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ACES at its Best: Celebrating Personal Excellence
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Pursuing Personal Excellence in Counselor Education:
The Challenges of Personal and Professional Growth

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Drs. Herr and Sweeney have defined the meaning of personal excellence and, in their usual eloquent manner, established the importance of excellence for counselors. As a counselor educator, this information represents a challenge to find ways to encourage the best in those students I encounter. Of course, this also requires that I be my very best, since, like it or not, I serve as a role model to my students. In considering how best to respond to these challenges, I will target my remarks to four broad areas: (1) a paradigm for optimizing behavior, (2) what the pursuit of personal excellence means in terms of students, (3) how this translates into action within a counselor training program, and (4) what the pursuit of excellence means to me as an individual.

(1) A paradigm for optimizing behavior

Dr. Herr underscored the need for “paradigms that capture the ingredients of the optimization of behavior, personal resilience, self-renewal, and personal flexibility as important foci for counseling.” He suggested the need for counselors to focus on strengths. Dr. Sweeney suggested that “at a minimum, {personal excellence} is a compass pointing each of us toward that which is worth pursuing and being.” I concur with the statements of both scholars concerning the need for strength-based approaches in our field.

I was encouraged by the research cited by Dr. Herr on emotional intelligence, notably the finding that “the hallmarks of character and self-discipline, of altruism and compassion, of maturity and responsibility...can be taught and they can be learned.” The question remains for us to define how to teach these characteristics of individuals. Perhaps we need a paradigm shift, perhaps we need only to recapture the roots of our profession in its developmental orientation.

We live in a time where our traditional delivery systems for health care, mental health care, and perhaps even education are being called into question. As we witness the proliferation of violence, hate crimes, and failures of the human spirit, we have to wonder how better to serve this new and rapidly changing, diverse, global society. The medically-based, deficit model has not served us well. It is time to embrace comprehensive wellness-based models of human functioning. It has been

decades since the human potential movement in our field was supplanted by a growing desire to compete in a mental illness marketplace. Like other professions with a foundation in illness, we are finding ourselves the victims of managed care rather than the masters of our philosophy and services. It is time for a change.

I am a proponent of one wellness model, based both in counseling theory and cross disciplinary research on healthy behaviors that embraces a holistic paradigm of human functioning. There are few other such models, though surely more are needed. In fact, as an aside, the American Psychological Association has now appointed a team of scholars to define the notion of “wellness,” something already done in our field but not well disseminated. Let me provide just one example of what we know that can serve as an impetus for change.

In 1998, more than 65% - two-thirds - of all high school graduates enrolled in a two or four-year college (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1999). Remarkably, only 50% of those who start colleges actually complete a bachelor's degree (NCES). Education is directly and positively linked to income, and hence standard of living over the lifespan. Income has been positively associated with better mental and physical health, greater quality of life, and increased longevity (Healthy People 2010). If we consider that only one-third of our young people graduate from college, thus having the greatest potential for a high quality of life, we must also admit that two-thirds of our population is positioned to not experience the maximum benefits of our affluent society. How does this translate into wellness?

My colleagues Drs. Tom Sweeney and Mel Witmer and I have developed a wellness assessment instrument based on a holistic model of wellness, and we have been collecting data for the last 10 years on the wellness of various populations. Recently we have begun to examine our data base. In looking at undergraduate students, we have been surprised to note just how unwell they are as a group. For example, in comparing the wellness of graduate students in counseling to undergraduate students, we found that the undergraduates experience and report significantly lower wellness on all 19 of our wellness scales. Further ALL of these differences are significant at the .001 level. If wellness is factor in graduation from college, then we may predict that wellness among the general population, those two-thirds of individuals without a college degree, is even lower than that for college students.

Can wellness behaviors be taught? Can wellness be enhanced? Based on my experiences, on feedback from persons in workshops, seminars, and courses, and on the scant outcome research that is now available, I agree with Dr. Herr and say, unequivocally, yes.

(2) what the pursuit of personal excellence means in terms of students

Again looking at the issue from a wellness paradigm, and from the perspective of our data, I have suggested that counseling graduate students experience, or report, greater wellness than undergraduate students. At the same time, this cannot be equated to high level wellness, or optimum wellness. When providing wellness scores to individuals, we resist the frequent pressure to provide norms. People want to know how others did, and if they are the same, or just a little better than average, this seems to be okay. In the absence of a clear understanding of the meaning of wellness, okay seems to be fine. But optimum behavior is not average anywhere except in a utopian society – and utopia seems not to exist.

Dr. Sweeney noted that “all of us have an opportunity to maximize our personal growth while benefiting others in the pursuit of personal excellence.” He spoke to our “modus vivendi” or way of living. So, how do we help our students capture a vision of excellence that will serve as their modus vivendi?

(3) how this translates into action within a counselor training program,

As a counselor educator, I have been asked by students and prospective students what it means to be a counselor. How is being a counselor different from being a psychologist? Why, in fact, would a student enroll in a counselor education program rather than a counseling psychology or a social work program? What is different about us?

I believe the essential difference between counselors and other mental health professions lies in our belief in the optimization of development, the optimization of human behavior and functioning. Stated another way, we are unique in our emphasis on wellness rather than illness. As a consequence, we need to structure our counselor training programs around models that reflect this philosophy.

If we base our training programs around a strength-based paradigm, the tenets of this paradigm need to be infused throughout the formal as well as the informal curricula of counselor education. Students may be expected to assess their personal wellness, learn strategies to enhance their wellness, and participate in the engaging, challenging, profound, and often difficult process of personal change. As they begin to work with clients, students may be expected to apply the strength-based philosophy to assessment, case conceptualization, treatment planning, and outcomes evaluation. They will need models, tools, strategies, and appropriate supervision to begin to view their work and their clients in terms of strategies for positive growth and change. Rather than just the remediation of dysfunction, they need to develop a conception of counseling as a strategy for helping others achieve optimum personal wellness through a personal commitment to excellence.

If students are to be expected to embrace this paradigm, counselor educators must do so first, and they must do so enthusiastically and systematically. We educators must infuse wellness in all aspects of our training programs. To do so effectively, we must live wellness. This leads me to my final point, ...

My Personal Pursuit of Excellence

I realize that who I am speaks more loudly than what I say, and that the communication of my personhood is the message most likely to be heard by the students who take my classes, by those students who pass me in the hall, and by those students who, though not even in my institution, know of me, see me at conferences, or read my publications. In short, who I am is communicated in subtle and not so subtle ways whether or not I am aware that I am being observed or, in many cases, evaluated. As a consequence, I have come to realize that my personal wellness is not just something I do for myself, it is something I do to make a statement to those persons I want most to influence: counselors-in-training.

Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned in my own search for excellence is that wellness is self-empowering, and at some point this empowerment is difficult (hopefully impossible) to reverse. Each change made towards a wellness lifestyle, whether it is to eat more fruit or take more personal responsibility for one's choices, to seek and find humor in daily life and a good belly laugh each day, to develop strategies to recognize and reduce one's stress, or to develop more friendships and improve one's intimate relationships, all such choices affect total or holistic wellness. We need to find ways to help counselor educators, counselors, clients, and ourselves make such choices. To do so will accomplish what Herr and Sweeney note as a personal, professional, and societal imperative: the quest for personal excellence.

http://www.csi-net.org/publications/excellence_papers/myers.html