.3%), indicating relatively strong cultural understanding. In contrast, creativity and career readiness remain at moderate levels. Descriptive patterns across semesters suggest higher scores in early semesters, with career readiness rising among final-year students. Gender-based differences were minimal, and ethnic-group variations must be interpreted cautiously, given unequal sample sizes. Overall, the findings provide an empirical profile of students' initial competencies and serve as foundational evidence for developing learning innovations that incorporate digital art and local cultural values.

**Key Words:** Creative competence; Cultural literacy; Career readiness; Digital art-based learning; Local wisdom.

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid acceleration of digital technology and global social change has reshaped the professional demands placed on counsellors. In the digital era, clients present increasingly complex issues linked to online interactions, multicultural identities, and shifting socio-emotional needs. Yet counsellor education has not kept pace, resulting in a widening gap between what the profession requires and what universities provide (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). This gap is evident in Indonesian Guidance and Counselling (BK) programmes, where learning remains largely theoretical, passive, and detached from real practice. Students receive limited opportunities to develop creativity, engage with cultural contexts, or acquire digital literacy competencies increasingly required in modern counselling settings (Siregar et al., 2025). Creative competence is the ability to think divergently, generate original ideas, and design adaptive interventions. Counsellors who lack creative capacity often rely on rigid, formulaic approaches that are ineffective when facing complex or unfamiliar client situations (Degges-White & Davis, 2017a).

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Cultural literacy encompasses understanding the cultural values, symbols, narratives, and social norms that shape clients' experiences. In multicultural contexts such as Indonesia, insufficient cultural literacy can lead to cultural blindness and ineffective counselling relationships (Sue et al., 2022). Career readiness reflects students' preparedness to transition into the counselling profession, including professionalism, adaptability, communication skills, and the ability to apply theory in real-world practice. Weak career readiness is repeatedly identified as a significant challenge in counselling training programmes (Conley, 2012). Creative competence, cultural literacy, and career readiness operate as interdependent dimensions of counselling professionalism. Creativity supports adaptive problem-solving, cultural literacy ensures contextual sensitivity, and career readiness strengthens role performance. Analysing these three competencies together provides a holistic baseline for designing learning innovations, including models that integrate digital art and local wisdom to strengthen these interconnected capacities (McNiff, 2008).

## METHOD

### Study Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative survey design to map and benchmark students' creative competence, cultural literacy, and career readiness. A descriptive survey is appropriate for establishing baseline competence distributions rather than testing causality (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Such designs are commonly used to generate population-level profiles, identify developmental gaps, and compare demographic segments (Check & Schutt, 2017; Dillman et al., 2014; Fowler, 2014), particularly in early model-development studies that require empirical profiling (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Because the study relied on self-report scales, risks such as social desirability and metacognitive inaccuracy were acknowledged (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007; Podsakoff et al., 2003). These were mitigated by focusing on aggregate patterns, using validated multi-item measures, and interpreting results descriptively in line with best practice (DeVellis, 2017; Kline, 2016). This approach supports the study's purpose of establishing baseline benchmarks to inform the development of the Digital Art and Local Wisdom instructional model.

### Participants

The participants comprised all active Guidance and Counselling students at Bengkulu University in 2024/2025. A census was conducted to generate a complete programme-wide profile. A total of 290 students participated (100% response rate), with data collected during scheduled academic sessions. The gender distribution (236 females; 54 males) reflects common structural patterns in guidance and counselling programmes. Participants represented semesters 1–9, enabling developmental comparisons. Ethnicity was recorded to contextualise cultural literacy, though it was used only descriptively due to unequal subgroup sizes.

### Measures

The instrument was a multi-scale questionnaire assessing creative competence, cultural literacy, and career readiness. Development followed established procedures for scale construction (DeVellis, 2017; Kline, 2016; Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). Item generation drew on theories of creativity (Guilford, 1967; R. J. Sternberg & Lubart, 1999; Torrance, 1966) and on counselling perspectives on creative intervention design (Degges-White & Davis, 2017); cultural frameworks,

including cultural capital and multicultural competence (Arredondo et al., 2014; Bourdieu, 1986b; Hirsch, 1988; Sue et al., 1992; UNESCO, 2017); and scholarship on career readiness and adaptability (Conley, 2012; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2021; Savickas, 1997; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012; Soland et al., 2014). An initial pool of 48 items was produced.

Content validity was established through expert judgment using CVI procedures (Lynn, 1986; Polit & Beck, 2006). Items below .80 I-CVI were revised or removed. The final S-CVI/Ave of .92 indicates strong content validity. (Lawshe, 1975; Rubio, 2003). A pilot test with 36 students assessed clarity and item functioning using item-total correlations and response patterns. (Costello & Osborne, 2005; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), resulting in five item removals. Reliability testing yielded strong internal consistency: $\alpha = 0.88$ (creative competence), 0.91 (cultural literacy), and 0.87 (career readiness), meeting recommended standards. (Cortina, 1993; Furr, 2021; George & Mallery, 2019; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The final instrument contained 43 Likert-type items designed for program-level profiling. (Cohen et al., 2018; Fowler, 2014).

### Procedure and Data Analysis

Data collection followed four stages: (1) Ethical clearance and informed consent ensured anonymity and voluntary participation; (2) The survey was administered over six weeks (Sept–Oct 2025) through supervised class sessions and secure online access to maximise participation; (3) Data verification involved screening for completeness, consistency, duplication, and demographic alignment with enrolment records, dan; (4) Cleaned data were coded, checked, and prepared in statistical software for descriptive analysis. These procedures produced a reliable dataset representing the entire BK student population and provided a solid empirical foundation for developing the Digital Art and Local Wisdom-based learning model.

Data were exported from Google Forms and analysed using descriptive statistics. Because the objective was baseline mapping, not causal testing, descriptive indicators were sufficient for identifying strengths, weaknesses, and distributional tendencies. (Fowler, 2014; Johnson & Christensen, 2020). Creative Engagement Theory guided interpretation. (Kaimal et al., 2016), Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986) and Career Readiness Models (Conley, 2012) enable theoretically grounded pattern recognition and identification of instructional needs relevant to the Digital Art-Local Wisdom model.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive profile of respondents

A total of 290 students completed the survey. The sample comprised 236 female students (81.4%) and 54 male students (18.6%), with representation across semesters 1–9 and from 17 ethnic groups; the largest ethnic clusters were Serawai, Bengkulu Malay, Rejang, and Javanese (see Table 1). Given the Guidance and Counseling programme's predominantly female enrolment, the observed gender ratio reflects the programme population rather than sample selection bias. Ethnic diversity is high in the cohort, but several ethnic categories include very small counts (some n = 1), so ethnicity should be treated as contextual descriptive information rather than the basis for inferential claims.


https://doi.org/10.24036/02025144159-0-86

## Overall competency levels

Table 1 and the accompanying chart summarise overall competency scores. When expressed as mean percentage contributions to the total competency profile, cultural literacy ranks highest (35.5%), followed by career readiness (33.2%), with creative competence lowest (31.3%). In plain terms, students report greater familiarity with cultural values and social norms than confidence in creative idea generation or professional readiness. These percentages provide a programme-level snapshot suitable for benchmarking and curricular planning (see Figure X: "Percentage Distribution of Competency Aspects").

## Overview of BK Student Competence

Analysis of the three main competency aspects of Guidance and Counseling (BK) students-creative competence, cultural literacy, and career readiness-shows relatively balanced results overall. Still, it reveals a tendency towards dominance in cultural literacy. Data from 290 respondents are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Total Scores, Mean, and Percentage of BK Student Competency Aspects

| Aspects | Total Score | Mean | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Creative Competence | 3521 | 12.1 | 31.3 |
| Cultural Literacy | 3991 | 13.8 | 35.5 |
| Career Readiness | 3727 | 12.9 | 33.2 |
| Total | 11239 | 38.8 | 100.00 |

The results of the study show that cultural literacy contributes most significantly to the competency profile of BK students, followed by career readiness and creative competence. These findings indicate that students have relatively strong cultural awareness, but their creativity and career readiness still need strengthening. The high level of cultural literacy can be understood in the context of Bengkulu's multicultural society, where students interact with various local values, languages, and cultural practices. Such cross-cultural experiences have been shown to increase empathy, broaden multicultural perspectives, and enhance counsellors' understanding of their clients' social dynamics. Sue et al. (2022) emphasise that exposure to diverse cultures strengthens multicultural competence, which is crucial in therapeutic relationships. The consistency between the local conditions in Bengkulu and this multicultural literature suggests that the social environment has provided a strong foundation for students' cultural literacy.

Conversely, relatively low creative competence indicates a tendency for the learning process to remain theoretical and to provide less room for creative exploration. Research in higher education shows that when learning is overly focused on memorisation and does not emphasise exploration, students' creative abilities tend to be inhibited (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009). These findings are also in line with Cojocariu & Jucan (2024), which reports that student creativity increases when project-based learning, digital art, and reflective activities are provided in a structured manner. Thus, the results of this study emphasise the need to strengthen creativity as part of today's counsellors' professional competencies.

Meanwhile, career readiness results in the moderate category indicate that students have a basic understanding of professionalism but are not yet fully prepared to enter the counselling workforce without applied experience. This is consistent with findings that student career readiness is greatly influenced by exposure to direct experience through field practice, professional collaboration, and project-based learning. Additionally, the career readiness model developed by

Conley (2012) explains that readiness encompasses reflective, adaptive, and collaborative competencies that develop significantly through counselling practice or internship experiences.

The imbalance among these three dimensions underscores the need for a learning approach that integrates creativity, cultural understanding, and career readiness within a single pedagogical framework. Digital Art-Based Learning (DABL), grounded in local wisdom, has emerged as a strategy with both theoretical and empirical support. McNiff (2008) states that art is a reflective medium that can facilitate self-understanding and emotional complexity, while Zubala et al. (2021) show that digital art practices increase student participation, self-expression, and creativity in learning contexts. When these principles of digital art are combined with the local wisdom of Bengkulu, students not only strengthen their creativity but also deepen their already strong cultural literacy, while producing creative products relevant to their career portfolios. These findings reinforce the views of Trilling and Fadel (2009) and contemporary educational research, which hold that creativity, cultural literacy, and career readiness are complementary 21st-century competencies that must be developed in an integrated manner. Thus, the results of this study not only map students' competency conditions but also provide curricular guidance that strengthening creativity through digital and culture-based approaches should be a priority in the education of prospective counsellors in the digital era.

## Competency differences across groups

Table 2 shows variations in BK students' competencies across creative competence, cultural literacy, and career readiness. The highest average score was recorded in semester 9, but this should be interpreted with caution given the very small number of respondents. After semester 9, the highest scores were recorded in semesters 3, 7, 5, and 1, respectively. Overall, student competencies fell within the medium to high category, indicating that competency development was gradual and not entirely linear from the beginning to the end of the semester.

**Table 2.** Average Competency Scores by Semester

| No | Semester | F | Creative competence | Cultural literacy | Career readiness | Total | Mean | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 9 | 2 | 27 | 30 | 30 | 87 | 43.5 | 21.9 |
| 2 | 3 | 77 | 971 | 1052 | 1001 | 3024 | 39.3 | 19.8 |
| 3 | 7 | 62 | 764 | 855 | 805 | 2424 | 39.1 | 19.7 |
| 4 | 5 | 66 | 781 | 924 | 827 | 2532 | 38.4 | 19.3 |
| 5 | 1 | 83 | 978 | 1130 | 1064 | 3172 | 38.2 | 19.3 |
| | Total | 290 | 3521 | 3991 | 3727 | 11239 | | 100 |

First-semester students tend to have higher cultural literacy scores than creative competence and career readiness scores. This pattern can be explained by students' intense exposure to the social environment and local cultural values since entering college. Recent research shows that direct exposure to local cultural practices from the first year of college strengthens students' social perceptions, cultural empathy, and identity (Arifin & Husna, 2021). This aligns with the theory of multicultural competence, which asserts that cross-cultural experiences in educational environments play an important role in shaping the cultural literacy of prospective counselors (Sue et al., 2022).

Furthermore, students in the middle semesters (semesters 5 and 7) showed a slight decline in scores. This pattern can be attributed to increased academic workload, the dominance of theoretical learning, and reduced opportunities for creative expression. These findings align with recent higher education studies, which indicate that when learning does not provide space for exploration and


https://doi.org/10.24036/02025144159-0-86

creative problem-solving, student creativity tends to decline as academic demands increase (Cojocariu & Jucan, 2024). Additionally, research by Karunarathne et al. (2024) shows that student creativity is highly sensitive to the type of learning activity, and that a learning environment that is too cognitive and repetitive can reduce divergent thinking skills.

On the other hand, career readiness competencies tend to rise in the final semester, particularly as students begin participating in field placements, microteaching, or other professional activities. Contemporary studies confirm that field placement experiences significantly improve students' work readiness, adaptability, and understanding of professional roles (Utami & Setiawan, 2022; Wibowo et al., 2021). This supports Conley's (2012) view that career readiness is not solely the result of theoretical mastery but develops through real-world experiences, reflection, and the ability to adapt in authentic situations.

The total score analysis shows a similar pattern: students in semesters 1 and 3 have the highest total scores, while those in semesters 5 and 7 have lower scores. This decline aligns with the theory of creative engagement, which holds that a lack of creative stimulation and reflective activities can diminish motivation, learning engagement, and even student self-efficacy (Kaimal et al., 2016a). In other words, when learning does not provide space for creating, experimenting, or expressing personal experiences, student creativity and motivation naturally decline.

These comprehensive findings confirm that developing student competencies, particularly creativity and career readiness, requires consistent, cross-level pedagogical strategies. One relevant approach is Digital Art-Based Learning (DABL), which integrates digital art with local cultural values. Recent research shows that using digital art media increases students' intrinsic motivation, emotional engagement, and reflective abilities (Zubala et al., 2021). In addition, digital art can connect personal experiences with cultural realities, helping students understand themselves and their social context more deeply (McNiff, 2008). When combined with local wisdom, DABL not only strengthens cultural literacy but also provides a safe space for experimenting, creating, and developing professional skills relevant to future counsellors in the digital and multicultural era.

Table 3 shows that of the 290 BK students, 236 were female (81.4%) and 54 were male (18.6%). Female students scored higher on creative competence (2,840), cultural literacy (3,276), and career readiness (3,025), with a total score of 9,141 (mean = 38.7). By comparison, males obtained a total score of 2,098 (mean = 38.9). This small mean difference indicates that cross-gender competencies are relatively balanced, although there is a tendency towards different patterns of strength across aspects of competence.

**Table 3.** Competency Scores Based on Gender

| No | Gender | Creative competence | Cultural literacy | Career readiness | Total | F | Mean | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Female | 2840 | 3276 | 3025 | 9141 | 236 | 38.7 | 49.9 |
| 2 | Male | 681 | 715 | 702 | 2098 | 54 | 38.9 | 50.1 |
| | Total | 3521 | 3991 | 3727 | 11239 | 290 | | 100 |

In terms of cultural literacy, females scored higher than males. This finding is consistent with various recent studies that found that females tend to have stronger empathy, cultural sensitivity, and social context-reading skills (Gao & Liu, 2022; Sue et al., 2022). Recent research in counselling education also confirms that women are more responsive to issues of inclusivity and cultural diversity, which is reflected in their strong ability to build empathetic relationships with cross-cultural clients (Chung & Bemak, 2023). In terms of creative competence, females again scored higher. A recent study found that females express their emotions more and reflect on personal experiences through art-based activities, thereby strengthening divergent thinking and professional

creativity (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Potash, Chen, & Lam, 2020). Additionally, research (Janssen et al., 2023) indicates that females exhibit deeper emotional engagement in digital art-based creative processes, which strengthens creative problem-solving relevant to counselling practice.

Regarding career readiness, differences between males and females are relatively small. This finding is supported by contemporary research indicating that career readiness in counselling education is more influenced by exposure to professional experiences, self-reflection, and practical opportunities than by biological variables such as gender (Utami & Setiawan, 2022; Wibowo et al., 2021). Global research also shows that male students tend to exhibit higher professional self-confidence, resulting in slightly higher career readiness scores under certain conditions (González-Romá et al., 2021). The slightly higher mean for males may also be influenced by the smaller number of respondents, despite their strong engagement. Recent research shows that men are more comfortable expressing themselves through digital and visual media than verbally, so digital art activities can increase their engagement in learning (Henderson et al., 2021). This shows that art and technology-based approaches have strong potential to accommodate both male and female learning styles.

Overall, these findings show that females tend to excel in empathy, reflection, and cultural literacy, while males demonstrate strong adaptability in career readiness and digital media use. Therefore, inclusive and gender-sensitive learning designs are needed, including Digital Art-Based Learning (DABL). This approach can accommodate the diversity of students' learning styles, strengthen creativity, and enhance cross-cultural understanding, as supported by recent research in counselling education and digital arts (Potash, Chen, & Lam, 2020; Zubala et al., 2021).

Table 4 shows clear variations in the three dimensions of BK student competence, namely creative competence, cultural literacy, and career readiness. Students from the Papuan ethnic group had the highest average score (mean = 45.0), followed by the Kaur ethnic group (mean = 43.0) and the Lahat ethnic group (mean = 42.0). Meanwhile, ethnic groups with a large number of respondents, such as Serawai (n = 60, mean = 39.2), Bengkulu Malay (n = 57, mean = 39.1), and Javanese (n = 51, mean = 37.0), were in the moderate category. The lowest scores were found in the Betawi (mean = 31.0) and Bali (mean = 33.0) ethnic groups, although these need to be interpreted with caution because the sample size was very small (n = 1). In general, the distribution of competency dimension scores shows that cultural literacy has the highest average (mean = 15.0), followed by career readiness (mean = 12.0) and creative competence (mean = 6.0). These findings indicate that understanding local cultural values contributes most strongly to the competency profile of BK students.

This can be explained by recent research on cultural resilience and cross-cultural adaptation, which shows that minority students demonstrate greater cognitive flexibility, creativity, and adaptive abilities when interacting in culturally diverse social environments (Esteves et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2020). These studies confirm that individuals in minority positions use more reflective and creative strategies to navigate social diversity, so their competencies tend to be stronger than those of majority groups. These findings are also in line with research (Afriyati & Herawati, 2022), which states that the ethnic diversity of BK students influences how they construct meaning in relation to professional development tasks, including how they express creativity and understand local cultural values in counseling practice.

**Table 4.** Competency Scores Based on Ethnicity/Ethnicity

| No | Ethnicity | Creative competence | Cultural literacy | Career readiness | Total | F | Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Papua | 15 | 15 | 15 | 45 | 1 | 45.0 |
| 2 | Kaur | 15 | 15 | 13 | 43 | 1 | 43.0 |


https://doi.org/10.24036/02025144159-0-86

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | Lahat | 13 | 15 | 14 | 42 | 1 | 42.0 |
| 4 | Minang | 160 | 174 | 159 | 493 | 12 | 41.1 |
| 5 | Bugis | 13 | 14 | 14 | 41 | 1 | 41.0 |
| 6 | Enggano | 12 | 15 | 14 | 41 | 1 | 41.0 |
| 7 | Pekal | 15 | 13 | 13 | 41 | 1 | 41.0 |
| 8 | Palembang | 29 | 30 | 22 | 81 | 2 | 40.5 |
| 9 | Pasemah | 290 | 326 | 309 | 925 | 23 | 40.2 |
| 10 | Tionghoa | 12 | 13 | 15 | 40 | 1 | 40.0 |
| 11 | Lintang | 35 | 43 | 40 | 118 | 3 | 39.3 |
| 12 | Serawai | 744 | 838 | 772 | 2354 | 60 | 39.2 |
| 13 | Melayu Bengkulu | 684 | 796 | 748 | 2228 | 57 | 39.1 |
| 14 | Lembak | 165 | 180 | 162 | 507 | 13 | 39.0 |
| 15 | Sunda | 70 | 86 | 78 | 234 | 6 | 39.0 |
| 16 | Rejang | 545 | 556 | 539 | 1640 | 43 | 38.1 |
| 17 | Batak | 127 | 149 | 140 | 416 | 11 | 37.8 |
| 18 | Jawa | 559 | 691 | 636 | 1886 | 51 | 37.0 |
| 19 | Bali | 6 | 15 | 12 | 33 | 1 | 33.0 |
| 20 | Betawi | 12 | 7 | 12 | 31 | 1 | 31.0 |
| | Total | 3521 | 3991 | 3727 | 11239 | 290 | 33.00 |

Overall, these results highlight the urgency of inclusive and multicultural learning design. Recent research shows that integrating local wisdom into higher education can increase students' cultural sensitivity, social empathy, and professional identity (Putra & Yuliani, 2023; Wibisono et al., 2020). By contrast, digital art-based approaches, such as Digital Art-Based Learning (DABL), have been shown to enhance students' creativity, emotional engagement, and contextual understanding (Zubala et al., 2021; Potash et al., 2020). Combining these two approaches can make BK learning more contextual, reflective, and relevant to the needs of today's counsellors. Thus, integrating DABL grounded in local wisdom is a logical and evidence-based strategy to strengthen the creative competence, cultural literacy, and career readiness of BK students in the multicultural and digital era. Key Patterns Relevant to Developing the Digital Art and Local Wisdom Learning Model. Four actionable patterns emerge from the data and bear directly on curriculum design:

1. Creative competence is the weakest domain. This indicates an instructional gap: students lack consistent opportunities to practice divergent thinking and to express themselves through media. For curriculum designers, this points to the need for structured creative tasks embedded across courses.
2. Cultural literacy is a relative strength. Students report strong familiarity with local norms and symbols; this existing cultural capital can serve as a scaffold when designing locally rooted learning activities.
3. Career readiness improves with practicum exposure. Readiness rises among later-semester students, suggesting that experiential learning (practicum, internships, supervised practice) positively influences professional preparedness.
4. A combined DABL local-wisdom approach is pedagogically coherent. Given (a) the weakness in creativity, (b) the available cultural capital, and (c) the benefit of experience for readiness, a Digital Art-Based Learning model that foregrounds local narratives and produces practice-oriented artifacts (e.g., digital case vignettes, reflective portfolios) is well aligned with the empirical profile.

These conclusions are intentionally descriptive: they identify where the program can intervene and the kinds of instructional moves that the data would logically justify. Any claims

about the effectiveness of a particular intervention (including DABL) will require subsequent experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation.

## DISCUSSION

The patterns observed in this study indicate that students in the Guidance and Counseling programme demonstrate the strongest performance in cultural literacy, followed by career readiness, while creative competence remains noticeably weaker. These three competencies do not stand in isolation, and a meaningful interpretation requires examining the instructional context that shapes them. This includes the deficits in creativity and what they reveal about the current curriculum. The lower level of creative competence is not surprising when viewed in relation to how most counsellor-education courses in Indonesia are structured. Instruction still relies heavily on lectures, standard readings, and conventional written assignments, with limited space for exploratory or open-ended learning. Creativity research has long shown that environments that emphasise correctness, repetition, and rigid assessment tend to suppress divergent thinking (Runco & Jaeger, 2012; Sawyer, 2017). In many BK courses, students are rarely asked to design new counselling media, experiment with expressive tools, or develop original intervention ideas. Such structural conditions make it difficult for creativity to flourish, which helps explain why this dimension consistently appears as the lowest in the descriptive profile.

Why cultural literacy appears strong and what it actually represents. The higher cultural literacy score should be interpreted with caution. The items on which students scored well relate to familiarity with local norms, social expectations, and cultural symbols, elements encountered daily in their communities. According to Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, people tend to perform well in domains aligned with cultural knowledge already embedded in their habitus. In other words, the strong performance reflects exposure rather than the deeper multicultural competencies needed in counselling practice. In a professional sense, cultural literacy requires the ability to translate cultural understanding into appropriate counselling decisions (Sue et al., 2019). This deeper layer was not directly assessed in this study, so the strong cultural literacy figures should be regarded as an initial advantage, not as evidence that students are already fully competent in multicultural counselling.

Career readiness and its link to developmental progression. Career readiness falls within the moderate range, consistent with the learning experiences students typically encounter. Upper-semester students who have completed practicum and professional courses show slightly higher readiness, suggesting that supervised field experience contributes to professional confidence. This aligns with earlier work showing that structured practicum exposure and reflective supervision play a central role in shaping professional identity among counsellors (Lenz & Smith, 2010; Niles & Harris-Bowlsbey, 2021). However, the overall moderate level of readiness suggests that practicum opportunities may not be sufficiently long, intensive, or reflective to produce strong workplace preparedness. Because readiness in this study was measured through self-report, it captures perceived rather than demonstrated competence, further reinforcing the need for expanded experiential learning. Demographic patterns are descriptive background, not evidence. The descriptive variations by gender and ethnicity do not carry inferential value given the sample distribution. Women constitute 81% of participants, and several ethnic groups are represented by very small numbers. Under these conditions, drawing sociocultural conclusions would be scientifically unjustified (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). These patterns can therefore be used only to understand the cohort's composition, not to draw assumptions about identity-based differences in competence.


https://doi.org/10.24036/02025144159-0-86

Why the creativity deficit justifies the adoption of Digital Art-Based Learning (DABL). The clear weakness in creative competence makes a strong case for introducing Digital Art-Based Learning. Research in arts-integrated and digital-media learning shows that creative tasks involving symbolic expression, visual narrative, and experimentation with digital tools help learners develop flexible thinking and the capacity to generate original ideas (Kaimal et al., 2016b; Potash, Chen, & Lam, 2020). Because the current curriculum provides very few opportunities for creative engagement, DABL fills a structural gap rather than adding an unrelated innovation. It offers a systematic way for students to practise idea-generation and reflective-creation skills that the descriptive data show are underdeveloped.

Why cultural literacy provides a foundation for integrating local wisdom into DABL. Students' strong performance on cultural-literacy items indicates that they already possess the cultural knowledge needed to work with local narratives, symbols, and traditions. This makes DABL particularly compatible with the cohort, as digital-art activities are most meaningful when they draw on culturally grounded themes (Potash, Chen, Wang, et al., 2020). Incorporating local wisdom into digital-art tasks gives students an accessible starting point while also prompting them to reinterpret cultural elements through a counselling perspective. In this way, cultural literacy does not merely support DABL; it becomes a scaffold for deeper reflection and culturally responsive practice.

How DABL addresses weaknesses across all three competencies. The observed competency profile shows not only what students do well but also where their development is incomplete. DABL offers a unified response to these gaps: For creativity, digital storytelling, reflective photography, collage, and symbolic illustration require students to practise divergent thinking, something the current curriculum lacks. For career readiness: Digital art activities can be embedded in authentic professional tasks, such as creating psychoeducational materials or visual case vignettes, helping students practise communication and intervention design. For cultural literacy application: When students translate elements of local wisdom into digital media, they move from simply knowing cultural content to using it in counselling contexts, a shift essential for multicultural competence. Taken together, these insights show that a Digital Art Local Wisdom model is not a cosmetic addition but a pedagogically coherent response to students' actual learning needs.

## Limitations

This research is constrained by several factors: the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; reliance on self-report instruments may inflate or underestimate actual competence; demographic imbalance limits subgroup interpretation; and the findings are context-specific to a single university. These constraints underscore that the present study provides a descriptive baseline—not evidence of program effectiveness.

Recommendations for future research. Subsequent work should employ (a) longitudinal designs to track developmental trajectories, (b) mixed-methods approaches to explore underlying mechanisms behind competence formation, (c) behavioural assessments to validate self-reported skills, and (d) experimental or quasi-experimental studies to evaluate the impact of DABL or other creative pedagogies on student development.

Overall, the study provides an empirically grounded portrait of GC students' competencies and highlights actionable directions for curriculum reform. By combining digital creativity, cultural grounding, and structured professional preparation, GC programmes can better prepare future counsellors to respond adaptively to complex, culturally diverse, and technologically mediated counselling environments.

## CONCLUSION

This study presents a diagnostic profile of three core competencies among Guidance and Counselling (GC) students: creative competence, cultural literacy, and career readiness. The findings consistently show that cultural literacy is the strongest domain, career readiness is in the middle, and creative competence is the least developed. Taken together, the results provide an empirical baseline for rethinking how GC programmes cultivate professional identity and skill formation.

First, the prominence of cultural literacy suggests that students have a relatively strong awareness of local values, social norms, and cultural narratives. However, high cultural literacy scores do not automatically translate into culturally attuned counselling practice, as several scholars highlight the gap between cultural knowledge and its ethical application in client interactions (Ratts et al., 2016; Sue et al., 2019). This implies that cultural understanding, while important, must be intentionally linked to reflective, context-sensitive pedagogical activities to support competent professional behaviour.

Second, career readiness scores indicate that students possess foundational knowledge of the counselling profession but lack confidence and practical exposure, a pattern commonly reported in counselling education programmes (Lambie & Swank, 2016; Perera, 2015). This aligns with evidence that readiness improves significantly when students engage in supervised fieldwork, experiential simulations, and structured professional mentoring (Yuen et al., 2014; Smith & Koltz, 2015). As such, these findings point to the need for more systematic integration of practice-based learning throughout the curriculum.

Third, the consistently low creative competence across semesters indicates a structural gap in how creativity is cultivated in GC education. This finding is not surprising, given that university teaching in Indonesia and many other contexts still relies heavily on reproductive learning, leaving little room for divergent thinking or exploratory tasks (Borg et al., 2022; Zubaidah, 2019). Creativity in counselling, particularly in designing responsive interventions, is increasingly recognised as a professional necessity rather than an optional enhancement (Carson & Becker, 2004; Richards, 2010). The weakness observed here suggests that curricula may be overly theoretical and insufficiently designed to encourage experimentation, multimodal expression, or problem-solving under uncertain conditions.

Regarding demographic differences, the results show variation by gender and ethnicity; however, these patterns must be interpreted with caution. Small subgroup sizes and uneven distributions make it inappropriate to draw sociocultural conclusions (Maxwell, 2013). Descriptive differences can inform curriculum refinement, but they do not justify claims about inherent group characteristics. Responsible interpretation, therefore, requires acknowledging the limits of subgroup analysis in survey research.

Taken together, the three-domain profile highlights why a more integrative pedagogical approach, such as Digital Art-Based Learning (DABL), grounded in local wisdom, may be beneficial. The documented creativity deficit provides a clear rationale for using digital art to stimulate divergent thinking and reflective expression (Kaimal et al., 2016b; Potash, Chen, & Tsang, 2020). Meanwhile, strong cultural literacy offers a foundation for embedding local narratives, symbols, and values into digital media projects, making learning contextually meaningful (Bourdieu, 1986a; Risner & Anderson, 2019). Because career readiness involves identity development, professional self-concept, and communication skills, DABL can also serve as a medium for students to articulate their strengths and envision their future roles (Hooley et al., 2018; Savickas, 2013). Therefore, DABL is not proposed as a decorative innovation but as a strategy that aligns with the empirical weaknesses and strengths identified in this study.


https://doi.org/10.24036/02025144159-0-86

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the Guidance and Counseling Study Program, Universitas Bengkulu, for providing institutional and academic support throughout this research. Appreciation is also extended to all BK students who participated as respondents and contributed valuable insights to the study. The authors acknowledge the contributions of lecturers, administrative staff, and academic partners who assisted with data collection and facilitated access to research activities. Special thanks are due to the research team of the PPKP Project 2025, whose collaboration and dedication have strengthened the development of this study. Finally, the authors express their gratitude to colleagues and reviewers who provided constructive feedback to improve the quality of this manuscript.

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